

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 left, partially overlapping the sword's hilt. The shield is decorated with several circular patterns. The overall style is clean and modern, using a monochromatic orange color scheme.

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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THE DEFEAT OF SENNACHERIB

Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him: for there be more with us than with him: with him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the LORD our God to help us, and to fight our battles. And the people rested themselves upon the words of Hezekiah king of Judah. — 2 Chronicles 32:7–8

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold, and his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold...

Sennacherib, king of Assyria, had entered Judah and encamped against all her fenced cities because he thought to take the nation for himself. The situation could not have appeared more dire for Hezekiah, Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Sennacherib was a tenacious foe, an implacable enemy. With Sennacherib was an enormous multitude of thousands upon thousands of soldiers, the fierce and cruel stormtroopers of the ancient world. Judah's cities were besieged and fell one by one. Mighty Lachish was under siege. Assyrian soldiers spread menacingly around Jerusalem. The footmen, the horsemen, and the chariots roared and thundered around the city.

Arrogant, boasting, disheartening speeches emanated over the walls of Jerusalem from Sennacherib's henchman, Rabshakeh:

14. Who was there among all the gods of those nations that my fathers utterly destroyed, that could deliver his people out of mine hand, that your God should be able to deliver you out of mine hand?
15. Now therefore let not Hezekiah deceive you, nor persuade you on this manner, neither yet believe him: for no god of any nation or kingdom was able to deliver his people out of mine hand...how much less shall your God deliver you out of mine hand? (2 Chron. 32:14–15)

Blasphemous letters that railed on Jehovah the God of Israel came from that man's wicked hand. "As the gods of the nations of other lands have not delivered their people out of mine hand, so shall not the God of Hezekiah deliver his people out of mine hand" (v. 17).

How that antichrist raged against the Lord:

24. By the multitude of my chariots am I come up to the height of the mountains, to the sides of Lebanon; and I will cut down the tall cedars thereof, and the choice fir trees thereof: and I

will enter into the height of his border, and the forest of his Carmel.

25. I have digged, and drunk water; and with the sole of my feet have I dried up all the rivers of the besieged places. (Isa. 37:24–25)

Insatiable in his lust, vaunting in his pride: mine, mine, all mine, by my power and my ingenuity and my forces.

Another Ozymandias: King of Kings; Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!

And what was little Jerusalem before such a monster?

Oh, to be sure, the people had strengthened the walls. They had multiplied swords and spears, and the captains had readied the armies. Hurriedly they had stopped up the wells so that the king of Assyria could find no water. But if forces be compared with forces, Judah was nothing before Sennacherib's host. In many respects she was the least of all the kingdoms he had fought against. Were not the soldiers of Syria more numerous? Were not the chariots and horsemen of many other nations mightier? And the Assyrians had swallowed up all of them.

Hezekiah said it best before the Lord: "A day of trouble and of rebuke and of blasphemy: for the children are come to the birth, and there is no strength to bring forth." No strength was in the people for all their walls and preparations and soldiers and the abundance of arms and armor. Before that boasting monster, Rabshakeh, there was no strength in them.

But, O man, who are you that rages against the living God?

Human strength and mighty hosts.

Charging steeds and warlike boasts.

Cannot save from overthrow.

O Jerusalem, be strong and courageous. Be not afraid or dismayed for the king of Assyria or for the multitude that is with him.

With him is an arm of flesh. Only flesh!

Flesh made from the dust of the ground, and into that flesh God breathed the breath of life. Flesh is as the grass, and all its glory is as the flower of the field. Flesh rises for a time and only as high and as long as the sovereign God

ordains, and it is quickly cut down. Flesh: a wind that passes away and comes not again. What is man, whose breath is in his nostrils? He is nothing except effervescent, weak, frail, faltering, failing flesh. Flesh is fleeting in all its existence.

Flesh is utterly dependent upon God, even in its opposition to him. For in him we live and move and have our being, even in opposition to him. Never is flesh independent. Flesh cannot have one breath, one beat of the heart, or one thought apart from the government of God. Never is flesh independent. Surely God made flesh rational and moral, having mind, heart, and will. And surely what man does he does willingly, and he labors in his strength; yet man is ever hemmed in by God's sovereignty. Never is man independent. Always the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, and he turns that heart withersoever he will. Always over against man God remains God, whose counsel controls all things so that all his pleasure is done. And so he said to Pharaoh, "For this cause have I raised thee up, that I might show my power in thee." And to Pharaoh, God said that he would harden Pharaoh's heart in order to show in him all God's wonders.

Ah, but worse, all flesh corrupted itself. By the sinful act of its own will, flesh rebelled against God its creator. Flesh allied itself with the devil. Man—who is flesh, all flesh—is corrupt to the depth of his being. He in his flesh became totally depraved, full of darkness, and he loves the lie and hates the truth. He holds the truth under in unrighteousness. God he will not worship. Idols he fashions for himself: he worships the creature rather than the creator. Most of all, man worships himself. He is an enemy of God. Subject to death is flesh—death of the body and soul and in all his life lying in sin and under the curse.

Many times God evaluated flesh: the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and every imagination of his heart was only evil continually. There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understand; there is none who seek after God. Their throats are open sepulchers; with their tongues they use deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed innocent blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; there is no fear of God before their eyes.

Flesh is an arm that impotently opposes Jehovah God, an ax that vaunts itself against God who hews therewith. An arm that is able to do only what Jehovah decrees to be done, an arm that is bent on carrying out sinful designs and wicked purposes; but in the end Jehovah accomplishes his. It is an arm that is not only impotent to defeat Jehovah but also unwittingly carries out the Lord's purpose.

So Jehovah says to the boasting Sennacherib:

25. Hast thou not heard long ago how I have done it, and of ancient times that I have formed it? now have I brought it to pass, that thou shouldest be to lay waste fenced cities into ruinous heaps.
26. Therefore their inhabitants were of small power, they were dismayed and confounded. (2 Kings 19:25–26)

And so it is always for the church of God in the world. So it was for her king. The king of Assyria was after Judah's king. The evil Assyrian king tried to dishearten the inhabitants of Jerusalem: "Do not believe your king's word. Do not be deceived when he tells you that Jehovah will deliver you." That was wicked opposition to the gospel. So that wicked spirit behind Sennacherib came after the King of the church, David's greater Son, by means of an evil arm of flesh. Allied against God's holy child, Jesus, were Pontius Pilate and Herod and the Jews and the Gentiles and the leaders of the people. For a time it was their hour and the power of darkness. For a time they gathered in their wicked conclave to condemn Jesus for blasphemy, to rend their clothes in false grief, to deliver the Savior into the hands of the Gentiles to crucify him as a rebel and raiser of sedition. And all their wicked hands accomplished was their own condemnation. For the stone the builders refused became the head stone of the corner. This was Jehovah's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

Can the true church of Jesus Christ in the world expect anything different? She is as a hut in a garden of cucumbers and as a besieged city. From time to time she faces a mighty host gathered by Satan for the purposes of overthrowing the church, taking it for himself, and making it his synagogue. The world of ungodly men raises threats of overthrow against the church. The false church surrounds the true church like a pack of wolves intent on her destruction and the silencing of her testimony and the murder of all her members. And the members of the false church have their hour and the power of darkness. They have their time when they stand boldly and threateningly and by all appearances invincibly over against the church and the truth. Shall it go any different for the church than it did for David, who said that daily his enemies would swallow him up? They are many that fight against me! Every day they wrest my words; all their thoughts are against me for evil; they gather themselves together; they hide themselves; they mark my steps; they wait for my soul.

In God I have put my trust; I will not fear what flesh can do unto me.

Be strong and courageous, be not afraid or dismayed.
There is more with us than with them.
With us is Jehovah our God.
And how does such puny, insignificant, iniquitous

flesh vaunt itself and rail on the living God? Jehovah of hosts, Jehovah is his name, the I AM THAT I AM. The eternal, unchanging, omnipotent, sovereign, righteous, holy, one and only God. Before him all the nations of the earth are as the small dust of the balance and as the drop of the bucket in insignificance. He is the God who made all things and whose are all things, so that of him and through him and to him are all things. He is the God who governs and controls all, even when devils and wicked men act unjustly, so that all is done according to his determinate counsel and by the strength of his hand.

Jehovah, who is the gracious, merciful, faithful God of the covenant, the God who loves his people and is faithful to his word, the God who forgives their sins and takes them as his own to be a God unto them. He is with us. God with us. Immanuel. That is Jesus. He was there in Jerusalem. The Angel of Jehovah...

Always he was with his people in the Old Testament. He came to speak with Abraham about the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah. He was with the host of angels that met Jacob at the camp of the Lord in Mahanaim because Jacob wrestled with him one night. He was in the midst of Israel in the fiery furnace of Egypt, so that the people, as the bush on fire, could not be consumed. He strode through Egypt to kill all the firstborn of man and beast but entered not into the houses with blood on doorposts and lintels. He was with the Israelites as they passed through the sea—the Angel of God, whose angry look from the cloud took off the wheels of Pharaoh's host, discomfited his horses and horsemen, and overthrew that contumacious sovereign in the midst of the sea. Jehovah went before his people in the desert in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, whose glory shown in Moses' day.

He was with them in Jerusalem too.

He is always with his church. God with us.

He will help us: he will be a faithful covenant friend to us. He will fight our battles. Jesus. Is that not the key? God came to us in Jesus in faithfulness to his covenant promise. Not any longer with the nature of angels but with the nature of man. God became flesh. He fought our battles for us. The great battle against sin, death, hell, the grave, and the power of darkness. The great battle that flesh could not fight in that it was weak, corrupt, and sinful. In the flesh he strengthens the flesh. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh. There was the great battle. There was the great deliverance of which all deliverances in the Old Testament were types and shadows. There God showed himself a help and strong to fight our battles.

And there at the cross and in the resurrection of Christ is the church's sure ground for certain victory in all her battles. There he crushed the enemy with an overwhelming defeat, a victory whose force is felt to the very present. The church will face mighty battles against charging steeds and warlike boasts of the enemy. God with us—Jesus Christ crucified and slain—promises certain victory, even in the face of overwhelming forces.

Be not afraid or dismayed.

Be strong and courageous.

So it was in Jerusalem. The people rested in the words of Hezekiah, king of Judah. He spoke to them of God and of his faithful covenant promise and of his great power and love for his people. He spoke to them of Jesus Christ, God with us, to help us and to fight our battles. And in that word they rested. They believed. God was with them. God was for them. Who could be against them?

And outside the walls of Jerusalem?

Will Jehovah hear the words of Rabshakeh—whom his master, the king of Assyria, had sent to reproach the living God—and reprove the words that the Lord God heard? Will the Lord see all the evil words that Rabshakeh wrote to reproach Jehovah of hosts, the God of Israel, who dwells between the cherubim, who is God alone of all the kingdoms of the earth, and who made the heaven and the earth?

Thus saith the Lord to the king of Assyria: "Whom hast thou reproached and blasphemed? and against whom hast thou exalted thy voice, and lifted up thine eyes on high? even against the Holy One of Israel..."

"I know thy abode, and thy going out, and thy coming in, and thy rage against me...I will put my hook in thy nose, and my bridle in thy lips, and I will turn thee back by the way which thou camest..."

"The virgin the daughter of Zion hath despised thee, and laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee..."

"I will defend this city, to save it, for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake..."

"He [the king of Assyria] shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shield, nor cast a bank against it..."

"Out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and they that escape out of mount Zion: the zeal of the LORD of hosts shall do this..."

And it came to pass that night that the Angel of Jehovah went out and smote in the camp of the Assyrians one hundred eighty-five thousand! And when the Assyrians arose in the morning, they were all dead corpses.

And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword, hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord.

—NJL

OUR PRESENT CONTROVERSY (7)

In our present controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), the way forward to peace includes instruction by consistories, polemics against the lie, and repentance by the officebearers and members of the churches for our corporate sin of compromising the gospel. These activities are not meant as a step-by-step plan that we follow like a recipe for baking a cake. They are not a list of ingredients and mixing instructions and oven temperatures so that when we have mechanically completed them all we pull out a piping hot Birthday Cake of Peace. Rather, these are the Spirit's admonitions in scripture to the church that teach us our spiritual calling in the midst of doctrinal controversy. These admonitions all concern the proper use of the word of God in controversy, for it is only upon the truth that we have true unity.

In this editorial I continue laying out the way forward for the PRC, coming now to the most important calling for the PRC in our present controversy: preach the word. The power that will drive repentance and reformation in the denomination is the Spirit of Jesus Christ as he works through Protestant Reformed pulpits.

This calling to preach the word in the midst of controversy is not a calling to preach the word generally. It is not a calling merely to make sure that we have sermons in our pulpits. The church of Jesus Christ is always called to have sermons from the word of God, whether she is in the midst of internal doctrinal controversy or not. But when the church is in the midst of doctrinal controversy, her calling to preach the word is a calling to preach the controversy. That is, she is called to preach the word of God as it applies to the doctrinal controversy at hand. The pulpit must shine the light of God's word on the lie in the church's midst to expose it as the lie. The pulpit must proclaim the true doctrine of God's word over against that lie. The pulpit must rebuke the church for her teaching of the lie and her toleration of the lie. The pulpit must reprove the church for her errors, as well as for her coldness and indifference toward God's truth that led to her errors. The pulpit must exhort the people to humble themselves, to abhor their errors, and to repent before God, with whom alone there is mercy and plentiful redemption in Jesus Christ. In the midst of doctrinal controversy, the pulpit must not be general but specific. The pulpit must preach the controversy.

Scripture teaches that the pulpits of the PRC must preach the controversy. Scripture teaches this by the example of the Old Testament prophets, who constantly

exposed the lie and the liars in their own day. In Jeremiah's day, for example, the prophets of Jerusalem walked in lies (Jer. 23:14). Their lies were the false doctrine that God would give peace to the inhabitants of Jerusalem who despised God and that God would not send evil upon the inhabitants who walked after the imaginations of their own hearts (v. 17). Instead of calling God's people to repentance for their sins, the prophets confirmed the impenitent sinners and strengthened their hands, so that no one returned from his wickedness (v. 14). God sent Jeremiah to preach publicly and specifically against the false doctrines of the prophets of Jerusalem.

16. Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they make you vain: they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the LORD.
17. They say still unto them that despise me, The LORD hath said, Ye shall have peace; and they say unto every one that walketh after the imagination of his own heart, No evil shall come upon you.

Jeremiah preached the word of Jehovah to expose the false doctrine of the prophets of Jerusalem and to set forth the truth over against them. Jeremiah preached the controversy. So also today the pulpits of the PRC must preach the controversy.

Scripture also teaches this by the example of Christ's apostle in his epistle to the Galatians. The churches of Galatia were bewitched by the Judaizers to believe the false gospel that they obtained righteousness and salvation by Christ and by their keeping of the law. The false doctrine into which the Protestant Reformed Churches fell is essentially the same false gospel that the Judaizers taught. It gives to man's good works the place and function of obtaining fellowship with God. That false doctrine compromises the gospel, displaces the perfect work of Christ, compromises the truth of justification by faith alone, and compromises the truth of the unconditional covenant. Paul wrote against the lie with a very specific and sharp rebuke of the Galatians: "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?" (3:1). The PRC are called to preach this inspired word of God in our own controversy, so that our pulpits say to us, "O foolish Protestant Reformed Churches, who hath bewitched you, that ye

should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?”

The calling to preach controversy is set forth in the Form for Ordination of Ministers of God’s Word.

It is evident that the office of pastors and ministers of God’s Word is:

First. That they faithfully explain to their flock the Word of the Lord, revealed by the writings of the prophets and the apostles; and apply the same as well in general as in particular to the edification of the hearers; instructing, admonishing, comforting, and reproving, according to every one’s need; preaching repentance towards God and reconciliation with Him through faith in Christ; and refuting with the Holy Scriptures all schisms and heresies which are repugnant to the pure doctrine. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 284–85)

The minister who truly would exercise his office as a servant of Jesus Christ in the church is a minister who will apply the word of God specifically to his congregation and denomination in the midst of controversy, who will admonish and reprove them for their sin of tolerating false doctrine, and who will refute with the scriptures the schism and heresy in the congregation’s own midst. If he neglects to preach the controversy, the minister is unfaithful to the office of minister of the word given to him by Jesus Christ, and he colludes with Satan in allowing the deceiver’s lie to find a place in the church of Jesus Christ.

The calling to preach the controversy is also part of the vow that the minister of the gospel makes when he signs the Formula of Subscription.

We promise therefore diligently to teach and faithfully to defend the aforesaid doctrine [of the three forms of unity], without either directly or indirectly contradicting the same, by our public preaching or writing.

We declare, moreover, that we not only reject all errors that militate against this doctrine, and particularly those which were condemned by the above mentioned synod, but that we are disposed to refute and contradict these, and to exert ourselves in keeping the church free from such errors. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 326)

The minister who truly would exert himself to keep the church free from doctrinal error is a minister who will preach the controversy when the error appears in his church or in his denomination. If he neglects to preach the controversy, he violates his Formula of Subscription vow, and he allows an error out of hell to fester, which error will eventually corrupt and destroy the souls in his congregation and denomination.

The calling to preach the controversy stands over against the attitude that the pulpits of the PRC are studiously to avoid entering into our own doctrinal controversy. This attitude has been prevalent in the denomination for some time. When I was first in the ministry, the churches were convulsed with the “Homeschool Controversy.” In response to this controversy, a professor in the seminary used his pulpit supply appointments in many churches to preach the Christian school as a demand of the covenant. His preaching entered into the controversy, and by his sermons the professor was fulfilling his vow to exert himself to keep the churches free from error. The response of many in the churches was anger against the professor, along with advice to a young minister not to follow the professor’s example. The message was clear: Do not bring controversy into the pulpit.

The same attitude has prevailed in our present controversy. My experience has been that, by and large, Protestant Reformed consistories and congregations will not suffer the controversy to be preached specifically and pointedly to them. The churches might tolerate some general instruction in the controversy, although even that wears thin very quickly for many. A minister might even be allowed to acknowledge that this is our controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches, but even then he must take care to tread so lightly and to be as inoffensive to our proud feelings as possible. But as soon as the pulpit becomes pointed in the controversy, reproving and rebuking the PRC for her doctrinal errors with the sharp words of scripture, the rejection of that preaching is swift and brutal. The rejection of that preaching happens unofficially and informally, as well as officially and formally. Individual consistories even take decisions that a particular preacher will not be allowed on their pulpits, thus effectively cutting that minister off from their fellowship in the denomination. If a minister is to be allowed to preach, he must first promise not to preach the controversy, which is nothing less than an attempt to muzzle the word of God and to subject the truth to the delicate sensibilities of men. The reasons, both informal and formal, for rejecting the preaching of the controversy are along the following lines, and they sound plausible from the viewpoint of the earthly, sensual, and devilish wisdom of man.

“The timing of that sermon was questionable while the churches are going through such a hard time.”

“God’s sheep need soothing words, not sharp words.”

“That sermon will create suspicion about the orthodoxy of our ministers and professors.”

“We all agree with the doctrine of the sermon, but we disagree with its tone.”

“That sermon agitates the churches when we most need peace and unity.”

Poor timing? Have we forgotten the apostle’s charge to the preacher before God? “Preach the word; be instant

in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Tim. 4:2).

Soothing words? Have we forgotten that this is exactly what rebellious people and lying children who will not hear the law of the Lord ask for? “Which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophecy deceits: get you out of the way, turn aside out of the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us” (Isa. 30:10–11).

Suspicion about our ministers? Have we forgotten that ministers who teach, tolerate, and defend false doctrine bring that suspicion—and worse—on themselves? “I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple” (Rom. 16:17–18).

The tone of the sermon? Have we forgotten the tone of the prophets, which is to be the tone of the preacher today? “Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins” (Isa. 58:1).

Agitation? Have we forgotten that this is always the charge that the Ahabs of Israel make against the Elijahs who preach the truth? “It came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, Art thou he that troubleth Israel? And he answered, I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father’s house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and thou hast followed Baalim” (1 Kings 18:17–18).

Above all of these, our favorite objection in the PRC is that doctrinal controversy may only be dealt with by the ecclesiastical assemblies. The thinking goes that if a Protestant Reformed minister publicly deviates in doctrine through his preaching or his writing, the only right way of dealing with that deviation is through that minister’s consistency by a formal charge of sin or by a formal protest against his sermon or his writing. While that formal protest is being treated, there may be no public mention of the minister or his doctrinal deviation. The process of protest and appeal to classis and synod might take many months and even years, but everyone is to remain utterly silent about the minister and his false doctrine during that time. Only the ecclesiastical assemblies are authorized to pronounce on the case. Defenders of this position call it the *ecclesiastical way* or the *church orderly way* of dealing with doctrinal controversy, as if this way alone is good order in the church, and as if this way alone is laid down in the Church Order.

The thinking is prevalent in the PRC that protest and appeal is the only church orderly way to deal with controversy. If a minister would go to his pulpit to preach doctrinal controversy today, and if he would warn Christ’s

sheep of the danger to their souls from that false doctrine that is in their own midst, and if he would even warn Christ’s sheep that they must not listen to ministers in their own denomination who would teach that false doctrine, the minister who preached the controversy would be charged with all kinds of sin. Men would accuse him of being disorderly and of not following the church orderly way of dealing with his objection to false doctrine, with appeal to articles 31 and 74 of the Church Order. Men would accuse him of pride for standing in judgment of his fellow ministers. Men would accuse him of schism for setting the members of the denomination against ministers in good standing in the churches. All of this would be accompanied by the loudest cries that we all believe the same thing and that we have no problem with the *doctrine* of the offending sermon; we only object to the *manner* in which the minister dealt with his objections, and we just want the controversy to be handled in the church orderly way of protest and appeal.

The fact of the matter is that the Church Order calls the minister of the word to preach the doctrinal controversy. The Church Order calls the minister to ascend the pulpit to warn the congregation of the false doctrines and errors that multiply in her own midst. And the Church Order calls the elders to insist that their minister preaches the controversy.

To ward off false doctrines and errors that multiply exceedingly through heretical writings, the ministers and elders shall use the means of teaching, of refutation or warning, and of admonition, as well in the ministry of the Word as in Christian teaching and family-visiting. (Church Order 55, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 397)

The Church Order’s reference to “false doctrines and errors that multiply exceedingly” recognizes that false doctrine *in our own denomination* is always a threat *within our own denomination*. False doctrines and errors multiply exceedingly! To ward off those false doctrines, ministers are to teach, refute, warn, and admonish the churches in the ministry of the word, that is, in the pulpit. The minister is called to preach the controversy. The minister is called to name the false doctrine in the church’s or denomination’s own midst and to preach against it. The minister may even name the heretical writing from the pulpit and quote from it, whether that heretical writing is a book written by a professor in the seminary, or an article in the *Standard Bearer* or *Sword and Shield* or the *Beacon Lights*, or a passage from the *Acts of Synod*. Regardless that the author of the heretical article is a minister in good standing or even is an assembly of the church, the church orderly way for another minister to ward off false doctrines and errors that multiply

exceedingly through heretical writings is for the minister to preach the controversy.

This is the church orderly way!

This is the article 55 way!

In fact, this is the main church orderly way for a minister of the gospel to engage in doctrinal controversy in his own denomination. The main way for a minister to pursue controversy is not by writing a protest. He may certainly write a protest. He may even consider himself in some instances duty bound to write a protest. But his protest is not the main calling that God has given him in the controversy. His main calling is to preach the controversy. His office is that of minister of the word of God. His calling is to preach the word and to reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. And he is called to do this among a people who eventually will not endure sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:1–4). Whether the minister ever writes a protest or not, he must preach the controversy.

So important is this preaching of the controversy that God uses it to “ward off false doctrines and errors” in a denomination (Church Order 55). The minister’s preaching the controversy, along with the elders’ teaching the controversy on family visiting and in other settings, serves to “ward off” the error. Preaching wards off false doctrine because the preaching of the gospel of Christ “is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom 1:16).

Failing to preach the controversy, the minister does not ward off the error but allows it to fester as a deadly poison among the sheep. Probably the minister fails to preach the controversy because he thinks that he is protecting the good name and reputation of his colleagues. Probably the minister thinks that he is loving the denomination by not causing a public stir. Probably the minister thinks that he is being orderly by his two-year-long journey through the assemblies. What the minister actually is doing is conniving at the slaughter of Christ’s flock. He refused to preach the controversy and thus failed to ward off false doctrine! God gave him the office of minister and fifty-two Lord’s days each year to feed and protect his sheep. And yet the minister remained silent just because the wolf had the name Protestant Reformed? Of course, the minister had the best of intentions. What those best of intentions purchased for the minister is a flock of dead sheep. When the Chief Shepherd shall appear at his coming, he does not require that the shepherds had the best of intentions but that they faithfully shepherded the sheep with the word of God for their protection and salvation.

If a minister ever finds himself having to sit down to write a protest against false doctrine in his own denomination, he ought to think, “It is probably too late for this! Instead, I must preach this tomorrow!” And he must keep on preaching it until the denomination repents of its false doctrine or until it casts him out as a troubler of Israel.

—AL

FROM THE EDITOR

There is such a thing as antinomianism.

There is also such a thing as a false charge of antinomianism. What is charged as antinomianism is not truly antinomianism. Let us call it “pseudo-antinomianism.”

Those who make the false charge of antinomianism proceed to attack the so-called antinomianism. Their position is anti-pseudo-antinomianism.

In this issue we are graced by two articles that take on the false charge and the false chargers of antinomianism. This issue of *Sword and Shield*, then, is the anti-anti-pseudo-antinomianism issue. Enjoy!

On another note, ever since reading Rev. Langerak’s stirring meditation in this issue, I have been drawn back to Lord Byron’s poem, *The Destruction of Sennacherib*, and to Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem, *Ozymandias*. Both are in the public domain and *Ozymandias* is reprinted here in full as a companion to the meditation.

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

—AL

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

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

A DEFENSE OF *SWORD AND SHIELD* AND REFORMED BELIEVERS PUBLISHING (5): False Charge of Antinomianism

Christ, Not Obedience

I have been advancing a defense of the Reformed periodical *Sword and Shield* and its publisher, Reformed Believers Publishing. This over against efforts to smear the magazine as divisive. Last time I began a defense of the necessity of the magazine in vindication of the truth over against writings that minimized the seriousness of the false doctrine that was condemned by two Protestant Reformed synods, first in 2017 and again in 2018.

Now I take up the matter of the false charge of antinomianism that has plagued this controversy.

It is essential to understand that the “false doctrine” faced at Synod 2017 (*Acts of Synod 2017*, 281) and Synod 2018 was the same. It is essential to understand that this “false doctrine” was first exposed in a sermon on John 14:6, which reads: “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” The following three statements from the sermon were the focus of the protests that came to Synod 2017: “The way unto the Father includes obedience... The way of a holy life matters. It is the way unto the Father... He [Jesus Christ] is the way, your way, unto me, through the truth which he works in your hearts, through a godly life” (*Acts of Synod 2017*, 315–16, 318).

Synod 2017 sustained protests against those statements. One of the protests stated,

Adding our good works, that is, us ourselves, to Jesus Christ as the way of the text [John 14:6] to the Father, that is, the way of salvation from sin and death unto justification and eternal life, is both falsification of the text and gross perversion of the gospel of “Jesus Christ alone” and “grace alone,” which gospel of grace the text clearly and powerfully teaches. (*Acts of Synod 2017*, 281–82)

Another protest stated, “The sermon errs by giving the works of believers a place in salvation that is not in harmony with the teachings of Scripture and the Reformed creeds” (*Acts of Synod 2017*, 333–34).

Synod 2017 stated over against the false statements in the sermon on John 14:6,

Adding our works to Jesus Christ as the way to the Father contradicts the plain teaching of the text that Christ alone is the way, which is the gospel of salvation by grace alone through Christ alone... To introduce good works and obedience into the text as part of the way with Jesus is to make ourselves in part our own mediator and advocate. (*Acts of Synod 2017*, 82–83)

Synod 2017 clearly condemned the false doctrine preached in a sermon on John 14:6. The false doctrine was the perversion of the gospel of grace by adding our obedience to Jesus Christ as part of the way to the Father, so that Christ plus our obedience are the ground, or reason, for our coming unto God.

The appeal at Synod 2018 concerned false doctrine that had been preached in sermons on different texts, but the issue was not different. There was not a new false doctrine that synod had to face, but the same false doctrine showed itself in various sermons. This is clear because Synod 2018 identified the false doctrine: “The doctrinal error is that the believer’s good works are given a place and function that is out of harmony with the Reformed confessions” (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 61). What confessions in particular? Lord’s Days 23 and 45, both of which have to do with the believer’s access to God. These Lord’s Days are John 14:6 in creedal form. The corruption of the gospel of both Lord’s Days was the same, namely, making our good works part of the way unto the Father.

In the sermon on Lord’s Day 23, works were made part of the way to a subjective justification in the sense of *knowing* the pardon of sin. Works were made part of justification by means of a fallacious distinction in the sermon between God’s courtroom of objective justification, wherein works were excluded, and the subjective courtroom of our hearts, wherein works were included. So the sermon stated the false doctrine in bald form:

What is James [in chapter 2] speaking of? He's certainly, beloved, not speaking of that objective, legal justification...in God's courtroom...How can I be justified in God's holy, pristine courtroom by my works?...

But there is, of course, that other courtroom...There's that courtroom that exists within our hearts...within our mind. And that's what James [v. 21] is speaking of. Abraham was justified, that is, in his heart. He became aware, he became more conscious of the justifying work, of God's declaring him righteous...how?

By looking at his works and giving a proper evaluation of those works. (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 67–68)

So the sermon taught that James and Paul both spoke of justification *in the same sense as pardon of sin*, but the difference between James and Paul was justification in *different courtrooms*. The sermon taught that works were part of the way to the Father in subjective justification, in our hearts and minds.

This is shocking. For the justification of the sinner in his heart and mind is the *main* sense in which scripture speaks of justification. And the Reformed creeds and scripture teach that this justification is absolutely without works and is by faith alone and on the basis of Christ alone. *Christ is the only way to the Father*.

In the sermon on Lord's Day 45, works were made part of the way of approach to God in prayer. So the sermon taught the following:

What do the creeds say about the relationship between obedience and fellowship? That there are requirements...

The Catechism says: Come to God that way, meeting those requirements, meeting those demands of God for a proper prayer, and you can be assured you will enjoy the fellowship of God. (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 65)

Works were again made part of the way to the Father. The sinner is in part his own mediator and advocate.

Now over against all of this, the word of the gospel is **NOT BY WORKS!** Works cannot be put away too harshly or thoroughly in this regard. The whole subject of the believer's access and approach to God is a matter of faith

in Christ alone because it concerns how the believer, who is a sinner, will be justified. The believer's access to God concerns how he will be acquitted before the perfectly righteous God, how he will stand before God, and on what basis he will ask for things from God. That basis can only be Christ and his perfect righteousness received by faith alone. Central to the issue of coming to God, access to God, and the way to God is the issue of justification because only if God forgives sins can the sinner, also the believer, stand before God.

Proper distinctions must be made on what issue we are talking about. Martin Luther is instructive here in his commentary on Galatians 2:17. Galatians 2:17 reads, "If, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid." One can take the text to mean an objection by opponents against the doctrine of justification by faith alone that it makes men careless

and profane and thus makes Christ the minister of sin. Or, my preferred interpretation, one can take the text to mean that those who teach justification by faith and works make Christ a new lawgiver. Those who teach justification by faith and works teach that our justification is by Christ and also by the works that Christ works in us.

But Paul says justification is either / or. It is either all Christ and no works, or it must be all works and no Christ. And so if we are justified by Christ and still are found sinners who have to be justified by the law, then Christ is a minister of sin and no savior at all. He does not take away sin but only reveals that we are still sinners who have to be justified by the law. And such a doctrine teaches that Christ and his incarnation, atoning death, and resurrection really accomplished nothing for us because, although we have Christ, all he did was leave us as sinners who still have to be justified by the law.

Regardless of how one takes the text, the point Luther made about it is true.

We do make a distinction here; and we say that we are not disputing now whether good works ought to be done. Nor are we inquiring whether the Law is good, holy, and righteous, or whether it ought to be observed; for that is another topic. But our argument and question concerns justification and whether the Law

The whole subject of the believer's access and approach to God is a matter of faith in Christ alone because it concerns how the believer, who is a sinner, will be justified.

justifies. Our opponents do not listen to this. They do not answer this question, nor do they distinguish as we do. All they do is to scream that good works ought to be done and that Law ought to be observed. All right. We know that. But because these are distinct topics, we will not permit them to be confused. In due time we shall discuss the teaching that the Law and good works ought to be done. But since we are now dealing with the subject of justification, we reject works, on which our opponents insist so tenaciously that they ascribe justification to them, which is to take Christ's glory away from him and assign it to works instead.*

We must understand that the issue before the Protestant Reformed Churches was *justification*, and this is true because the central matter before the synods of 2017 and 2018 was access to God, the way to the Father. Thus the issue was grace versus grace and works regarding access to God. The way to the Father is Jesus Christ by faith in his name and without works. All the talk about good works, calling, and obedience was a near total failure to distinguish, as Luther insisted that we must, when the issue before the churches was access to God and thus was justification (and by extension the unconditional covenant of grace).

The Charge of Antinomianism

An inexcusable part of this controversy, then, has been the introduction of the charge of antinomianism against those who said that the way to the Father does not include works, preaching the law, and obedience, but is a way of pure grace on the basis of Christ's perfect obedience alone.

Antinomianism was first charged at the consistory level. Elder Neil Meyer was charged with antinomianism and deposed from his office. The connection between his objection to preaching obedience as part of the way to the Father and the charge of antinomianism against him was most clearly and succinctly stated by Classis East in January 2016:

Mr. Meyer's objection to the three statements of the sermon...preached in the context of the calling of one saved by grace, constitutes an objection to preaching the necessity of obedience and good works for the life of the child of God. (Decisions of Classis East, quoted in *Acts of Synod 2016*, 108)

Now it must be remembered that Mr. Meyer objected to statements in a sermon on John 14:6 that obedience is

part of the way to the Father. So classis said that to deny that obedience is part of the way to the Father in John 14:6 was *ipso facto* antinomian. That judgment was grounded, according to the statement of classis, on the idea that the one addressed in the preaching is "saved by grace."

So the idea becomes, if you are a regenerated, called, believing child of God—"saved by grace"—a preacher can and must call you to come to the Father by Christ *and your obedience*. A preacher can and must preach to you the necessity of your obedience and good works in order for you to come to the Father. To object to that and to say that the way to the Father is a way of pure grace that excludes—absolutely excludes—your obedience is antinomian.

That is a novel species of antinomianism. That is to charge the gospel with being antinomian. For the gospel of John 14:6 is that *Christ is the only way to the Father*. Christ is the way, and you are not, and you have Christ by faith alone through grace alone.

The charge of antinomianism was an entirely false charge.

This false charge led to other extraneous issues being introduced into the controversy: works in the life of the covenant believer, the callings and admonitions of scripture, and the place of the preaching of the law. The false charge of antinomianism was the only reason these issues came up, and they were distractions from the issue of Christ as the only way to the Father. The false charge of antinomianism was a red herring that flagrantly misled the churches when the battle was about *Christ as the only way to the Father, at the heart of which stood the issue of justification by faith alone*.

Reverend Koole repeatedly takes issue with this assessment and contradicts it. He wrote,

I take exception to the notion that the issue of antinomianism [*sic*] was extraneous to this controversy with its ensuring [*sic*] debate. Contrary to your assertion, it was not a "red herring." It was plain from the outset that the orthodoxy of the phrase "in the way of" was part of what was being challenged, as in, "Is fellowship with God (its ongoing enjoyment), as well as reassuring one that he is a believer, to be found (experienced) in the way of obedience? And, is obedience unto godliness (that is, the 'must' of good works) to be preached and exhorted with that reality in mind? (Kenneth Koole, "Response" [to David J. Engelsma, "Faith as a Doing?"], *Standard Bearer* 96, no. 4 [November 15, 2019]: 85)

* Martin Luther, Lectures on Galatians, in *Luther's Works*, Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 26:145.

Recently, he instructed the following regarding Herman Witsius' response to antinomianism: "What we in our denomination are presently dealing with has pedigree" (Kenneth Koole, "Herman Witsius: Still Relevant," *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 4 [November 15, 2020]: 81).

His public analysis of the controversy began this way:

What we touch on in this editorial are issues that are not only relevant to a proper understanding of the Canons and of the historically defined Reformed faith, *but to issues being discussed in the PRC of late, namely, grace and godliness—the life of good works—in the life of the child of God*; in particular, how the life of godliness relates to grace, and to faith, and then to the preaching of the gospel itself with its call to faith and godliness. (Kenneth Koole, "What Must I Do...?" *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 1 [October 1, 2018]: 6–7; emphasis added)

So the issue being discussed in the Protestant Reformed Churches is supposed to be "the life of good works."

Later he defended his analysis: "*It* [the article "What Must I Do...?"] *was occasioned* by the discussion on the various issues raised by the controversy. And one of the large issues was (and continues to be) 'What is to be judged as antinomianism?'" (Kenneth Koole, "A Charge Answered," *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 4 [November 15, 2018]: 81).

So he states again that "one of the large issues" facing the Protestant Reformed Churches is antinomianism and has been antinomianism.

A False and Dangerous Charge

He must understand that the problem with his analysis is not disagreement that the churches face antinomianism from time to time. The problem with his analysis is that the false charge of antinomianism arose in the churches' controversy about statements in a sermon on John 14:6 and the subsequent revelation of the same false doctrine in other sermons dealing with justification and our approach unto God in prayer. The gospel in that context says that Christ is the only way, and you and your obedience are not the way. This was judged by some to be a species of antinomianism, a threat to preaching obedience and the callings and admonitions of scripture, and an attack on the language of "in the way of." This has been the message since Synod 2016. It was not the message of Synod 2016 and subsequent synods. It has been the message in spite of the decisions of the synods.

This message must be rejected as a false analysis of what was at issue in the Protestant Reformed Churches and what they must consequently be warned against in

the present controversy. The false analysis is not merely false, but also dangerous. It is dangerous because it threatens the gospel of grace as that was defended in the proper explanation of Christ as the only way to God. The calling to do good works, the value of good works, the use of the phrase "in the way of," and the preaching of the law were only at issue insofar as those things were used to teach that Christ and our works of obedience *are* part of the way to the Father. When a minister declares as the gospel that good works are part of the way to the Father, and then when the believer calls him on that lie and the minister defends his false theology by an appeal to "in the way of," the believer can be excused for thinking, "Well, if that is what 'in the way of' means, I want no part of it." The fault, though, is the egregiously false doctrine.

What Reverend Koole fails to see, or will not see, is that the calling to do good works, the calls to obedience, and the use of "in the way of" were not threatened by those who objected to the false preaching, but these were threatened by those who used the calling to do good works, calls to obedience, and the phrase "in the way of" to defend heresy—specifically the heresy that our obedience is part of the way to the Father—thus compromising justification by faith alone and the unconditional covenant. The defenses of the John 14:6 sermon and other bad sermons were almost entirely made by quoting at length a goodly number of Protestant Reformed ministers who wrote using the phrase "in the way of," as though the phrase had much to do with the proper explanation of John 14:6. It was as though the fact that this phrase had a long and venerable use in the Protestant Reformed Churches—beginning with Herman Hoeksema—was justification for the explanation of John 14:6 as including the believer's obedience as part of the way to the Father. It was as though because the phrase had been used in our churches it had to be part of the explanation of John 14:6.

But the exact opposite is true. The believer's obedience must be excluded from the way to the Father, which way is Christ alone. It is not antinomian to deny—and with some vigor—that good works, preaching the law, and the rest have anything to do with the way to the Father. It is egregiously misleading to suggest that objections against the false doctrine that good works are part of the way to the Father are antinomian or open the door even a crack to antinomianism, because to say so is to say that the gospel opens the door to antinomianism and is suspect of antinomianism.

Beginning a defense of the necessity of good works, the preaching of callings and admonitions, and the rest from that standpoint of this false charge of antinomianism also makes that defense suspect. It is suspect because

these necessities were all defended very vigorously in the service of defending a sermon that perverted the gospel and taught obedience and good works as part of the way to the Father in John 14:6 and similarly in sermons on other scriptural texts and Lord's Days. The problem is not teaching the necessity of good works, the preaching of callings and admonitions, or using the words "in the way of," but the problem is the *use* to which these things are put. If they are put to use in the service of a doctrine that teaches that good works and obedience are more than fruits, that they really do gain with God, that they are part of the way to God and his fellowship, and that the promise of God in the covenant is fulfilled in the way of obedience, they stand in the service of a false doctrine of works-righteousness, and that *use* is to be condemned as a perversion of the gospel.

In the controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches, that charge of antinomianism was determined by three Protestant Reformed synods—2016, 2017, and 2018—to be *without basis*. How can it not finally be agitation against synod to keep bringing up antinomianism as the major issue, or even part of the issue, in the churches' controversy? How can that not be regarded finally as militancy against the synods' analyses of the controversy? How can that not be finally regarded as an inexcusable misleading of the churches?

Yet the whole idea of antinomianism as part of the controversy continues to hang around. It has never been allowed to be laid to rest. The charge of antinomianism continued to come to Synod 2017 and Synod 2018, and *three synods said the charge was not true*, yet not without battles and severe disagreement.

The charge began to take on a life of its own. The statements that were charged with being antinomian became divorced from the John 14:6 sermon and the protest against which the charge of antinomianism was raised. Concerted effort was made in a protest and in connection with that protest to prove that some of Mr. Meyer's statements were antinomian, and this by means of an appeal to the definitions of antinomianism by avowed enemies of the gospel of grace and the unconditional covenant, such as Mark Jones.*

The false charge of antinomianism was a red herring that flagrantly misled the churches when the battle was about *Christ as the only way to the Father, at the heart of which stood the issue of justification by faith alone*.

Some still wrongly claim that antinomianism *is* the issue in the Protestant Reformed Churches, an issue that Synod 2018 failed to deal with. Antinomianism is not the issue—not in the form in which it is being described, that is, being against good works and preaching the law and the callings and admonitions of scripture.

The introduction of the false charge, the continual drumbeat about the dangers of antinomianism in this controversy, and the wild flinging of accusations against ministers and members for tending to antinomianism or being antinomian have allowed the fiction to take root in the minds of many that the Protestant Reformed Churches were really facing two issues at the synods.

They were facing, on the one hand, those who would make obedience part of the way to the Father. On the other hand, they were facing those who objected to that teaching. The idea took hold that the objectors were in principle antinomians, and the reasons they objected to obedience being made part of the way to the Father was their objections to any and all preaching of the law, preaching of commands, and preaching of the callings and admonitions of scripture; and they were against the language of "in the way of."

That the idea took hold in the minds of many that the controversy faced by the churches was in part, even in large part, about antinomianism was inexcusable because Synod 2016 had addressed the matter decisively: the protestant is not an antinomian; he is not against preaching the law; he is not against preaching commands and admonitions. But he is against these things in the preaching regarding how believers come unto God. It is not antinomian in the least, does not betray even a whiff of antinomianism, when one vigorously contends that works have nothing to do with our coming unto God but that we come to him only by faith in Christ—Christ who is the only way to God.

I do not know how to get rid of this approach that has so hindered the easy condemnation of the lie and that has set up this false enemy, except to insist yet again: *the controversy in our churches had nothing, nothing, nothing to do with antinomianism, and those who continue to say that it did are perpetuating a myth—and a dangerous one*.

* See "Protest of Prof. Ronald Cammenga," in *Acts of Synod 2017*, 264–77. See also Mark Jones, *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013). For the theology of Mark Jones, see Nathan J. Langerak's nine-part series, "The Charge of Antinomianism," <http://rfpa.org/blogs/news>.

The charges of antinomianism in this controversy were egregiously false and false in the most serious matter of the gospel and the believer's coming to God. *The gospel in its insistence that Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father and that the believer's obedience is not part of that way was charged with antinomianism!*

When someone preaches to me my calling, the law, and the necessity of good works and warns me of antinomianism, my first question to him will be, do you mean as the way to the Father? If so, I will say, "I am not an antinomian; you are a teacher of works-righteousness."

Antinomianism had absolutely nothing to do with the issue that the Protestant Reformed Churches faced. If we continue to insist that it did, not only are we going to miss the seriousness of the false doctrine that cropped up in our churches, but we are also going to end up denying the gospel yet again. For if a man is suspected of

antinomianism for insisting that the way to the Father is a way of pure grace that does not include our obedience at all, that we leave our obedience at the door when we go to God, and that in coming to God our standing before him has nothing at all to do with our obedience—or in the words of Luther, if we do not properly distinguish what the issue is and, therefore, what the answer of scripture is—we will make the very same mistakes again.

If the question is whether the law is good and we must obey it and do good works, then we say yes. If the question is, how does the believer come unto God, then we say no; in the matter of the believer's access to God, we are not talking about the law or good works or obedience at all, but Christ and his perfect righteousness alone. That is not antinomian.

—NJL

FAITH AND LIFE

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.—Romans 12:1

CANCEL CULTURE

Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil; neither shalt thou speak in a cause to decline after many to wrest judgment. — Exodus 23:2

The ethics of mercy ought to lead us to form judgments regarding what we are presented with today in the form of cancel culture. So many instances of cancel culture show a pointed failure to exercise mercy. Cancel culture is brutal, cold, and unforgiving. It destroys persons' lives and livelihoods. It uses manipulation and deceit. Its weapons are slander and anger, to the point of rage and physical violence. As a culture it brands corporate leaders and well-known persons who used poor judgment in speaking on one occasion or another with the same hot iron as the likes of Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein. J. K. Rowling, Chick-fil-A, and police officers are thrown into the same category as pedophiles and serial rapists. Jewish people rightly take umbrage that present so-called "systemic racism" is compared to the Holocaust. Political conservatives are branded as Nazis.

The following paragraph, from a major newspaper, provides a good definition of cancel culture:

The acclaimed Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is known for speaking her mind. And recently, she tackled one of the most controversial topics of the year, on the BBC program *Newsnight*. When asked about "cancel culture"—the social media trend of demanding people who say objectionable things be "de-platformed," stripping them of speaking engagements, livelihoods and reputation—Adichie said she found it lacking in basic compassion. "In general, I think that the response to bad speech is more speech," she said. "The problem with just sort of no-platforming people, cancelling people, sometimes for the smallest things, I think that it

then makes censorship become a thing that we do to ourselves. I often wonder how many people are not saying what they think because they're terrified. And if that's happening, how much are we not learning? How much are we not growing?"*

As bad as it is and in spite of its name, cancel culture is more an ethical system than a culture. It is indeed one of the worst to appear in the history of mankind. It is a complex ethical system with various branches. Admittedly, it is not very organized. Yet it is organized and systematic enough to be called a culture. It has such a consistency that it can be defined and described. As a system it is ethical in character and nature. It declares its distinctions between good and bad. It metes out punishment according to its applied distinctions. The proclaimed goodness of cancel culture it reserves only to itself. Cancel culture uses all its power to pronounce condemnation, never to exonerate. It is called *cancel culture* because its business is to cancel, that is, to destroy.

Its targets are many and varied, and they range from prominent individuals to corporations and to institutions. Conservative college professors are targeted for teaching about differences among cultures and nations throughout history. Recently a journalist for the *New York Times* felt compelled to resign because of her stand in support of journalistic freedom and integrity. She cited as a reason for her resignation the cancel culture in operation at her employer, formerly recognized as a pillar of journalism. Remarkable about her case was that she was an ardent supporter of the LGBTQ movement and identified herself as bisexual. Yet she faced powerful opposition and bullying in the workplace because of her willingness to entertain opinions disagreeable to cancel culture. Others like her—liberal journalists, authors, and prominent members of academia—together signed an open letter concerning the demise of intellectual and academic freedom due to the rise of cancel culture. Their letter brought on them a firestorm of criticism from their peers.

Institutions likewise have come under severe pressure and strain from cancel culture. Calls to defund the police are part of cancel culture. The office of the president of the United States was under fire by cancel culture because of the president's opposition to cancel culture and most notably because of his support of law and order in the country. As Amy Coney Barrett was confirmed by the Senate to the Supreme Court, politicians attempted to use cancel culture to defeat her approval to become an associate justice in the highest court of the United States. Her crime

was that she believed that the constitution of the United States was a valid legal and controlling document—not to mention that she was a Roman Catholic whose thoughts had an objective moral alignment to them.

Parentage of Cancel Culture

Regardless of whether cancel culture admits it or not, this movement has historical roots. Its roots are in boycott and other forms of protest, including civil disobedience. These roots developed in history from boycott and civil disobedience to rioting. Cancel culture is sympathetic toward anarchy and rioting both because they are partners in the destruction of rule of law and because together they are anti-institutional. In these roots are the movement's present force and justification. Even though it is somewhat ashamed of its history, cancel culture is not afraid to make twisted use of history's force and justification for present advantage. In light of cultural and intellectual history, it would seem that cancel culture, like anarchy, seeks to apply the philosophy of nihilism into concrete action.

Because cancel culture is truly an ethical system, it has criteria by which it imposes its judgment upon persons, companies, and institutions. The most basic criteria are political, but the criteria are divided. Cancel culture enjoys support from liberalism, while having none from conservatism. Because of this support, the movement justifies liberalism and determines conservative views to be unethical. However, cancel culture is actually too strident a movement for simple liberalism in the United States, its main base as a cultural movement. Cancel culture also condemns as unethical moderate liberalism, which supports historical institutions, law and order, and capitalist economies. Especially in this respect cancel culture represents the destructive force that historically has led to the beginning of communist regimes. "Leaders" of cancel culture will cite tenets of Marxism as justification for their actions.

An early manifestation of cancel culture was the Occupy movement, in which groups of young people made encampments near financial centers in various cities. Their first point was to try to condemn the wealthy by positioning themselves as poor persons who had the right to occupy the same ground as their wealthy enemies. Their first point was to serve a second: the only possibility for wealth to exist was the poverty of the poor, and to be wealthy was to be guilty of stealing from the poor. The Occupy movement pushed its particular form of civil disobedience into anarchist expression. It was remarkable

* Tara Henley, "Writers Call for a More Nuanced Alternative to 'Cancel Culture,'" *The Globe and Mail*, January 2, 2021, accessed January 4, 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books/article-writers-call-for-a-more-nuanced-alternative-to-cancel-culture/>.

that many in government expressed not only sympathy toward, but also solidarity with, the movement. One of the more troubling elements of cancel culture is that many government officials, trying to gain the favor of populist sentiment, approve anarchy.

The above leads to one of the revealing features of cancel culture: it has two kinds of targets. First and more apparent, it has persons and definable institutions in view. Second, it has everything historical in view. In the viewpoint of cancel culture, the past is so steeped in sheer prejudice and bigotry that it ought to be entirely canceled. Statues, not only of white male oppressors, are torn down. Torn down are also many simple, symbolic reminders of the past. Statues commemorating the abolition of slavery are destroyed because they are reminders of a history that ought not to exist any longer, even in the minds of a people. It is not hard to envision the movement, now directed at historical icons such as statues, soon to be directed against all history books.

Roots of Cancel Culture

There are two main forces that drive cancel culture: hatred and ignorance. These two forces are coordinated as an emotionalism that is so strong exactly because it defies reasoning. Reasoning generally tempers emotions. Seeing cancel culture in the light of scripture, the necessity of judging all things in the light of God's word is meant to curb and control our emotions, so that we properly love good and hate evil. But the hatred of cancel culture is so strong exactly because it refuses arguments, pro and con.

This ignorant hatred that is characteristic of cancel culture is manifested. When asked for justification or explanation for the destruction of any victim, the response defies logic. Why must a particular statue be torn down? Because the commemorated individual was either a slave owner or represented racism. When the conversation continues with a suggestion that whatever those facts may be, it does not deny the individual's contribution to history, the response is simply an angry recitation of the same line. Another way in which ignorant hatred is expressed is the angry shouting down of those presenting opposing arguments. Facts do not matter. History does not matter. Arguments do not matter. What matters is channeled anger—anger that is present in enough persons to justify itself, build up, and gather those persons together. Anger then focuses that energy to destroy persons, companies, institutions, and history itself.

Cancel culture also condemns as unethical moderate liberalism, which supports historical institutions, law and order, and a capitalist economy.

Cancel culture presents itself then as mob rule. Having no basis in thoughtful, deliberative control of its force, it nevertheless expresses itself against identifiable targets. Consideration of these targets leads to two certain conclusions about the movement. First, its targets have a common feature. They represent a solid past, a past that is able to project itself into the future with a certain force. That force is orderly, structural, objective, and standardized and has the potential for shaping and molding the future. That force represents basic divisions in society and culture that project these divisions into the future. These are divisions that represent law and order and values of marriage, family, and parenting. These are divisions between conservative and liberal, between capitalism and socialism. These divisions represent a standard, in light of which the future can be judged. Cancel culture is truly revolutionary in the deepest sense of the word. It seeks to remove but has nothing to replace. It works to tear down but has nothing to build up. One can only guess at what will fill the vacuum that cancel culture is stridently and angrily creating.

The second conclusion concerns the nature of the movement's control. Who or what is the guiding force behind cancel culture? The importance of this question becomes clear from a consideration not of its victims or targets but of those caught up in the sweep of its power. Those claiming to represent cancel culture do not control it. Many who claim to represent it show in their representation that they do not understand it. Attempts to explain or justify the movement all show a failure to reckon with its anarchist nature. Many who one day claim to represent the movement or even control it are the next day felled by it.

Both of these conclusions must be truly frightening to every thoughtful individual. But the Reformed believer must see the hand of God's judgment in cancel culture. As man has tried to overthrow the rule of God and denied his sovereignty, he has substituted his own laws for the laws of God. He has rejected absolute truth in favor of a relativistic worldview. Morality and ethics have become increasingly relative, determined by a society's own interests and values. Favoring selfishness over love of God and love of the neighbor for God's sake, cancel culture represents the end of that selfishness: a building rage against all that smells the least bit of authority or absolutes. The Reformed believer is thus comforted when confronted with cancel culture, for it is but the manifestation of the

righteousness of God against the wickedness of men who hold the truth under in unrighteousness.

At the same time, the Reformed believer has an answer for cancel culture.

First, he must know the condemnation of its building rage and anger according to God's word. It is the very same rage at which the Lord laughs in Psalm 2, the rage of the nations' seeking to cast off the sovereign rule of the living God. It is the anger fomented by Demetrius and the other silversmiths of Ephesus against the testimony of the gospel preached by Paul in that city, an anger that drew the whole city together.

The people of the city were gathered into the theater as an aroused and angry multitude, ready to destroy whomever was presented to them as the public enemy. Yet, as we read in Acts 19:32, "the more part knew not wherefore they were come together." Cancel culture is

a violation of Exodus 23:2, God's law prohibiting following a multitude to do evil. It partakes of the same character as the multitude of the Jews gathered together, whipped into a frenzy by their leaders, who cried out for the crucifixion of Jesus, saying, "His blood be on us, and on our children" (Matt. 27:25).

Second, the Reformed believer must go behind the rage and ignorance of cancel culture to consider its complete lack of any moral basis. Cancel culture has nothing to explain and no standard to apply. It does not move from an objective framework that can be understood and communicated to a set of actions governed by that objective framework. This aspect of cancel culture ought to be most outstanding to the Reformed believer. In one respect it signals to him a real end of the rejection of the objective standard of God's word, particularly God's law. What makes cancel culture so astounding is that its bitter viciousness rests on an avowed policy of being nonjudgmental. It even rejects the perverted standards of men that have ruled for so long in our society and culture, expressing outrage at the term "sexual preference" when used by Amy Coney Barrett at her appearance before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Tide of Worldliness

Cancel culture is present in Reformed circles. Its anger and deliberate rejection of rational argument have crept in and become dominant. How is it that certain ministers are reviled and branded, with such hatred and contempt heaped on them? Derisive and contemp-

tuous words such as *slander* and *schism* are aimed and thrown with no ground or basis in fact. A new magazine that simply defends and maintains the truth merits the worst opprobrium without its opponents delving into the contents and taking the time to understand what is written and judging it in the light of God's word. Consistories, whose work is bound by article 30 of the Church Order, transgress the limits of the Church Order to censure the publication. The basis for that censure is said to be a violation of article 31 and the Formula of Subscription, without explaining how. Defense of the

truth of sovereign grace, based on such historical creeds as the three forms of unity, meets with hatred and reproach. Upholding certain decisions of past synods and seeking the maintenance and application of those decisions in the present is attacked with the buzzwords *slander* and *schism*. A furious mob gathers with weapons at the ready, whereof the

more part know not wherefore they are come together (Acts 19:32). Who pauses to consider the love of the truth as a proper motive for defending and maintaining it? Who stops to think things through? Far easier it is to let others decide and judge and simply follow their lead, rather than judging responsibly. To see civil government officials undermining their own rule and authority by promoting cancel culture should be a strong enough warning to ecclesiastical assemblies to keep them from doing the same. The power of cancel culture is indeed heady stuff!

A proper Reformed ethical response to cancel culture is to repudiate it for these reasons. The first is that its mode of destructive anger is condemned by scriptures such as James 1:20: "The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God." The second is that cancel culture denies the judgments of God in history, whether those judgments are the manifestations of his holiness against the sins of men or the simple outworking of his providence, even in such matters as rule of law and distinctions among men (Prov. 22:2). The third is that cancel culture denies the standard by which all things must be judged, the standard of holy scripture, according to 1 Thessalonians 5:21–22.

The child of God has a sure refuge from the raging force of the destructive power of cancel culture. The faces of men, though filled with fury and anger, cannot assail the righteousness of God (see James 1:20). Just as he who sits in the heavens laughs them to scorn, holding the heaven in derision (Ps. 2:4), the believer who possesses God's

What makes cancel culture so astounding is that its bitter viciousness rests on an avowed policy of being nonjudgmental.

righteousness by faith alone has nothing to fear from cancel culture. The name of God is the high tower to which he runs and finds and possesses all safety there. Being a redeemed servant of God, answering always and only to the God who has purchased him with his own blood,

he need not wither before the angry faces of men. He answers not to them but to his faithful heavenly Father. He is freed from the snare of the fear of man, though so intricately laid and so deadly of force.

—MVW

LETTER: HOW OTHERS SEE US

Rev. Langerak,

I understand that you originally hadn't written for the purpose of carefully inspecting why they assigned the particular descriptions of cultic, spiritually abusive, and sectarian schismatic to PRC believers. And I understand why you placed the accusation into the context of a broader polemic that has continued between Protestant Reformed theologians and Hyde, Carr, and others.

However, the charge still stands as a description of how PRC believers operate out of their convictions of truth. One cannot dismiss, override, or redefine their meaning by simply placing them under an umbrella label of "doctrinal." The terms—regardless of whether they are patently false or patently true—are unequivocally describing exactly *how* a group of believers are operating within their claims of possessing and maintaining the truth. Although there is both a lengthy and recent history of doctrinal opposition between Protestant Reformed theologians and Hyde and Carr, the terms of cultic, spiritually abusive, and sectarian schismatic still speak for themselves. Disallowing these terms to speak for themselves is like exegeting Eph. 4:15 as though the prepositional phrase "in love" doesn't speak for itself. Al-

though the phrase "in love" in vs. 15 resides in a context of an urgency to speak truth among ourselves, the phrase "in love" is still there. It still *speaks* for itself. It cannot be dismissed, overridden or redefined. It still stands regardless of how we understand the context, especially since the phrase "in love" is repeated again in the verse that follows. In similar fashion, the accusation that a group of believers are cultic, spiritually abusive, and sectarian schismatics still stands regardless of the broader context of doctrinal opposition. The charge still speaks for itself. It still stands especially since the same charge has resurfaced again and again repeatedly, both recently and historically.

A couple of questions for you:

1. How might Isaiah 58 apply to the controversy that has stirred among us over the past 4 years?
2. Will you point out to me the *watered garden* as described in Isaiah 58:11, a promise directly tied to the ten and a half verses preceding it? I can't seem to locate that particular garden.

Earnestly,
Stefan Griess

REPLY

I must confess that I am at a complete loss to determine Stefan's point. Perhaps instead of asking questions, he could give his interpretation of Ephesians 4:15 and Isaiah 58 and their application to the false and scurrilous charges of Hyde and others. Stefan apparently sees a con-

nection with Hyde's evil charges, the doctrine of the Protestant Reformed Churches, and the controversy in our churches, but what the connection is he does not say. He should come out with his views.

—NJL

TWO DITCHES...OR ONE?

The truth can be compared to a path on which we walk. This picture is scriptural. “Shew me thy ways, O LORD; teach me thy paths. Lead me in thy truth, and teach me: for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day” (Ps. 25:4–5).

But how do we view the perils of all the lies that surround us as we walk on that path of truth? The question is important. We need to know what the falsehoods are and where they are in order to avoid them. But the question is not so easily answered. Lies are intended to fool and deceive, after all. They lurk, they divert, they hide, and they divide. We do well to continually examine the landscape around us and take stock of where our feet are treading on the path. The purpose of this article is to do exactly that by reexamining a conception of the lay of the land that is commonly held in Reformed thought: a path that runs between two ditches.

The metaphor is used to explain the situation of the truth of salvation by grace alone as that truth constitutes a path running between two heretical ditches, which, according to the metaphor, are opposites. On one side of the path lies the ditch of legalism and works-righteousness, which teaches that justification is not by faith alone but includes works. On the other side of the path is the ditch of antinomianism, which teaches that the law of God need not be obeyed and need not be obeyed exactly because justification is by faith alone without works. Both ditches are abominable. According to the illustration, the truth has to find its way between the two.

The analogy is long-standing, and numerous examples could be cited. Jerry Bridges uses a picturesque description to explain the idea:

In one southern state, a narrow two-lane highway has been built through a swampland by building up the road bed above the swamp. You must be extra alert not to drift off the road because there is no margin for error. If you go off the road, you do not end up on a grassy shoulder but rather submerged in a swamp.

...the built-up roadbed represents grace that allows you to drive safely through the swampland of legalism and license.*

But is this illustration biblical, confessional, and even helpful? Have we taken the accuracy of the metaphor for

granted without considering the implications, options, or consequences? Considering these questions may prove to be unexpectedly revealing.

Let us assume that the illustration of the road between two ditches is true and that we are walking on that road. In practical terms, what do we tend to do if we get too close to something that is very dangerous and we want to avoid that thing completely? We would likely run in the opposite direction. Let’s try that.

“There are no works that can be or must be done for our salvation. Salvation is by grace alone.” That is true. We are walking on that road. But in a ditch that lies nearby, to one side of us, we peek over the edge and see that there are just a few works that must nevertheless be performed in order for us to obtain or to enjoy our salvation. Those works are oh so subtly hidden, yet they are there. “You must do justice to the responsibility of man in salvation as well as to God’s power to save. God doesn’t save corpses, you understand. He saves men who are able to work and meet conditions to the saving of their souls and to their own assurance and comfort.” No, that’s not true! That’s the false doctrine of legalism, works-righteousness, and Arminianism. Run! And so we run. We run in the opposite direction from the ditch. But the road—how wide is it? How much room is there for our escape?

We are still on the road and are nearing the other side. “There are no works that can be or must be done for our salvation. Salvation is by grace alone.” That is true. We are still standing on that ground. But just beyond, one more step in the direction we are heading, another ditch lies before us, with another fiendish deception lurking within its mire. “If you don’t need to do any good works in order to be saved, then you never need to do any good works at all. Sin—sin as you please, for that will only magnify the grace of God all the more.” No, run! That’s not true, either! That’s the heretical doctrine of antinomianism. And so we run. We run as far away as we can from that lie too.

But how far is far? The ditch of legalism looms once more in front of our fleeing stride. As we zigzag across the road, feverishly trying to avoid each ditch, we will make little progress in our journey walking down the road. At what point are we traveling straight in the middle of it, safe from both ditches on either side of us? And what is the width of that middle path? In the end must it not be

* Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2008), 148–49.

exceedingly narrow, lest we begin to err and lean toward one lie or the other? It becomes a tightrope on which we must balance in order to stay upright between the evil of licentious antinomianism on one side and the lie of self-righteous legalism on the other. It becomes a balancing act for the most skillful of theological acrobats to perform. We must ask, will this road between two ditches help us on our way to understanding, maintaining, and growing in the truths of God's grace, or are we left in a state of fear, so that we hardly dare to move?

What does scripture teach? "For thy mercy is great unto the heavens, and thy truth unto the clouds" (Ps. 57:10). "Remove from me the way of lying; and grant me thy law graciously" (119:29). "I have seen an end of all perfection: but thy commandment is exceeding broad" (v. 96). As the Old Testament people of God traveled to Zion to worship Jehovah there, they sang a set of songs called the psalms of degrees. Psalm 121 is one of them:

1. I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.
2. My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth.
3. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber.
4. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.
5. The LORD is thy keeper: the LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand.
6. The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.
7. The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul.
8. The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

They sang this on the road as well: "They that trust in the LORD shall be as mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth for ever" (125:1). The truth of God is high as the clouds and strong as the mountains and abides of old and forever. "For the LORD is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations" (100:5). In these texts walking on the path of the truth is not seen as any fearfully executed tiptoed circus feat.

And what of the Reformed creeds? Do they recognize two distinct ditches that must be avoided by finding our way between them? The answer we discover to that question is striking. "Doth not this doctrine [of justification by faith alone] make men careless and profane?" In other words, is there any danger in taking the truths of God's grace too far? Won't such strong adherence to Reformed doctrine cause men to despise the law of God

and to be antinomians? We know we must avoid the ditch of works-righteousness and Arminianism, but must not we beware of that antinomian ditch on the other side of the road too? Behold the Catechism's answer: "By no means; for it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness" (Q&A 64, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 107). Nor is this answer any fluke. Belgic Confession article 24, Canons 1.13, 5.12–13, 5 error and rejection 6, and the conclusion to the Canons all confess the same thing. As far as the Reformed confessions are concerned, carnal security because of believing too much in the truth of grace alone "is impossible."

The Reformed confessions are concerned with one ditch: works-righteousness. In all the references cited above, the ditch of antinomianism as caused by believing fully in the truths of faith alone and grace alone is denied as a possibility. In fact, when the enemies of grace voice their concerns that the Reformed doctrines of grace and predestination will cause people to run straight into that so-called ditch of careless impiety, their concerns are met with outright disgust:

It clearly appears that some...have violated all truth, equity, and charity, in wishing to persuade the public:

That the doctrine of the Reformed churches concerning predestination, and the points annexed to it, by its own genius and necessary tendency, leads off the minds of men from all piety...which the Reformed churches not only do not acknowledge, but even detest with their whole soul. (Conclusion to the Canons, in Confessions and Church Order, 179)

That charge of antinomianism the delegates at Dordt detested with their whole souls. The charge was false and completely undeserved.

What then do we do with these two errors called legalism and antinomianism? Both are serious, are they not? Both heresies are real, correct?

Let us examine them more closely. They are serious and they are real, but they may not be as opposite on the pendulum as we might think—and that makes all the difference. Belgic Confession article 23 sums up the danger of the lie of works-righteousness: "Verily, if we should appear before God, relying on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should, alas! be consumed" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 52). The ditch could not be more serious. The warning of this article applies to us all, we who are so weak in faith of ourselves. Let us peer into the terrifying darkness of the depths of the pit of self-righteous legalism and Arminianism, of reliance on our works for salvation—reliance on our works *though ever so little*—and

see how abominable this lie really is. By the grace of God, and only by the grace of God, are we delivered from such false religion. “If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O LORD, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared” (Ps. 130:3–4).

And what is antinomianism? Strictly speaking, it means to be against the law of God. In the context of two ditches on opposite sides of a road, it means to be against the law of God because of the doctrines of grace. Reformed doctrine, believing in too much grace, is to blame. It works this way: I am saved by grace alone without any reliance whatsoever on my obedience to the law of God. Therefore, in order to magnify God’s grace even more, I may sin as I please. I may do this for three reasons. First, I am saved no matter what, so no additional sin on my part is going to change that. Second, I can’t keep the law of God perfectly, so why try? And third, the more I sin, the more God has to save me from my sin, and that means that more grace of God will be utilized and more grace may therefore be extolled. The heresy is pernicious to the core, compounding evil upon evil.

But where lies that ditch of antinomianism? That it is a real lie that must be condemned is not the question. Where the ditch is located is the question. Logically and on the surface of it, it appears to lie across the road of grace alone, opposite the heresy of legalism. Since “legal” refers to law, perhaps calling legalism “law-ism” will be helpful for the moment. It means that the law of God saves in some way, not grace alone. So while one heresy (legalism, or law-ism) pulls back on grace alone and takes away from grace by replacing it with the works of the law, the heresy of antinomianism (or anti-law-ism, if you will) pushes grace alone too far and takes the law of God out of the picture completely.

But the matter is not that simple. There is antinomianism, an awful and real heresy, but there is also the false charge of antinomianism. And the false charge of antinomianism reveals that more is happening in this landscape than meets the eye.

How so? To begin to answer that, let us ask on whose lips the false charge of antinomianism is to be found. The delegates of the Synod of Dordt explain who they are. They are those who “have violated all truth, equity, and charity.” They are the Remonstrants, the Arminian branch of legalism. They are those who attack the doctrines of the Reformation in order to put works into election, justification, sanctification, and all the rest of God’s sole work of salvation. That the synod concludes with its

detestation of the charge is indicative of how prevalent the charge was against the delegates and also how significant the charge is. The false charge belongs to legalism. It is not only legalism’s effort to justify itself as it wrongfully puts man’s work into God’s sole work of salvation, but it also serves legalism’s jealousy to persecute those who rightfully walk on the path of grace alone, all the while attempting to stop further progress in understanding the Reformed truths of that grace.

The charge is doctrinally impossible. It is exactly in the confession of the doctrines of faith alone and grace alone that the law of God will be the object of one’s love. In that confession is every reason to strive to obey the law of God out of love and thanks for such great salvation worked by Jehovah alone. Indeed, Belgic Confession article 24 precludes any other motive, lest obedience to the law of God be performed “out of self-love or fear of damnation” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 53).

The charge is practically impossible as well. All believers, given the gift of faith, which is their bond to Jesus Christ, will receive the life of Christ flowing into them through that bond, which life infallibly produces in them all of the good works that God foreordained for them to do. That’s God’s grace at work. And God’s grace, which is itself power, is irresistible and unstoppable.

Thus all three forms of unity concur: antinomianism in a believer is impossible. Article 24 continues, “Therefore it is impossible that this holy faith can be unfruitful in man” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 53).

Repeatedly, Rome falsely accused the reformers of being antinomians, thus charging Luther, Calvin, and all the rest with that crime. Paul was accused of it, and he called the charge slander.* Jesus was accused as well: “Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.”** There is good company in being at the brunt of the false charge. Legalism’s embrace of the false charge of antinomianism could not be tighter or stronger. The charge is one of legalism’s main weapons against faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone.

And the charge has teeth. If antinomianism is truly believed and confessed (which some may still do but not while holding to the doctrines of salvation in truth, for that is impossible), the doctrine is doubly evil because it involves not merely sinning against God’s law, which is bad enough, but it also finds allowance for that sin in God’s grace. Those teeth are sharp because one who confesses the grace of God in truth and sincerely desires to live according to the law of God out of thanks and

* “And not rather, (as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say,) Let us do evil, that good may come? whose damnation is just” (Rom. 3:8).

** “The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children” (Matt. 11:19).

love will be devastated at the thought of being guilty of such an evil heresy. And more, the fear of the charge can tempt believers to weaken their confessions of the truths of grace alone, lest they be accused of holding to that pernicious doctrine or lest they somehow slip into that ditch. The charge is capable of leaving its mark.

And as Lucifer's own lie, the charge is ingenious as well. It uses the impossible to batter the consciences of God's people, while reining in the confession of the truth itself and stopping it in its tracks, or at least attempting to. In the end the attack is on the believer's faith itself: "You believe in God's work too much." The delegates at Dordt had good reason to detest the charge.

If the truth of God's grace cannot be stolen from a believer's heart by the slickest enticements to perform legalism's works of self-righteousness, then convincing men to be afraid of confessing and resting in the truth of God's grace too much will still do the job. The false charge of antinomianism against the truths of grace alone is a roadblock hurled straight out of the ditch of works-righteousness and legalism onto the road of the truth walked by faith in Christ alone. Whether salvation by works is able to grab a believer into its clutches and pull him off the road into the abyss of trusting in his works or the threat of the charge of antinomianism stops that same pilgrim from moving forward on that road, grace is not fully embraced nor wholeheartedly believed. The enemy against grace has won.

So where lies the ditch of antinomianism if the false charge of antinomianism rests in legalism's arsenal? It hides in the very same ditch. It is legalism's ammunition, after all. Legalism and antinomianism are bedfellows there. They may be two opposite sides of one coin, but they are still one coin. Their goal is one. Their methods differ. Legalism abuses the law of God just as much as any true antinomian does, by using the law for a purpose for which the law was never intended. Works of the law can never save and never could, but works-righteousness claims that they do. And more, because no one can obey the law of God perfectly in this life, works-righteousness lowers the bar of the law so that imperfect obedience can still merit. Perfection is no longer required. Such a false doctrine not only attacks the truth of justification by faith alone by inserting works into justification, but it also does despite to the holy law of God, which reflects God's own righteousness and holiness in absolute perfection. While antinomianism says you do not have to obey the law of God at all, legalism says you do not have to obey the law of God perfectly. Both attacks effectively harm the law of God.

And antinomianism's attack on the truth does not end with disposing of the law. It leaves the grace of God in shambles. First of all, using the grace of God as an excuse to sin is nothing short of villainous against God's holy grace. Further, if good works are the fruit of faith, there is

no gracious gift of faith given to that antinomian. And still more, this heresy does despite to the wondrous and glorious grace of God, which saves the elect sinner not only from the guilt of sin but from the power and dominion of sin as well. Antinomianism denies God's grace of sanctification altogether. Thus, along with denying the law of God, antinomianism denies the grace of God just as much as any brand of legalism does. In the end the damage to the law of God that these errors inflict is collateral destruction, while the central target of both heresies remains the truths of an entirely gracious salvation. Hitting justification by faith alone (which is what legalism does) takes all of salvation down in one strike, but sighting in sanctification as well (which is what antinomianism does) seals the demise and in the end batters justification some more for good measure besides. Satan knows the law doesn't save. His most fiery darts will always be pointed at what does.

How can a road fit between these two enemies of grace? How can we safely pry our way between them? Attempting to do so might very well plunge us over the edge of the cliff with both of them, heads and tails spinning together, to land where the father of all lies resides in his den at the bottom of its depths. How do we escape such an end? We escape by heading directly away from all false notions of works, though ever so little, and into the truths of grace more and more. In the face of the true confession of justification by faith alone, the enemy of sanctification—which is antinomianism—becomes nothing but a rogue phantom. That the truth of sanctification is put at risk by the pursuit of the truth of justification in full strength of faith is a lie. The opposite is true! Out of the knowledge and confidence of God's wondrous work of salvation, accomplished by him alone and centrally displayed in the truth of justification by faith alone, grows the sure fruit of gratitude. And gratitude demolishes any obstacle that any shade of antinomianism might attempt to set up, real or alleged. We escape because God puts us on that path of truth and grace, a path we walk in the certainty of faith, the faith that God alone gives.

What's on the other side of the road if a cliff drops away from only one edge of it? A wall is there, a wall of safety that guides us on our way. The road is built on a mountain. Its foundation is steadfast as solid rock. It is no man-made road floating in the middle of a swamp. It is a highway, straight and sure. It ascends to the top of Mount Zion. It is built on Mount Zion. It is Mount Zion. It is Jesus Christ himself. The voice of one in the wilderness cried, "Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isa. 40:3). Jesus said of himself, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). In him our foot cannot be moved.

Such is the landscape of faith, of grace, and of truth.

—Connie L. Meyer



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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbideth them that would, and casteth them out of the church. — 3 John 9–10

Diotrephes.

A miserable picture scripture draws, a picture more grotesque because it occurs between two beautiful portraits. On one side is a picture of the well-beloved Gaius, loved of the beloved disciple, John, in the truth. The truth was in Gaius, and he walked in truth and faithfully did all things, both to the brethren and to strangers. He was especially a help to the preaching of the gospel by supporting the ministers of the gospel, who went out and took nothing of the Gentiles. Lovely Gaius.

On the other side is the portrait of Demetrius. Less fully done and drawn with quick strokes, yet the Christian beauty of the man emerges clearly. He had a good report of all men and of the truth, and John testified to that.

But Diotrephes! Ugly!

He loved to have the preeminence. He loved to be first and wanted to be in control. He desired to be regarded as superior and would not suffer anyone to have more power or influence than him. He would not even let anyone be his equal. There was nothing preeminent about Diotrephes, but he was full of covetousness, envy, and ambition.

And he did his evil work in the church. When John wrote to the church, Diotrephes would not receive or communicate John's letter to the church. Diotrephes loved being prominent, and he would not tolerate instruction, even from an apostle. Not even the word of God would be allowed to have preeminence in the world and church of Diotrephes.

You can imagine that such a man would be a very evil influence in a congregation. And so Diotrephes was. He went about prating against the apostle with malicious words. Diotrephes went through the congregation reviling, slandering, undermining, and attacking the apostle at every opportunity.

What would move the man to such wickedness? He loved to have the preeminence.

Diotrephes did not stop there. Not content with destroying the name of the apostle, Diotrephes did not receive the brethren and forbade those who would and cast them out of the church. Those men came with the gospel. They were the teachers of the gospel to the church, and Diotrephes would not receive them. He would not suffer any influence in the church other than his own, not even the gospel. And if any in the church would receive those preachers, Diotrephes forbade them. And when those who received the preachers would not listen, the tyrant cast them out of the church.

Diotrephes was essentially a small-minded man, concerned only for himself, his power, his name, and his reputation. The truth was not in him, so he loved to have the preeminence and would not give place to any, not even to the truth, which is God and Christ. So Diotrephes was full of jealousy, envy, lying, slander, and hatred of the brethren because he loved to have the preeminence.

Watch out for men like Diotrephes.

And men like Diotrephes had better remember the word of the Lord: "If I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth."

Woe to Diotrephes!

—NJL