



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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IN WISDOM JEHOVAH MADE THEM ALL

*O LORD, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all:
the earth is full of thy riches. — Psalm 104:24*

“**O** LORD, how manifold are thy works!” The unknown psalmist stands at the threshold of a new spring. The sweet zephyr ruffles his hair and pleasantly swirls through the new grass of spring. God sends forth his Spirit, and the earth is renewed. The creation is coming out of the death grip of winter, and there is the promise of new life and resurrection from the death of winter. The trees begin to blossom, grass and herbs again flourish, the birds return and build their nests, and the mountain goats and conies appear on the mountainsides. The coming year of plowing, planting, and harvest awaits him.

The psalmist knows not what the coming year will bring, but he knows this: God is active in his creation. He is active, as he has always been active from the beginning of the world and as he will be active to the end of the world. God is the God who cares for his creation. He holds everything in his hands and directs all things to the goal he has established in his eternal counsel, so that the coming year will be the unfolding and bringing to pass of God’s decrees.

As the psalmist surveys the wonderful works of God, he interrupts his survey with a noble exclamation: “How manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches.”

An exclamation of faith.

An exclamation of praise.

An exclamation of trust in the Lord who made heaven and earth and who is our help.

An exclamation full of hope!

The psalmist can stand in the creation at the beginning of the year and have such hope because he fixes his eye of faith firmly upon God.

This psalm has been called the finest hymn in the whole psalter and the most perfect expression of praise in the entire book of Psalms. It is a psalm of praise to God. The theme is “O LORD my God, thou art very great.” The Holy Spirit develops that theme by rehearsing God’s manifold works in creation.

In this sublime survey of God’s manifold works, the psalmist begins where every believer ought to begin—with the scriptures. In fact, it appears that, whoever the inspired scribe was, he had the book of Genesis open in

front of him, and indeed the same Spirit who inspired Genesis inspired this psalm in praise of God’s work as that is recorded in Genesis. The psalmist does not begin by looking at creation, but he begins by looking at what scripture says about creation. He learned first from God’s word. He does not subject scripture to his observations, but his observations are subject to scripture. He is a keen observer of creation, as we ought to be, but he starts by observing scripture and what God says about his creation.

Creation is an elegant book. That book should lead us to contemplate the invisible things of God, namely his power and divinity, but that book is closed to us apart from faith and the revelation of scripture.

The sinful heart of man draws all the wrong conclusions from the creation. He holds the truth under in unrighteousness. He denies God’s account of creation in scripture and says that God made this creation in millions of years. Sinful man robs God of the glory that is due his name in creation. Changing the truth into a lie, unregenerate man worships the creature rather than the creator. When man denies God’s work of creation, he cuts off creation from God’s providential control and places himself outside of God’s law and word. Rejecting that divine word, a man shows himself to be an unbeliever and makes himself a fool in all his observations of creation, and his mouth grows silent in giving glory to God.

But the believer begins with God’s work of creation as that is revealed in Genesis 1 and 2. That revelation of God the believer receives by faith, and creation is the first in his long catalog of the marvelous works of God. So also the psalmist in verse 5: God “laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be removed for ever.” As an expert builder, God set the earth upon a foundation as the very beginning of his work of creation.

Moving through Genesis, the psalmist extols the work of God in the flood: “Thou coveredst it with the deep as with a garment: the waters stood above the mountains. At thy rebuke they fled; at the voice of thy thunder they hasted away” (Ps. 104:6–7).

In verse 9 the psalmist mentions God’s covenant promise to Noah and in him to the whole creation: “Thou hast set a bound that they may not pass over; that they

turn not again to cover the earth.” God will never again destroy the earth with a flood. There will be seed time and harvest, cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease while the earth remains.

For the preservation of his church, for the advancement of his cause and kingdom, and for the destruction of the wicked who inhabited his creation, God sent the flood to destroy the earth and at the same time to renew it. That redemption through the flood is both a picture of the destruction to come and a promise of renewal through that judgment.

By implication, then, the believer expresses his faith in the fall as recorded in Genesis 3. By one man sin entered into the world and death by sin; so death passed upon all, for that all have sinned. When the believer looks at creation, he does not see only beauty, but he sees also a creation groaning under the curse and waiting for the promised perfect redemption. He sees lightning and hears thunder and the lions roaring after their prey. He understands that there is death in creation, that God still hides his face, and that the creation is troubled.

With the right view of creation and the flood, the psalmist passes on to survey the works of God that he beholds. God sends the waters and showers, and by those life-giving waters the beasts drink and the wild asses quench their thirst; by the waters the trees grow and the birds have a home and a place to sing; and by the waters the earth is satisfied and brings forth her fruits. By that elixir God causes the grass to grow for the cattle, herbs for the service of man, wine and oil for gladness and beauty, and bread to give life to man. God plants the mighty forests of the Lebanese hills. In the trees the birds make their nests, and on the hills the mountain goats and conies have their fortresses.

God governs the seasons of the year and appointed the sun to rule the day. Oh, that we would see God’s faithfulness every morning in the rising of the sun and his faithfulness year to year in the changing of the seasons. God made the night as a time for the beasts, when the lions roar for their prey. Their roars are their seeking food from the hand of God every night. And God hears their roars and gives them food. The day belongs to man so that he can go forth and labor until the night comes again.

The psalmist’s eyes move from the earth and heaven to

the sea, in which are the ships and great and small things, from the tiniest little creature to the greatest of God’s animals—leviathan, to whom God gives the oceans as his playground.

Overcome in the middle of his survey, the psalmist pauses for an exclamation of praise to God: “O LORD, how manifold are thy works; the earth is full of thy riches!” The psalmist could not possibly recount all the works of God, for there are not enough books in the world to record all of them. All of creation and every moment of history are God’s book unfolded before our eyes to declare his eternal power and Godhead.

Manifold works: a great richness, enormous variety, and vast scope belong to the works of God. Everything

in heaven and on earth and in the sea waits upon him. The leviathan is God’s concern, but so are the conies that hide in the rocks. The movement of the sun is his work, but so is giving the stork a place to lay her young in safety. Giving to the lions their food, but also making the sun to rise so that man can work. In God all men live, move, and have their being. Every moment of time and all that they contain are his work, and all of those moments, forming one history, are his work. God created the world in the beginning, and he has never abandoned that

world but has been active in it and still is to this day—all the unfolding of his decree.

Manifold works in the sense of great. How very great they are—beyond our comprehension, indeed, mysterious. God’s ways are very deep. He created a perfect world. He decreed the fall. He brought the flood, out of it made this world, and he will make another. Who can come to the bottom of that great mystery of creation, the fall, sin, the curse, redemption, and re-creation? God’s manifold works, then, which the believer observes from scripture, are creation and providence and redemption through judgment. The believer reads of them in scripture, and he believes them, and they govern his view of creation. It is God’s world. It is ruled and upheld by him from moment to moment, and all is held in existence for his sake and for his purpose.

God’s works.

“O LORD my God, thou art very great!”

“How manifold are thy works!”

The psalmist does not begin by looking at creation, but he begins by looking at what scripture says about creation. He learned first from God’s word. He does not subject scripture to his observations, but his observations are subject to scripture.

“In wisdom hast thou made them all!”

Wisdom. Wisdom refers to God’s virtue according to which he works all things for the glory of his name in Jesus Christ. Wisdom is the name of Jesus Christ. He is the wisdom of God. “Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). “The firstborn of every creature...by him were all things created...all things were created by him, and for him” (Col. 1:15–16).

In relationship to God’s manifold works, this means that God created every creature and all things as one organic whole, so that the whole creation is as a tree with each of its parts in its particular place and each of the creatures serving the purpose of God’s glory in Jesus Christ. To be made in wisdom means that God had Jesus Christ in view in everything that he created, and God has Jesus Christ in view in everything that he does in creation.

So Jehovah created! Jehovah is the God over all. Jehovah created with a view to his covenant, and he is faithful in creation with a view to his covenant—the covenant that he determined to be revealed in the world through Jesus Christ, establishes with his elect people, and will perfect in the new creation when God shall be all in all.

The profundity of God’s wisdom is that he made everything in wisdom in order to reconcile all things to himself in Jesus Christ through the cross of Jesus Christ, so that through the way of sin, death, the curse, the cross, and redemption the creation might be the perfect, spiritual, and heavenly dwelling place of Jesus Christ and his elect church in the new creation.

All the earth is full of God’s riches. Riches means acquisitions. The whole creation is God’s by the act of creation, and all of creation was made in wisdom. God in wisdom determined the fall in order to acquire the creation, which is his and which he loves, in the highest sense of the word as a *redeemed* creation with the elect church at its heart through the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ. God would consecrate all to his glory through the heart, Jesus Christ. Through the blood of the cross, God reconciled to himself all things, whether things in heaven or things on the earth.

Then it makes perfect sense how the psalm ends: “Let the sinners be consumed out of the earth, and let the wicked be no more” (v. 35). Unbelief calls this jarring, insensitive, unnecessary, and harsh. But every believer who is consumed with God and confesses that in wisdom God made everything and that the earth is full of his possessions can understand the important and necessary connection between praising God for his manifold works and praying for the destruction of the wicked.

Jesus Christ did not die for all men, and God did not intend to save all men. When the believer looks at creation, he sees not only beauty but also death, that God

still hides his face, and that the creation is troubled. Precisely in this the believer sees wisdom. He sees that God has firmly planted the cross of Jesus Christ in the middle of history in order that this whole creation might be redeemed with the elect church at its heart.

Thus elect believers see that the whole creation is destined to become the perfect dwelling place of the righteous with Jesus Christ and that out of that creation will be cast all adulterers, all whoremongers, all who love and make a lie, all idolaters, all rebellious, all who offend against God’s commandments.

As believers we see also the reason we have the use of creation and why we may live in creation and expect God to provide for us. It is because of Jesus Christ, who is God’s wisdom, by whom he made the creation and through whom he has become our God, so that if he provides for the lions and the birds, will he not also provide for us who are his dear children?

That we are able to see this and do see this are because God is our God, and he has made himself such in Jesus Christ our Lord. No man, woman, or child looks at creation and praises God except that God is his God. Not that many have not been enamored with creation. There have been many nature poets, but man worships the creature rather than the creator. The Greeks said, “O Zeus.” The Romans said, “O Jupiter.” The modern unbeliever says, “O Evolution.” The believer says, “O LORD my God, thou art very great, and how manifold are thy works!”

He says this because of God’s marvelous and wonderful work of re-creation through the Word and the Spirit of Jesus Christ, who made the believer a new creature in Jesus Christ. So the believer praises Jehovah his God. He praises God with his soul and with his lips and with his whole heart, for God is very great. The believer praises God in the sanctified use of creation. The whole life of the believer is in praise of God. Before the face of God, the believer goes forth unto his work, and he labors until the evening. He uses God’s creation and such things as God gives him from it for God’s glory.

The wickedness of the wicked and the transgressions of the sinner are that when God gives him strength for his labor, work to do, wine, bread, and oil, then man presses these things into the service of sin and the fulfillment of his lusts, and he will not praise Jehovah God.

The church, the believer, praises God, who laid the foundations of the heaven, bid light to stand forth out of darkness, covered the world with a flood, placed the waters in their garners, feeds and shelters the animals, gives to all life and breath and all things, and is gracious to his people in Jesus Christ.

—NJL

OUR PRESENT CONTROVERSY (8)

Introduction

The series of editorials, “Our Present Controversy,” has laid out the doctrinal controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). The editorials have identified the doctrinal issue in the controversy: whether man enjoys covenant fellowship with God by grace or by works (July and August 2020). The editorials have identified the current state of the controversy, the importance of the doctrinal decisions of Synod 2018, and the ongoing threat to the PRC of the lie through the minimization of the error and the continuation of it (September 1 and October 2020). The editorials have also laid out the path for the PRC to rid herself of the lie and to come to blessed unity in the truth. This includes official instruction in the doctrinal controversy by consistories and vigorous polemics against the error (December 1, 2020), repentance by the leaders and members of the denomination for teaching, defending, and tolerating the lie (January 1, 2021), and the deliberate and explicit preaching of the controversy by Protestant Reformed ministers in their pulpits (February 2021).

Along the way these editorials have sought to instruct and warn the readership of *Sword and Shield* of the life and death seriousness of the lie that has infiltrated the PRC. The editorials have not minced words in identifying the lie as an error out of hell that stinks of the devil’s foul breath. The editorials have also sought to instruct and warn the readership of the life and death seriousness of eradicating the lie and standing for the truth in the PRC. The present controversy in the denomination is not a game; it is not a matter of misspeaking and misunderstanding; it is not a vain clash of personalities. Rather, the controversy is the devil’s all-out assault against the church of Jesus Christ, which assault aims at the utter destruction of the Protestant Reformed denomination. The devil’s current assault against the PRC takes the most deadly form of his warfare against the church: false doctrine. The devil is a master deceiver; there is no truth in him, and he is a liar and the father of the lie (John 8:44). He comes twisting the truth a little here and a little there to deceive God’s people, so that the people think everything is as it always was, while in reality the people are being taught the most monstrous perversions of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When the devil’s deceptions are finally pointed out and identified, the devil goes to work to convince the church that the perversions of the gospel were not that serious and that they certainly were not the biggest threat in the

controversy. Through the leadership of the churches, the devil teaches that the biggest threat in the controversy is that people become suspicious of their leaders in the church. The denomination then mobilizes to preserve the empty reputations of men, thinking that by doing so it is doing God service. Meanwhile, the devil’s lie continues to be woven more and more into the fabric of the denomination’s thinking and teaching. But the people have been taught not to notice the lie and certainly not to say anything about it, lest they damage the names of the ministers, professors, and elders in the church who teach it and defend it.

In pointing out the deadly seriousness of the lie and the controversy, these editorials have brought hard words of reproof and rebuke against the PRC, including the warning that toleration of the lie will cause the denomination to be consumed by the lie and eventually to be destroyed by it. The editorials have been as clear and as sharp as this writer knows how to be. If anyone in the denomination is yet ignorant of the lie that threatens the PRC; if anyone in the denomination yet denies that such a lie existed or that it now exists; if anyone in the denomination yet believes the lie or is willing to excuse it or tolerate it as a minor matter; then when the denomination perishes in her generations someday for her unbelief and hardness of heart, the blood of the members and their children will be on their own heads. “Whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet, and taketh not warning; if the sword come, and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head” (Ezek. 33:4).

Christian Discipline

In this editorial I now come to the conclusion of the series, “Our Present Controversy.” There is one matter yet that belongs to the path forward for the Protestant Reformed Churches. That matter is the exercise of Christian discipline against the teachers and defenders of the lie.

When the church of Jesus Christ identifies false doctrine in her midst, it is her solemn, holy, and urgent duty to discipline the officebearers who taught and / or defended the false doctrine. The discipline that must be exercised is twofold.

First, the church must discipline the men with regard to their office in the church. By an official decision of the church through her consistory, the church must depose the officebearers, which deposition takes away the office of ministry of the gospel from the ministers and

professors in the seminary and the office of elder from the elders in the consistory. The result of such discipline would be that the man who formerly was a minister is no longer a minister but a lay member of the church, and the man who formerly was an elder is no longer an elder. Such discipline with regard to a man's office can take place whether or not the man repents of his false doctrine. By his false doctrine he has made himself untrustworthy and unfit to hold office in the church. By his false doctrine he has spoken perverse things that draw disciples away from Christ and unto man and thus has behaved as a wolf and not an undershepherd among the flock (Acts 20:28–30). He must repent, but even if he does, he cannot again be entrusted with the care of the souls of Christ's sheep in the church.

Second, the church must discipline the men who taught false doctrine with regard to their membership in the church. That is, the false teacher would be barred from the Lord's supper and ultimately would be entirely excommunicated from the church. This discipline would be a testimony that the man is outside the kingdom of Jesus Christ and has no part with Christ or Christ's salvation. Such discipline with regard to a man's membership would take place only upon the impenitence of the man. If the man would repent of his sin by God's grace, he would be readmitted to the Lord's table and would not be expelled from the church. He would be a member in good standing with all of the rights and privileges and obligations of church membership. The only right and privilege he would lose permanently would be that of holding special office in the church, but his membership in the body of Christ would have been graciously preserved by his Lord.

Christian discipline must be exercised against the teachers of false doctrine. False doctrine is teaching that is contrary to the sound doctrine of scripture as that sound doctrine is set forth in the creeds and confessions of the church. Perhaps the false doctrine is present in all of a man's preaching and writing. Perhaps the false doctrine is present only in a single sermon or a single article. Perhaps the false doctrine is present only in a single sentence or two. Perhaps the false doctrine was even an honest mistake due to a slip of the tongue or a momentary lapse in judgment. Especially when the churches are in the midst of doctrinal controversy, false doctrine in a single sentence or two can be all the more damaging, since it will be seen as unreasonable and harsh for anyone to take issue with it. The offending sentence sits there daring anyone to object, thus forcing many to become complicit in its error by their silence. But all false doctrine must be taken in hand by the church, and the teachers and defenders of it must be confronted. And all men who continually

repeat the error, or who repeatedly defend the error, or who repeatedly refuse to acknowledge the heretical character of the error, must be disciplined by the church.

Christian discipline must be exercised against both the teachers and the defenders of false doctrine. The minister, professor, or elder who teaches false doctrine must be deposed and barred from the Lord's supper. But also the elders in the consistory who defend the teacher and his teaching by their official decisions must be deposed from office and suspended from the Lord's supper. This is the implication of the Formula of Subscription vow that every officebearer makes upon his ordination into office.

We promise therefore diligently to teach and faithfully to defend the aforesaid doctrine, 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 elder who defends a minister who speaks false doctrine has violated his vow. That elder has not faithfully defended sound Reformed doctrine; he has not rejected the error in his own ecclesiastical house that militated against sound Reformed doctrine; and he has not refuted or contradicted the error when it appeared. By such a spectacular breaking of his vow, the defender of the false doctrine is also worthy of Christian discipline.

How serious a matter is false doctrine in the church! Not only the teacher who introduces it but also all those who become entangled in defending it make themselves the proper objects of Christian discipline. And how difficult it is to eradicate false doctrine once it has been introduced and tolerated even for the briefest time! In almost no time at all, there are many who have given their voices and their backing to the teacher of the error, so that it becomes an almost unthinkable task for the church to clear herself of the error through the discipline of so many.

The Requirement of Scripture and the Confessions

Scripture teaches the necessity of Christian discipline against officebearers who teach and defend false doctrine. In the Old Testament this discipline was carried out by slaying the false prophets. After Jehovah's demonstration on Mount Carmel that he is the true God and that Baal is a lie, Elijah commanded that the 450 prophets of Baal be killed. "Elijah said unto them, Take the prophets of

Baal; let not one of them escape. And they took them: and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there” (1 Kings 18:40).

Elijah slew the prophets of Baal in obedience to the law of Moses in Deuteronomy 13:1–5 regarding false prophets.

1. If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder,
2. And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them;
3. Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.
4. Ye shall walk after the LORD your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, and ye shall serve him, and cleave unto him.
5. And that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death; because he hath spoken to turn you away from the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to thrust thee out of the way which the LORD thy God commanded thee to walk in. So shalt thou put the evil away from the midst of thee.

The killing of the false prophet was the Old Testament picture of the spiritual reality that God cuts off the speech of the false prophet from among his people and thus cuts off that prophet’s influence among God’s people. By slaying the false prophet, Jehovah ensured that the false prophet would no longer speak to God’s people and thus deceive them. The church cuts off the false prophet and his influence today by deposing the officebearer, thus taking away his speaking and teaching among the people of God.

The killing of the false prophet was also the Old Testament picture of the spiritual reality that God condemns the false prophet and punishes him with eternal death in hell. The church condemns the false prophet today by excommunication from the Christian church, which is the testimony that the impenitent man is outside the kingdom of heaven and under the curse of God.

Also in the New Testament, God teaches the necessity of Christian discipline against the teachers and defenders of false doctrine. The churches in Galatia were bewitched by the doctrinal error of the Judaizers. The Judaizers taught that a man is saved by Christ and by keeping the law. They presented their doctrine as the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul

exposed their doctrine as a false gospel and as a perversion of the gospel of Christ (Gal. 1:7). Paul pronounced a scathing anathema on the Judaizers for their false doctrine. “Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed” (vv. 8–9).

What Paul said about the false teacher, “Let him be accursed,” means the same thing spiritually as what Moses said, “That prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death” (Deut. 13:5). Paul did not call for the physical killing of the false teacher, as Moses called for the physical killing of the false prophet. In the New Testament the types and shadows of the Old Testament are done away, including the physical killing of false prophets. Nevertheless, the spiritual reality remains. The church fulfills Paul’s anathema by disciplining the false teacher in the New Testament church. By the officebearer’s deposition from office and by his excommunication from the Christian church, he is accursed. God himself executes the full measure of that anathema by his destruction of the impenitent false teacher in his everlasting curse in hell, just as God in the Old Testament executed the full measure of the false prophet’s death by laying God’s eternal curse upon the man.

The Reformed confessions also teach the necessity of Christian discipline against the teachers and defenders of false doctrine. The Heidelberg Catechism teaches what is to be done with those who “under the name of Christians maintain doctrines...inconsistent” with Christianity.

Q. 85. How is the kingdom of heaven shut and opened by Christian discipline?

A. Thus: when according to the command of Christ, those who under the name of Christians maintain doctrines, or practices inconsistent therewith, and will not, after having been often brotherly admonished, renounce their errors and wicked course of life, are complained of to the church, or to those who are thereunto appointed by the church; and if they despise their admonition, are by them forbidden the use of the sacraments, whereby they are excluded from the Christian church, and by God Himself from the kingdom of Christ; and when they promise and show real amendment, are again received as members of Christ and His church. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 119)

The Reformed Church Order also teaches the necessity of Christian discipline against the teachers and defenders

of false doctrine. The Church Order's instruction is especially striking in that it lists false doctrine or heresy as the first gross sin that is worthy of being punished with deposition. Also noteworthy in the Church Order is the fact that Christian discipline of officebearers is not given as an option for the church to take or leave as she sees fit. Rather, the officebearer who has committed the sin of false doctrine must be suspended and deposed.

Article 79. When ministers of the divine Word, elders, or deacons have committed any public, gross sin which is a disgrace to the church or worthy of punishment by the authorities, the elders and deacons shall immediately, by preceding sentence of the consistory thereof and of the nearest Church, be suspended or expelled from their office, but the ministers shall only be suspended. Whether these shall be entirely deposed from office shall be subject to the judgment of the classis, with the advice of the delegates of the synod mentioned in Article 11.

Article 80. Furthermore, among the gross sins which are worthy of being punished with suspension or deposition from office, these are the principal ones: false doctrine or heresy, public schism, public blasphemy, simony, faithless desertion of office or intrusion upon that of another, perjury, adultery, fornication, theft, acts of violence, habitual drunkenness, brawling, filthy lucre; in short, all sins and gross offenses as render the perpetrators infamous before the world, and which in any private member of the church would be considered worthy of excommunication. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 402–3)

The Purpose

The purpose of the discipline of the teachers and defenders of false doctrine is the protection of Christ's sheep from the insidious lie. The flock of Christ is vulnerable to the lie. The devil cloaks the lie in religious and orthodox language, calling his perversion of the gospel the true gospel (Gal. 1:7). The devil is subtle and beguiling, making the simple gospel confusing by his corruption of it. Satan's servants transform themselves into the apostles of Christ and ministers of righteousness, following the lead of their master, Satan, who himself is transformed into an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:13–15). God's people have a hard time distinguishing these deceitful workers from true ministers of the gospel, with the result that God's people are willing to bear a long time with him who preaches another Jesus than the true Jesus and with him who preaches another gospel than the true apostolic gospel (v. 4). The apostle

Paul feared that while God's people bore with the false teacher, their "minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (v. 3).

Jesus himself taught that the doctrine of the Pharisees and the Sadducees was leaven (Matt. 16:6–12). Just as leaven works unseen and undetected in the lump of dough, fermenting and fizzing away until the whole lump is permeated by the leaven, so false doctrine works unseen and undetected in the church. The false doctrine seems so innocent, especially when it is constantly anointed with the language of grace. The teachers and defenders of the false doctrine are likable men whom we have known our whole lives and who have even been spiritually profitable to us, so how could they be wrong? Meanwhile, the false doctrine fizzes and fizzes and fizzes its influence into the church. Imperceptibly it leavens the thinking of the members, so that they become confused and can no longer distinguish the truth from the lie. Subtly it leavens the sermons in the churches, so that the emphases of the preaching are man and his doing rather than the sound doctrine of the apostolic gospel of Jesus Christ and the Reformed faith. "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees" (v. 6)!

God warned Israel that the prophet who speaks false doctrine turns God's people away from God. "He hath spoken to turn you away from the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to thrust thee out of the way which the LORD thy God commanded thee to walk in" (Deut. 13:5). The result of the prophet's teaching false doctrine will be that your own family members desire that false doctrine, which is to worship at the altar of strange gods.

6. If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers;
7. Namely, of the gods of the people which are round about you, nigh unto thee, or far off from thee, from the one end of the earth even unto the other end of the earth;
8. Thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him.

How dangerous is false doctrine to the church! What a threat it is! How seductive, how appealing, how deceiving, how subtle, how imperceptible—and how deadly! Once it is introduced, it is almost already then too late! What shall the church do in the face of such a deadly menace? This: "That prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death...So shalt thou put the evil away from the

midst of thee” (v. 5). And this: “Ministers of the divine Word, elders, or deacons” shall be “punished with suspension or deposition from office” (Church Order 79–80).

The Christian discipline of the teachers and defenders of false doctrine protects the flock from the lie. The discipline of the hireling heralds to every sheep in the fold that they are not to heed the doctrine of that teacher. By removing the false teacher, the church removes the false teaching that comes from his mouth.

Failure to discipline the teachers and defenders of false doctrine destroys the flock by the lie. The teachers remain among the flock, sowing their subtle and deceitful lie, which lie is deadly poison to the flock. The flock is even taught to be fiercely loyal to the hireling and to defend the hireling from the Shepherd’s rebuke, while all throughout the flock the sheep and the lambs slowly weaken and eventually begin to choke to death on the lie.

How necessary is Christian discipline against the teachers and defenders of false doctrine in Christ’s church!

The Present Controversy

Perhaps here more than anywhere else, the Protestant Reformed Churches have utterly failed in their present controversy. I do not write this with any relish but with profound grief and distress that renders me almost insensible. There has been no discipline of any sort against the teachers and defenders of false doctrine within the denomination. There has certainly been false doctrine in the PRC, as these editorials have demonstrated, but there has been no discipline whatsoever against it. The closest that the churches came to discipline was when Synod 2018 required that the then Rev. David Overway submit to a Formula of Subscription exam on the ground that “the challenged statements in the sermons give ‘sufficient grounds of suspicion’ of his ‘uniformity and purity of doctrine’ requiring a ‘further explanation of [his] sentiments’ as required by the Formula of Subscription” (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 84).

Even then, with the Formula of Subscription exam looming, the churches were instructed that the minister was not guilty of heresy and that he was not being disciplined. “Synod did not declare this error to be heresy. Synod did not state that this teaching denies the unconditional covenant or justification by faith alone. The minister will be examined, but he is not suspended” (Russell Dykstra, “Synod 2018: Obedience and Covenant Fellowship,” *Standard Bearer* 94 [July 2018]: 415).

When the minister later that same year preached the same false doctrine again, the churches still flatly refused to discipline the minister. Under duress from protests and appeals from God’s people, the denomination finally accepted his resignation under article 12 of the Church

Order, which has nothing to do with Christian discipline, but she refused to depose the minister under articles 79 and 80. For at least five years the minister had taught false doctrine in Christ’s church, and for all of those years, the church through her leadership had refused to discipline him. How far the denomination has fallen from the word of God, which requires: “That prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death” (Deut. 13:5).

Nevertheless, there is something for the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches to learn from the denomination’s refusal to discipline for false doctrine. There is a direct connection between Christian discipline and sound doctrine. Christian discipline reveals what a denomination thinks about her doctrine and about her doctrinal decisions. If a church loves sound doctrine and is convicted of her doctrinal pronouncements, then she cannot and will not tolerate deviation from that doctrine. In love for the truth as it is in Jesus, which truth is the very name of God himself, the church defends that doctrine against the lie and against all false teachers. When the lie springs up in her midst, she abominates it and removes the teacher so that the lie will not continue among her. She leaps to obey this word of God: “That prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death; because he hath spoken to turn you away from the LORD your God” (Deut. 13:5).

If a church does not love sound doctrine and has contempt for the name of God and his truth, then she can tolerate false teachers for years and years. The false teachers do not bother her, and she gladly bears with them. She esteems men and instinctively protects their honor at the expense of the truth. Even when the denomination can be brought to condemn the error of the false teachers, largely through the work of the spiritual element in the churches that does indeed abominate the error, the denomination still finds reason to protect the false teachers in her midst. She not only fails to discipline them but also positively refuses to do so. God’s truth and God’s name are less important to her than the honor of the men she defends.

What does the state of Christian discipline in the PRC reveal about her attitude toward sound doctrine? Synod 2018 took doctrinal decisions. Synod 2018 identified “doctrinal error” and such doctrinal error as is astounding and monstrous to be found in a Reformed church. Synod 2018 took pains to state the doctrinal error: “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). Synod 2018 spelled out the spiritually disgusting nature of the doctrinal error: “compromises the gospel of Jesus Christ”; “the perfect work of Christ is displaced”; “the doctrines of the unconditional covenant (fellowship with God) and justification by faith alone are compromised by this error” (70). That is

such strong language that both the ears of every Reformed man tingle when he hears it. Such were the doctrinal decisions of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Now, a denomination that agreed with its doctrinal pronouncements and that loved the truth over against the lie would demonstrate its love and agreement by its application of Christian discipline to teachers and defenders of the lie. How could she not? How could a denomination declare that sermons in a congregation and the doctrinal statement of a classis compromised the gospel and yet fail to depose the ministers who preached that error, wrote that error, and defended that error? Compromise of the gospel is intolerable to a Reformed denomination! Compromise of justification by faith alone is anathema to a Protestant denomination! Compromise of the unconditional covenant should be heinous to the Protestant Reformed Churches! And displacing the perfect work of Christ? That is monstrous and unthinkable to a Christian! A denomination that believed its doctrinal decisions about the error could not possibly just go on as if nothing had happened. It could not possibly allow the teachers of the error to ascend the pulpit again or to sit in the elders' bench again. If the denomination would allow this, she would demonstrate that she did not believe her doctrinal decisions and that she had no real use for the sound doctrine that those decisions represented. It would show that she was determined not to abide by sound doctrine or to abide by her doctrinal pronouncements. It would show that she had contempt for God himself, whose truth it is, and whose name, whose Son, and whose truth were blasphemed by the compromise of the gospel.

Yet this is exactly what the PRC did. Not a shred of discipline was administered against the teachers and defenders of the lie. All of them are, or could be, officebearers in good standing in the churches today. What is more, they are the leaders, the church visitors, the synodical delegates, and the classical and synodical officers. By keeping them in office, the denomination reveals its disdain for the truth and its regard for men. The denomination reveals its rebellion and disobedience to the word of God that requires: "That prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death; because he hath spoken to turn you away from the LORD your God" (Deut. 13:5).

Adding sin to sin, the Protestant Reformed Churches not only have neglected to discipline the teachers of false doctrine, but they have also consistently disciplined those officebearers who have stood for the truth over against the lie. Then Elder Neil Meyer first brought the controversy to light in the PRC in 2015 by his protest against the heretical preaching of his minister. His consistory at Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Walker, Michigan, responded by deposing him from office and cruelly barring him from

the Lord's table for more than three years. In 2019 Rev. Martin VanderWal and Deacon Craig Ferguson joined several other men in criticizing the *Standard Bearer* for undermining the theology of Herman Hoeksema. The editors of the magazine responded by bringing formal charges of slander and schism against them to their consistory at Wingham Protestant Reformed Church, with the result that the pastor and the deacon were disciplined by being relieved of their duties. These men have all since been exonerated of the charges against them and are members in good standing in their churches. Most recently, the undersigned was deposed from the ministry of the gospel in Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church for my sermons that rebuked the PRC for her false doctrines and lies and that warned the denomination of the dangers of those errors. The content of the sermons was essentially what has been written in *Sword and Shield* since its birth last June. Yet the denomination counted those rebukes against her to be the sin of schism and has cast me out. Elder Dewey Engelsma and Elder Bryan Van Baren were also placed under discipline for a time by the consistory of Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church by being relieved of their duties for their objection to my suspension.

How is it that the same denomination that never once disciplined any teacher or defender of false doctrine in more than five years of doctrinal controversy has consistently disciplined those officebearers who opposed the false doctrine in the denomination? The explanation is simple, though it is grievous. By its discipline the denomination shows what it thinks of the truth. By its discipline the denomination shows whether it is for or against sound doctrine. The denomination was and is willing to bear with those who taught another Jesus and another gospel (2 Cor. 11:4). But the denomination will not suffer the reproving, rebuking, and exhorting of sound doctrine against her errors. By this the denomination reveals her contempt for the truth, which is contempt for God, whose truth it is, and for Christ, who is the truth. The truth does not rouse the denomination to vigorous action against the lie. She sees no need to stop the mouths of the liars but can live comfortably with them. But when the truth rebukes her, the denomination is roused to vigorous action to stop the mouths of those servants who bring the truth. She will not endure the reproofs, rebukes, and exhortations of the word of God. By that the Protestant Reformed Churches reveal that the time has come when they will not endure sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:3).

God is very angry with a denomination that reveals its contempt for the truth by such an approach to discipline. When a church will not contend against her errors through discipline, but instead contends against the defenders of the truth, God himself will come to contend against that

church. And his contention will be severe and devastating. “Whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet. Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrhah in the day of judgment, than for that city” (Matt. 10:14–15).

Conclusion

Is there a path forward yet for the Protestant Reformed Churches in her present controversy? It is the conviction of the undersigned that the Protestant Reformed Churches have been overthrown in their controversy. Especially by their refusal to discipline false teachers and by their persecution of faithful teachers, they have taken on one of the most stark and visible marks of the false church, for the false church has always been infamous for its persecution of the prophets of Jehovah (see Matt. 23:29–39). If any readers are not similarly convicted, then I advise you to take careful note of which officebearers the Protestant

Reformed Churches have not disciplined, which officebearers they have disciplined, and which officebearers they shall yet discipline. By observing something as obvious and public as the discipline of officebearers, you will be able to tell what the denomination thinks of the truth. If there is a path forward yet, then the denomination’s turn will be radical and stunning as the denomination puts out those who taught and defended the lie, thus stopping their mouths. But if the denomination continues on its current path of contempt for the truth, that will be obvious as well through the denomination’s stopping the mouths of those officebearers who rebuke her for her errors.

Whatever the case, this is no time to sit back but to watch and read and study. The life of a denomination is at stake, as are your lives and those of your generations.

“Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:26–27).

—AL

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

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

THE MAJORITY REPORT

Where is our humility? True humility is not the feigned humility of the soft voice and a downcast countenance that does not submit to the word of God and counts one’s own honor the most important thing. True humility submits to the word of God and confesses and lives out of the reality of one’s own spiritual wretchedness and labors thankfully for the wonder of grace that God realizes his promise in me. True humility submits to the will of God even if it kills me. Where is our humility as individuals and as churches? We are so prickly for our own righteousness and glory and to defend our own honor and reputation.

We have problems—doctrinal problems—as churches. We can all say to each other that we have not apostatized *de jure* by official ecclesiastical decisions at the synodical level, but what do we do with the truth? What place does vigorous doctrinal preaching have in our hearts? Where is the fiery offense at false and heretical theology? If we have no stomach for doctrinal preaching and would rather have the fluff of supposedly practical preaching; if we can listen to sermons that are Christless and not be bothered; if

the truth is dishonored and we think that is unimportant, or we cannot even hear that it is happening; and if those who teach explicit false doctrine are excused; then where do we stand in relationship to the truth? Some can say, “Not in my church.” But as we look over the denomination and see the turmoil, what do we say? Is the solution to say that the problem is merely a pack of radicals, antinomians, and rabble-rousers, or must we examine where we stand as a denomination on the truth—the truth that was given to us by our fathers and that they defended at great cost to themselves and the churches?

I believe that we are being misled down a theological pathway that will lead us away from the pure doctrine of the unconditional covenant and salvation by faith alone—faith as God’s gift, by grace alone, because of God’s election alone. We are being misled by emphases on the practical, man’s activity and responsibility, man’s obedience, and warnings against a false species of antinomianism.

That was Herman Hoeksema’s warning to the Protestant Reformed Churches in the aftermath of the doctrinal turmoil of 1953. He gave the speech in 1954 in Hull,

Iowa. At that time it could be said that the ecclesiastical assemblies had made all the right decisions. The split in the denomination had happened in the East. Yet he gave this warning:

In this connection [that “Christ is the entrance into the kingdom of God”] I cannot refrain from issuing to all of you a word of warning. I’ll do it. You know, we talk about so much in our day, and in our churches,—we talk about responsibility. We talk about the activity of faith. And similar things. I’ll warn you that on that basis and in that line we’re going to lose the gospel. We’re going to lose the gospel. We’re going to lose election. We’re going to lose reprobation. We’re going to lose the gospel, the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. O yes, we must preach the activity of faith. *But by the activity of faith I mean not something that you and I must do*, except that first of all, by the activity of faith we cling to Christ, and embrace Him and all His benefits. That is the activity of faith. Responsibility? Don’t you ever forget that the accusation that Reformed people cannot maintain responsibility has always been brought against,—Reformed people have always been accused of denying responsibility by those that are Arminians and moderns. We do not deny responsibility. We do not deny the activity of faith. Of course not. But I warn you that with the emphasis that is laid upon these things, upon conditions, upon activity of faith, and upon responsibility, you’re going to lose the gospel. That’s my warning. (Herman Hoeksema, “Transcript of Address and Question Hour,” *Standard Bearer* 34, no. 21 [September 15, 1958]: 490; emphasis added)

I note that Hoeksema explicitly warned against the idea that the activity of faith is something that you and I must do. He taught that same thing in his sermon on Acts 16:30–31, preached in the midst of the denomination’s theological controversy over the conditional covenant. The Philippian jailor asked, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.” Hoeksema explained as his considered answer that this means *do nothing for your salvation*. This is the theological truth of the gospel’s proclamation “believe!” The gospel in Paul’s answer proclaims do nothing; do absolutely nothing; rest and rely on Jesus Christ crucified alone for your salvation. Faith in its entirety is the gift of God. Teaching that faith is a doing threatens the unconditional character of salvation over against those who make faith a condition unto salvation and the blessedness of God’s covenant.

Further, Hoeksema did not reject faith as a condition by preaching against a caricature of that false position, but as it really was preached and as that false theology paraded and defended itself by appeals to faith’s activity and man’s responsibility. Hoeksema exposed the subtlety of that theology, which claimed to express scriptural and Reformed ideas but in fact rejected them and did so under the guise of emphasizing faith’s activity and man’s responsibility.

The burden of this article is that Herman Hoeksema’s warning is what the Protestant Reformed Churches must hear today. Recently, the churches faced a doctrinal issue similar to and as serious as that of 1953. I believe that the doctrinal issue faced recently is in fact an extension of the doctrinal issue of 1953. One might say that in 1953 the issue was the covenant itself and the question whether *the promise of the covenant* is conditional or unconditional. The issue is sharper today, and it concerns whether *the promise in the daily conscious experience of covenant fellowship* is conditional or unconditional. And I have witnessed how the false theology of conditional covenant experience was defended by appeals to conscious activity, explanations of the phrase “in the way of,” warnings about a false species of antinomianism, and similar arguments. What is deeply concerning is that we are claiming that the false theology has been rejected, and yet all the arguments that were used to defend it are back on the foreground. That is the emphasis in articles and in sermons.

I believe that if we as churches do not come to an agreement that the issue facing us is whether the promise in the daily conscious experience of covenant fellowship is conditional or unconditional, we will not be able to develop in this matter. I believe that if we now turn our focus to the perceived threat of a supposed doctrinal antinomianism, which is to be combated by emphasizing man’s activity and finding words and phrases to prompt godliness, we will not root out the real and serious threat of a conditional covenant experience.

I believe it matters very little whether we use the word *condition* or not. We may not use the word, but I do not stumble over a mere word. I am not demanding that this or that precise phrase be used. That is stifling. Rather, it is a matter of the presentation of fellowship with our God and the believer’s spiritual activity, whether of believing or repenting. When the presentation of the believer’s fellowship with God is that it is effectively hinged upon the believer’s activity; when it is so presented that God withholds his fellowship until the believer acts; when the teaching that God enables the sinner to believe or repent comes with the distinct impression that after all of God’s enabling it is still in the believer’s power to believe or not, repent or not; then I maintain that this is basically the

teaching of conditions in the experience of God's fellowship. Such presentations set man as another party alongside God within the covenant of grace. If the presentation either explicitly or by strong implication leaves the impression that a believer does not receive fellowship with God until he acts, or that the believer's acts of believing and repenting are decisive, then the presentation teaches conditions in the believer's experience of fellowship with God. It makes little difference at that point whether one uses the word *condition* or *way*. If the whole emphasis of the sermon is on the activity of faith, the activity of man, and the sermon is essentially Christless, the presentation is conditional, although the word is not used.

Here Hoeksema's comments about DeWolf's sermon on Matthew 18:1–4, in which he preached conditions, are applicable:

How, then, can our conversion, our act of conversion be something that God requires of us before we enter into the kingdom of God. That was his sermon. That was the sermon throughout. Let me say too: it was a preparatory sermon, supposed to be. There was no Christ and no cross in it. I emphasized that in my protest. I protested against that sermon...The cross is the entrance into the kingdom of God, the entrance through which we enter only as we are regenerated before. Christ is the entrance into the kingdom of God. (Hoeksema, "Transcript," 489–90)

Even if DeWolf never made the heretical statement, his sermon emphasized man's activity from beginning to end and was Christless.

Rather, we must have sermons that emphasize the same truth about faith that Herman Hoeksema taught and that emphasize that truth all the way through the believer's experience of covenant fellowship with God and all the way into heaven. Christ is the entrance into the kingdom from beginning to end, from regeneration to glorification, in regeneration and every day of our lives. The believer's whole life in the covenant is out of Christ. In the covenant for the regenerated and converted believer, the truth that must be preached is not only that he is enabled to do this or that and that Christ fills up his lack, but also that in the covenant the believer has only a small beginning of the new obedience and that he needs Christ's righteousness daily and Christ's forgiveness daily and Christ's Spirit daily to conform him more and more to Christ's image.

This is to say that the covenant—in its establishment and maintenance and perfection, in the believer's entrance into it, and in his life in it—is absolutely without conditions. The gospel of the unconditional covenant of God must be so preached and the impression so left that the

unconditionality of the covenant extends to the believer's daily enjoyment of his salvation. All his activity in the covenant is the infallible fruit of the realization of God's promise in the believer. The impression may not be left that God does his part and enables the believer to do his part, but after the believer is enabled it is still in his power whether to do it or not. The impression may not be left that because God enables the believer to do this or that, that now in his life in the covenant he becomes a party alongside Christ. This impression may not be left especially at the vital point of the believer's experience and assurance of salvation.

The Arminians taught that entrance into the covenant was conditional. God worked in man in such a way that it was still in man's power to believe and repent. Against this position the Canons say, "This is in no wise effected merely by...such a mode of operation that after God has performed His part it still remains in the power of man... to be converted or to continue unconverted" (Canons of Dordt 3–4.12, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 168–69). For the Arminians, man's act was the decisive thing. Man's response to grace received was the hinge on which all turned. That same Arminianism enters in when in the daily conscious experience of, enjoyment of, and joy in God's fellowship, the matter is presented the same way. Then the impression is so left that God enables in the covenant, but it is still in man's power whether he will act or not. Man's act becomes decisive in the daily experience of the covenant. When the response of man to grace received is preached as the hinge on which his experience and assurance turn, I maintain that this is fundamentally Arminianism in the experience of salvation. When the preaching of the law ends with what man can do and does not begin with the exposure of what man still is with his sinful human nature and thus does not take us right back to Christ for forgiveness and for his Spirit to conform us more and more to God's image, then I say in essence this is teaching conditions for the maintenance of the covenant. If this is true of the daily experience, then this is true of the believer's ultimate entrance into the kingdom of God in heaven, which is the perfection of what the believer now enjoys in the covenant.

The truth is entirely different. When God works repentance in the believer, it is absolutely certain that he will repent. When God works faith in the believer, it is absolutely certain that he will believe. When God works daily conversion in the believer, it is absolutely certain that he shall be turned and joy in the God of his salvation and walk in good works. As the Canons say, "All in whose heart God works in this marvelous manner are certainly, infallibly, and effectually regenerated and do actually believe" (Canons of Dordt, 3–4.12, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 169). This is true of the believer's entrance

into the covenant, and it is true of his daily experience of fellowship in the covenant.

When God works these things in the believer, God is realizing his unconditional promise not only in the believer's initial entrance into the covenant by regeneration but also in his daily conversion and assurance of, consciousness of, and enjoyment of God as his God. The grace of God does not operate one way in the believer's entrance into the covenant and then operate another way in his daily experience of salvation. The grace of God does not take the believer into the covenant wholly passively in regeneration, and then after God's grace enables the man, grace waits on his acts and works. The believer receives all the gifts of the covenant—from regeneration, to faith, to conversion, to justification, to sanctification—as gifts, none of which are dependent on his activity. He enters into the covenant absolutely unconditionally, and all his righteous activities thereafter every day are the infallible consequences of God's gracious realization of his promise. The preaching of the law to the regenerated believer may not be that he is enabled to do this or that, and Christ will fill up the believer's lack. But the preaching of the law must be so sharp as to show the regenerated believer his sin and drive him to Christ for forgiveness of his sin and his sinful human nature and for Christ's Spirit to conform the believer yet more to God's image.

In this connection I want to remind the Protestant Reformed Churches of a very important decision in their history that they may not forget because it bears on their current doctrinal struggles. That is the decision of Classis East in May 1953. The April classis of that year had put into the hands of a committee protests against Reverend DeWolf's now infamous statements. The first statement was "God promises every one of you that if you believe you shall be saved." The second statement was "Our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter into the kingdom." The committee that came back was split. Two elders, R. Newhouse and P. Lubbers, wrote a simple minority report, little more than a page long, that declared both statements to be "literally heretical."

Three ministers, R. Veldman, G. Lubbers, and E. Knott, wrote the majority report. Long and convoluted, it sought to explain how DeWolf's statements could be understood properly as being Reformed. What is of great interest and ought to be of great interest to the Protestant

Reformed Churches at present is *how* the three ministers set about to do this. We should reckon with their report. Their emphasis was similar to what I hear today, their language was similar to what I hear, their distinctions were similar to what I hear, and appeals were made to the same articles in the Canons to prove that their explanation was Reformed. The majority report can be found in Appendix I in Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 481–501. The report should be read carefully by every reader.

DeWolf's first statement—"God promises every one of you that if you believe you shall be saved"—in a sermon on Luke 16:19–31 taught a general promise of God to everyone in the audience, contingent on their faith.

The committee's defense was that DeWolf was preaching to the elect, regenerated church of God, the living church as the body of Christ, and thus "God promises to every believing saint what he needs, the gift of faith, forgiveness of sins, hope of glory, and life everlasting. But to underscore the need of active trust he [DeWolf] says: if you believe" (489–90). Thus the statement was really only emphasizing the need for active trust.

I understand this in relationship to our present doctrinal struggles that all the emphasis on man's activity, man's responsibility, and man's doing will lead to and in essence is doing the same thing. God's promise, now in the daily conscious experience, is contingent on man's activity, which becomes the decisive thing. If God's promises concerning conscious and daily fellowship with him are so preached that the distinct impression is left that the promises are contingent on man's activity, that is preaching a general promise contingent on man's activity, only in the covenant itself.

The majority committee wrote similarly concerning DeWolf's second statement, made in a sermon on Matthew 18:1–4: "Our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter into the kingdom." DeWolf explained this statement by saying that calling conversion a condition or way makes little difference and that he referred to daily entering, always entering, and conscious activity. The committee's solution was to deny that DeWolf spoke of the initial entering into the kingdom, but that "he has in mind the daily entering" (492). By means of a distinction between "entering the kingdom," by which the committee meant regeneration,

Christ is the entrance into the kingdom from beginning to end, from regeneration to glorification, in regeneration and every day of our lives.

The believer's whole life in the covenant is out of Christ.

and “entering *into* the kingdom,” which the ministers equated with the second part of the covenant, they tried to not condemn DeWolf’s statement. They saw this distinction present in Canons 3–4.11–12, 14, where “the work of God is confessed in our conversion in which work of God man does not cooperate one iota. But our Fathers here also speak of the act of believing by virtue of this work... this ‘act of believing’ is entering into the Kingdom-life” (495). The committee described this in terms of the covenant as well: “a man is in the Kingdom. The ‘first part’ of the Covenant is our portion. But in the ‘second part’ wherein our obligation to a new obedience is set forth we are told, admonished [*sic*] to ‘enter *into* the Kingdom” (496).

The committee explained: To say our act of conversion is prerequisite

does not mean that we perform a work in our native strength to *enter* the Kingdom. In this work of God whereby we are translated into the kingdom we are wholly passive. But the text [Matt.18:1–4]...speaks of our entering into the Kingdom. And the text teaches that we must have the *act* of *humbling ourselves* to thus enter into the Kingdom, that is, for the conscious tasting of being lifted up by God and set in a broad place. Then the act of humbling is prerequisite to the wonderful experience of being lifted up. That we are told to humble ourselves is not then the command of the law...but it is the precept of the Gospel whereby we are called, admonished, and exhorted unto the new obedience, unto the performance of our “part” in the Covenant... Compare Canons III, IV, Articles 16–17. (497)

I maintain that the way the committee sought to approve conditional language and a conditional presentation was to move the matter into the daily experience and make appeals to man’s being made active. In the believer’s initial entering, he is wholly passive; but once in the covenant, he becomes active. This activity must be present first and before God’s fellowship and friendship are experienced. This activity is decisive for fellowship with God. The committee reminded all the classical delegates, “Rev. DeWolf is not too insistent on the term ‘condition’...He is willing to call it a ‘way’ of entering too when speaking of ‘our turning’” (497).

It is true that he did not have to be too insistent on the word *condition*. The substance of the matter was presented conditionally because in the experience and enjoyment of salvation, the assurance of it, and the conscious enjoyment of it, man’s activity was made decisive. God enabled, but it still remained in man’s power to be converted or not, to believe or not, and to obey or not. Thus was the daily experience of God’s fellowship hinged on

man’s activity, an activity unto which he was enabled by the grace of God, but which activity was not the infallible fruit of God’s grace and the realization of God’s promise in him by grace daily.

In the present doctrinal struggles in the Protestant Reformed Churches, we must remember that covenant and kingdom are essentially the same and that both deal with the elect’s relationship to God in Christ. DeWolf’s statement could easily be reworded as “Our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter the covenant.” Then make the same sort of distinction between being in the covenant and experiencing covenant fellowship. To excuse his statement the committee made it a matter of the daily enjoyment of or the daily entering into God’s fellowship. The committee did that by means of a distinction between the initial entering of the kingdom in regeneration and the daily entering *into* the kingdom; or to put it another way, by means of a distinction between the covenant and the experience of fellowship with God in the covenant. The committee used the activity of the regenerated man as an excuse for conditions and was really arguing for a conditional experience of fellowship.

That issue, which the 1953 classis did not take up because it rejected the majority report, is now before us as churches and must be answered by us. The Lord himself will have us answer the question. Will we reject conditional daily fellowship with God as vigorously as we reject conditional entrance into the covenant? Will we reject that not merely by rejecting the use of the word *condition*, so that we reject as “literally heretical” the statement that there are conditions for fellowship, that is, conditions for daily fellowship with God? But will we also reject that by rejecting the emphases on man’s responsibility, man’s activity, and man’s obedience that so present the matter that God’s fellowship is effectively held in suspense until man acts? Will we reject the presentation of God’s promise and man’s obedient activity that is Christless, so that God’s promise comes into effect by man’s obedience, and Christ is hardly mentioned at all and so Christ is not the entrance into the kingdom initially and every day and into eternity? Will we emphasize clearly that the believer’s daily conscious enjoyment of and assurance of his salvation in the covenant—so explaining his believing and his daily repenting—are the infallible fruits and consequences of God’s realization of his promise in the believer daily for Christ’s sake? Will we make clear that the believer’s daily conscious enjoyment of God as his God is a gracious gift to the believer in faithfulness to God’s promise and by his own gracious realization of his promise in the believer? The covenant and the experience of the covenant, salvation and the daily enjoyment of salvation, are absolutely unconditional. God is always first. Man’s activity follows. God realizes his promise. Man

becomes active according to the realization of the promise both initially and every single day and into eternity.

Along this same line I want to reiterate, both negatively and positively, what the issue is in the Protestant Reformed Churches. The controversy is not about anti-nomianism, a threat to the phrase “in the way of,” the necessity of good works, calling men to do good works, or man’s being a rational, moral creature and not a stock and block. The controversy is about access to God, and I would add *daily!* The issue is the truth that Christ is the only way to the Father and that the believer has access to the Father in no other way than by faith, which faith itself is a gift of God. Both the will to believe and the act of believing are also gifts, by consequence of which man himself is rightly said to repent and believe.

The issue is now the application of that truth to conscious fellowship with God or the realization of God’s covenant promise daily in our hearts and lives. The struggle is really in essence this: Is God’s covenant promise to be a God to you and to your children after you, to enter into fellowship with you and take you into his fellowship, to bless you with Christ and with all the blessings of his salvation hinged in some sense on your activity? Does God’s promise become contingent at the point of your experience? Does the realization of God’s covenant promise take place “in the way of works,” but by which phrase we really mean *dependent on works* or *contingent on works*, and in explaining that we leave Christ out of view? Once in the covenant unconditionally, is God’s promise realized in the end by Christ’s merits and our obedience? Do you sit at the table with your God and slide your works across the table, and God slides his fellowship to you in return? In the conscious enjoyment of salvation and fellowship with God, is your spiritual activity of believing, repenting, and so forth the decisive thing, so that God gives only after your activity? Is the grace of God in daily fellowship dependent first on your action of responding to that grace? Does the grace merely enable you to respond, but whether you get more grace is dependent on your responding?

This kind of thinking is not new. It was contained in the majority report that was before the Protestant Reformed Churches at Classis East in May 1953. The thinking was rejected. Now we must look into that thinking and see whether our presentation of the matter of fellowship with God—not just the word *condition*—is in fact the substance of that report. It was this kind of thinking, preaching, writing, and emphasis that Hoeksema warned against in the strongest language.

If the Protestant Reformed Churches go in this direction, then in principle we have given up on 1953 and the contention that the covenant is unconditional. Because teaching about the covenant of grace that so presents the

relationship between the believer’s obedience and God’s promise and fellowship such that the believer’s obedience is decisive *is* a conditional covenant, all denials of the word *condition* to the contrary notwithstanding.

If we find that this is the case, then I am pleading with the churches to recognize the theological and ecclesiastical peril in which this theology puts our churches. If this is the case, then in my view we are doing nothing more and nothing less than engaging in the kind of theology that was written in the majority report in 1953. That report served the purpose of trying to make acceptable heretical statements that approved the worst part of common grace, namely the well-meant offer of salvation, and statements that were intent on importing into the Protestant Reformed Churches the conditional covenant theology of Klaas Schilder.

If we head in this direction, the Protestant Reformed Churches’ denial of the word *condition* in the covenant will be as empty as the federal vision’s denial of the word *merit* in justification. The substance of the conditional doctrine will be taught while the word is denied. Indeed, if we make the theological rationale of the majority report our thinking, we will essentially have federal vision covenant theology as well. For we do well to remember that the federal vision puts all of the children of believers in the covenant by baptism and unconditionally, but teaches that whether that position of covenant membership and union with Christ issues in a child’s salvation is contingent on his active faith and his active obedience: the promise is realized in the way of trusting *and* obeying. That is what the majority report in essence did, and it gave a way for the Protestant Reformed Churches to approve conditional, indeed, Schilderian conditional theology, which covenant theology became the covenant theology of the federal vision. We will have that if the covenant and covenant promise are presented solely as a matter of promise and obligation with no Christ and no election and reprobation. Then you have a Schilderian covenant presentation: God’s promise, but with man’s obligation that brings that promise into effect, taught, of course, as God’s promise realized in the way of obedience.

All I can do is warn the churches of what I see. I will continue to do so as long as God gives me a voice. I do not care about names or personalities. The truth is not about names or personalities. If I am in error doctrinally, then tell me. If I am not seeing the things that I am seeing and hearing, then tell me. I want nothing but the pure Reformed truth that gives all glory to God and debases man. I want nothing more than for the churches—which I love and in which I see a lack of love for that doctrine and great interest in the activity of man, in which I see little willingness to become fired up when conditions are preached and a great deal of fire when the activity and responsibility of

man seem to be de-emphasized—to turn. It is not true that the pure Reformed doctrine of the gospel de-emphasizes the responsibility or activity of man, only so long as it is kept in its proper place and that all of the believer's activity is the fruit and only the fruit of the gracious realization of God's covenant promise in him.

I agree with what Rev. Woudenberg said about my churches, as sad as it is:

It's quite a different church. But it's quite a different world too. The whole culture has changed completely. What you had when I was a child and particularly in the environment in which I lived, was a constant preoccupation with doctrine. The folks would have visitors over, and they would talk doctrine all night. That is gone almost completely. You just don't get into conversations about that. Even among the ministers, they don't talk doctrine. I think that this is crucially missing. [Rev.] C. Hanko said somewhat the same thing in 1995 when he wrote in the anniversary book that you just don't have the doctrinal preaching we used to

have... Through 1953, we drifted out of this focus on doctrine into a focus on church polity. Now it's preoccupation with what Classis and Synod says or does. They can say or do anything they want, but that doesn't put it into the heart of the people. If it's just what you are doing that preoccupies everybody, you're back into works. You can say, theologically, we don't believe in conditions, but if you get preoccupied about what things people have to do, you are preoccupied with the behavior of people. Look at the subjects they have for conferences and lectures. Again and again, it's on marriage, raising children—all these practical subjects. If you go back to the late 1940s, when the whole controversy was building, that was when it came to the top. We have to have more practical preaching. We're sick of this doctrine. That was the leading objection against HH in those days. That was the real point. In a very subtle way DeWolf played into it.*

You know the aftermath.

—NJL

SOUND DOCTRINE

Speak thou the things which become sound doctrine.—Titus 2:1

ENMITY PROMISED, ENMITY FULFILLED

*Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother.
And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.
Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you. — 1 John 3:12–13*

Cain the firstborn, Abel the second. God realized his promise in these two firstborn sons of the first parents of the human race. The power of God's just judgment upon disobedience was immediately realized in the fall and depravity of these first parents. According to God's true and faithful word recorded in Genesis 2:17, they were punished with depravity and became "children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3). Thus they came into the same need that all their children would have. The parents needed the same remedy for the guilt

and the pollution of their then natural depravity. They needed redemption from the mercy of God alone.

That redemption their gracious God gave to them. By his covenant word, before unspoken but then declared, he saved them from their sins. He sealed to them his redemption by clothing them with the skins of animals slain for their coverings. God spoke the first promise, the mother promise, after the fall. His action of covering them was his own. By his divine, gracious action, he nullified their actions. The shame of their nakedness had

* Excerpt from Rev. B. Woudenberg's interview with the editor of the *Beacon Lights* on June 24, 2009. The interview was published in the March 2017 issue of the *Beacon Lights*, <https://beaconlights.org/sermons/interview-with-rev-bernard-woudenberg-2/>.

to be covered with the gracious work of their merciful, covenant, promising God and not with their own works, actions, or activity.

The word and action of God were alone sufficient. No word of reception from the first parents of the human race was needed. The mother promise was not met by a parent acknowledgment, a parent reception, or a parent confession. God's promise and action were themselves sufficient to remove their guilt, shame, and condemnation. God's promise and action were sufficient to break the government of their depravity and to begin the dominant, everlasting, and victorious rule of grace in their hearts, minds, and lives.

Redemption must be gracious and thoroughly gracious. Just as redemption can never be of works, so it can never be of nature. Adam and Eve had been created in the image of God, and in that blessed image they were able to conceive and to bring into the unfallen world children who bore the image of God in its blessed perfection; but they lost all that in the fall. "As in Adam all die." "Since by man came death" (1 Cor. 15:22, 21). "So death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." "The judgment was by one to condemnation." "By one man's offence death reigned by one" (Rom. 5:12, 16–17). Whether the first or the second or the hundredth or the thousandth, all the generations of the human race are conceived and born in sin. David's penitent confession, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5), is the true condition of the whole of mankind by nature.

So it must be true of *all* the generations of Adam and Eve. Not only must it be true of Cain, but it must also be true of Abel and Seth. Although redeemed, Adam and Eve according to their nature could conceive and bear only children with the same nature. Of themselves they could produce only children of the flesh, the seed of the serpent. They could bring into the world only children of wrath, opposed in wrath to those who by the grace of God had been redeemed to be of the seed of the woman. Only the God of promise was powerful in sovereign grace to give them the seed of the woman. Just as Adam and Eve needed the grace of the promise of the seed of the woman, so did their seed.

Therefore it must be no surprise that the firstborn son of Adam and Eve was Cain, a child of the flesh and of the seed of the serpent. It was certainly true, as Eve confessed, "I have gotten a man from the LORD" (Gen. 4:1). But it could not be supposed, as many commentators allege she expressed, that simply because she received such "a man from the LORD," this man was going to be of the seed of the woman. If Eve had entertained such hopes and thoughts that she would naturally give birth to covenant seed, she would be proved grievously wrong.

What ought to deeply register with the child of God in the study of Genesis 4 is that the chapter records powerfully and profoundly the power of both the righteous judgment of God and his gracious promise. The second generation of the children of men was indelibly marked with the stamp of God's word, the firstborn with the stamp of Genesis 2:17 and the second with the stamp of Genesis 3:15. Between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman there was great enmity. Despite being the only two of the second generation of the children of men, the third and fourth persons to live and walk on the face of the earth so broad and wide, their enmity brought them into the ultimate conflict of life and death, with the seed of the serpent claiming victory over the seed of the woman.

What is also so striking about this enmity is that it manifested itself in the worship of the Lord. The enmity did not happen between these two brothers in their labors, Cain as a tiller of the ground and Abel as a keeper of sheep. Enmity did not happen between them in the older brother's refusal to acknowledge the Lord and the worship of him, while the younger acknowledged and worshiped God. The seed of the serpent entered into the house of the Lord with the seed of the woman. The antithesis between them was made clear in their worship of the same Lord. Enmity developed and broke out in the church.

In that worship the difference was revealed. Scripture records the rejection of Cain instead of the acceptance he sought. It records over against that rejection of Cain the acceptance of Abel. Genesis 4:4–5 give the distinction succinctly: "The LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering; but unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect." In whatever form that respect was made evident, it revealed that Abel's offering was acceptable and that Cain's was not. The acceptance was indicative also of entrance into God's fellowship. Abel was accepted, while Cain was rejected.

Scripture gives only two reasons for the division between these two brothers of the same parents.

The first reason we are told in Genesis 4:3–4. The brothers offered very different sacrifices. "Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof." This statement, it must be emphasized, was the only distinction made, and it was made immediately prior to the distinction in the Lord's respect to their sacrifices.

It is not very difficult to understand from this distinction between the sacrifices why the Lord did not have respect to Cain's offering but did to Abel's. The younger brother's sacrifice was after the manner of God's clothing of his parents with coats of skin. The shedding of blood and

the offering up of a slain animal was to be a proper sacrifice. The fruit of the ground had no blood to be shed or life to be taken. The offering up of a firstling with its fat was a respectable offering in form. Its form was in submission to the pattern of sacrifices established by the living God.

Rejected must be any thought that the acceptance of Abel's sacrifice and the rejection of Cain's were due to their differing occupations. Cain could have been the keeper of sheep and Abel the tiller of the ground. Had each then brought the fruit of his own labors to sacrifice to the Lord, both would have been rejected. Abel's sacrifice was accepted not because he was the keeper of sheep, and Cain's was rejected not because he was a tiller of the ground. Neither was Abel's sacrifice accepted merely because he offered the proper kind of offering, a sacrifice of life which is in the blood. The following history of God's word makes clear not only that he abhors merely formal sacrifices, but also that his wrath rests upon the sacrifices of the wicked no matter how formally correct they are.

The difference in form found in Genesis 4 is revealed in Hebrews 11:4 according to its root difference. The root difference, the difference that resulted in the proper form, was not of works but of faith. "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain." Abel's faith was the instrument whereby he laid hold on the mother promise of God spoken to his parents. By faith Abel accounted that promise as giving him such a strong foundation for his faith that he could not offer up his own efforts or the fruit of his labors for acceptance with God. Through faith he received the same substance of the promise as his parents had received—the true seed of the woman, Jesus Christ. By faith Abel received Jesus Christ crucified, the lamb that was slain, whose blood is the precious blood of the covenant.

By faith Abel's offering was in remembrance of the promise of salvation. He knew his gracious forgiveness as the covering of the shame of his own sin in the sight of God. By faith his sacrifice had to be not his own production but a remembrance of the promise of God and the token of that promise, also of God.

In the strict difference of the antithesis must Cain's sacrifice be understood.

That difference is further shown by Cain's reaction both to the rejection of his sacrifice and to the acceptance of Abel's. Genesis 4:5 relates Cain's reaction in two respects: "Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell."

There are many ways in which these two respects can be explored and identified, but the following word of God to Cain must identify the heart of that reaction. The focus of Cain's anger was completely away from himself and directed toward others. God confronted Cain with his own fault and failure. Cain himself was to blame for the rejection of his sacrifice. It was not Abel's fault. Nor was it the Lord's, who had graciously redeemed Abel and given to him, in distinction from Cain, the gift of faith.

Cain's unbelief was his own fault. It was his own fault that he did not offer a sacrifice to which the Lord would have respect. It was Cain's own fault that he offered up his own work as a sacrifice. It was his own fault that he rejected a proper sacrifice of a slain animal in remembrance of the Lord's promise and his instituted sacrifice

and covering. It was Cain's own fault that he confided in his own works to make him acceptable to God, rejecting the mother promise and reliance on it. "The cause or guilt of this unbelief, as well as of all other sins, is no wise in God, but in man himself" (Canons of Dort 1.5, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 155).

The following rebuke of the Lord made perfectly clear to Cain that he ought to have no confidence in himself: "If thou

doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?" (v. 7). Cain did not do well. He rebelled against the Lord. His unbelief was rebellion. His sacrifice was rebellion, offered neither in faith nor in harmony with God's word and action. Cain's sacrifice was therefore not accepted. The Lord also rebuked Cain for his present state of anger: "Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen?" (v. 6). Cain's anger was sin. His fallen countenance was sin. His anger and fallen countenance were sure signs of his wicked impenitence. In his sin he had steeled himself against the repentance that ought to have broken his heart the moment the Lord did not have respect to his sacrifice.

The seed of the serpent still lives in the world and is ruled by the living God. That seed, like Cain, continues in its way of rebellion against its creator and judge. That seed continues on its way in stubborn defiance. The seed of the serpent is inexcusable in its rebellion. It is inexcusable not only because it remains always aware of its creator and his law, but it is also inexcusable because it constantly has ringing in its ears and driving upon its stubborn heart the judgments of God constantly rebuking it for its sin. Especially that seed of the serpent that

Only the God of promise was powerful in sovereign grace to give them the seed of the woman. Just as Adam and Eve needed the grace of the promise of the seed of the woman, so did their seed.

stands before the altar to offer its sacrifices to the Lord must hear an even stronger rebuke and a greater condemnation for its wicked pretensions.

The rebuke of the Lord showed further where Cain was required to pick up the battle. As Cain was ready to continue on in his evil way, he had demonstrated already that he was of the seed of the serpent. Sin was ready at the door to lead him wherever sin willed. His anger, as controlling self-will, was blinding him to the truth of sin's governance over him. The word of the Lord, instructing Cain in true self-knowledge, set before him his responsibility with complete clarity. The Lord called him to cast off the governance of sin: "Unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him" (v. 7). So the Lord commanded Cain. So the Lord held Cain responsible.

There are two radically different views concerning that rebuke of the Lord. One view is that of common grace, and that view of common grace includes the well-meant offer. This view would have that word of the Lord engaging in the work of restraining sin. Common grace sees an unrestrained Cain murdering Abel and the implications of that sin for the future of the human race in bloodshed and war. According to common grace, the word of the Lord had a definite purpose: to keep Cain from carrying out the horrible crime of fratricide. The well-meant offer of common grace explains that with those words God expressed a desire for Cain's salvation. God had a genuine desire for Cain's repentance over his wrong, unbelieving sacrifice and over his subsequent great wrath and fallen countenance.

The above view must completely fall apart under the judgment of what follows in the record of scripture. This view can only leave behind a God whose will for Cain's repentance was entirely thwarted and whose efforts to prevent the horrific crime of fratricide were utterly futile. Continuing to maintain such a doctrine of common grace must result in a God who has no real sovereignty over the universe and who consequently has no right to judge it either. If God is not the absolute sovereign over all, including Cain, then God has no right to hold him either responsible or accountable, rights clearly demonstrated in the following verses.

Rather, it is exactly the other, correct view that alone can account for all the following history.

God is sovereign, the absolute sovereign, who always performs all his will and good pleasure and before whom all, both the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, are responsible and accountable. The true God, who is sovereign and particular in his grace and in the giving of that grace through faith, is the God who elected Abel and reprobated Cain. He is the God who determined according to that decree to apply the grace of the mother promise to Abel and who determined according

to that decree to leave Cain in his depravity and unbelief. God's rebuke was therefore not of grace but of judgment. Without sovereign, particular grace, his rebuke could only harden Cain's graceless heart in its impenitence.

The absolute sovereignty of God's grace was exactly the reason for the following murder of Abel by Cain.

The Lord who rebuked Cain was the absolutely sovereign, gracious God of the covenant. He was the Lord who had spoken the gracious mother promise to Cain's parents, the mother promise against which their son Cain, who was of the seed of the serpent, had closed his ears in unbelief. The Lord graciously gave the tokens of that redemption and covering of sin to Cain's parents, clothing them with coats of skin. Against those tokens their son Cain had closed his eyes. The Lord had taken Cain's younger brother Abel for his own, giving him the faith whereby he offered to God a more pleasing sacrifice than Cain. He was very wroth against his younger brother because that brother was of the seed of the woman, the seed brought about by God's gracious mother promise. Cain's countenance fell because of his brother's believing sacrifice. Indeed, in Cain's deep anger is fulfilled the gracious word of God's mother promise in Genesis 3:15: "I will put enmity."

The above is also the teaching of 1 John 3:12. The Holy Spirit's explanation for Cain's murder of Abel is the antithesis. "Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous." Because Abel was of the covenant, made the friend-servant of God by grace alone, his works were righteous. Because his works were righteous, Cain hated him.

The truth of 1 John 3:12 is applied in the following verse: "Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you."

That Cain hated Abel for the righteousness of his works and that the world hates the "brethren" for the righteousness of their works, that is, the love of the brethren, must not be a marvel. What the world hates about the brethren is that their love of one another is the fruit of God's sovereign, particular grace. Those righteous works displayed to the world are the righteous works of God, having their basis and root in Christ—the seed of the woman, the perfectly righteous Son of God. The brethren must not marvel. The enmity of the world against them is the faithfulness of their God's faithful mother promise. The hot breath of the seed of the serpent on the necks of the seed of the woman in its heated, hateful pursuit is the divine execution of that promise. So is that relentless, hateful seed under the sovereignty of God's just judgment. So are the brethren, the seed of the woman, under the protection and care of the sovereign God who has graciously promised to be their God, their friend-sovereign.

—MVW

TWO QUESTIONS FOR CALVINISTS WHO SUPPORT JOHN MACARTHUR'S VIEW OF JUDAS ISCARIOT

In a sermon titled “The Master’s Men Part 5: Judas Iscariot,”* John MacArthur taught that Jesus loved Judas Iscariot. Read the sermon manuscript, and you will see that MacArthur said, “Jesus loved him [Judas]” and “He [Christ] was showing love to him [Judas],” and MacArthur argued that Jesus’ action toward Judas in giving him the sop at the last supper was “an act of love.”

Personally, I reject these unbiblical notions, and if you disagree, respectfully, let’s see how you respond to two questions below to determine if you trust in the particular and free grace of God or the false gospel according to John MacArthur.

First Question

Despite MacArthur’s love language and teachings about Jesus having loved Judas, where does the Bible explicitly say that Christ loved Judas?

There are no verses in the Bible which teach that Christ loved Judas. During his incarnate ministry, Christ said that it would have “been good for that man [Judas] if he had not been born” (Matt. 26:24), and Jesus also referred to Judas as “a devil” (John 6:70), but he never said that he loved Judas. Interestingly, MacArthur teaches that Jesus loved Judas, but Jesus called Judas “the son of perdition” (17:12).

Teachers like MacArthur often fail to explain how God can love and hate reprobates simultaneously. The Bible teaches that God “hatest all workers of iniquity” (Ps. 5:5), and “the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth” (11:5). Arguing that God can love and hate reprobates simultaneously violates the laws of logic. Logic is not a standard that exists apart from God but is an expression of his infinite, eternal, and immutable character. And logic is not contradicting because God is not contradicting. Put another way: logic exists because God exists.

Second Question

Where does the Bible teach that Christ tried to save Judas?

MacArthur teaches that Jesus pleaded with Judas and tried to save him. In an article titled “Unmasking the Betrayer,”** MacArthur said regarding Judas, “Jesus gave him warnings and pleas to bring him to repentance and salvation. And at every point he turned it down. We see that clearly in John 13.”

God ordained Judas for eternal destruction; thus, it is absurd to argue that Christ pleaded with Judas to be saved. Several hundred years before his birth, the Bible taught that Judas would be the one who would betray Christ (Ps. 41:9; 55:12–14, 20–21; Zech. 11:12–13). According to MacArthur, Jesus was trying to save Judas; but according to the Bible, God the Father ordained Judas for perdition, and God the Son reaffirmed this: “None of them is lost, *but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled*” (John 17:12; emphasis added).

MacArthur taught that Jesus tried to save Judas, but “at every point he turned it down. We see that clearly in John 13.” This implies that Christ failed, and Judas could have chosen to be saved and not betray Christ. MacArthur’s imbecilic argument should be rejected based on the following:

First, the Bible never teaches that Jesus tried to save Judas, and Christ never fails to save all for whom he died. In John 19:30 Christ said, “It is finished.” The Greek word *Τετέλεσται* (“it is finished”) is in the perfect tense, which indicates that the action was accomplished or completed once and for all.

Second, the Bible never maintains that Christ loved or tried to save Judas, and it is impossible to argue that Christ was offering salvation to Judas if Christ never purchased salvation for Judas. The Bible teaches that Christ died for the elect (John 10:11), not the goats (v. 26). Therefore, if the Bible teaches that the gospel is Christ’s

* John MacArthur, “The Master’s Men Part 5: Judas Iscariot,” May 31, 1981, retrieved October 30, 2020, from <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/2276/the-masters-men-part-5-judas-iscariot>.

** John MacArthur, “Unmasking the Betrayer,” August 18, 2016, retrieved October 30, 2020, from <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/P26/unmasking-the-betrayer>.

substitutionary death and perfect obedience that is imputed to God's elect, arguing that Christ tried to save Judas—despite the fact that Christ's Father ordained his perdition and Christ never died and shed his blood for Judas—is tantamount to saying that Jesus was offering a different gospel to Judas.

Moreover, *implying* that Judas could have chosen to be saved and not betray Christ blatantly ignores the fact that several hundred years before his birth, the Old Testament prophesied that Judas would be the one to betray Christ. Jesus reaffirmed this in John 13:26. This means that it is literally impossible for Judas to have chosen not to be the one who would betray Christ.

Lastly, to argue that Judas had turned down Jesus' pleas of salvation, MacArthur referenced John 13. This is a horrible interpretation of this text. A simple review of John 13 reveals that Jesus never offered Judas salvation, and Jesus knew Judas would betray him (v. 26). Jesus knew

because he is God the Son and is thereby all-knowing and because his word teaches that Judas would be the one to betray Jesus, as previously discussed. Yes, Judas rejected Christ because God ordained that he would deny Christ, not because Judas turned down Jesus' offer of salvation.

Closing

Regardless of what MacArthur thinks, the Bible does not teach that Christ loved and tried to save Judas. The Bible teaches that Christ loved and died for his elect (Eph. 5:25), not for reprobates. This means that Judas was not loved by Christ, because God ordained his perdition and Christ never died for him. Thus Christians need to examine what MacArthur teaches and compare it with the Bible, then remind themselves about Romans 3:4: "*Let God be true, but every man a liar*" (emphasis added).

—Dr. Sonny Hernandez

A PILGRIM'S PRAYER

O Jehovah, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy riches. The earth is Jehovah's and the fullness thereof; the world and all they that dwell therein. Jesus Christ, the wisdom of God, hath ascended on high, hath given to us his righteousness, forgiven us all our sins, and made us heirs of this thy grand design.

Grant, Father, that in Jesus Christ we may use with thy blessing this creation: food out of the earth, wine to make glad the heart, oil to make the face to shine, and bread to strengthen our hearts; and for these we pray.

O Lord our God, thou art very great, and with all thy abundant care of thy creation wilt thou not also care for us thy redeemed people, granting to the men work, to the families daily bread, and to each one strength to do his labors before thy face. Grant us thy grace that, remembering to be thankful and blessing thee always, we may do our work, whatever thou mayest be pleased to give to us, to thy name's honor and glory as members of thy covenant and kingdom.

Grant us hope that we may also labor in hope, looking forward to that day when thou shalt be all in all in this renewed creation. As we look forward to that day, grant that we may not cling to the things of this life but receive thankfully and patiently from thy hand such

things as thou dost give to us. For we do not at present see all things put under the feet of Jesus Christ, but we see him ascended to thy right hand and reigning in the interest of his church. We see yet many signs of a creation groaning under the curse, not only the fact that the lion and the lamb do not yet lie down peacefully together, as they shall in thy perfect creation; that there is death and a creation bloodied and violent; that sinners yet despise thy bounties and press them into the service of sin; but also our own fears and struggles and often our sheer unbelief in thy fatherly care of us. For thou dost hide thy face, and we also are troubled.

As we face this coming year of growing, planting, harvesting, and labors, wilt thou strengthen our faith in thee that we might praise thee always and that our thoughts may sweetly repose in thee that thou wilt provide us with every good thing and avert all evil or turn it to our profit. We commit our way unto thee, who alone rules and reigns in creation. Grant us, therefore, to sing of thee while we have our being, as long as we live and into eternity, and let sinners be consumed out of the earth, and let the wicked be no more when this creation being renewed shall be the perfect habitation of Jesus Christ and his righteous church.

Amen.



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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? — Micah 6:8

God's requirements. They are good. Do justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly with thy God. The two tables of the law. Here they are reversed. When the second table is broken, so that we do injustice and hate mercy, we are not walking humbly with our God, and the first table is broken. The law and its keeping are good for man: in the keeping of God's testimony there is a great reward.

That keeping is *required* of all men. None will have an excuse in the judgment day. For Israel has the law, and the Gentiles have the testimony that God is and that he must be served written in the blue heavens and in every creature.

Required! That is ominous for fallen man. There is damnation in that word. Adam heard it and rejoiced. But for fallen man there is terror in that word, so they dare not die, and all their lifetime through fear of death they are subject to bondage.

To do justly is required: that in all your heart, mind, and works you are in harmony with goodness. Having righteousness in your heart, you do justly. That is God. That is his people in principle.

To love mercy is required: the inmost desire of your heart is to bow before your brother in misery and to deliver him out of his distresses, even to those who spitefully use you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely. Then you are very near to the heart of God.

To walk humbly with your God is required: to press your heart down before God. Because God is infinite and you are a creature of the dust; because God is perfect and you are an abominable sinner. To do God's will, even if you lose family, job, name, honor, or life; that you will not take one step in your life without his direction; that God is all in all in your heart, and you are nothing.

What does man do with that? By nature he will have nothing of it. Proof? When God came to us doing that perfectly, we crucified him. "Do justly" thunders from heaven, but we are crooked. "Love mercy" sounds from the heavenly tribunal, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel. "Walk humbly before God" is proclaimed, and we say there is no God of might! Corrupt are we and base our deeds and in evil we delight, even as we give a trifle of religion but our hearts are not in it.

Only one man fulfilled that whole law. Jesus. His meat and drink was to do God's will. A hearing ear and a willing heart he had. What did it mean for him to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God? It meant the cross, where he had to suffer hell and damnation to make satisfaction to God. He humbled himself before God, became a worm and no man, and suffered himself to be mocked, ridiculed, crucified, and cursed for God and for his people.

If a man does justly, loves mercy, and walks humbly with his God, the only explanation is that Jesus Christ has come and taken his abode in that man's heart. That alone explains his life. He has a new heart where Christ reigns, and from that new heart his whole life proceeds. Now he sees his wretchedness, he sees Jesus, and he desires as God desires.

—NJL