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

APRIL 2021 | VOLUME 1 | NUMBER 14

CONTENTS

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

Editor-in-chief
Rev. Andrew W. Lanning

Contributing editors
Rev. Nathan J. Langerak
Rev. Martin VanderWal

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

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

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

Signed letters and submissions of general interest may be sent to the editor-in-chief at lanning.andy@gmail.com or

2705 48th Ave
Zeeland, MI 49464

Sword and Shield does not accept advertising.

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

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

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

FINISHED

When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost. —John 19:30

It is finished! Beautiful word. Blessed salvation. It is the sixth and second to last cross word. Jesus spoke one more time after that. He said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." Before he surrendered his spirit to the Father, Jesus said, "It is finished."

What is three words in English is one word in Greek: *te-tel-es-tai*! The dying Christ came out of the darkness of the cross, and the whole universe came with him. He said, "I thirst!" He thirsted after his immense effort to accomplish salvation. The bystanders put a sponge full of vinegar to his mouth. With that taste of vinegar stinging his cracked lips, tingling on his teeth, and biting his parched throat, he uttered one last, glorious shout. With a voice empowered by the divine, he uttered a shout that reverberated throughout the universe: "It is finished!"

That shout made heaven and the angels rejoice, and it made hell and Satan shudder. The hosts of fiends that were so active at the cross must have paused, looked questioningly at each other, and asked, "What is finished?" They had been so busy. Busy all his life. Busy at his birth, so that Herod rose up to slay Jesus. Busy in the minds of Jesus' enemies. Busy even on the lips of his own disciples. Busy in the chambers of the high priest and the council room of the Sanhedrin. Busy on the lips and tongues of the false witnesses, busy at Gabbatha, busy in the hammer blows of the soldier who nailed Jesus' hands and feet to the cross, and busy in the throats of the mob shouting, "Crucify him!" Busy on the road leading past Golgotha as the crowds jeered, mocked, and reviled the dying Christ. They had worked so hard to bring him to the cross, to crucify Jesus, to finish him, and to bury him once and for all. Then at the bitter end of the cross, he shouted victoriously, "It is finished!"

What is finished?

The victory cry from the cross of Calvary reverberated not only in heaven above and in the portals of Satan's kingdom beneath, but that cry also reverberates down through history wherever the gospel is preached. The victory shout of the dying Christ was a one-word summary of the whole gospel of Jesus Christ and his cross that would be preached, that is being preached, and that has been preached throughout all the world. The gospel, if it is to be gospel, must declare the cross of Christ. The preaching must declare about the cross of Christ what Jesus shouted about his own cross before he gave up the ghost: "It is finished!" By this one word everyone who hears the gospel can test whether what they hear is indeed the gospel or whether it is a lie by which men contradict the dying Christ.

It is finished! All the work that is necessary for the church of Jesus Christ to have fellowship with God is finished. All the obedience that is necessary for the believer to have fellowship with God is finished. All the labor that was necessary to take away the stain of guilt, the punishment of sin, and the pollution of transgression is finished. All of salvation is accomplished.

All was finished in the perfect obedience and lifelong suffering of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ assumed human nature in order to suffer. He assumed the human nature and became a real man in order to suffer in the same human nature in which the offense of his people had been committed. When he was made man, incarnate in the womb of Mary, he was found in fashion as a man by the law of God, and Jesus was made sin and a curse for his people. Because he was their head and representative, all their sins were imputed to him, and he suffered for those sins. In all his suffering he obeyed, and in all his obedience he suffered.

He suffered during his whole life. He suffered as the object of the wrath of God every moment of his existence. He suffered in the womb because for his sake there was no room in the inn. He suffered in the stable as the world rejected him. He suffered as a child. He suffered in the desert as the devil attacked him. He suffered in his ministry as the Son of Man who had no place to lay his head. His enemies whispered, despised, criticized, contradicted, glared at, and flattered him. They plotted against him and tried to entrap him and to incite him to anger and to mistakes. He was rejected by his own brethren and was thronged by a crushing multitude, and afterward they all left until only twelve remained, and one of them was a traitor and a devil. The Jews begged him to leave their country, wished him ill, and called him the most terrible names. They envied him. They tried to kill him. He suffered during his whole life. He suffered as perfection itself among sinners. Was there any sorrow like his sorrow?

He suffered especially at the end of his life. One who ate bread with him lifted up his heel against him, sold him for thirty pieces of silver, and betrayed him with a kiss. The weight of wrath pressed out of him his bloody sweat, a look into the cup that he had to drink nearly killed him, and he was sorrowful unto death. All the while he was attended by sleeping disciples who soon were offended at him, forsook him, and fled. The mob with swords and staves bound him as a thief. He suffered in his trial before the members of the Sanhedrin: all their abuse, their feigned righteousness, their hypocrisy, the false witnesses, and the lies. The oath! They put the Son of God under oath. He suffered in his trial before Pilate and by the gratuitous brutality of Pilate's soldiers and then before Herod and his men, at first desiring to see Jesus and quickly tiring of the silent Christ. He was exchanged for the murderer, thief, and rebel, Barabbas. Jesus' whole nation shouted for his crucifixion.

He suffered at the cross most of all. All his life he lived in its shadow. In the garden he shrank from the cross as a horrible reality, and it filled his soul with agony. The cross was not merely an aspect of the suffering of Christ, but the cross was the central part of his suffering. He marched toward the cross, and the shadow became larger and darker the closer he came. The cross was terrible because its essence was the wrath of God. The form that wrath took was the curse. Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree! When God in his holiness maintains himself against the sinner, God curses the sinner. That curse is the living word of God that works the damnation of that sinner. By the utterance of God—by the word of God—everything is and is maintained. To say that there is a word of God that works the sinner's damnation means that everything—every particle of creation, everything possessed by the sinner, and every moment of that sinner's existence in that creation—works his damnation. That was the cross. That especially was the darkness at the cross. Three hours of terrible, furious, hellish darkness. God forsook Jesus.

After thirty-three and a half years of suffering that wrath of God and after three hours of horrible darkness, Jesus took a last taste of vinegar—the last of the vinegar, the last of his suffering. And from his lips came the cry that shook heaven above and earth beneath and hell under the earth: "It is finished!"

The suffering is finished. He accomplished all the work of salvation. It is ended, finished, completed.

> It is finished! By this one word everyone who hears the gospel can test whether what they hear is indeed the gospel or whether it is a lie by which men contradict the dying Christ.

More than that, *finished* means that the plan is completed. In all his lifelong suffering, but especially at his cross, he finished a grand plan, a master plan of salvation.

God had eternally decreed all of Jesus' suffering to be the perfect and only foundation of salvation. Salvation, the salvation of God's elect, did not begin at the cross but in eternity. The cross, according to the Christ of the cross, demands that we ask about its origin. Where did that cross come from? What explains that cross and all the details of that cross? Did man conceive of the cross? Did Jesus' enemies devise the idea of the cross? Did the man Jesus Christ propose the idea of the cross? No, the cross is God's, wholly God's, in every detail and from eternity.

In his eternal decree God expressed his unchanging and eternal love for his people and his will to bless them with unspeakable blessedness: that they know him, have his fellowship and friendship, worship him, and praise him as the God of all grace and mercy. Since God's decree is not a dead blueprint but God's living and active will, he refers to all Jesus' lifelong suffering as it was exquisitely carried out by God in order to accomplish God's eternal will for the salvation of his elect people. Salvation—salvation full and free, salvation and every benefit of salvation—is accomplished, finished, brought to completion, just as God decreed and governed it.

Satisfaction is finished. The salvation of God's people demands satisfaction because the justice of the righteous God against whom they had sinned demands satisfaction. Jesus made the perfect payment for sin, so that all the punishment of God's wrath against the sins of his people was finished at the cross, and there is no more punishment for sin. Finished!

Redemption is finished. With that satisfaction Jesus accomplished redemption. He purchased his people from the power and bondage of sin, hell, death, and the grave. He paid to God what God was owed for their sins, so that they escape the punishment that their sins deserved. Finished!

Righteousness is finished. Jesus fulfilled all righteousness. Everything that God required, all his demands, as those are expressed in the law of God, Jesus fulfilled. He performed the whole law for all his people and thereby accomplished their righteousness. He earned for them the forgiveness of sins and the verdict of perfection. Their whole salvation and all their blessedness rest on his work of righteousness. Finished!

Reconciliation is finished. Oh, Jesus did not reconcile God to his people. Jesus came from God. He was God's gift in love to those whom he loved. Jesus reconciled God's people to God. They were enemies in their minds because of sin. They ran from God, fled from him, hated him, and sinned more against him. God reconciled them to himself in the cross. He removed the barrier of sin and accomplished the righteousness by which they can stand before him and live with him. Heaven opened, the covenant confirmed, fellowship with God realized, the way to the Father made plain. Finished!

God's plan of salvation saved not only people but saved also his whole creation with his elect people at its heart and Christ at its head. God planned to wrap up all things into one, to join heaven and earth, to live with his people in eternal happiness forever in a new creation. God's eternal plan to join all things into one in Christ Jesus; to unite heaven and earth; to destroy sin, death, hell, and the grave once and for all—finished!

Every benefit and blessing of salvation, every saving act of God on you, in you, and for you is to be traced to the cross and the work of Christ at the cross. He did all—all that God had planned and determined and all that was necessary to save his whole elect church. Every benefit stored up in him: of God he is made to us wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

Oh, please do not say, "But what about all the work Jesus does from heaven? Does his work in heaven not contradict his words, 'It is finished'?" Jesus ascended into heaven, and he received the Spirit and pours out by that Spirit his heavenly graces on his people. But understand that all that work of Jesus is based on his work on the cross. All salvation was accomplished at the cross. All Jesus' work at the cross was rooted in God's eternal decree to save his elect by Christ and in Christ. Yes, yes, Jesus Christ pours out on his people heavenly graces: he regenerates them, calls them, and works faith in their hearts, and they really do repent and believe. And he justifies them and sanctifies them; and by virtue of that work of Christ, they really do good works. But understand that nothing of what we do, nothing, nothing at all, adds to the perfect work of Christ on the cross. All these graces flow to us by the work of the Spirit as surely and infallibly as the blood and water poured from Jesus' wounded side.

He is the complete, perfect, and only savior. He did enough. He did all. There is no other work that we need than his for salvation, blessedness, and fellowship with God now and forever.

When Jesus had received the vinegar, *therefore*, *he* said. *He* said it. *He* took the vinegar. *He* gave up the ghost. *He*! Jesus Christ! He is the only one who can finish salvation and the whole plan of God. God in the flesh. He took that taste of very sour vinegar mingled with bitter gall. In that there is a word to us of how he accomplished all of our salvation.

Vinegar is closely related to the idea of leaven. It is sour. Like leaven, vinegar stands for sin, corruption, and its bitterness and power to dissolve and to work death. And gall, oh gall, tells us of the bitterness of that vinegar; for gall in the Hebrew is snake venom! There was in the suffering of the cross the painful bruise of the serpent to Jesus' heel. He took a last swig of that bitter wine.

Thus that last taste of the vinegar was also symbolic of all his suffering—all the cruelty, unrighteousness, venom, poison, wrath, corruption, sin, and curse that he suffered. How he received the vinegar—he tasted it and drank it down—is how he finished salvation.

He became one with us and with all our misery. He did that in God's eternal counsel when he was appointed head of all and thus also made our head and representative. He was made one with us in order to take responsibility for us. In the fullness of time, when he was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary, he took our flesh. He became flesh and dwelt among us. He entered into our night, misery, suffering, and all our bitterness. He did that as our head and representative and thus as the one who was responsible for all our sins and miseries and tasked to take away all our sin and guilt.

He was made sin and became a curse for us, so that it entered into him and he drank it down as the bitter and terrible cup of God's wrath. He drank that cup. He drained that cup of God's wrath and took it away. That cup terrified him. O Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. If there is a way to finish thy will, to accomplish salvation, if there is any other way, any other possibility, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt. To drain this cup willingly was required. It was not poured down his unwilling throat; he had asked for it. He asked for it in order to carry out God's will; he asked for it in love for God; he asked for it in love for his people. He asked for it in order willingly to drink all of its bitterness, terror, misery, wrath, and anguish—the very anguish, wrath, misery, terror, and bitterness of hell itself. That is what the whole life of Jesus was, the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Was there any sorrow like his sorrow? And that life of sorrow led up to and culminated in the bitter and shameful death of the cross.

He brought that life to an end. After the last taste of bitter vinegar, Jesus bowed his head and gave up the ghost. Finished! His whole life was bitter suffering and sorrow, pain, anguish, and torment for our sins. He bore

my sins and your sins, and so also the sins of every one of his elect people.

Oh, do not make him suffer for a man who is not saved. That is the most terrible blasphemy of the cross. If God offers salvation to every man and desires the salvation of every man who hears the preaching of the gospel, and if Christ also died for every man, every single human being who ever lived, then I would empty hell rather than deny that his cross was effectual.

But this adds to the wonder and mystery, the glory and grace of the cross. He tasted death for every kind of human being. He died for black and white, rich and poor, bond and free, king and beggar, for we are all beggars before the cross. For scandalous sinners and respectable sinners. He died for every one of his elect people. He laid down his life for his sheep. He suffered in the place of each one individually, and so he lived and suffered for my sins, was tried for my sins and found guilty by God, was hung on a tree and cursed for my sins, and he had suffered at the cross the full and eternal weight of the wrath of God for my sins.

He said, "It is finished!" He bowed his head and gave up the ghost! He brought that life in which he suffered for you and me to an end. That life of yours and mine in which we had to be punished for our sins, suffer for our sins, go to hell for our sins—that life is finished, it is dead and buried in the grave with Christ.

So it is for everyone who believes in him. For by faith we are dead and buried with him. It is finished. All punishment is past. All righteousness is ours. By faith. And that is God's gift.

That sixth cross word is terrible, then, for the world. Jesus overcame the world. How that word reverberated as God in human flesh cried with a loud voice. It reverberated and shook the foundation of Satan's dark kingdom, shook that great red dragon, for Christ had crushed his head. Satan fell from heaven with that word; he fell, fell, fell and has been falling ever since, until he will be cast into the deepest, darkest, and lowest hell, where the fire is unquenched and the worm does not die. That word of Christ is terrible for the unbeliever. There is no comfort in the cross for the unbeliever. It declares that he is finished except he repent and believe. The cross declares to him that so long as he remains impenitent and unbelieving he stands outside salvation, heaven, for this cross word declares Christ as the only way of salvation.

The word is terrible for the man who works for his righteousness, the man who says, "I must do this to have fellowship with God," who says, "I must do this to have a richer experience of fellowship with God; I must do this to enter rest, have heaven, joy, assurance, and glory." The word is terrible for the one who says, "It is not enough that Christ died; you must also do this and that to be saved." He makes Christ a liar. He will be damned for his unbelief in Christ's word. For one of these things is true: Jesus is not a complete savior, or you must find all things in him necessary for your salvation.

Nothing of what you do can ever add to Jesus' work, and then nothing that you do can ever be a ground or reason for your blessedness. And comfort of comforts, nothing you do can ever confound or bring to nothing that work of Christ.

Jesus said "It is finished" for our comfort who believe in him. Shout against all your sins and your guilt and your besetting sin, "It is finished!" Shout against all your suffering and sorrow, "It is finished; this can only be for my glory." He said that for us, so that we may have comfort and glory in his cross. He did enough. He did everything necessary for your salvation.

Nothing of what you do can ever add to Jesus' work, and then nothing that you do can ever be a ground or reason for your blessedness. And comfort of comforts, nothing you do can ever confound or bring to nothing that work of Christ.

Believing that word, you too must learn to die. Take up your cross and follow Christ and learn to die willingly—to die to yourself and your own desires and your own will—and to do God's will, which is only good.

—NJL

AN ANSWER TO DEPOSITION (1)

Introduction

On January 17, 2021, I was deposed from the office of minister of the word in Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church. I had held the office of minister there since December 31, 2017, the Lord graciously giving me three years to preach the gospel to his sheep in Byron Center.

If my deposition only affected me personally, I would not be writing about it. I have no desire to talk about myself in these editorials. However, the decision of the assemblies to depose me was an attack on the word of God and Christ's sheep. Therefore, I am compelled to answer, even if that means undertaking the distasteful task of writing about myself.

During those three years in Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church, by God's grace, I fed the flock the sound doctrine of the word of God. I preached the sound doctrine of the word of God in the pulpit, I taught the sound doctrine of the word of God in the catechism room, I brought the sound doctrine of the word of God privately in my study and in the homes of God's people, I led in the discussion of the sound doctrine of the word of God in Bible studies, I counseled according to sound doctrine in the consistory room, and I spoke and voted according to sound doctrine in the ecclesiastical assemblies. In its own way, the Protestant Reformed denomination testified that my doctrine was sound even as it deposed me from office. The official charge against me includes this declaration about my last sermons in Byron Center: "These statements are not false doctrine" (Minutes of Classis East, January 13–15, 2021, article 37.II.A).

During those three years that God gave me in Byron Center, I especially applied the sound doctrine of his word in warning and reproving Christ's sheep with regard to the danger of false doctrine that threatened them. Within their own denomination, an error had arisen that compromised the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even after this error had been exposed, men in the denomination labored mightily to minimize the error, to protect the teachers and defenders of the error, and even to continue in the error. Readers of *Sword and Shield* are familiar with this controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), for it has been the continual subject of the editorials and many other articles since the magazine's birth in June 2020. There is no more grievous danger to Christ's sheep than a compromise of the gospel. Churches that compromise the gospel do so to their own destruction under the righteous judgment of God. Therefore, as a watchman upon the walls of Zion, I cried warning upon warning to God's people in Byron Center and to the Protestant Reformed denomination. I daresay that anyone who has paid even a moment's attention to the controversy in the PRC has heard me crying this warning to them.

I do not write any of this to boast (and God forgive all my pride). I have nothing of myself of which to boast, for I am prone to every error against which I have preached and written. I write this with humility and gratitude to God for his faithfulness to his servant, for he has caused me to cry a warning for three years, even in the face of the wrath and displeasure and opposition of many men and eventually of an entire denomination. I also write this with love and with grief for the congregation and denomination that I once served. By casting me out, Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church and the denomination as a whole have declared the biblical warnings of God's word that I brought to be sin and wickedness, and God will judge those who call his word sin.

If anyone in the PRC who has heard my doctrine even a little for the last three years is still listening, then take heed: "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears" (Acts 20:29–31).

In spite of my sound doctrine, and especially because of my warnings and reproofs based on that sound doctrine of the word of God, the Protestant Reformed Churches cast me out as a divider of the churches. The charge against me—the charge against my preaching of God's word—was public schism. On this charge I was deposed from office and barred from the table of the Lord.

I contend that my deposition from office and my discipline was unholy and unjust. I contend that the charge against me was false. In these editorials I intend to give an answer to that charge. I do not intend to enter into all of the details of my deposition, which are ugly and disgusting. Those details must be brought to light for the protection of Christ's sheep who remain exposed to the wickedness that transpired. Elder Dewey Engelsma is currently doing tremendous work exposing the hypocrisy

and iniquity of the whole business in his blog, *A Strait Betwixt Two*, which I highly recommend. The blog can be accessed at astraitbetwixttwo.com. Much of the background and many of the details concerning my deposition can be found there, from the firsthand point of view of an elder in the church of Jesus Christ who witnessed exactly what treachery was carried out behind closed doors. My focus in these editorials will not be those things that are already being covered very well. Rather, my focus will be the specific charge and grounds that the assemblies brought against me and for which they deposed me.

Shifting Grounds

The great difficulty of giving an answer to the charge against me is that the grounds for my deposition were constantly changing. Every time another assembly rendered judgment against me, it wrote its own new set of grounds. By the time I was actually deposed, there were at least three distinct sets of grounds for my suspension and deposition: the original grounds written by the church visitors of Classis East; the grounds written by Trinity Protestant Reformed Church as a neighboring consistory; and the grounds written by Classis East itself. One could make a case that there was also a fourth set of grounds in the additional grounds written by the elders of Byron Center's consistory after they had adopted the church visitors' grounds but before the consistory went to Trinity. One could even make a case that there was a fifth set of grounds in Byron Center's answer to my protest against my suspension. Whether there were three, four, or five sets of grounds, there certainly was not one set of grounds. Every assembly that judged the case wrote its own new set of grounds.

It would be one thing if the grounds were merely tweaked or clarified. But each set of grounds is a new set. In some places the grounds of these bodies do overlap. But in many places the grounds are very different. Some grounds included by one body are entirely ignored by another body. Some grounds used by one body are used by another body but explained differently. In at least one case, the grounds blatantly contradict each other. The grounds used by the last body—Classis East—are especially different from the grounds used by the previous bodies. Classis East's grounds include material that was brand new to the case and that had not been brought to it by Byron Center, Trinity, or the church visitors but was written by classis on the spot. The one thing consistent from beginning to end is that each body that rendered judgment against me wrote its own new set of grounds.

The constant rewriting of grounds indicates two things. First, the grounds for my suspension and deposition were never sufficient to support the charge against me. If the grounds for my suspension and deposition were solid, meaningful, true grounds, each body that judged me would have been able to stand on those grounds. There would have been one set of grounds from the beginning to the end that would have proved the charge against me to be true. Every assembly that looked at those grounds would have been able to see that they supported the charge. Every assembly that judged the case would have been able to speak with one voice on the basis of the same grounds. The fact that each assembly could not stand on the grounds brought to it, but had to write its own set of grounds to stand on, demonstrates that the grounds were never sufficient. The assemblies could not speak with one voice together but spoke with three or four or five different voices by producing their own grounds. When each assembly wrote its own new set of grounds, each assembly was by that fact declaring that it could not proceed on the basis of the grounds brought to it. If each assembly had been able to proceed on the basis of one set of grounds, it would have. But no assembly could do so, and so each had to write its own grounds.

But the grounds are all-important! If the grounds are no good, then the charge is no good! If the grounds are insufficient, then the charge cannot stand. It is extremely unjust for an ecclesiastical assembly to hear a charge against a man, find the grounds against him to be insufficient for the assembly to stand on, and yet condemn the man anyway. It is not only unjust but extremely dishonest for an ecclesiastical assembly then to prop up a bad charge against a man by constructing a different set of supporting grounds. If the grounds are so rotten that they cannot support a charge against the man, the assembly must deny the charge, not go in search of new lumber to brace the bad charge.

The second thing that the constant rewriting of grounds indicates is that grounds were never truly necessary for my deposition. The verdict was settled long before the process of deposing me ever began. The charge against me was that I was guilty of the sin of public schism in the church of Jesus Christ. The charge of schism has been swirling around my head for years. The charge of schism was made against me publicly in letters from consistories to their congregations regarding my writing in *Sword and Shield*; that charge was made against me privately to Byron Center's consistory by the separate charges of three Protestant Reformed consistories; that charge was made against me to Byron Center's consistory and to Classis East by the editors of the *Standard Bearer*; that charge was made against me privately to Byron Center's consistory by the protest of a Protestant Reformed individual; that charge was made against me to Byron Center's consistory and to Classis East by another Protestant Reformed individual; that charge was made against me privately by at least two Protestant Reformed

ministers, neither of whom followed up by bringing it to Byron Center's consistory; a similar charge was made against me privately to Byron Center's consistory by the Theological School Committee of the PRC; that or a similar charge was behind the decision of three Protestant Reformed churches (that I know of) to bar me from their pulpits so that I was not allowed to fulfill my classical appointments to them in their vacancies. And these were only the official charges and decisions, to say nothing of private conversations. So constantly has the charge of schism been lobbed at me these last couple of years that I am almost sure that I am forgetting an incident or three in this list. Everyone had his own reasons, but all of the reasons had to do with my preaching and writing. The point is that everyone already "knew" that I was guilty of schism long before the process of deposing me ever began. By the time the process of deposing me began, grounds were hardly necessary. The charge of schism was going to be upheld with this set of grounds, that set of grounds, or no set of grounds at all.

How else does one explain that throughout the process of my deposition, no one ever even raised a concern that there were several sets of grounds? That no one ever questioned why there were grounds that flatly contradicted each other? That no one ever questioned why so much new material was introduced at classis that had not been brought to it by Byron Center or by Trinity or by the church visitors? That no one ever questioned why classis had ignored some things that the consistories brought? At a classis where nearly every single piece of advice was recommitted at least once, classis never even considered recommitting the advice on my deposition. Why not? Because the verdict was in before classis ever met. Classis could have voted after it deliberated, before it deliberated, or before it even convened, and the vote would have been the same. When everyone already knows that a man is guilty, the grounds can be this, that, anything, or nothing.

But the grounds are all-important! If the grounds are no good, then the charge is no good! If the grounds have to be added to, subtracted from, and rewritten by every assembly that gets ahold of them, then the charge cannot stand. When the grounds are not consistent, then everyone who already thinks he knows that a man is guilty ought to reconsider whether he actually knows that the man is guilty. If the verdict was so sure, then why were the grounds so unsure? If the decision was so firm, then why were the grounds so malleable?

When the church is exercising discipline, her grounds may not be shifting but must be firm. Discipline is the church's activity of putting a man to death spiritually and ecclesiastically. It is the activity of binding a man's sin and guilt on him so that he knows in his heart and soul that he is outside of Christ and that he will not enter into the kingdom of heaven except he repent. When the church disciplines, she puts a man to death. When she does so on solid grounds, then she puts that man to death according to the will and command of Jesus Christ. But when the church disciplines on shifting grounds, she murders that man. Spiritually and ecclesiastically she sheds his innocent blood.

Such was my discipline by the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Still, there that charge of schism sits, waiting to be answered, with all of its changing grounds heaped around it.

Next time, then, let us take hold of that charge and give it an answer.

—AL

FROM THE EDITOR

We are now just over a year into the worldwide coronavirus panic-demic. In mid-March of 2020, everything suddenly shut down. All nations, tribes, and tongues were gripped by the fear of sickness and death. Governments commanded their citizens to cease and desist all but essential activity, businesses worked remotely, and schools were shuttered. Even churches forsook the assembling of themselves together, regardless that scripture commands otherwise. In all the earth, it has been a year of fear.

In his rubric on ethics, Rev. VanderWal takes up the reality of fear and anger as they apply to the spiritual and ethical life of the child of God. As one would expect, Rev. VanderWal handles the topic with great insight and depth and provides some nourishing meat for the believer. He works through how fear and anger have operated in the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a particularly excellent section, he shows how that same fear and anger operate in a church during doctrinal controversy. This section is eye-opening and sheds

light on why the doctrinal controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches has proceeded the way it has. This will be an article for us believers to hang onto and to revisit from time to time, to be reminded that "perfect love casteth out fear" (1 John 4:18).

Moving on to Rev. Nathan Langerak's rubric on understanding the times, he takes us to revisit an old foe of the Reformed faith: Norman Shepherd. In fact, when it comes to modern-day opponents of the Reformed faith within Reformed and Presbyterian walls, one would be hard-pressed to find a greater foe than Norman Shepherd. His federal vision theology has spread far and wide and has infected the theology and the thinking of the Reformed world. As one would expect, Rev. Langerak handles the topic with crystal clarity and provides a sound wall of defense for Christ's sheep against a deadly wolf. The particular excellence of this article is that it trains us believers to hear what Norman Shepherd's theology sounds like. It trains us to recognize the words and the formulations that make up federal vision theology so that we can recognize it, especially when it is closer than we might think.

We also welcome a new author to the pages of *Sword and Shield*: Mr. Elijah Roberts. Mr. Roberts will be familiar to readers of the *Beacon Lights*, where several of his articles have appeared. We are delighted to have an article of his now appear on the pages of *Sword and Shield*. And an important article it is, developing the doctrine of the antithesis as it relates to covenant fellowship and the believer's walk with God. Instruction on the antithesis is sorely needed by Reformed believers today, and we believe that Mr. Roberts' article provides that instruction.

Finally, after so many months of receiving *Sword and Shield* free of charge, it is time to start thinking about subscribing. Through generous donations we have been able to provide the magazine at no cost to our readers thus far. The next issue (May 1) will be the last issue of volume 1. The following issue (June 1) will be the first issue of volume 2. Both of these issues will still be sent free of charge to everyone on our mailing list. If you would like to continue receiving *Sword and Shield* beyond June, then you can subscribe at https://reformedbelieverspub.org/purchase. Thank you to all who have already subscribed. And thank you to the generous donors who made the publication and distribution of *Sword and Shield* possible for all these months.

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

—AL

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

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

REVISITING NORMAN SHEPHERD

Norman Shepherd was the professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia from 1963 to 1981. He was released from his post due to controversy over his doctrines of the covenant and justification. After his release and before his retirement, he served two pastorates in the Christian Reformed Church. He is the father of what is known as federal vision theology.

This theology has infiltrated every Reformed and Presbyterian denomination in North America. Federal vision theology is a development of the covenant theology of Dr. Klaas Schilder and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated). Prof. David Engelsma has led the way in exposing federal vision theology as a corruption of the pure Reformed doctrine of the covenant and of the gospel truth of justification by faith alone.

Federal vision theology teaches that every baptized child is incorporated into the covenant and receives covenant grace in the form of a covenant promise of God to save that child and to be the God of that child. Every baptized child is engrafted into Christ by a real and vital union and receives the promise of salvation. Whether the promise issues in the child's final salvation is contingent on the child's trusting and obeying, faith and faithfulness, or faith and covenantal loyalty. The covenant promise is fulfilled in the way of faith and the covenantal loyalty of

the one to whom the promise was given. Necessarily, then, the promise is given to more than to the elect; more than the elect are members of God's covenant of grace. And the grace of the covenant is resistible grace. The federal vision also teaches the real possibility of falling away out of the covenant of grace and falling away into eternal perdition by those who were at one time in the covenant and the objects of God's favor and who possessed the promise of salvation. This teaching necessarily also corrupts the doctrine of justification—justification that is by faith alone without works and that grants the sure promise of heaven and eternal life now and forever, only for the sake of Christ's perfect work received by faith without works.

In the Protestant Reformed rejection of Norman Shepherd and federal vision theology, I believe we have missed some things, and if not missed them entirely, have not emphasized them as we should have. I think as well that there is a popular caricature of federal vision theology and its preachers and writers. The distorted thinking is that federal vision preachers and writers breathe out the word *condition* in almost every sentence; they blatantly say that justification is by faith and works; they openly state that saints can fall away; they clearly make known that the promise is for elect and reprobate alike; and, therefore, they and their theology are easily detected. The opposite is in fact true.

The issue for me, and what I want the reader to focus on, is this: what does federal vision teaching actually sound like? Many have written about Norman Shepherd and his federal vision theology, but I am not going to quote those writers. I am going to quote Norman Shepherd himself from his book *The Way of Righteousness*.* This title is a reference to Proverbs 12:28, as he quotes it from the NIV: "In the way of righteousness there is life; along that path is immortality." In this book Norman Shepherd sets down his view of justification and thus also of the covenant promise and salvation. We are going to take a walk through this book to hear what federal vision theology sounds like.

Norman Shepherd begins with this statement about salvation:

> Eternal life is a gift in the fullest sense of the word. It is not something that anyone can achieve, earn, or merit, or in any way deserve. Eternal life is a gift of sovereign grace. It is a gift that God gives to whomsoever he wills according to his eternal plan and purpose. He gives us eternal life, and he gives us the faith by which we lay hold on this gift of life. Our salvation is all of grace from beginning to end (Eph. 2:8). (19)

What error could possibly come out of such a statement? Much! And it depends on how one teaches and preaches justification and the faith by which the believer is justified. The issues are whether justification is by faith alone without works and whether that justification by faith alone without works gives to the believer the knowledge of his salvation, peace with God, the Holy Spirit as the earnest of his inheritance, fellowship with God, assurance of his salvation, and ultimately heaven itself. It depends on whether one teaches that the believer has all of these blessings on the basis of Christ's righteousness alone and that the believer's works are no basis at all for any of these blessings. The answer of the gospel is yes! The answer of Norman Shepherd is no! Justification is not by faith alone without works. Justification is by faith; however, the faith that justifies is a penitent, obedient, loyal, working faith. That faith only justifies with its penitence, obedience, and covenantal loyalty.

The starting point for his doctrine of justification is James, and the following quotation is the road map for the walk that we will be taking through Shepherd's book:

> What James has to say [about justification] is every bit as clear, authentic, and authoritative as anything that we find in the teaching of Paul, and therefore we are taking as our starting point for understanding the biblical doctrine of justification in James. From there we will go on to the teaching of Paul and our Lord in the New Testament, and then to justification under the Mosaic covenant in the Old Testament. The final chapter will take up justification under the new covenant dealing especially with matters related to our experience of this biblical truth today. (20)

A little explanation is in order. Shepherd's contention is that James 2—a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone—is teaching justification in the same sense as Paul in Romans 3—a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. Further, the doctrine of James and Paul concerning justification is no different than what the rest of the Bible teaches about justification.

What does Norman Shepherd say James teaches about justification? The key and central passage for Shepherd's whole argument is James 2:14–26. He rather fully analyzes this passage, so I will quote him at length.

> James is using the word "justify" (vs. 24) in a sense parallel to the word "save" (vs. 14)…Salvation in verse 14 is therefore salvation from condemnation when we stand before the Lord God to be judged. Salvation from condemnation in

* Norman Shepherd, *The Way of Righteousness: Justification Beginning with James* (La Grange, CA: Kergyma Press, 2009).

> the judgment of God is exactly what we mean by justification…Justification has to do with the judgment that God makes concerning the sinner that leads to eternal life. It is a saving declaration that the one being judged is free from guilt and is accepted as righteous in the sight of God…Salvation in verse 14 and justification in verse 24 both mean forgiveness, deliverance from eternal punishment, and entrance into eternal life. (21–23)

James' conclusion, according to Norman Shepherd, is that in the final judgment people will be saved from condemnation and enter glory. "They will be justified and saved by what they do and not by faith alone" (26).

So the question naturally becomes, what does James mean when he says that justification is by works and not by faith alone?

> The first and most important observation we must make is simply that James is not denying that justification is by faith. He is not saying that justification is by works alone…Rather, verses 14–26 are designed to establish justification by faith in a pointed and precise way. The one who believes in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior will be justified and saved…James teaches a gospel of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. He urges faith not as a meritorious human virtue making a person worthy of being saved, but as total dependence on Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior…[James 2:14–26] does not teach salvation or justification by works apart from faith or even justification by works in addition to faith. The bottom line is that justification (salvation) is by faith…James and Paul cannot be set over against one another as though James taught justification by works and Paul, justification by faith. Both teach justification by faith.
>
> But James says more about this faith when he says that justification is by works and not by faith alone (vs. 24). These words focus our attention on the kind of faith that justifies and saves. Justification is by faith, but not a faith that stands all alone devoid of action and unproductive of good works. Saving faith in Jesus Christ is a faith that works. It is a living and active faith. Only a living and active faith justifies and saves. (26–27)

Norman Shepherd goes on to use the illustrations of James 2:14–26 to prove his point that only a living, active faith justifies and saves.

> In verses 15–17 James begins by illustrating his point…Suppose someone is without clothes and food. You wish him well but do nothing to meet the pressing need. The wish without the deed accomplishes nothing…In the same way, faith without deeds accomplishes nothing. It does not save and it does not justify. (27)

Shepherd moves to the two examples of the doctrine drawn from the Old Testament, Rahab and Abraham, the two extremes by which James establishes that "what is true for converted Jews is also true for converted Gentiles…James is saying that there is now no difference between Jew and Gentile when it comes to justification and salvation" (29).

What he says about Abraham will suffice to establish his point.

> Verses 21–24 present the example of Abraham. Verse 21…literally…says that Abraham was justified by works…Verse 22 makes the point that this action of Abraham was an expression of his faith… *His faith was not merely demonstrated by what he did, but was completed by what he did.* Without the deed the faith would not be genuine faith. It would be useless and dead…Abraham trusted and obeyed. His obedience is the obedience of faith. It springs from faith and is an expression of his faith. Verse 23 says that in this way Scripture was fulfilled. The Scripture referred to is Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." This happened at the point when the promise was given to Abraham, but of course the work of offering Isaac as a sacrifice did not happen until much later in the experience of Abraham…The point is that the faith Abraham had when he believed the promise was the kind of faith that would issue in obedience…*What is credited or imputed to Abraham? The answer is his faith…faith and the obedience flowing from faith are of a piece with one another and together they constitute the righteousness of Abraham.* Abraham was a righteous man. He trusted the Lord and obeyed him. This fact is recognized, acknowledged, and declared in the judgment of God. This is the man who is justified and saved, the man who believes God and who believes in God with a living, active, and obedient faith…James is saying that the person who believes God, who believes in his Son, and who believes the gospel with a living, active, and obedient faith, is a righteous man. He is in the right with God now and will be saved from condemnation in the Day of Judgment. He is justified now and will be justified in the final judgment. (29–30; emphasis added)

Norman Shepherd then summarizes his argument about the gospel of James.

> First, James 2:24 is talking about justification in the forensic-soteric sense, not in the demonstrative sense. Second, this justification takes place on the Day of Judgment when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead. Third, those who will be justified in that day are those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior with a living, active, and obedient faith. Fourth, faith that is not living, active, and obedient is a dead faith, and dead faith will not justify and will not save. (32)

So do James and Paul conflict with one another? James teaches that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone (2:24). Paul teaches that a person is justified by faith without the works of the law (Rom. 3:28). What does Shepherd say the apostle Paul means when he says that a man is justified by faith without the works of the law?

> First, justification is the forgiveness of sins so that we are accepted of God as righteous and receive the gift of eternal life. Second, justification is the forgiveness of sins grounded on the imputed righteousness of Christ. Third, the righteousness of Christ imputed for our justification is his death and resurrection for us and in our place. (33)

Justification for Paul in Romans 3:28 is the same as in James: it is a forensic, saving declaration of God, the forgiveness of sins grounded on the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Then the question becomes, what does Paul mean by the faith that justifies?

> First of all, justifying faith is faith in Jesus…Faith in Jesus means trusting Jesus, accepting, receiving, resting upon Jesus for the pardon of sin and the title to everlasting life…The shed blood of Jesus atones for sin and is the ground of our pardon…
>
> Second, justifying faith is a penitent faith [citing Romans 2:4, 7]…The impenitent are storing up the wrath of God for the Day of Judgment; but the penitent, those who turn away from sin and persevere in doing good, will enter into eternal life…It is inconceivable that justifying faith can be anything but a penitent faith. Paul says in Romans 4:5 that God justifies the wicked…God justifies the wicked who repent, who turn away from sin with deep sorrow and who turn to Jesus for pardon…
>
> Third, justifying faith is not only a penitent faith but also an obedient faith…Justifying and saving faith is a penitent and obedient faith… In Romans 2[:7] Paul speaks of the necessity of repentance that becomes evident in doing good. He says God will give eternal life "to those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality"…In Galatians 5:6 Paul writes, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." Faith that expresses itself through love is an obedient faith, and this obedient faith is justifying faith…Faith, repentance, and obedience are possible in the experience of sinners only by grace, because we are a new creation…The believer, who believes in Jesus Christ with a living, active, penitent, and obedient faith, is the righteous man who lives by faith (Rom. 1:17). (36–38)

According to Norman Shepherd, this justification has nothing to do with justification by works of the law. The issue is how he defines works of the law that are excluded from justification.

> First, by works of the law Paul refers to the Mosaic Covenant as such. You will not be justified by living according to Jewish religious regulations…When you do you separate yourself from Christ…and apart from Christ there is neither justification nor life!
>
> Second, by works of the law Paul means obedience to a limited selection of law found in the Law of Moses and in tradition.

Thus works of the law mean self-chosen obedience to some laws of Moses and tradition while neglecting "the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness."

> The problem has a long history in Israel as evidenced by Isaiah 64:6. Isaiah says, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags." By "righteous acts" Isaiah does not mean good works, that is to say, works done in faith, according to the law of God, and for the glory of God. He means by "works of the law," selective acts of obedience that are designed to cover up the massive disobedience of which the people were guilty…These works of the law are, indeed, no better than filthy rags. People who are seeking to be justified by such works of the law are sinners who do not confess their sin but pretend to be righteous. (41-43)

Shepherd continues his explanation of the works of the law that are excluded from justification:

> Third, works of the law are works that are done without faith…They were not the obedience of faith wrought by the power of God. They were works done in the strength of human flesh to obtain the justifying verdict of God…There is a vast difference between works of the law that Paul everywhere condemns and the obedience of faith that Paul everywhere commends and encourages. (43–45)

Norman Shepherd then draws the following conclusion from his study of James and Paul:

> Therefore Paul does not come into conflict with himself when he declares that justification comes by a penitent and obedient faith, and not by works of the law. By the same token Paul does not come into conflict with James when he says that justification comes by faith without works of the law. Both apostles are saying that we are justified by faith in Jesus, that this faith is living faith. It is a penitent and obedient faith. (45)

Norman Shepherd goes on to explain that both James and Paul teach the same thing that Jesus Christ taught in his ministry on earth. I cite only a few examples to establish the sound of Shepherd's theology. His basic thought is that Jesus called sinners to faith, repentance, and obedience and forgave the sins of those who believed, repented, and obeyed.

> [In the gospel accounts] repentance is presented as unto the forgiveness of sin and as unto justification. Sinners must repent in order to be forgiven. They must repent in order to be justified and saved. Therefore we have to say that in the teaching of our Lord repentance is necessary for justification…
>
> In the ministry of our Lord we see that the call for repentance is coupled with teaching penitent sinners to obey his commands…Jesus says [in the Sermon on the Mount], "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."… Jesus is not talking about the imputation of his own perfect active obedience to sinners as the ground of their justification, but about the righteous behavior he is describing in the Sermon… [The works of the Pharisees] were not the works of faith. Jesus is saying to his followers, "You must not be satisfied with that kind of righteousness. You must press on to be the disciples I am calling you to be, disciples who do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8). That is the kind of faith in Jesus that gives entrance to the kingdom of heaven. (54–55)

In the final part of this section, Norman Shepherd becomes more explicit about what he believes the teaching of Jesus Christ is on justification: "It has become apparent by now that in the proclamation of the gospel, our Lord makes justification and salvation contingent upon obedience." He states the following as evidence of this point:

> Jesus makes the forgiveness of our sins contingent upon our readiness to forgive those who have wronged us (Matt. 6:14–15). This same teaching is found in Mark 11:25…The master passes judgment on the unmerciful servant and says, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matt. 18:35). These examples are striking because forgiveness belongs to the very essence of justification. Justification is the forgiveness of sins. Unless you are prepared to forgive, you will not be justified in the judgment of God…
>
> In Matthew 12:36–37, Jesus says, "But I tell you that men will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."… Jesus is saying either you will be justified by your words or you will be condemned by your words. This is justification by works (words are works), and it is in the teaching of our Lord. This is the closest grammatical parallel we have in the gospels to the teaching of James 2:24, "You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone." (59–60)

Summarizing his conclusions to this point after studying James, Paul, and the gospels, Shepherd says,

> Jesus, Paul, and James all make justification and salvation contingent upon penitent and obedient faith. All of this has nothing to do with justification or salvation on the ground of the merit of good works. Faith receives what is promised. Living, active, penitent, and obedient faith can only receive what is promised, and what is promised of pure grace. Jesus died and rose again to take away the guilt of sin and to destroy its power. He recreates us in his own image so that we can bring glory to God on the earth by reflecting his righteousness and holiness. In this way God saves us and leads us into possession of eternal life. We are saved by grace through faith. (63)

Norman Shepherd has a long section on "Justification under the Old Covenant." The key text for him is Habakkuk 2:4, which is quoted by the apostle Paul in Romans 1:17.

> The righteous will live by his faith…The Hebrew word for faith used in this verse also means faithfulness…The faith by which the righteous live is a penitent and obedient faith…Paul sees his own doctrine of justification by faith as continuous with what we find in the Mosaic laws and in the ministry of the prophets. The Law and the Prophets teach justification by a living, active, and penitent faith. (76)

Now the question is, what are the marks of federal vision's explanation of the gospel?

First, federal vision theology makes the gospel synonymous with justification and salvation. This is not a criticism. The gospel is synonymous with justification and salvation. This is Reformed and creedal: "We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied." "We believe that we have no access unto God but alone through the only Mediator and Advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous…only on the ground of the excellency and worthiness of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose righteousness is become ours by faith" (Belgic Confession 23 and 26, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 51, 56–57). This is also biblical: "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). Peace with God encompasses the whole right relationship of the believer with God. He knows God as his God; he understands that God is for him and cannot be against him; and he has the assurance that there is no condemnation to him, that he has passed from death to life, and that he will never die but enter into heaven. The apostle asks the Galatians, "This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" (Gal. 3:2). The "hearing of faith" is the hearing of the gospel of Jesus Christ that all the promises of God are yes and amen in him. It is hearing that and believing that—doing nothing for their salvation, trusting and relying on Christ alone—which faith is God's gift and work in their hearts. By the hearing of faith, they have the Spirit. This means that they are justified, all their sins are forgiven, the righteousness of Christ has been imputed to them, and the Spirit has been given to them as the earnest of their inheritance. To receive the Spirit is salvation, fellowship with God, glory, peace, assurance, and hope in eternal life in heaven. Having the Spirit, the believer will suffer for righteousness' sake, love his neighbor, and love God. There is no higher state that the child of God can come to than receiving the Spirit. All who have the Spirit have him as the very earnest of their inheritance; they have passed from death to life, can never die again, and will enter heaven. They have the Spirit by faith alone and not by works at all. This is to say, all of that comes by justification. Justification is the chief article of the gospel. Justification is salvation. Justification grants peace with God, assurance of salvation; opens the door of the kingdom; gives access to and fellowship with God, deliverance in the final judgment, and eternal life with God. Justification must be so preached. If justification is not so preached, then one does not have the gospel at all.

> The federal vision train that leads to heaven rides on two rails: Christ's atoning death on the one rail and the believer's faith and obedience on the other rail.

Second, Norman Shepherd's emphasis that justification has to do not only with the here and now but also with the final judgment is important. I would say that is how justification should be preached. The question for the believer is not only how shall I be right with God now, but also how am I right before God every day of my life; every moment of my existence; at the moment of my death when I appear before the great judge, Jesus Christ; and at the final judgment when I shall stand before him in body and soul? Thus the issue of justification for the believer is this: how do I receive the earnest of my inheritance—the Holy Spirit and fellowship with God—now? And how will I receive the fullness of my inheritance—the Holy Spirit and fellowship with God—in the final judgment? The answer is by Christ alone, being justified by faith alone. The preaching of the doctrine of justification must bring the believer all the way into the possession of his salvation, to the final judgment and right into heaven. Now, every day, and at the final day the believer enters his inheritance by faith alone, without works, on the basis of Christ's obedience, holiness, and righteousness freely imputed to him.

Then how does federal vision theology corrupt the doctrine of justification? It is obvious to anyone reading the quotations of Norman Shepherd that there are many references to grace, the work of the Spirit, Christ's atoning work, salvation by faith, and even God's sovereignty. Wherein is the corruption of the truth? *It is by means of corrupting the idea of faith itself and coordinating*

or mingling faith with the fruits of faith, or works. Trusting and obeying are the way to fellowship with God, joy, peace, assurance, and enjoying a richer experience of salvation, and ultimately the way to enter heaven.

Faith itself is presented as man's response to the gospel, what a man must do to be saved, and man's activity by which he is saved. The emphasis is on an *active* faith, man's *response*. Over against that must be placed Herman Hoeksema's teaching on faith and the gospel that the gospel call to faith means do nothing for your salvation. For the gospel is not you *must* believe, that is, *you* must; faith is that which *you must* do. But the gospel call is believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, do nothing for your salvation, rest in Christ alone, rely on Christ alone, and you will be saved. The gospel is that Christ's obedience is the only obedience necessary to enter God's fellowship and to enter heaven. Believers receive that by faith alone. The gospel is that believers are saved; enter into life; enjoy fellowship with God; and have assurance, joy, and peace through Christ alone by faith alone. They are in him by faith alone; they enjoy all his blessings and grace by faith alone; they are justified by faith alone. That faith is God's gift, including the bond, the willing, and the believing. All is of God.

Still more, federal vision thinking appears when faith itself is defined by its works. Faith and the works of faith are essentially made one. Faith is defined as an obedient faith, a living (working) faith, a persevering faith, or a sanctifying faith. It is not that Norman Shepherd will not speak of faith and the fruits of faith, but faith does not avail for anything without its fruits. *It is faith and its obedience that avail for fellowship with God, assurance, joy, peace, and entering into heaven.* Faith without its works does not avail for anything; faith without its works does not justify; faith without its works does not bring into fellowship with God; and faith without its works does not give joy, peace, and the assurance of salvation. The federal vision train that leads to heaven rides on two rails: Christ's atoning death on the one rail and the believer's faith and obedience on the other rail. As Norman Shepherd freely admits, this idea makes justification, salvation, and the realization of God's promises *contingent* on obedience. One need not say *condition*, *contingent*, *prerequisite*, or any other similar word to have contingency in salvation. Indeed, Norman Shepherd rarely uses these words, or he uses *in the way of* as a synonym. *When the promises of God are not realized until man believes with an obedient, repenting, persevering faith; when the blessings of God do not come except a man trusts and obeys, believes and works; when fellowship with God is not experienced unless a man responds in faith and obedience, then one has contingency, no matter how vigorously it is denied.*

This idea of an obedient faith as a justifying faith leads then to other corruptions of the truth.

First, it necessarily leads to the loss of the preaching of the law properly. The law as demand of perfection and as impossible for even the converted believer to keep perfectly virtually disappears. The law is doable for blessedness, grace, fellowship with God, and ultimately heaven itself: the believer obeys and then he receives God's blessing. Where this appears federal vision theology appears.

Second, the law as doable for blessedness, grace, and fellowship with God is defended because the believer is converted, made in the image of God, and has the Spirit of Christ in him. The believer's sanctification is not the *fruit* of his justification and the gift of life with God but is *part* of his justification and unto fellowship with God, blessing, grace, and glory.

Third, this idea of doing the law is closely coupled with the place of forgiveness in the believer's experience. *Forgiveness of his sins*—in which his perfect righteousness before God is implied on the basis of Christ's atoning work and because of which he has salvation, justification, fellowship with God, and heaven itself—*as salvation is missing.* In its place is that *forgiveness of sins serves chiefly to make the believer's imperfect works of obedience functional in his salvation.* He must trust that God forgives the sin that adheres to his works and that God accepts his imperfect works as perfect because Christ forgives the sin of them. Faith is an obedient faith that penitently seeks forgiveness and trusts that with the sin forgiven God will use the believer's works in his salvation.

Over against this the truth of justification must be stated with great vigor. A man is justified by faith alone without works, any works whatsoever. His very faith is the gift of God to him. His justification by faith alone is grounded on the perfect obedience, righteousness, and holiness of Jesus Christ, which become the believer's by faith. There is no other work, no other righteousness, no other holiness, no other obedience needed to come to God, to stand before God, to live with God, to enjoy fellowship with God, and ultimately to enter heaven than the perfect righteousness, obedience, and holiness of Jesus Christ. Being justified by faith alone, the believer has peace with God, the Spirit of grace and reconciliation, joy, assurance, and eternal life. Justification by faith alone is the linchpin of the doctrine of the unconditional covenant. Without it or corrupting it, the doctrine of the unconditional covenant cannot stand. If faith and obedience together garner the believer one benefit of salvation, one blessing, then justification by faith alone is corrupted and by necessity the unconditional covenant is corrupted.

—NJL

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

FEAR AND ANGER

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.—1 John 4:18

Introduction

It ought to be striking to the reader that an article written under the rubric of ethics is about fear and anger. Then one might suppose that the article would judge that fear and anger are unethical. Certainly the fear and anger discussed in this article are sinful and born out of unbelief. But the point is the role of fear and anger in ethics. Fear and anger can dominate and radically alter an ethical system. They can skew and bend ethics. Fear will prevent objective judgment. Anger distorts ethics. Something that brings an angry response is considered evil regardless of whether it truly is evil. Persons cannot make proper judgments between right and wrong because they are dominated and gripped by fear. And when fear is confronted by an objective standard, anger is the result.

The subject of this article is sinful fear and sinful anger, not holy fear and righteous anger. The distinction between *sinful* fear and anger and *holy* fear and *righteous* anger is the antithesis. Holy fear is God-centered, recognizing the littleness of the believer before the greatness of his God. Holy fear is also love and devotion, a delight to be near this great and glorious God, and knowledge of the greatness of the God who has graciously become the refuge of the small, helpless believer. Thus the believer, who has this fear in his heart by the grace of God, has the only deliverance from all other fears, fear of evil and fear of men. He is the party of the living God. What has the believer to fear with God as his God? The same characterizes righteous anger. It is anger not born of self but is centered on God and his glory. It is anger that springs out of devotion to God and is jealous for his honor and glory. It is selfless anger, independent of any wrong or injury done to the believer himself.

The fear and anger this article addresses are the opposite. This fear and anger are rooted in selfish pride and centered upon man. For this reason this fear is unholy, and this anger is unrighteous. There is no strength to them but only weakness. There is no virtue in them. They are characteristic of an unacknowledged and denied terror: the terror that man by himself, despite all his bravado and boasting, is nothing at all.

The concern of this article is present ethical systems that are not only skewed by sinful fear and anger but also controlled by them, and controlled to such a degree that their fear and anger become righteous, holy, and virtuous. This is what is truly horrific about these present ethical systems: they justify their own fear and anger. In other words, the ethical systems dominated by sinful fear and anger are upside down. The fear and anger that are usually understood to be subversive of ethics and morality now become ethical and moral.

Fear and COVID-19

The present circumstances in the world due to the sickness called COVID-19 are powerful examples of this dominating and controlling fear and anger. These circumstances are examples of how fear builds on itself to become the power that it is. They are also examples of how anger based on fear becomes self-justified. And these circumstances are examples not only of how fear leads to inordinate control by outside forces, but also how fear is so easily manipulated and abused for evil purposes.

The world, in facing and dealing with this so-called pandemic, is truly experiencing a revolution of fear. Most fundamental is fear of the disease itself. The lies of the medical community developed this fear. Doctors who were so-called experts in the field of infectious diseases reported that this disease was comparable to the Spanish influenza of the early 1900s. These experts led nearly every individual in the world to believe that he would very likely die of COVID-19 should he contract the virus. Fear of death was followed by fear of contagion, which fear projected itself upon others. A healthy individual, free of COVID-19, might feel a certain sense of safety in his home, but he regarded going out in public as risky and gathering in groups as especially dangerous. All of the individual's broader social acquaintances—extended family, classmates, coworkers, and church

members—were assumed to be dangerous, potential carriers of this deadly virus. Nearly every person was led to believe that contact with others would likely mean his certain death. So we were led to fear one another.

The reaction of governments around the world led to an entirely different and greater realm of fear. Shutdowns of every kind became the order of the day, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. Factories were shut down. Shops and businesses were closed. The economy was going to sink. Two new fears were thus introduced. There was the magnified fear of how bad the sickness must be, if countries were willing to endure crippled and perhaps collapsing economies for the sake of keeping their citizenries safe. This fear was doubled with the fear of losing jobs, careers, and livelihoods because of this sickness. The fear intensified when citizens' lives suffered all kinds of disruptions caused by imposed requirements of masks and social distancing and the shutdown of social gatherings, including the gatherings of congregations for worship. Bare faces, proximity of friendship and fellowship, and gatherings became matters of fear. There was fear of getting sick and dying. There was fear of making others sick and killing them.

New habits were instilled out of fear of this disease. Packages had to be washed, whether of groceries purchased at the local grocery or received from the hands of delivery men. Masks were required everywhere, and after one use masks were considered so contaminated by the virus that special precautions had to be taken when disposing of them. But these instilled habits also reinforced the fears that led to them.

There can be no doubt now that governments across the world took advantage of this fear. Citizens of country after country simply obeyed every decree handed down by their governments, even though many of those decrees attacked freedoms constitutionally guaranteed. Without so much as a blink, Christians obeyed government decrees not to gather for worship, and leadership in church after church took the position that love for the brother demanded not gathering at all for worship. Churches that insisted on gathering for worship despite government restrictions were regarded as offensive. The regular public worship of churches was viewed as a threat to public health and well-being: demise was all but guaranteed through the spread of this disease among those who would worship together in such harmful conditions. What these governments have learned about their ability to deprive their people of basic freedoms and rights! How will they apply these lessons in the future?

Yet governments themselves became imbued with fear. The fear that they projected in order to gain compliance with their unconstitutional restrictions doubled back on them. They were accused of not doing enough to manage the damage they were causing to different sectors of the economy. They were accused of being too slow to respond, too slow to handle the grave public emergency, too slow to develop solutions to the problems. Government leaders leveraged comparisons among countries and regions to create fear and to impose even tighter restrictions. Those leaders became fearful that they would be blamed for whatever damage might occur, and political rivalries found much traction through criticism by weaker political opponents who were not in charge of public policies.

But perhaps to an even greater degree this fear became evident in the treatment of those who upheld their freedoms. Fundamental constitutional liberties had been set aside due to the fear of a looming disaster. Governmental intervention into people's daily lives that restricted their movements and social interactions on every level was alarming to many people, and they refused to follow those laws. Their refusals were met with deep anger by others who not only fell into line with the imposed restrictions but also adopted those restrictions as moral. As it became morally virtuous to follow the restrictions and even to go above and beyond them, considerable anger and hatred was directed against those who refused for whatever reason. Because of fear, not wearing masks became immoral. Voicing disagreement with the public consensus and restrictions became a public threat. Refutation and rejection of cited statistics that drove the popular, fear-driven consensus became as evil as anarchy itself. Belief in government without question became the new godliness. Questioning governmental intrusiveness became the depth of immorality, and proposing any other response to the pandemic than the governmental line was treasonous.

Fear and Doctrinal Controversy

Deeply striking for their similarity are the circumstances of the controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches. Debate and discussion about controversial issues are considered harmful and evil. Even to assert that there has been and is a controversy, especially a fundamental controversy between works and grace, is regarded as threatening. Even permission to treat controversial matters is regarded as the province of a few. Without this permission any public treatment in writing or speaking is deemed sinful. Indeed, questions may be asked and alternative thoughts may be entertained, but only those that scratch the surface of the controversy. Deeper questions that penetrate to the foundation of the controverted issues are not allowed. Challenges going down to biblical foundations, and thus to distinctions of heresy and orthodoxy,

are banned from public discussion. They must be locked away in consistory rooms or in closed sessions of classes and synods, and the agendas and minutes are sealed off from the general membership.

Permeating so much discussion in the controversy is a sense of deep anger. Anger divides. Anger disallows. Anger cuts off. Anger exiles from fellowship. Why the anger? Why angry responses to questions? Why such anger directed against persons that pushes them out of conversations and labels them as criminals? Why are protestants and appellants angrily rejected as troublemakers? Why do certain delegates at deliberative assemblies meet with scorn and their questions and statements with contempt? Why is this the case, though these protestants and appellants are members in good standing and these delegates have been duly appointed by their respective assemblies?

The answer to this anger becomes evident when we look at its occasion. The occasion of this anger is not random but has a consistency to it. This anger consistently arises against probing challenge. What is challenged lies beneath the surface of the anger. The particular challenge is not satisfied with mere human authority. The challenge requires more. It requires the word of God to be the sure answer that will alone bring true peace, especially in controversy.

> What is really so terrifying is not that it might appear that there is something deeply wrong with the denomination and its sermons and decisions. It is rather that there is truly nothing there at all.

There are two reasons for this anger, both of which have to do with fear.

The first reason for this anger is protection. Anger protects the authority of man. When human authority is challenged, the defense is anger. The challenge is taken personally, for there is no other place to go with it. "How dare you?" is the angry question asked of any challenge.

That anger is of one kind and one sort in the civil realm when dealing with issues like COVID-19. It certainly has become part and parcel of political discussions, though civility in such discussions is decreasing. That decrease can be traced to the impact of social media and to the post-modern rejection of objective values and principles, chiefly the rejection of scripture in the public forum. However, rejection of scripture is much more heinous in church and religion, where scripture alone is supposed to be the authority. Over time and imperceptibly authority moves from scripture to the institutions of men and their authority. As long as there is no controversy, that authority can shift without notice. But when controversy arises, the authority of men and institutions is tested. Many will be content to rest on the authority that is seen and loudly heard. They are comfortable with it, having put their trust in leadership that they think has guided them safely and will continue to guide them safely. But others are not content with that authority. They seek to be firmly grounded in scripture and cannot be satisfied with the answers of men, no matter their positions. But these dissatisfied persons are viewed as disruptive and troublesome. They are not content to remain with the majority and the implicit trust of the majority in leadership. They meet with anger for daring to question the foundation upon which so many are resting and upon which the churches' stability rests. How much greater is the anger against those who actually challenge as unbiblical the writings and teachings that others are simply following and maintaining!

The second reason for anger is fear of being found out. This is fear that what has been believed, preached, and taught will all be found to be vain. The preaching has its content, but sermons can be protested. Consistories, classes, and synods can make decisions, but those decisions can be protested. Protests call into question statements made in sermons, and sermons overall. Protests call into question what has been decided by the churches' deliberative assemblies. Protests are submitted that bring the word of God to bear on sermons and decisions. If protests are upheld, then it will become evident that the sermons or decisions were not according to the word of God. It will not only become evident that those sermons and decisions were wrong, but it will also become evident that the ministers who preached the sermons were wrong and that those assemblies were wrong. Weakness will be found out. What was thought to be strong and enjoying popular support will be found to be a sham. A dominant fear cannot allow such failures to become evident.

This fear results in bad decisions by the deliberative ecclesiastical assemblies. This fear keeps deliberations and decisions behind closed doors and out of the awareness of the rest of the denomination. This fear cannot allow the word of God its free course in deciding matters, lest consistorial decisions are overturned and sermons are found to be erroneous. Instead, the stability of the churches and the reputations of men on whom that

stability rests must first be consulted. Out of a dominant fear that deep flaws may destroy the confidence of God's people in the churches they have come to trust, the priority becomes maintaining the appearance that all is fundamentally well.

But a deeper and far more gripping fear lies underneath that. What is really so terrifying is not that it might *appear* that there is something deeply wrong with the denomination and its sermons and decisions. It is rather that there is truly nothing there at all. It is the fear that when everything that was said and done is set before the word of God in all its clear, searching light, it is all nothing but the wisdom and strength of men. It is the fear that faith, grace, and Christ had received so little place in preaching and decision-making that faith, grace, and Christ are now entirely missing. It is the fear that preaching that centered on works; man's capabilities, power, and goodness; psychology; self-affirmation; and self-esteem—while still attempting to give the gospel, grace, faith, and Christ honorable mention—actually pushed out completely the glorious gospel of Christ crucified for sinners.

How amazing that this very fear, so strong and so fundamental, should be exactly right and very much to the point! Yes, fear greatly and fear very much!

However, instead of having that fear be the deep, fearful secret that must be covered over with a multitude of fearful maneuvers, shameless tactics, and angry responses and attitudes, it must have its blessed, saving use.

What is that use? That use is to show denominations, leaders, pastors, deliberative assemblies, and members what they must repudiate and flee. There is no need to cling to fearful vanity, to try to make something out of nothing. The very point is to be chastened and afflicted in repentance over folly, to find all peace and confidence in one source: the gospel of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, the antithesis is that stark. Indeed, the wisdom and strength of men are afraid of the cross. All the boasting of the world and of the church that has compromised with the doctrines of the world is born of fear. The world fears the wisdom and power of God that puts all the wisdom and strength of the world to complete shame. It is the reason, according to 1 Corinthians 1, for the scandal of the cross. The wisdom of the cross in the wisdom of God puts to shame the wisdom of men, showing it to be mere folly. The power of the cross in the wisdom of God puts to shame the strength of men, showing it to be mere weakness. But to those who are saved the cross is the glorious wisdom and power of God to salvation, strength, peace, and confidence. It gives to the people of God glorious, everlasting safety and security.

They have nothing to fear.

Article 23 of the Belgic Confession speaks of this great difference between fear and faith:

> And therefore we always hold fast this foundation, ascribing all the glory to God, humbling ourselves before Him, and acknowledging ourselves to be such as we really are, without presuming to trust in any thing in ourselves, or in any merit of ours, relying and resting upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we believe in Him. This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities, and to give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror, and dread, without following the example of our first father, Adam, who, trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig leaves. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 51–52)

Concerning good works, article 24 speaks in the same fashion:

> Though we do good works, we do not found our salvation upon them; for we can do no work but what is polluted by our flesh, and also punishable; and although we could perform such works, still the remembrance of one sin is sufficient to make God reject them. Thus, then, we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences continually vexed, if they relied not on the merits of the suffering and death of our Savior. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 55)

May the power of the gospel, and the gospel alone, free us from the bonds of fear and anger! May it free us to live in the exaltation of the cross and show its power in our confession and walk! May it free us to pursue the blessedness of the kingdom of God and leave far behind everything of man and of his miserable fear and anger!

—MVW

WALKING WITH GOD

The Biblical Idea

Amos, a prophet to Israel, wrote, "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (3:3). "Walk" in the text refers to companionship. When two walk together they walk upon the same path with the same destination in mind. They are of one mind. The two are able to converse, to speak with one another, and to enjoy each other's company. The basis for unity is agreement. Though the text is rhetorical and demands a negative answer, the positive truth is that mutual harmony and fellowship consist in agreement. Where the truth is agreed upon, there is friendship.

The concept of walking is a prevalent theme in scripture. The Bible uses this image to picture to God's people how we commune with God in his covenant and also how we live in the world. What is God's covenant? The covenant is established by God's oath, whereby he promises to be a God unto his people and their children. This promise is based solely upon the faithfulness of God, since its eternal conception is found within the Godhead. God lives within himself in the communion of three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Lord brings his elect into his own fellowship and causes them to taste and see that he is good.

In that covenant the believer walks with God in the midst of the world. Walking with God necessarily means walking *against* the world. All that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. The man who fears the Lord deliberately, emphatically, and antithetically opposes that which God himself opposes in his word. The Lord God formed this separation in paradise after Adam forsook the friendship of God for the friendship of the devil. Establishing the antithesis, God spoke, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed" (Gen. 3:15).

What does *antithesis* mean? The noun refers to enmity and division. Enmity is opposition, hostility, hatred. The Lord God made a sharp demarcation line between two distinct spiritual families. This antithesis is characterized by the strongest, most powerful and deep-rooted hatred that God has for the serpent (the devil) and his seed (the reprobate wicked). Yet his love is upon the seed of the woman (the Christ) and Christ's seed (the elect righteous). There is absolutely no harmony between these two spiritual races. While by nature the righteous and the wicked have everything in common, the distinction of persons lies in the eternal mercy of God. Grace separates. The Lord has mercy upon some, and he hardens others.

Having considered enmity, we do well to consider its counterpart, namely friendship. When God said he would put enmity between the devil and the woman, between his seed and her seed, he also was saying that he would be the friend of the seed of the woman. The seed of the woman is the church of all ages, chosen of God in Christ before the foundation of the world. The friendship God establishes with believers and their seed is his covenant. The psalmist David wrote, "The secret [friendship] of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant" (Ps. 25:14). According to Hebrew parallelism, the terms *friendship* and *covenant* are synonymously identified with each other. This indicates that the essence of God's covenant is friendship and fellowship.

What does friendship involve? Friendship or companionship refers to close communion, such that one may even share his deepest secrets with, open his heart to, and disclose all of the intents of his heart to his friend. This is what God does with his people, his friends in Christ. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the persons of the Trinity, share this covenant life among themselves in perfect harmony and love. Those who fear God belong to his covenant because he "shews" it to them. This means that God makes himself known to them and welcomes them into his own family life and causes them to taste and see that he is good and the overflowing fountain of all good!

Out of this friendship with Jehovah, the believer cannot possibly live in harmony with sin, Satan, and the world. Can God oppose the wicked while the believer lives as a friend of the wicked? If God opposes the wicked, the believer must also. The believer belongs to the party of God. The serpent has no part in God's covenant. Men who believe Satan's lie do not partake in the blessings of God's covenant either. There is hostility between the two, a brutal war wherein the Lord "hatest all workers of iniquity" (Ps. 5:5) but "loveth the righteous" (146:8). This antithesis between love and hatred determines all of God's dealings with men in the world and forms the basis for the Christian in his walk with the Lord.

A Calling to Walk

How does God's word illustrate the antithesis? By two visible things we experience every day, light and darkness. "The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1:5). Christ came into the world! Not into a world full of light but of darkness. Did men receive the light? Did Christ approve and live in harmony with darkness? The apostle John answers, "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (3:19). What happens when a child is sleeping and his mother comes and wakes him up for school by turning on the lights? The child immediately pulls the blankets over his face to remain in the darkness—he does not want the light. Christ comes into the dark world and turns on the light (condemns it), and men hate that light because their deeds are evil.

What is scripture's counsel to the believer who is surrounded by darkness? Do the scriptures teach that the believer is to spend as much time around darkness as possible in order to try to make it light? In answer to this the Spirit wrote in Ephesians 5,

7. Be not ye therefore partakers with them.
8. For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light:
9. (For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth;)
10. Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord.
11. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.

To the believer the Spirit says, "Be not…partakers" and "have no fellowship." Positively, the Spirit also says, "Walk as children of light" and "reprove the unfruitful works of darkness." The believer is "light in the Lord." In all goodness and righteousness and truth, the believer *proves* what is acceptable to the Lord by his conduct in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. Proving what is pleasing to God, the Christian *reproves* the unfruitful works of darkness. Those who belong to darkness, who may even claim to be Christians, deny Jesus by their works and false doctrine. The apostle says in this connection, "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth" (1 John 1:6). Again, "He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked" (2:6). Not only is the believer to oppose and reprove his own sin in his daily life, but he is also to oppose the unfruitful works of darkness of others who do not the truth.

Can the believer have friendship with his friends or family members who live as enemies of God? The believer confesses that he is God's friend. By this confession he also says that he is the enemy of sin, Satan, and the world. To befriend God's enemies is spiritual adultery. "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4). Adultery is a gross act of sin whereby a man violates the bond of marriage and brings a third party into it. As ruinous and destructive as adultery is in marriage, so it is in one's relationship to God. The Lord will not company with an adulterer. In his law he forbids it. And cursed are those who walk in such sins and do not repent.

How does the believer tell if someone is God's enemy? Surely there are many people in the world who do "good" things: they feed the homeless, visit the sick, help the needy, generously give of their possessions, and the like. We would not say that these people are God's enemies, would we? A lesson of Jesus about false prophets is helpful to answer this question. Jesus says, "Beware of false prophets" (Matt. 7:15). A false prophet in principle is someone who says he believes in Christ but either by his doctrine or life or both actually denies Christ. Outwardly, these false professors look like sheep; that is, they look like God's friends or Christians. How do we tell the difference? "By their fruits," said Jesus (v. 16). He said,

17. Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.
18. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.
19. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.
20. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

Fruit refers to what they produce, based on the root. Harmony between what one believes and how one lives indicates whether he belongs to God as his friend or whether he is God's enemy.

Therefore, the Christian examines the fruit of one's profession and judges accordingly. In stark opposition to the fruits of the Spirit, the works of the flesh are

19. Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness,
20. Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies,
21. Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal. 5)

Many are the fruits of the flesh. The one who claims to be a Christian and yet lives as divorced and remarried

(adultery, uncleanness), or the one who believes that God loves all and desires to save all (idolatry, heresies), may not have assurance of belonging to the kingdom of God. Those who depart from the truth of scripture, forsake the true church, corrupt the gospel, and abuse the sacraments and discipline necessarily manifest that they do not belong to Christ. The Christian who walks by the Spirit discerns this and points out these deeds to his neighbor and declares to him with the apostle that "they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." Although the world perceives this warning by the believer to be an act of hatred, love is at work in seeking the spiritual advantage of the neighbor by showing him the error in order that he might repent and confess the truth for God's glory. Love seeks the neighbor's eternal welfare and works to turn him from evil. Hate ignores the neighbor's sins and allows him to continue in wickedness on the path to destruction.

Did Jesus have anything to say about the antithesis? When it came down to walking with Jesus or walking with those who did not care to walk with Jesus, the Lord was always insistent that "he that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37). The Lord Jesus brings the antithesis between families by his word: "I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household" (vv. 35–36). Exactly where Christ is denied in the family, the sword is drawn. This sword is the division that is brought about not by the confessing Christian, but by Christ himself. The believer should take comfort in this reality that it is not he who has brought separation but his Lord, and therefore it is a righteous separation that cannot be gainsaid.

Let it be understood that this separation is primarily *spiritual,* not physical or personal. By *spiritual* is meant that the division is not over physical things, such as a disagreement about anything earthly, but rather relates to *religious or heavenly convictions* that are confessed and practiced. Therefore, when Jesus spoke of the antithesis he spoke of a *spiritual reality* that he forms in the heart of the believer, which works itself out in his life in the activity of loving Christ and hating anything contrary.

This calling works out practically in the life of the believer not by the believer's isolating himself or obnoxiously pointing out everyone's sins all the time, but rather by his living in the midst of the world in such a way that he bears witness by his conduct and words to what he believes, that others may be gained to Christ. The heart of the believer desires others to be gained to Christ. However, this does not require that he company with or even maintain a relationship with them. As the apostle says, "What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness?" (2 Cor. 6:14). There is no harmony between that which is righteous and that which is unrighteous. To pretend as though there is mutual company and harmony in the truth is false unity and contrary to the sword of Christ.

But did not Jesus himself company with tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 9:10; Mark 2:15)? In contrast to the religiously pious, Christ called those sinners *to repentance*. And because of that powerful word proclaimed to them by Christ, *they repented*. Those tax collectors and sinners did not *remain* in their sins but were joined to the party of God and forsook their evil deeds. Christ never calls the believer to cast his pearls before swine or give that which is holy to the dogs. Where his testimony is not received, the believer responds by shaking the dust off his feet to bring his peace to others.

But how can we expect others to be gained to Christ if we do not have any relationship with them? A would-be disciple once said to Jesus, "Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go and bid them farewell, which are at home at my house" (Luke 9:61). Many today would expect Jesus to say something to the effect of, "Yes, that is a good idea; in fact, stay there for a while and be a light to them so that you can try to win them to my cause." Contrary to this folly, the Lord in perfect wisdom responded thus: "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (v. 62). Not a farewell, not an extended stay, not a misapplied requirement to "be all things to all men," so to speak, but a complete, radical, emphatic forsaking of all with eyes fixed solely upon Jesus Christ and his church (the kingdom of God).

In God's covenant the believer is glad to be in the friendship of the Lord. As God's friend he takes no delight in company with evil men, but his pleasure is in God's law and with those who fear him. Over against houses, brothers, sisters, dads, moms, wives, children, or geographical locations, the gospel is the treasure of the believer, for which cause he leaves all behind that he may enjoy the bliss of everlasting life (Matt. 19:29). This is the standing confession of the church that exhorts us all in a God-glorifying, antithetical life: "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (2 Cor. 6:17–18).

—Elijah Roberts

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

FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

That which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. —Romans 7:15–17

Strange struggle. The unregenerated man knows no such struggle. His carnal mind is enmity against God and his law. He willingly sins with his whole heart. He loves his sins. Only the regenerated knows this wretched struggle. The most contradictory things are said of him. What I do I do not allow, or recognize. What I will to do I do not do. What I hate is what I do. Most mysterious of all, what I do I do not do but sin in me! This all concerns the law as the revelation of that which is good, spiritual, holy, and just. In that sphere this man wills the good but does not do it; does what he does not approve; hates what is evil and does it; and strangest of all, he no longer does what he does but sin in him.

Look at your works in the light of the law of God and its demand of absolute perfection. Then you must say about them, what I have produced I do not even recognize; what I have accomplished I do not approve. They are so tainted with sin; they are filthy rags.

The deed began in the regenerated heart throbbing with love for God and the neighbor. But unholy thoughts intruded; I mingled in some self-praise; I defiled the deed. Whereas I willed the good, I did the evil. The evil that I hated I did. This is true of all that I produce; I instantly and terribly defile it. Willing the good, I produce the evil; I do what I hate; I do not do what I will.

Strange experience of the regenerated. I consent to the law: I acknowledge with the heart that the law in its demand is good, holy, just, and righteous. Engrafted into Christ, Christ comes by his Spirit and abides in my heart. In my heart, my deepest spiritual existence, I am in Christ and indwelt by his Spirit. I have been born of God, and I sin no more in my heart.

Yet I have that heart in a body of death. In that body of death—in my soul, mind, will, eyes, ears, feet, hands, legs, tongue, and whole body—are powerful operations of sin. In me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing. My heart is renewed, but the rest of me is full of sin. The good that I in Jesus Christ by the power of his Spirit will to do I do not accomplish.

This perfect man in Christ Jesus wills the good and hates the evil. The perfect man does what he wills not to do, and he hates it. He does not will it to be so. That is his victory. The believer in his spiritual struggle does not sin with his heart. His heart is not in it. He hates his sin. It is not him but sin in him.

What a wretched man! Willing the good, hating the evil, not approving of what he does. Who will deliver him?

I thank God through Jesus Christ. Hating his sin, he takes it daily to Christ. He takes his stand by faith in Christ's perfect atoning work and perfect obedience. He seeks forgiveness for all that he does. There is no condemnation to him who is in Christ Jesus. He is perfectly righteous in Christ and an heir of eternal life. He casts off confidence in what he does, constantly praying for the grace and Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God!

—NJL