



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

MAY 2021 | VOLUME 1 | NUMBER 15

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

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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

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325 84th St SW, Suite 102
Byron Center, MI 49315
Website: reformedbelieverspub.org
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PENTECOST FULLY COME

*A sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind!
Cloven tongues like as of fire sat upon each of them!
Filled with the Holy Ghost!
They began to speak as the Spirit gave them utterance!
Pentecost fully come!
Acts 2:1–4*

In the old dispensation the church had the magnificent temple of Solomon, her gorgeous priesthood, elaborate feasts, mighty armies, stunning victories, and many mighty and impressive miracles. However, they were all only types and shadows that the church of the new dispensation is not to envy. Pentecost has now fully come. The new and better age has descended from heaven to continue until the age of perfection dawns in the new heavens and the new earth.

It is better to have a solemn and reverent worship service where two or three are gathered in Christ's name and he is in their midst than a temple full of gold. It is better to have sound doctrine concerning Christ and his cross taught by a faithful preacher than a hundred thousand animal sacrifices. It is better to have a little church than the whole land of Canaan and the city of Jerusalem. It is better to have the heritage of sound doctrine than a farm in Canaan. All those old types were promises of a new day.

The new day came at Pentecost.

Pentecost was the espousal of the church to Christ as his bride. The church has existed in God's counsel from eternity. The church was found throughout the old dispensation. Adam and Eve, Abel, Noah, Shem, Abraham, and finally the nation of Israel in the Old Testament were the church. But all through the Old Testament she was a little girl. On Pentecost she grew up. She became the lady who would be married to Jesus Christ. The church is one. In the Old Testament she was a child. In the New Testament she is an adult. In the Old Testament God promised her what she would receive in the New Testament. At Pentecost he gave his promise, the promise of the Spirit.

Pentecost was the day of fulfillment. On that day Christ filled his church with his Spirit.

Pentecost was one of three great Old Testament feasts, along with the feast of Passover and the feast of tabernacles. In these feasts all the males had to appear before Jehovah in the temple. Pentecost was celebrated fifty days after Passover and thus was closely connected with it and was inconceivable without it. Pentecost was a harvest feast.

On the Sunday after Passover, fifty days before Pentecost, the first ripe sheaf of barley grain was brought to the temple and waved before the Lord. Passover—the death of Christ. The feast of firstfruits—the resurrection of Christ, the first begotten from the dead. Then seven weeks were numbered, and the day following the seven weeks—fifty days from that first harvest—Pentecost was celebrated. It celebrated the commencement of the ingathering of the wheat that would end in the feast of tabernacles. With golden grain the valleys gleamed.

From that first harvest of Pentecost wheat, Israel made a special, new offering of two enormous loaves of bread. Unique from all the sacrifices of the Old Testament, which used unleavened bread, these loaves were made with leaven and were puffed out with fullness. The priest consecrated the loaves and heaved them back and forth in the temple before the Lord. Pentecost was peculiar as well in that it was a new Sabbath, celebrated on a Sunday.

Israel was reminded in this feast of the gracious work of God to deliver the nation from the bondage of Egypt, to redeem the people from slavery, and to give them the promise of Canaan. The Israelites' whole existence in Canaan, their blessedness there, and the ingathering of their harvests were all based upon the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. At Pentecost the Israelites rejoiced in that goodness of Jehovah to deliver them into Canaan and to bestow upon them all the riches of that land, so that they dwelled in houses; had farms, flocks, and herds; and partook of all the goodness of Canaan.

Pentecost was a covenantal feast—a feast of covenant fulfillment. The very name of the feast makes this clear: fifty (seven sevens plus one) signifies the covenant fulfilled. The activity at the heart of the feast emphasizes the same thing: two huge loaves heaved before Jehovah by Israel's priestly representative. The covenant fulfilled.

God promised to Abraham to give him and his seed the land of Canaan. They would dwell there with Jehovah, and they would eat and drink of Jehovah's goodness by partaking of the milk and honey that flowed in the

land. That promise of God came to fulfillment in Pentecost. The Israelites ate and drank and rejoiced in the goodness and salvation of God, and they drew near to him in his holy place. The two large loaves represented all the goodness, blessings, and salvation of Jehovah, and Israel heaved them all to him in the loaves.

The covenant of grace was realized not objectively and coldly but in the life, heart, and experience of the believing Israelite. Believing the promise of God, the Israelite ate, drank, and rejoiced in the goodness and graciousness of God; he stood before his God and rejoiced before him for all his blessings. Pentecost was the covenant feast *par excellence*. If the Passover celebrated the accomplishment of Israel's salvation, then Pentecost celebrated Israel's enjoyment of it. The Israelites partook of the goodness and fatness of the land, and they heaved all of it to Jehovah God in thanksgiving for his graciousness to them, and they rejoiced in Jehovah for giving the goodness and fat of the land to them with grace.

At the cross, in the death of the Lamb of God, Jehovah in his goodness and graciousness delivered his people from the bondage of sin, from death, and from the terrible kingdom of darkness. At the cross he harvested salvation and reaped the benefits of righteousness, holiness, redemption, and eternal life. At Pentecost God gave his people to experience that. He delivered them into his covenant and made them his sons and daughters, made believers partakers of all the riches and blessings of salvation, so that they were brought near unto God, rejoiced in God as the God of their salvation, and heaved all to God in thanksgiving and gladness.

Jehovah makes the covenant of friendship and fellowship with the living God reality in their hearts and lives, he draws near to them, he forgives their sins in their own experiences and hearts, he sanctifies and cleanses them, he enriches them with every gift of salvation and every blessing of grace, and he consecrates them to himself in the covenant of grace, so that they know him as their God and themselves as his people.

He does that by the gift of the Spirit. The fulfillment of the feast of Pentecost was the act of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ filling with the Holy Ghost the 120 believers gathered in the upper room. He is the covenant-creating, covenant-fulfilling, covenant-realizing Spirit! This is what he is in the Godhead. He is breathed forth. He is breathed forth from the Father to the Son, and he is breathed forth from the Son to the Father. He is eternally the Spirit who proceeds, flows out, as the Father's breath to his beloved Son and the beloved Son's breath to his dear Father. Proceeding, the Spirit is eternally active in the Godhead. He is the Spirit of life and fellowship.

That particular covenant-creating activity of the Spirit

is revealed in the first part of his name, Holy. He is called Holy because, as the breathed Spirit, he is the consecration of Father to Son and of Son to Father. The Spirit is the love, affection, peace, kiss, and embrace between Father and Son. In the Godhead the three persons do not sit in their divine corners and pass eternity far from one another, but they are deeply, eternally, and intimately involved with one another and commune with one another in the Spirit. He is their personal bond, so that the Father squeezes his Son to himself, and the Son presses himself into the Father's bosom in the Spirit.

At Pentecost the third person was poured out as the Spirit who was given to Christ. Just as we speak of the second person, the Son and the Word, and we speak of the man Christ Jesus, we also speak of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Ghost, and the Spirit of the man Christ Jesus, the Spirit of Christ. He was given to Christ as the reward for accomplishing the whole will and counsel of God for the redemption of his elect church. The Spirit is so wholly identified with Christ, so completely taken up with Christ, so given to Christ to be his that where the Spirit is, there is Christ. And as the covenant-creating, covenant-fulfilling Spirit, he is poured out into the church.

It is God's will, it is his promise, it is his eternal good pleasure that the creature experiences him, knows him, and is embraced within God's blessed covenant fellowship. Of that truth the whole old dispensation spoke. God gave a dim picture of it in his walking with his son Adam in the garden during the cool of the day. God spoke of this friendship with man in the garden immediately after the fall in the promise of the Seed of the woman. God revealed there that he would realize his covenant in his Son Jesus Christ and would reconcile his people to himself by paying the debt of their sins, by earning for them perfect righteousness, and by taking them to himself and drawing them near to him. God gave his covenant to his friends Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David. God revealed to Abraham that, although salvation was of the Jews during the whole old dispensation, in Abraham all the nations of the world would be blessed with this blessing: to know God as the God of their salvation and to be embraced within his fellowship and friendship. All the sacrifices, ceremonies, and prophecies of the Old Testament had this at their heart: that his dear people be brought near unto him, that they experience his graciousness, be enriched by his grace, and be filled with all the fullness of his blessing.

Israel, elect Israel, had that in pictures, promises, and prophecies. Thus they had that by faith in those things. They believed God's word and that he is faithful who promised. The whole old dispensation was an age of promise.

In Jesus Christ himself personally God realized his covenant. He gave Jesus Christ as a covenant for the people.

He is God and man together. At the cross of Christ, God accomplished all that was necessary to realize this fellowship with his people by fulfilling all righteousness. And Christ ascended on high to fill all things. God gave to Christ the promise of the Spirit, the Spirit to be his Spirit, the Spirit to pour out on believers and work in them the fullness of his salvation.

By the Spirit God brings to his elect people the full harvest of their salvation that is in Jesus Christ. By that Spirit God makes them partakers of that harvest. He assures them of the fullness and completeness of the work of God in Christ. God assures them of the security of that harvest in Jesus Christ. God makes them partakers of it, so that they rejoice in the God of their salvation. They can eat and drink now and be filled now with all the fullness of salvation. It is not only that all of salvation is secured in Christ and stored up in him, but also that by his Spirit salvation comes to them and they are made partakers of it, experience it, eat and drink it, and rejoice in God for his unspeakable gift.

The Spirit only; nothing else is needed. When he is given he brings Christ and all the benefits of Christ. To have the Spirit is to have Christ and the triune God and every blessing of salvation. The Spirit works new life, faith, justification, assurance, sanctification, and glorification. *All* this is his work.

As Pentecost of the old dispensation was the commencement of the whole harvest of a particular year, culminating in the feast of tabernacles, the fulfillment of Pentecost in the coming of the Spirit commences the harvest of the nations. The Lord will make not only Jews but also Gentiles partakers of his covenant and of the blessings of salvation. Now he gathers in the nations to his covenant and makes them all sit down in a grand feast with Abraham his friend.

And the Spirit by his coming created wonderful signs! Signs of himself and his work. Signs for us to confirm us and to comfort us in his work and purpose.

A sound as of a mighty, rushing wind!

The sound came from heaven and filled the whole house where the 120 believers were gathered. The sound had voice-like qualities. Its sound was similar to a great speaking tornado or hurricane. The Spirit is not merely an impersonal force, a mere infusion of some unnamed and

mysterious force or power, an effulgence of the Godhead. He is the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Ghost, who is personally God, coequal and coeternal with the Father and the Son.

The Holy Spirit comes in power—divine, sovereign, irresistible, and saving power. He comes, and he blows on the church and fills the church with his power and his sovereign grace. He blows and creates life where there was death. He blows, and forgiveness comes. He blows, and God's people are brought to repentance. He blows, and the assurance of salvation springs forth. He blows, and God's people are made holy. Who is able to withstand him when he comes to save or to judge in sovereign might?

The Spirit creates in us, God's people, a work that is as mysterious and powerful as the wind. The wind blows

where it will. You hear the sound thereof but cannot tell from whence it came or whither it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit. He makes us wind-like. Where did you come from? Where are you going? Men, like the wind, can make a big noise. Many criticize the Spirit in this work. The believer testifies the truth before the world and disrupts by that kingdoms and nations; he objects to false doctrine, and there are protests and appeals; he lays down his life for the truth's sake. People say, "Where did that come from? Where is this going?" That is the Spirit's working. He makes the people of God steadfast and immovable in confessing Christ.

He makes them confess Christ over against all the ineffectual opposition of the gates of hell.

Cloven tongues as of fire too!

A tongue! The tongue is the instrument of speaking. All received a tongue.

The first division of tongues took place shortly before the covenant promise of God was confined to Abraham and his seed. The division served that too. By that division of tongues, God scattered the nations and suffered all the people to walk in their own ways. Salvation was of the Jews. Now God divides the tongues again and this time heals the division of the nations, so that in Christ all nations shall be blest.

The power the Spirit will use to accomplish all his work is represented in the tongue. He will use speech. He will exert his divine power, his irresistible power, by speech. The

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speech that is the divine, ever-abiding Word. The Spirit does all things by the Word. The Spirit serves the Word, Jesus Christ, and the Spirit brings the Word, Jesus Christ, and works by means of the Word, Jesus Christ, preached.

Fiery tongues!

When Christ comes he baptizes his church and the individual elect child of God with the Holy Ghost and with fire. Fire is indicative of the work of the Spirit. Christ purifies God's people with the Spirit. Christ sits as a refiner by his fire and thus by the Holy Ghost purifies the sons of Levi so that they may make an offering in righteousness.

The Holy Spirit is an agent for the destruction of the sinful flesh. The Holy Spirit is the agent for the consecration of the purified believer to God. As fire burns up the dross and at the same time purifies the gold, so also is the work of the Holy Spirit. He is a cleansing, purifying, sanctifying agent.

If the Spirit's work is consecration, two things are true of his work of bringing Christ to God's people.

Since he brings sinners to God, his work consists of forgiving those sinners their sins for Christ's sake and imputing to them the perfect righteousness of Christ and assuring them of their righteous standing before God. He purifies them from sin's guilt so that they may come into his presence and stand before him. Otherwise, no sinner may come to God.

The Spirit must also sanctify believers and make them holy. Through the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, they mortify the old man of sin and put on the new man. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, they put off the flesh with the works thereof and put on the spiritual man with the works thereof. The Spirit purifies sin's pollution and dominion, so that believers make a living sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise to God—not merely two loaves of bread but themselves. Not merely in a temple of wood and stone, but the Spirit makes the whole church his temple, abides in his people and dwells with them, so that the Spirit consecrates them to himself in their lives in fiery zeal for him, for his word, for his truth, and for the kingdom of heaven.

Since both justification and sanctification are by faith—by faith alone God's child receives the righteousness of Christ and comes to God through Christ, and faith makes him a new creature as well—so faith is the Spirit's particular work. He gives and works faith: our union with Christ, our knowledge of God, and our assurance of our justification and peace with God.

The Spirit is the power that heats the church and the individual believer. The Spirit warms with the gospel of the forgiveness of sins and the perfect righteousness of Christ freely imputed to believers, so that they rejoice and

are glad. He warms them with the love of God and Christ and works in them repentance and a life of thankfulness and prayer. The Spirit is their experience of salvation. It is not separate from the Spirit and does not happen apart from him. The believer tastes that Jehovah is good by the Spirit of the risen Lord. The Spirit inspires the church and the believer with a fiery zeal for the truth and the glory of God. The apathetic Christian is the unspiritual Christian: he is Spiritless.

And the church filled with the Spirit overflows with the Spirit.

By the word! Christ poured the Pentecost Spirit on the church, filled his church with the Spirit, and they spoke in many different languages as the Spirit gave the people utterance. Inhabitants from other countries heard the speaking in their own languages.

The wonderful things of God! *Magnalia Dei!*

A glorious sermon: God-focused, Christ-centered, exegetical, doctrinal, gospel. The pure, convicting, saving gospel of Jesus Christ.

Outflowing of the Spirit!

He speaks not of himself. He speaks of Jesus Christ.

The great work of the Spirit is to give utterance to the church and to individual believers, so that they speak of Christ in all his sweetness, grace, power, and glory as the only way to the Father and the all-sufficient sacrifice for sinners—to give them utterance, so that their whole lives are testimonies of gratitude to God for his unspeakable gift.

Ye shall be my witnesses!

So you can still judge today where Pentecost is taking place. For we receive the gift of the Spirit not by the works of the law but by the hearing of faith! Which Spirit works wonders among us! Raising dead sinners to new life in Christ; turning hard sinners to a sorrowful confession and turning from sin; giving faith; justifying guilty sinners; assuring trembling sinners that all is forgiven for Christ's sake; sanctifying sinners and making them saints in all their lives.

Where the truth is preached! Where the truth is, there is the Spirit. Where the truth is lacking, there likewise is the Spirit lacking. Where the truth thus also characterizes all the speaking of that people and all their dealings with one another, there is the Spirit. The speech of the Christian day school teaching the truth and the speech of parents who instruct their children in the doctrine of the Reformed faith are utterances by the Spirit. The speech of prayer and thanksgiving to God as the God of our salvation and the speech of a holy life in consecration to the living God are utterances by the Spirit.

The outflowing from the church of the in-poured Pentecost Spirit!

—NJL

AN ANSWER TO DEPOSITION (2)

In this editorial I resume my answer to the charge of public schism made against me by the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), for which the denomination deposed me from the ministry of the gospel in their midst and for which the congregation of Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church was in the process of excommunicating me from membership in their midst.

As noted last time, there are several distinct sets of grounds for my deposition, because each assembly that faced the question of my suspension and deposition wrote its own grounds. Byron Center's consistory had its set of grounds. Trinity Protestant Reformed Church wrote its own new set of grounds. And Classis East wrote its own new set of grounds. These shifting grounds are a powerful indication that the charge against me was false, for it is characteristic of false witnesses that they cannot agree in their testimony against a man.

And yet, to give an answer to the charge against me, I must start somewhere. Therefore, let us take hold of the grounds that Classis East wrote and adopted. I suppose this could be considered the definitive set of grounds for the charge against me. First, because they are the grounds that both classis and the synodical delegates of Classis West agreed to, and therefore these grounds represent the entire denomination's judgment. Second, because they are the grounds that have been circulated widely in the denomination and that most people have heard by now in one way or another.

Classis' Decision and Charge

Classis' decision was that I should be deposed. "That Classis East concur with Byron Center's decision to depose Rev. A. Lanning and advise Byron Center's Consistory to proceed with the deposition of Rev. A. Lanning from the office of the word and sacraments."¹

Classis advised that I be deposed for the sin of public schism.

Rev. Lanning's actions in the sermons he preached on Jeremiah 23:4, 14; 2 Timothy 4:1-4; and Ecclesiastes 7:2-6 constitute the sin of public schism. With statements made in these sermons, Rev. Lanning has sinfully divided the congregation and the churches into factions. These statements are not false doctrine, but his own wrong applications of

the teaching of the texts, by which he divided the church and churches. (II.A)

And classis advised in article 38: "The sin of public schism is listed in Church Order Article 80 as 'among the gross sins which are worthy of being punished with suspension or deposition from office'" (amendment to add a ground D).

Deposed for Preaching

Classis' decision makes it clear that I was deposed for my *preaching*. The issue before Classis East and the synodical deputies was the content of my *sermons*. This point has been obscured by a narrative within the PRC that I was deposed for my *behavior* but not for my preaching. This narrative maintains that the *content* of my preaching was sound but that my *manner* of dealing with the controversy in the PRC was sinful. The watchwords of this narrative are "manner," "tone," and "behavior." This narrative makes a distinction between my preaching and my behavior in order to affirm my preaching but to condemn my behavior.

This narrative is deceitful, and it has allowed many Protestant Reformed people who should know better to go along with my deposition. Many of them, including some elders of Byron Center church who deposed me, have testified repeatedly that my preaching is sound. They have acknowledged to me and to others that they love the doctrine that I preached to them and that through my instruction they have grown in their knowledge of the truth and their ability to detect the lie. How is it, then, that those who make such a testimony can go along with my deposition? This way: through the false distinction between my preaching and my behavior. They console themselves and others that my deposition was not for my preaching or for my doctrine but for my manner or my behavior or my tone. "We like Rev. Lanning's preaching. We just wish he had addressed his concerns in a different way."

This narrative is deceitful because the issue in my deposition was strictly my preaching. The issue that classis judged was the content of my sermons. Let everyone who doubts this read the actual decision of Classis East to advise my deposition. What is the decision about? Sermons! In classis' own words, the decision was about "sermons he preached on Jeremiah 23:4, 14; 2 Timothy 4:1-4; and Ecclesiastes 7:2-6." The decision was about "statements made in these

¹ Minutes of Classis East January 13, 2021, article 37, II. Subsequent quotations from article 37 of the majority report are given in text.

sermons.” The decision was about “Rev. Lanning’s actions in the sermons he preached.” From beginning to end the case was about my sermons.

This makes the false narrative that the case was about my behavior a very dangerous narrative. Protestant Reformed people are being told that they may dismiss my preaching of the word of God as merely my behavior. They are being told that my preaching of the word of God was the sin of man. The false distinction between my preaching and my behavior means that Protestant Reformed people are being taught to call my preaching of the word of God sinful and schismatic. They are being taught to call the word of God sin! How dreadful for a denomination!

Does the denomination know how precious God’s truth is to him? Does the denomination know how precious the preaching of that truth is to him? And does the denomination know how dreadful is the sin of labeling the preaching of the truth as schism? When the Jews spoke against those things spoken by the apostle Paul, the Bible calls it “contradicting and blaspheming” (Acts 13:45). Blaspheming! In calling the word of God that I preached schism, the PRC have aligned themselves with godless Ahab, who charged Elijah’s rebuke against him as the troubling of Israel. “It came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, Art thou he that troubleth Israel?” (1 Kings 18:17). Like Ahab, the denomination has declared about my preaching of the word of the Lord that it troubles and divides Israel. Schism!

However, the PRC could have easily tested whether my preaching was truly schismatic or not. It is possible, after all, for preaching to be schismatic. Preaching is schismatic when sermons divide the congregation away from Christ. Preaching is schismatic when sermons divide the congregation away from Christ’s truth and Christ’s doctrine. “I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple” (Rom. 16:17–18).

Classis never evaluated my sermons from this viewpoint. Classis never even asked whether my sermons brought the congregation and the denomination to Christ or whether my sermons divided the congregation and the denomination away from Christ. Classis could only think and speak about men and the honor and reputation of men. But what about Christ? What about his truth? I maintain that my sermons did not divide from Christ but brought the congregation and the denomination to Christ. My sermons did this by exposing the denomination’s sin and by calling the denomination to repent and to believe in Jesus Christ alone for her salvation from her sin. You

can test this for yourself. The sermons are available on the website of First Reformed Protestant Church at <https://firstrpc.org/sermons>. These sermons, in accusing the PRC of sin, testify “repentance toward God.” And the sermons, in pointing the PRC to Jesus Christ, testify “faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). This preaching is not schism but the faithful preaching of the word of God.

First Ground: Public Charges of Sin

Classis based its charge of schism on three grounds. Although classis added a fourth ground from the floor, the charge of schism is explained in the first three grounds. Let us take each of these grounds in turn.²

Classis’ first ground for deposing me was that “in these sermons he publicly charges ministers and office-bearers of the PRC with unrepentant sin.” “Rev. Lanning’s schismatic actions of publicly charging office-bearers with sin are contrary to Scripture.” “Rev. Lanning’s schismatic actions of publicly charging office-bearers are contrary to our Confessions.” “Rev. Lanning’s schismatic actions of publicly charging office bearers with sin are contrary to the teaching of the Church Order in Article 74, which is built on the foundation of the Scriptures and Confessions quoted above” (II.A.1–4).

This ground misrepresents my sermons. They were not public charges of sin against *officebearers*, but public rebukes of the *church* for her sins. My sermons exposed the gravity of the denomination’s sin of false doctrine. They exposed the denomination’s wickedness of minimizing and denying its sin. They called the congregation of Byron Center and the denomination as a whole to repentance before God and to faith in Jesus Christ.

When classis construed my public rebukes against the church as public charges against officebearers, it built a straw man. When classis proceeded to knock down its straw man as contrary to scripture, the confessions, and article 74 of the Church Order, it was not truly dealing with my sermons but only with its straw man.

My sermons themselves make clear that they were directed to the church as public rebukes against the church’s sins. From the introduction to my sermon on Jeremiah 23:4, 14, “Shepherds to Feed You”:

There’s something so dreadfully wrong in the Protestant Reformed Churches and in Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church. And what’s so dreadfully wrong is the same thing that happened in the days of Jeremiah: the word of God was perverted, corrupted, twisted. And there are those who will look around and say, “Where is that? I don’t recognize that. I don’t see that. We’ve got everything we

2 Much of this material has been adapted from a letter adopted by the council of First Reformed Protestant Church addressed to the Protestant Reformed synod.

always did. Where is that corruption you're talking about?" But it's there.

And we this morning must not think that because we don't look like Rome that everything's well. It's not well. The word of God has been perverted! There is one calling for the congregation and the denomination: repent! Repent.

Clearly, the sermon is directed to the congregation and to the denomination. Clearly, the sermon is rebuking the church for her sins. Classis was wrong to construe my public rebukes against the church as public charges against officebearers.

Public Rebukes Required

But what shall we say about my public rebukes of the church? My sermons did, after all, publicly expose the church's sins. My sermons did publicly explain the gravity of those sins. My sermons did publicly rebuke the church for those sins and publicly call the church to repent of those sins. May a minister of the gospel do this? May he publicly rebuke the church for her sins?

The narrative in the PRC is that there is only one church orderly way for a minister to address sin in the church. This is the way of bringing his grievance to the consistory, classis, and synod. If he is going to make a charge of sin, then he comes to the consistory in the way of article 74 of the Church Order. If he is going to address ecclesiastical decisions, then he comes in the way of article 31. Either way, he addresses sin in the church through the assemblies. The narrative is that the assemblies are the only way to address sin in the church and that the pulpit is not at all the place to address sin.

This narrative is simply wrong. Jesus Christ calls his ministers of the gospel to address the church's sin from the pulpit. He calls his ministers of the gospel to preach the church's sin and to call his church to repentance for her sin.

God commanded Isaiah and thus all prophets and ministers: "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins" (Isa. 58:1).

Paul commanded Timothy and thus all ministers: "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." (2 Tim. 4:2).

The Form for the Ordination of Ministers of God's Word requires the Reformed minister to rebuke the church for her sins.

First. That they faithfully explain to their flock the Word of the Lord, revealed by the writings of the prophets and the apostles; and apply the same as well in general as in particular to the edification

of the hearers; instructing, admonishing, comforting, and reproof, according to every one's need; preaching repentance towards God and reconciliation with Him through faith in Christ; and refuting with the Holy Scriptures all schisms and heresies which are repugnant to the pure doctrine. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 284–85)

The Church Order in article 55 requires the Reformed minister to preach against error, whether in the church or without.

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

Let everyone who bemoans my manner of dealing with the church's sin as schismatic and disorderly take heed that my manner is the biblical way, the confessional way, and the church orderly way for a minister to deal with the church's sin. My manner is Christ's way. When you bemoan my manner, you complain against Christ and against his calling for a minister of the gospel.

Showing God's People Their Transgression

What shall we say about my quotations of public documents in my sermons? It is true that in my sermons I proved my accusation against the denomination by quoting from public documents that represent the popular mind and the official position of some Protestant Reformed churches. I quoted from heretical sermons of a minister that classis had failed to deal with in early 2018 and that Synod 2018 had condemned. I quoted this to dispel the popular notion that there has been no false doctrine in the PRC. I also quoted passages from two *Standard Bearer* editorials that minimized the false doctrine and that made threats against those who would call it heresy. I quoted these to demonstrate that the popular view in the denomination, as represented by the denomination's unofficial magazine, was that the false doctrine of the sermons was not heresy and that it did not truly contradict the Reformed confessions. I also quoted from letters of two consistories to their congregations that denied that there was error in the PRC. I quoted these to demonstrate that even officially at the consistory level, Protestant Reformed congregations were unable or unwilling to acknowledge the denomination's sin of false doctrine, which failure would prevent the denomination from repenting.

The narrative in the PRC is that these quotations constitute public charges of sin against individual officebearers in the denomination. However, by this narrative the

denomination shows itself to be consumed with the honor of man. The denomination labors to make the sermons about men. The denomination labors to make the sermons into public charges against men. What the denomination does not see is that these quotations were not public charges of sin against *men* but were demonstrations and proofs of the *denomination's* impenitence. The materials quoted represent either the popular mind of the churches (*Standard Bearer*) or the official position of churches (letters from consistories). Instead of wringing its hands about the wounded honor of men, the denomination should have been pricked by its own impenitence as represented by its magazine and its letters.

Furthermore, when I quoted from these materials in order to prove my rebuke against the denomination, I was doing exactly what the Lord Jesus Christ called me to do as a minister of the gospel. Especially when a congregation and a denomination do not believe that they are sinning, the minister's calling is to show them their sin and prove to them the Lord's accusation.

Isaiah was called to "shew my people their transgression" (Isa. 58:1). The people had to be shown their transgression because they did not see it. They behaved outwardly as the people of God. "Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God" (v. 2). Isaiah had to demonstrate the people's sin to them by pointing them to their own public behavior. "Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness" (vv. 3–4). So also, when the Protestant Reformed Churches are denying that they have walked in the lies of false doctrine and that they are currently minimizing those lies, the minister's calling from God is to "shew my people their transgression" from the pulpit.

Timothy was called to "reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:2). The doctrine of the word of God that Timothy was to preach had to be applied to the congregation in reproofs and rebukes. The word "reprove" means to convict someone of their sin by proving their sin. So also, when the Protestant Reformed Churches are denying their sin or minimizing it, the minister's calling from God is to "reprove" them—to prove it to them—so that they are convicted and repent.

Classis' misconstruing my preaching as public charges against officebearers is a straw man. All of classis' subsequent arguments in this first ground only knock down their straw man, but these arguments do not prove that I was schismatic.

Second Ground: Slander

Classis' second ground for deposing me was that "Rev. Lanning's actions in the sermons he preached and in his

subsequent defense of these actions constitutes public schism when he slandered the office-bearers in the churches through his characterizations, accusations, and charges, which is a violation of the 9th commandment" (II.B).

This ground fails to deal with the actual texts that I preached and expounded. This is so important because the applications in sermons arise out of the texts and the doctrine of the texts. The minister is called to "reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:2). The doctrine itself is the material from which the reproofs and rebukes spring. When a minister faithfully expounds the doctrine of the text, that doctrine will demand a certain application to the life of the congregation in its actual circumstances. The question is not how the application makes the congregation feel. The question is whether the application is faithful to the word of God.

Everything that I said came out of the text of God's word, was in harmony with the text of God's word, and was demanded by the text of God's word. When the word of God is brought faithfully in both doctrine and application, that word of God is not slanderous or schismatic. This can be demonstrated in each instance that classis mentions.

First, classis said,

In his public accusations of office bearers of Classis East Rev. Lanning dealt with brothers in the Lord as if they were his enemies going so far as to imply they were unbelievers. He does this when he portrays the men of Classis East as homosexuals deserving the punishment of Sodom. Such a horrible accusation against the office bearers of Classis East could not possibly come out of a proper exegesis of Jeremiah 23:14 (II.B.1; II.B.1.a).

However, my portrayal of the events of Classis East in February 2018 as homosexual fornication comes directly out of the text of Jeremiah 23:14. God accused the prophets of Jerusalem of walking in lies. Their lies were false teachings that contradicted God's word and God's will. God said about all of the prophets who walk in lies, "They are all of them unto me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah." By this God taught the spiritually sleepy inhabitants of Jerusalem how abhorrent false doctrine is to him. By such a startling comparison, God shook them awake from their spiritual slumber. The application of that word to the PRC leaps off the page. The churches committed the gross sin of false doctrine, which is to walk in lies. They taught, defended, and tolerated the devil's lie among them for years. But even after Synod 2018 exposed that error, the churches remain spiritually sleepy. The constant refrain in the churches is that there was no false doctrine and that the churches have always been united in one holy theology. The text of Jeremiah 23:14 shakes the churches awake by teaching them how much God abhors false theology. When

the delegates to Classis East in February 2018, representing all of the churches and all of the members of Classis East, officially excused the devil's theology by refusing to uphold an appeal against that theology, God abhorred what the denomination did as much as he abhorred the homosexual depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah. This is God's own word about it: "They are all of them unto me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah."

This is further confirmed in Lamentations 4:6: "The punishment of the iniquity of the daughter of my people is greater than the punishment of the sin of Sodom." Jesus also made this comparison when he contrasted the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah to the city that will not receive the preaching of God's word: "Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city" (Matt. 10:15).

The point of the comparison was not to judge the men of Classis East as unbelievers. Rather, I made the point, faithfully from the text, that God abhors false doctrine, and the comparison to the abhorrent sin of sodomy was made to drive that point home to the church.

My application of the text has nothing to do with the fact that I am not an inspired prophet like Jeremiah. Amusingly, classis felt the need to remind me that I do not have direct revelation: "Jeremiah was able to say this because the God who knows the hearts of the prophets of Jerusalem gave this to Jeremiah by direct revelation. Rev. Lanning may not make this same claim" (II.B.1.a). Well, let me say that I know the difference between Jeremiah and myself. I know that Jeremiah was inspired and that I am not. I do not imagine that my preaching is done by direct revelation of the Spirit, the way that Jeremiah's preaching and writing was done by direct revelation of the Spirit. I have never claimed inspiration or direct revelation of the Spirit. However, I do claim to preach the word of God. I do claim that my preaching of the word of God, in both its doctrine and its application, when it is faithful to the text of God's inspired word, is indeed the word of God and not the word of man. "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe" (1 Thess. 2:13). The question is not whether I receive direct revelation but whether my preaching was faithful to the inspired word of God.

In my sermon I was faithful to the doctrine and application of the text that those who walk in lies are unto God as the men of Sodom and the inhabitants of Gomorrah.

Second, classis said, "Also in his sermon on Jeremiah 23 he denounced rashly and unheard by consistory, classis or synod, a professor of our seminary and editor of the *Standard Bearer* as minimizing and covering up the sin of false doctrine" (II.B.1.b). However, as noted above, the

quotation of the *Standard Bearer* article was not a charge against an individual man but a demonstration of the denomination's mindset, as represented by a popular publication within the denomination.

Third, classis said, "In standing behind his sermon on Jeremiah 100%, Rev. Lanning informs the elders of BCPRC that they 'have gone to the prophets of Egypt for understanding by going to the Church Visitors.' And, 'the Church Visitors will not counsel you to your profit, but to your shame'" (II.B.1.c).

However, my characterization of the church visitors as the counselors of Egypt was made faithfully from the word of God in Isaiah 30, as that word was applied to the actual situation in Byron Center church and to the church visitors. In Isaiah 30 God rebukes his people as "rebellious children." The rebellion of God's people was that they took "counsel, but not of me." Instead of seeking counsel from God, they "walk to go down into Egypt, and have not asked at my mouth; to strengthen themselves in the strength of Pharaoh, and to trust in the shadow of Egypt" (vv. 1-2). The rebellious children of Israel sought counsel and strength in Egypt, even though God had sent his word to Israel through his prophets. When the prophets came to Israel, the people silenced them.

8. Now go, write it before them in a table, and note it in a book, that it may be for the time to come for ever and ever:
9. That this is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the LORD:
10. Which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophecy deceits:
11. Get you out of the way, turn aside out of the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us.

The application of the passage, which I did not make publicly in my preaching but privately to the elders of Byron Center church, leaps off the page. God sent his word and his prophet to the congregation in my preaching. I faithfully labored for three years in Byron Center church, preaching repentance toward God and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ. I did not preach smooth words to the congregation. I regularly exposed the sins and the errors of the congregation and denomination. By the time I preached on Jeremiah 23:4, 14, I was infamous in the PRC for preaching the controversy and for not preaching smooth words.

During the three years of my preaching to the Byron Center congregation, the consistory never charged that word with sin. Even when I preached a view of the controversy that was unpopular in the denomination, no one could ever accuse me of not bringing the word of God. My preaching had been the counsel of God to the congregation.

(Not because of me, but solely by the grace and mercy of God, to whom belongs all the glory for his word.)

Instead of heeding that word, the majority of the elders decided to look elsewhere. They turned to the church visitors of Classis East, who already had told the consistory that the problem in the congregation and in the denomination was not false doctrine, but me. When the consistory turned away from my preaching and turned to the church visitors to judge that preaching, the elders already knew that the church visitors would put a stop to my preaching. In turning away from the counsel of God in my preaching, the consistory refused the counsel of God. In turning to men who would bring them contrary counsel, the elders went down to Egypt. They became rebellious children, and the church visitors indeed brought the counsel of Egypt to stop the mouth of Byron Center's minister.

The point of this comparison is not to judge the salvation of the consistory or of the church visitors. Rather, the point is that Byron Center's elders refused to hear the counsel of the Lord and said to her prophet, "Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophecy deceits." The church visitors played the part of the counselors of Egypt by helping the rebellious children of Byron Center to silence their prophet who had brought to them the word of the Lord.

For me to say these things was not slander but a faithful application of God's word to the actual condition and situation in the churches.

Fourth, classis said,

Later in his sermon on Ecclesiastes Rev. Lanning does not promote the honor and good character of the church visitors when he says, "Beloved congregation, we stand at a crossroads. We stand before that calling: go to the house of mourning. Do not go to the house of feasting as a church, as a congregation. Will we go to the house of mourning, or will we be a house of feasting? The essence of the church visitors' advice to this church is that the rebuke against our sin as a church and as a denomination of displacing the perfect work of Christ is not allowed in this pulpit. That is the essence of this advice"...This rash accusation is aimed at office bearers in the church in order to discredit them as enemies of the cause of Christ, without the congregation even knowing that the church visitors gave advice to the consistory or proving that this advice was in error. (II.B.1.d)

However, my contradiction of the church visitors' advice in my sermon on Ecclesiastes 7:2-6 had nothing to do with the honor or the character of the church visitors themselves. My statements in the sermon were strictly about the advice the church visitors had given. It is not

true, as classis stated, that "this rash accusation is aimed at office bearers in the church in order to discredit them as enemies of the cause of Christ" (II.B.1.d). The statements in the sermon were not aimed at officebearers in the church but were aimed at the *advice* that was sitting on the consistory's desk. The statements were not made to discredit the men but were made to discredit the *advice* as detrimental to the cause of Christ.

The sermon is crystal clear on this. There is nothing whatsoever in the sermon about the church visitors' character or honor. The only thing the sermon dealt with was the *advice*.

Beloved congregation, we stand at a crossroads. We stand before that calling: go to the house of mourning. Do not go to the house of feasting as a church, as a congregation. Will we go to the house of mourning, or will we go to the house of feasting? The essence of the church visitors' advice to this church is that the rebuke against our sin as a church and as a denomination of displacing the perfect work of Christ is not allowed in this pulpit. That is the essence of this advice.

Furthermore, I faithfully applied the text that I was preaching to the church visitors' advice. The preacher in Ecclesiastes instructs the church that the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting because "it is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools" (7:5). In the house of mourning, which is the house of worship, God's people hear the rebuke of their wise God. If the people reject that rebuke and demand that it be replaced with the empty song of fools, they will perish in their empty folly. The church visitors' advice was that I had sinned in bringing the rebuke of God's word to the congregation and denomination. The advice was that I be suspended from the ministry for this rebuke. The effect of that advice would be to remove that specific rebuke from the congregation of Byron Center and from the denomination. The effect of that advice would be to bring the denomination to the house of feasting and the song of fools.

My exposition of the passage and my application proved to be true. The church visitors' advice put me out and ensured that no Protestant Reformed congregation may hear a rebuke from the pulpit against the sin of false doctrine committed by the PRC.

For me to preach those things was not slander but a faithful application of God's word to the actual condition and situation in the churches.

Fifth, classis appealed to the minutes of the assemblies of the PRC as proof that the denomination was not walking in lies and was not minimizing and excusing the lie (II.B.1.e). However, my sermons demonstrated that walking in lies can happen in many places in a denomination,

including sermons, letters from consistories, and a denomination's unofficial magazine. Whether a lie can be found in the minutes of the assemblies is beside the point.

Classis' charge of slander against me cannot stand. By God's grace, I faithfully brought the word of God in its exposition and application, which can never be slander. Rather than charging the word of God with sin, the denomination should have humbled itself under the reproofs and rebukes of that word.

Third Ground: Insubordination

Classis' third ground for deposing me was that "Rev. Lanning's actions in the sermons he preached constitute public schism by insubordination to the authority in the church in violation of the 5th commandment" (II.C).

This ground misrepresents my sermons. I did not preach in opposition to the authority in the church, but I was careful and deliberate to honor that authority, even as I warned and rebuked the denomination for its sin. This can be demonstrated in each example used by classis.

First, classis said, "Rev. Lanning expressed grievances which contradict the decisions of Classis East at its Sept. 12, 2018 meeting" (II.C.1). I marvel at this charge against me, because so far from contradicting the decisions of September 2018, my sermons called the denomination to live up to those decisions and warned the churches about the danger of contradicting those decisions. Although I did not mention Classis East September 2018 by name, my sermons took hold of the doctrine of that classis and pressed it home to the churches. How could classis then charge me with insubordination to Classis East September 2018 and depose me for it?!

Classis' error in January 2021 was that it continued to misconstrue my preaching as public charges of sin against officebearers. "In his sermon on Jeremiah 23, Rev. Lanning charges that the office-bearers of Classis East remain guilty for the wrong decisions they made and must repent; that they continue to walk in lies, twist, pervert, and corrupt the truth, commit spiritual fornication, and strengthen the hand of the evildoer" (II.C.1.a).

As shown above, my sermons were not public charges of sin against officebearers but were public rebukes of the church. As part of those public rebukes, I demonstrated—for the sake of those who still did not know about that sin—that the sin of false doctrine had actually been committed. I instructed—for the sake of those who were indifferent to that sin—how evil the sin of false doctrine is in the eyes of God. And I called the denomination to repentance for her sin—for the sake of the recovery of the entire denomination.

In doing all of this, I was preaching exactly in harmony with Classis East September 2018. That classis, after a tremendous struggle to the contrary, had finally agreed with Synod 2018's declaration that there had been doctrinal

error that gave to man's works a place and function out of harmony with the confessions. My pointing out the dreadful evil of the decisions of Classis East February 2018 does not militate against Classis September 2018. Rather, it lives up to Classis September 2018. It says the same thing as Classis September 2018. It is good that Classis September 2018 declared the decisions of February 2018 to be in error. How is it now schismatic for me also to say that February 2018 was in error? It is exactly in harmony with September 2018 for me to instruct the congregation in the error of what happened in February 2018 and to show the perverse wickedness of the lie.

Second, classis said, "Rev. Lanning expressed public disagreement with the decision of his consistory to the congregation and denomination through the pulpit, thus showing insubordination to his overseers, the elders" (II.C.2). Classis said, "Rev. Lanning's sermon on Jeremiah 23:4, 14, was a public expression of his disagreement with the Nov. 1, 2020 decision of his consistory that required him to resign as editor-in-chief of the *Sword and Shield*, and about which decision the congregation had just been informed" (II.C.2.a).

I acknowledge that the consistory's decision was an occasion for the sermon on Jeremiah 23. However, I was careful and deliberate in the sermon not to mention that decision. Nowhere in the sermon did I criticize or repudiate the decision of my consistory. The sermon was not about my being an editor of a magazine. Rather, the sermon was about the controversy as a whole in the PRC.

At the time I preached the sermon, I was privately working on a protest against the consistory's decision requiring me to resign as editor of *Sword and Shield*. In that protest, following the way of Church Order article 31, I privately opposed the elders's decision and asked them to rescind the decision. All of that private opposition I deliberately kept out of the sermon on Jeremiah 23, as is evident from the actual content of the sermon.

The charge has repeatedly been made against me that my sermon on Jeremiah 23 was militancy against the elders' requirement that I resign as editor. This charge alone seems to be a stumbling block for many. So let everyone ask themselves what that sermon on Jeremiah 23 was actually about. Was it about being an editor? Search the sermon front to back, and one will find nothing in it about being an editor or not being an editor. Rather, the sermon was about the controversy as a whole. Search the sermon front to back, and one will find that the whole sermon was about the controversy and nothing more. The sermon on Jeremiah 23 was not about the meaningless, indifferent matter of editing a magazine. Rather, the sermon was about the all-important, denomination-consuming matter of false doctrine in the PRC.

Third, classis said that in the sermon on Ecclesiastes 7, "Rev. Lanning expressed publicly his disagreement and

condemned the advice of the church visitors, and urged both his consistory and church to reject it before it was decided upon” (II.C.3). Classis said that I made “public in that sermon what had not yet been decided. The only explanation can be an attempt to sway the consistory and set the congregation against the advice the church visitors gave to the consistory” (II.C.3.b).

Classis is correct in this. I did publicly disagree with and condemn the advice of the church visitors, and I did so in an attempt to instruct the consistory and to set the congregation against the advice the church visitors gave to the consistory. However, this was not insubordination. The church visitors’ advice was not the settled and binding decision of an ecclesiastical assembly. It was merely advice, and advice without the “teeth” of an assembly. Neither had the consistory of Byron Center yet voted on the advice. It is the right and the duty of the pulpit to cry a warning even regarding private dangers that will scatter the flock of Christ. When a watchman is placed on the walls by being put into office, Christ gives him a position to see things that others might not see. For example, he can see the private advice of the counselors of Egypt that will destroy the congregation. When he sees these things, he must cry the alarm, lest the citizens of the city perish. “Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me” (Ezek. 3:17).

My warning against the church visitors’ advice appears to be a stumbling block for many. Many have a hard time seeing how it is right for a minister to bring to the pulpit a private matter from the consistory room. In response, first, the fact

that the church visitors were giving advice to Byron Center was public. The elders had announced to the congregation that they had called in the church visitors exactly to give advice. Second, even though the church visitors’ advice had not yet been made public to the congregation, their advice was merely their advice and was not settled and binding. Let all who stumble at this look through the sermon from front to back to see what settled and binding decision I contradicted. One will not find anywhere such a contradiction. I was careful and deliberate not to criticize a settled and binding decision. And then let all who stumble at this imagine what a minister should do if the church visitors had brought advice to approve divorce and remarriage, for example. Would the congregation really want the minister to wait and see whether the consistory would adopt the advice, and only then have the minister silently protest once it was adopted? Rather, the minister’s calling is to cry out as a watchman on the walls to the consistory and to the congregation that danger threatens. So also when I saw the danger of the rebukes of the word being silenced by the church visitors’ advice, I cried out with the deliberate purpose of instructing both consistory and congregation in the right way.

In all of my preaching, I was careful and deliberate to honor the authority in the church, even as I cried out the warning of God’s word against the sin of the congregation and denomination.

The work of answering my deposition must continue for one more editorial. Next time, let us look at some of the grounds used by Byron Center and Trinity Protestant Reformed churches.

—AL

FROM THE EDITOR

This issue contains articles by two NJLs. Rev. Nathan J. Langerak, in addition to his meditation and his Finally, Brethren, Farewell, continues to revisit the theology of Norman Shepherd. Rev. Langerak labors with might and main to save the PRC from the dread clutches of the federal vision. Our second NJL is Dr. Nathan J. Lanning, who has been reading Herman Witsius for many years and who takes issue with the promotion of Witsius’ theology in recent issues of the *Standard Bearer*. Dr. Lanning labors with might and main to save the PRC from the dread clutches of Witsius’ covenant doctrine.

All who desire to continue receiving such edifying theological and polemical material, the time has come to subscribe to *Sword and Shield*. Through generous donations, the magazine could be sent free of charge through June

2021. A hearty thank you to all who made these free issues possible. Beginning in July 2021, the magazine will be sent only to subscribers. Visit reformedbelieverspub.org/ purchase for details on how to subscribe.

And just like that, we have come to the end of the first volume year of *Sword and Shield*. I say “just like that” even though from one viewpoint it seems like a long time ago that *Sword and Shield* was born. A lot has happened since June 2020. Nevertheless, article has followed article, issue has followed issue, and suddenly we find ourselves at the end of volume one. To reprise a line from the first issue of the magazine: Let us end where we began, with thanksgiving to Jehovah for giving this first volume a place. We pray that he will speed the truths written herein to your heart, and the next volume into your hands.

—AL

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

REVISITING NORMAN SHEPHERD (2)

I have begun revisiting Norman Shepherd. He is the theological father of the federal vision movement that has swept through every Reformed and Presbyterian denomination in North America, if not the world. His theological starting point is the covenant theology of Klaas Schilder and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated). Basic to that theology is a general, conditional promise to all the baptized children of believers. That promise comes to fulfillment through the faith and covenantal obedience of the child to whom the promise was made. Thus that promise can be shipwrecked on the unbelief and covenantal apostasy of the child to whom the promise was made. Election does not control the covenant promise, but the promise is given wider than election and is contingent on the child's fulfillment of the obligations of faith and obedience by grace.

Shepherd's Doctrine of Justification

Central to the covenant theology of Norman Shepherd is his doctrine of justification.

Justification is central to the doctrine of the covenant. So central is justification to the doctrine of the covenant that if one's doctrine of justification is faith and works, then one's doctrine of the covenant is *conditional*. By contrast, if one's doctrine of justification is by faith alone without works, then one's doctrine of the covenant is *unconditional*.

I noted in the last article the *sound* of Norman Shepherd's doctrine of justification and gave some of its characteristics. In this series I am interested in the *sound* of federal vision theology. That sound is important. The importance is that, whether or not the word *condition* or *contingent* is used in preaching and writing, the *theology* of the federal vision can be detected and condemned by its sound, its words and phrases, and its emphasis.

In his book *The Way of Righteousness*,¹ Shepherd clearly sets forth his doctrine of justification and applies it to the doctrine of the covenant. Shepherd teaches that justification is not on the basis of works or by the merit of works, but by faith in Jesus Christ on the basis of his atoning death. The believer is justified for Christ's sake and by faith in Christ. The faith that justifies is always fruitful in

repentance, obedience, and perseverance. The faith that justifies is a penitent, obedient, active faith. The faith that justifies does not justify now and does not justify in the final judgment *apart from* God's consideration of faith's penitence, obedience, and activity. Now and in the final judgment, *God sees* the fruits of faith as the evidence that faith is genuine faith in Jesus Christ, and *then God will justify* the believer. Summarizing and defending his theology of justification, Shepherd writes,

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 is 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)

Justification and salvation are thus by a living, active, obedient faith. This is subtle, soul destroying, and terrifying. It is in essence the old doctrine of justification by faith and works. God now and in the final judgment takes into account in justification as evidence of the believer's union with Christ the works that the believer does by faith.

God does!

For justification!

In the final judgment God will hear the words and see the works of the believer that proceed from true faith!

God will see from those words and works that faith is true faith!

God will *justify* the believer through his penitent, active, obedient faith!

Shepherd's Doctrine of Justification Serves His Covenant Doctrine

Norman Shepherd's doctrine of justification serves his covenant doctrine. In my analysis of that covenant doctrine,

¹ Norman Shepherd, *The Way of Righteousness: Justification Beginning with James* (La Grange, CA: Kerygma Press, 2009).

it must be remembered that my approach will again be to demonstrate what federal vision theology sounds like.

Federal vision theology truly and freely speaks of *conditions* and *contingency* in salvation and in the covenant. Yet that theology does not need to use those words. That theology covers itself by appeals to divine grace, to Christ's atoning death, to the work of Christ in the believer to renew him in Christ's image, and by saying, "We are saved by grace through faith." It is not enough for one simply to say, "Of course, this is all by grace. Of course, this is for Christ's sake, and this is by faith," after having taught faith and works. The federal vision theology constantly talks about salvation and justification being for Christ's sake, by grace, and through faith. But it so mingles faith and the works of faith that faith does not avail for anything apart from the consideration of its works. Federal vision theology cannot say, "*Faith alone!* By faith *alone* we are justified. By faith *alone* we have the assurance and experience of justification. By faith *alone* we are justified now and have everlasting righteousness, salvation, and eternal life. By faith *alone* we enter into life now and will enter into life in heaven." This theology is terrified of the gospel of faith *alone!* It does not preach and teach it. It is always faith and the works of faith. It is always an obedient, penitent, active faith—a faith that is *confirmed, propped up, and assured* by works, a faith that saves, justifies, and assures with its works.

The position of many is that unless a speaker or writer uses the word *condition*, he cannot be guilty of federal vision theology. The same attitude is held regarding federal vision's main tenets, such as a general covenant promise to all the baptized children, a promise contingent on the response of faith and faithfulness, not viewing the covenant in light of election, and other tenets. The thinking goes that unless one *explicitly teaches or preaches* these main doctrines, one cannot be guilty of federal vision theology.

My position is different: one *can* be guilty of teaching federal vision theology *in essence* while carefully avoiding using the more offensive terms and teaching the main tenets. If covenant teaching is not explicitly rooted in and controlled by election; if the promises of God are not fulfilled until one responds in faith and faithfulness; if works prop up the assurance of faith; if the entire presentation of the covenant is simply one of promise and obligation, promise and required response, God's grace and man's responsibility set side by side; if believers are being taught that they will enter the final judgment so that God can see their works and hear their words as evidences of their faith in Christ, then one has federal vision theology,

although all of its more offensive words and phrases and main tenets are carefully avoided. That kind of teaching has a certain sound and a certain emphasis.

I will review Shepherd's covenant doctrine from his book *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism*.² He begins with the covenant with Abraham, moves to the covenant at Sinai, and finishes with the new covenant of grace. I will focus on his treatment of the covenant of God with Abraham. The covenant of God with Abraham was one form of the one, eternal covenant of grace that God establishes with his people in Jesus Christ. The covenant of God with Abraham was fulfilled in the covenant of grace in the New Testament. Whatever one says about the covenant of God with Abraham, one says about the covenant of grace, also in the New Testament.

Shepherd defines the covenant as

a divinely established relationship of union and communion between God and his people in the bonds of mutual love and faithfulness...In the Abrahamic covenant, God entered into union and communion with Abraham and his children, promising them his steadfast love and requiring the same response from them. (12)

Thus the covenant for Shepherd is a relationship of union and communion consisting of promised grace on God's part and the fulfillment of man's obligation on his part. Norman Shepherd is honest in his teaching that the covenant with Abraham was conditional:

But now we ought to ask whether the covenant that God made with Abraham really was, in fact, unconditional. Would the promises be fulfilled irrespective of any response on the part of Abraham and his children? The biblical record shows that conditions were, indeed, attached to the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham. (14)

What Shepherd means is that there were no conditions for union. God established the covenant without conditions. There were, however, conditions for communion, that is, for the maintenance of the covenant. He then explains six considerations that show that the covenant with Abraham was conditional.

1. There was the requirement of circumcision. God required Abraham and his children to keep the covenant by practicing circumcision...When God required circumcision as a condition in the Abrahamic covenant, his concern was not merely with

2 Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000). Page numbers for quotations from this book are given in text.

an outward ceremony...In requiring circumcision, God was requiring the full scope of covenantal loyalty and obedience all along the line...Just as circumcision obliged Israel to obey God under the old covenant, so also baptism obliges believers to obey him under the new covenant. (14–15)

2. The Abrahamic covenant required faith. It belongs to the very nature of promises that they cry out to be believed. Thus, the promises made to Abraham had to be believed if they were to be fulfilled. (15)
3. The faith that was credited to Abraham as righteousness was a living and obedient faith...His faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. (15–16)
4. Abraham was commanded to walk before the Lord and be blameless...The covenant and its promises are confirmed to Abraham, who demonstrates covenant faith and loyalty. He fulfills the obligations of the covenant...Also worth noting in this connection is Genesis 18:19. The Lord is speaking about Abraham. “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” In this verse, the Lord affirms that his electing purpose for Abraham and his children will be fulfilled. It will be fulfilled in the way of covenant keeping. Abraham must teach his children to do what is right and just in the eyes of the Lord *so that* the Lord will do what he has promised to do. (16–17)
5. The history of Israel demonstrates that the promises made to Abraham were fulfilled only as the conditions of the covenant were met...It was in the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant that God brought Israel out of Egypt into the Promised Land...If the promises of the Abrahamic covenant had been unconditional, the Israelites would have been able to march right into the Promised Land regardless of their behavior. That did not happen. It was a new and different generation that inherited what was promised. It was a generation that believed God and moved forward at his command. (17–18)
6. Nothing demonstrates the conditional character of the Abrahamic covenant more clearly than the way in which the promises of that covenant are ultimately fulfilled. They are fulfilled through the covenantal loyalty and obedience of Jesus Christ. But just as Jesus was faithful in order to *guarantee* the blessing, so his followers must be faithful in order to *inherit* the blessing...We must become not only

believers, but disciples...to be a true believer is to be an obedient disciple. (19)

According to Shepherd, the covenant of God with Abraham has two parts: promise and obligation. Using other words, the covenant consists in divine promise and human responsibility. The promise does not come into effect until the obligation is met. The fulfillment of the promise is the result of two factors: God’s gracious promise and man’s responsibility meeting the obligations of the promise by grace. So Shepherd writes, “Abraham and his seed are obliged to demonstrate new obedience. They must walk before the Lord in the paths of faith, repentance, and obedience. In this way, the promises of the covenant are fulfilled” (20).

He continues by giving the importance of such a presentation: “The Abrahamic covenant offers no comfort to antinomians. The promises are not unconditional. The promise will not be fulfilled irrespective of any response on the part of Abraham and his children” (20).

Defending this presentation of the covenant against the charge of legalism, Shepherd writes, “Fulfilling the obligations of the Abrahamic covenant is never represented as meritorious achievement. The Abrahamic covenant gives no comfort to legalists, just as it gives none to antinomians. There are at least two ways to demonstrate this point” (20).

First, he brings up the whole matter of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael.

Hagar and Ishmael are symbolic of human effort to achieve blessing. They are symbolic of the merit of works. This is not how the promises are realized. When God, therefore, calls for faith that is living and active, and for a blameless walk through life, he is not asking for what Abraham tried to accomplish with Hagar and Ishmael. The obedience that leads to the fulfillment of the promise is totally different. It is the expression of faith and trust in the Lord, not expression of confidence in human effort. (21)

Second, he points to the nation of Israel’s entrance into the promised land as the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise to Abraham.

This triumphal entry was in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, but it happened in the way of faith and obedience...What is of importance here is the warning that Moses gave to the Israelites just as they were about to enter...“Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people”

[Deut. 9:6]. Moses was saying in the clearest possible way that the inheritance does not come because of human achievement or merit. Israel had not made herself worthy of receiving what was promised to Abraham. The land was a free gift of God's grace, but it could be received only by a living and active faith. (21–22)

According to Shepherd, the obligation to faith as *response* to the divine promise and the obligation to the obedience of faith as *response* to the divine command are not meritorious conditions because the obedience of faith is an obedience that arises out of trust and is so different from the obedience that arises out of confidence in human efforts.

Summarizing his position on the covenant of God with Abraham, Norman Shepherd writes,

The Abrahamic covenant cannot give comfort to the antinomians, but neither can it give comfort to the legalists. The Abrahamic covenant was not unconditional, but neither were its conditions meritorious...In the Abrahamic covenant, there are promises and obligations. The blessings of the covenant are the gifts of God's free grace, and they are received by way of a living and active faith. Salvation is by grace through faith. By *grace* and through *faith!* (22)

Shepherd's Covenant Doctrine Analyzed

How are we to analyze this? Notice that there is a vigorous *denial of merit and human achievement*. There is the insistence that *all* responding, believing, obeying, and fulfilling obligations *is by grace*. But the sum of it all is this: the covenant promise is *realized in the way of* responding, believing, obeying, and fulfilling obligations.

It is true that the covenant includes God's gracious promise. He gives his elect people the covenant by promise. There is also the truth that in all covenants there are two parts and that the second part of the covenant is an obligation. However, the relationship between these two parts is not that divine initiative or divine promise is brought into effect by human response or human obligation. The relationship is not that divine promise and human obligation are simply laid side by side.

The rejection of Shepherd's covenant doctrine is not simply about rejecting a promise wider than election or rejecting the use of the word *condition* or *contingent*. For much of his presentation of the covenant, he simply leaves the whole subject of election and reprobation out of view. He speaks strictly of the promise and the obligation. And then when speaking of the promise, Norman Shepherd does not always use the word *condition*. For instance, in *The Call of Grace*, he writes concerning the

covenant promise, "The promise [of the covenant] comes to fulfillment in the lives of God's people in the way of covenantal loyalty and obedience" (23).

How many would reject this?

It must be rejected. The covenant promise of God does not come to fulfillment in the lives of God's people in the way of obedience.

Rather, as the Protestant Reformed Churches pointed out in their controversy with Liberated Reformed covenant theology in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the relationship between the promise and obedience is that *obedience is the fruit of the fulfillment of the promise*.

We maintain:

1. That God surely and infallibly fulfills His promise to the elect.
2. The sure promise of God which He realizes in us as rational and moral creatures not only makes it impossible that we should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness but also confronts us with the obligation of love, to walk in a new and holy life, and constantly to watch unto prayer. (Declaration of Principles of the Protestant Reformed Churches, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 426)

The infallible and sure realization of the promise of God in the elect is the *source* of their obedience and confronts them with their obligations.

This truth stands over against the idea that their obedience is *the way* to the fulfillment of the covenant promise.

The language used by Shepherd is important to recognize. He masks the conditional character of the covenant promise and teaches conditions in the *realization* of that promise without ever using the word *condition* or *contingent* or mentioning to whom the promise is given. He teaches a conditional promise because he says that *the realization of the promise is by means of an obedient faith*—faith and its obedience. Faith itself is man's obligation. Faith is that *which a man must do to be saved*. The obedience of faith is man's obligation in response to divine command. Without faith and faith's obedience, the covenant promise is not realized. All the emphasis is on what a man must *do*. He must *do* faith, and he must *do* obedience, and *in the way of* faith and obedience, trusting and obeying, God graciously realizes and fulfills his promise.

It must be noted that Shepherd uses the phrase *in the way of* interchangeably with the word *condition*. They are the same for him. It is not enough, therefore, simply to use the phrase *in the way of* as an acceptable alternative to the word *condition*.

Especially since that phrase was used in the recent doctrinal controversy in the Protestant Reformed

Churches both to mask and to defend false doctrine about the way of salvation—the perfect sufficiency of the work of Christ for salvation, justification, and the covenant of grace—that phrase must not be used as though its *mere use* is a defense of the theology in question. The phrase must be used in its *proper sense*, namely, that the sovereign God in his salvation of his elect people in the covenant saves them as rational, moral creatures who are responsible to God in the covenant of grace. But never may the impression be left, never may the phrase be so used, that the rational, moral activity of the child of God is that upon which the efficacy, the fulfillment, or the reception of the promise of God depends. That is federal vision, whether the word *condition* is used or not.

It is important as well to note Shepherd's caricature of the unconditional promise. According to him an unconditional promise would be fulfilled irrespective of a response—obedient faith—in those to whom it has been given. Such a view he writes off as inherently antinomian. But this very caricature of the unconditional covenant promise proceeds from the viewpoint of Shepherd's false doctrine *that the promise of God is fulfilled through the response of those to whom it was given*. It is a caricature, really, of divine sovereignty in salvation.

In salvation God is absolutely sovereign. His promise depends for its *fulfillment* upon nothing in man and upon nothing that man does, not fulfilling his obligations or his responsibilities. Rather, man's obligations to new obedience, the second part of the baptism form, is the fruit of the infallible realization of God's promise in his elect people, and that infallible realization of God's promise in his elect people confronts them also with that obligation.

Shepherd's Reasons for His Covenant Doctrine

I believe it is also necessary to highlight Norman Shepherd's explanation for the development of his covenant doctrine.

His first concern was to find a solution to the supposed two ditches of antinomianism and legalism. He mentions this throughout his treatment of the doctrine of the covenant. His doctrine gives no refuge for antinomians and no comfort to legalists. He states the problem of the gospel and thus of the covenant this way:

How do you preach *grace* without suggesting that it makes no difference what your lifestyle is like? In other words, how do you preach grace without being antinomian? On the other hand, how do you preach *repentance* without calling into question salvation by grace apart from works? How do you insist on obedience without being legalistic? (8–9)

The answer is his doctrine of the covenant:

We can find the answers to these questions in the light of the biblical doctrine of the covenant... Divine grace and human responsibility are not antithetical to one another. They are the two sides, or the two parts, of the covenant that God has made with us and with our children. (9)

Shepherd creates his own conundrum. His real issue, put crudely, is, how do you get people to obey? How do you prompt godliness? How do you make God's people thankful? The answer of Shepherd, when you strip away all the extra verbal baggage and uncover the nakedness of his error, is to *hinge their salvation or some blessing on obedience*.

The answer of scripture is, *preach the gospel to them*. Preach the pure gospel of salvation by God's sovereign grace alone, especially justification by faith alone without the works of the law. Preach what justification grants: life, the Holy Spirit, everlasting righteousness, salvation, eternal life. Justifying faith is always fruitful, and justifying faith can be instructed in all the ways of God's law out of thankfulness. Preach the sovereign and infallible realization of God's covenant promise that also confronts God's people with their obligation to live a holy life.

Do not preach that you obey and then you get God's blessing. Do not preach that works confirm or assure justifying faith. That is federal vision.

Second, Shepherd's doctrine was to provide a way forward in ecumenism, especially with evangelicals and Rome. He writes,

On the threshold of a new century and a new millennium, we are painfully aware of the challenge of secularization... Many believe that we are living in a post-Christian era. In the face of this, Christians sense the need to band together to offer resistance. (3)

His doctrine of the covenant is a way for Christians of every denomination to unite together to confront a broad range of social issues.

He is right. The one doctrine that *distinguishes and separates* more than any other is the doctrine of the unconditional covenant and with it all the doctrines of unconditional salvation as found in the Canons of Dordt.

If the Protestant Reformed Churches adopt the thinking, the language, the emphasis, and thus *de facto* the theology of the federal vision, they will have no reason to remain separate from any other Reformed churches and, ultimately, will have no reason to remain separate from Rome herself.

—NJL

WITSIUS AND POSSESSION AS A CONDITION IN THE COVENANT

A recent series of editorials in the *Standard Bearer* by Rev. Kenneth Koole has enlisted the theology of the seventeenth-century Dutch theologian Herman Witsius in order to provide “wise-hearted” and “judicious” insights into the present controversy within the Protestant Reformed Churches.¹ These insights are drawn from Witsius’ 1696 book, *Conciliatory, or Irenical Animadversions, on the Controversies Agitated in Britain, under the Unhappy Names of Antinomians and Neonomians*.² As described in the *Standard Bearer* editorials, this book addresses certain points of controversy between Presbyterians and Congregationalists in England in the 1690s.

Conflicts with the Heidelberg Catechism and Synod 2018

The *Standard Bearer* editorials assert that antinomianism is a primary feature of our denomination’s current controversy. Therefore, the editorials produce and affirm quotes from sections of Witsius’ book wherein he defines and then addresses what he believes to be antinomian teachings. These editorials are revealing in that they plainly state a view of the relationship between good works, justification, assurance of justification, and salvation considered broadly—topics that Synod 2018 decisively adjudicated. Anyone who has carefully read the 2018 *Acts of Synod* and the Witsius editorials has likely noticed a distinct dissonance between synod’s decisions and Witsius’ theology as quoted and affirmed in these editorials. Indeed, an incisive summary of the conflicting theology of Witsius and Synod 2018 has already been provided in a series of blog posts.³ These blog posts also reveal to the reader an important bit of information that the *Standard Bearer* editorials failed to reveal: that Witsius in this book admits his disagreement with the Heidelberg Catechism’s theology on assurance in Lord’s Day 7. Thus these editorials, which aim to teach our denomination the proper

relationship between works and assurance, employ a theology that itself admits its disagreement with our confessional doctrine of assurance.⁴

Adding to this confusion, the *Standard Bearer* is currently publishing a series of articles by Prof. Brian Huizinga that directly contradicts Reverend Koole’s evaluation of the relationship between works and assurance of justification. The editorials teach that the following is antinomian theology: “preaching must not then teach or leave the impression that the life of uprightness has any vital value when it comes to peace of conscience, joy in Spirit, or assurance of forgiveness” (Koole, 126; emphasis added). The editorials additionally affirm that the “perspective of those of an antinomian bent” is properly described as teaching “that no justifying virtue may be attributed to our works of whatsoever kind” (Koole, 126). Reverend Koole further affirms Witsius’ statement, “Hence, I conclude, that sanctification and its effects, are by no means to be slighted, when we treat of assuring the soul as to its justification” (Koole, 151). While the editor spends a paragraph attempting to explain away this last statement by discriminating between good works as useful for assurance of justification rather than being useful as the basis of justification, in the end he positively affirms the statement. Together, through these statements and affirmations, Reverend Koole teaches us that it is antinomian doctrine to deny that our good works contribute to our assurance of justification.

Professor Huizinga, on the other hand, teaches the following: “In the matter of justification, all our good works are and must be excluded.” “Nevertheless, while the believer may find some assurance of the genuineness of his faith by beholding the good works that spring forth from his faith, he does not derive from those good works any confidence of his justification.”⁵

Again:

1 Kenneth Koole, “Herman Witsius: Still Relevant,” *Standard Bearer* 97, nos. 4–8 (November 15, 2020–January 15, 2021): 81–82. Page numbers for other quotations from this series of articles are given in text.

2 The electronic version of Thomas Bell’s 1807 English translation of this book is freely available at https://books.google.com/books/about/Conciliatory_Or_Irenical_Animadversions.html?id=Y64TAAAYAAJ.

3 <https://notallpiousandeccelesiastical.wordpress.com>.

4 See Chapter IX of *Conciliatory, or Irenical Animadversions* for Witsius’ disagreement with the Heidelberg Catechism on assurance. See also pages 247–52 of this book, where the translator thought it necessary to write five pages of notes correcting Witsius’ doctrine of assurance.

5 Brian Huizinga, “As to Our Good Works (9): Relating Good Works and Justification (e),” *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 10 (February 15, 2021): 230–31. Page numbers for other quotations from this article are given in text.

The believer does not find in his good works the basis for his justification before God. From his good works the believer does not derive any confidence of his legal standing before God. He does not look to any of his good works for assurance that he is acceptable before God. (Huizinga, 231)

And again:

Nevertheless, as soon as that believer consciously thinks of his legal status before God, he does not turn to any of his good works in order to confirm his status or bolster his assurance that he is righteous. Especially when his conscience begins to trouble him again, and he starts smiting his breast again, turning to his good works will only intensify his growing concern. When the issue is *justification*, that is, when the issue is the sinner's legal status before the thrice Holy God, the sinner will not give to his good works any place or function but will renounce them. (Huizinga, 231)

According to Professor Huizinga, good works are renounced and have no place or function when it comes to justification and assurance of justification. According to the editor of the *Standard Bearer*, Professor Huizinga's theology is of an antinomian bent. One wonders when these two authors will address each other's conflicting theologies.

The Grounds for a Conditional Covenant

For those who still desire the Protestant Reformed Churches to maintain her doctrinal distinctives, there is more in these editorials about which to be concerned. Through these editorials an established system of conditional covenant theology has been introduced into our denomination. That is, although Reverend Koole fails to reveal it to the reader, he has taken the explicit line of reasoning that Witsius uses to establish a conditional covenant theology and then presents it to our denomination as the way to solve a supposed antinomian problem within our denomination. This line of reasoning is Witsius' distinction between a right to salvation and the possession of salvation. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that these editorials are at odds with the decisions of Synod 2018 and other *Standard Bearer* authors.

Witsius, in his *Conciliatory Animadversions* as well as in other works, uses the distinction between a right to salvation and the possession of salvation to lay the foundation for a condition in the covenant of grace. As we will see below, after developing his line of reasoning that

distinguishes the right to salvation from the possession of salvation, Witsius admits that this introduces a condition into the covenant, and he concludes that the covenant of grace is therefore rightly described as a "mutual agreement" between God and man.⁶ This is the line of reasoning that the *Standard Bearer* editorials would have us believe will solve the supposed antinomian problem within our denomination.

In his third Witsius editorial, Reverend Koole introduces this concept of distinguishing between the right to salvation and the possession of salvation by using Witsius to teach us that the following statement is antinomian:

That good works are of no profit to us, in order to *the possession* of salvation; so, that though they are acknowledged not to be *the cause of reigning*, they cannot be reckoned even the way to the kingdom: that whatever good we do, we do it *not for ourselves*, but for Christ: that nothing is to be done *that we may live*, but [only] *because we do live*. (Koole, 126; emphasis is in the original)

The subsequent editorial offers additional quotes from Witsius, which pronounce that good works are required for believers to "obtain the possession of the salvation purchased by Christ" and that by good works "we go to the possession (!) of the right obtained by Christ" (Koole, 150). The editor correctly explains that we are to understand the term "possession" as our experience of salvation. The editor teaches us that "men drift in the direction of an antinomianism" (Koole, 126) exactly because they do not distinguish between right and possession as Witsius does. Therefore, it is worth determining what Witsius means by this distinction.

Witsius on the Possession of Salvation

This distinction is first used by Witsius in *Conciliatory Animadversions* in chapter 14 on the covenant of grace. It is interesting that this chapter is omitted from the editorials. Indeed, it seems that the editorials interact with each chapter that addresses good works in the life of the believer *except* the chapter on the covenant of grace. This is a significant omission because it is in this chapter that Witsius develops his theology of the utility of good works in the Christian life. In this book Witsius approaches the utility of good works in the believer's life thus: In chapter 14 he introduces how good works are related to the covenant of grace; in chapter 15 he describes how antinomians depart from this system; and in chapter 16 he describes how to correct this antinomian departure. By omitting chapter 14 from the editorials, readers are shielded from

⁶ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, trans. William Crookshank (1822; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 1:289. Page numbers for other quotations from this book are given in text.

the very context in which to understand believers' good works and their possession of salvation. The context is the covenant, and the context is conditional.

Chapter 14 of Witsius' book is titled "Concerning the Covenant of Grace." In this chapter Witsius makes bold claims about the *unconditional* nature of the covenant of grace. Yet with each statement regarding the unconditional nature of the covenant of grace, it becomes clear that Witsius specifically refers to the elect's *right to life* within the covenant of grace. Later in this chapter Witsius treats the *possession of life* within the covenant. When he addresses how the elect take possession of salvation in the covenant, Witsius teaches that sometimes scripture uses conditional language when describing the covenant. Witsius writes, "In fine, it cannot be denied, that scripture sometimes exhibits the form of the covenant of grace in a conditional style."⁷ Then he quotes Romans 10:8–9, John 13:17, and John 14:23. His conclusion from these texts is that

in this sense *some condition is to be admitted in the covenant of grace*; inasmuch as it signifies a duty according to the will of God, to be performed by man, in a manner agreeable to the nature of that covenant, before he enter upon the possession of consummate salvation. (Witsius, *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 149; emphasis added)

Therefore, according to Witsius, the covenant is divided into two parts: the right to salvation or life (unconditional) and the possession of salvation or life (conditional). We agree with the *Standard Bearer* editorials that possession means experience. Thus in chapter 14 Witsius introduces a covenant theology wherein our experience of salvation is conditional.

Later in this chapter Witsius posits that the type of condition associated with the possession of salvation is that of a consequent condition (Witsius, *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 150). It is worth evaluating this assertion. The idea of a consequent condition is that of a "state of being" derived from some antecedent condition. For example, when someone is ill, we might ask about his "condition." In this example "condition" is a state of being that results from the antecedent condition of a pathogen entering the ill individual. With care, a consequent condition may be described by the phrase *in the way of*. However, Witsius demonstrates in this book and his other works that he really does not mean consequent condition when he describes the utility of good works in the possession of salvation. In the quote above Witsius teaches that good works must come *before* the possession

of salvation. That is, our good works are required *before* we experience salvation. If a condition comes before an effect, it is no longer a consequent condition. That Witsius really does not mean a consequent condition is also demonstrated by the phrase *in order to*, quoted in the third editorial when it introduces us to the idea of possession of salvation. The very purpose of the phrase *in order to* is to denote instrumentality. Witsius (and the *Standard Bearer* editorials) teach us that it is antinomian to deny that good works are of no profit "in order to the possession of salvation" (Koole, 126). By this, they teach us that it is antinomian to deny that good works are instrumental in the experience of salvation.

That this is Witsius' theology is plain from his other writings. Witsius' most famous work, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, was written in Latin approximately twenty years prior to *Conciliatory Animadversions*. In *Conciliatory Animadversions* Witsius borrows heavily from *Economy of the Covenants*, and therefore the theology of these two works is in agreement. In his section on the covenant of grace in *Economy of the Covenants*, Witsius is at pains to explain that no conditions may be admitted into the covenant of grace with respect to the right to salvation. For example, he writes, "A condition of a covenant, properly so called, is *that action, which, being performed, gives a man a right to the reward*" (Witsius, *Economy*, 1:284; emphasis is in the original).

Yet in this book too, real conditions come into the covenant of grace when the experience of salvation is explained.

But the law, adapted to the covenant of grace, and according to it, inscribed on the heart of the elect, enjoins to receive all those things which are proposed in the Gospel, with an unfeigned faith, and frame our lives suitably to that grace and glory which are promised. *When God, therefore, in the covenant of grace, promises faith, repentance, and consequently eternal life, to an elect sinner, then the law, whose obligation can never be dissolved, and which extends to every duty, binds the man to assent to that truth, highly prize, ardently desire, seek, and lay hold on those promised blessings. Moreover, since the admirable providence of God has ranged the promises in such order, as that faith and repentance go before, and salvation follows after, man is bound, by the same law, to approve of, and be in love with this divine appointment, and assure himself of salvation only according to it. But when a man accepts the promises of the covenant, in the order they are proposed, he does, by that acceptance, bind himself*

⁷ Witsius, *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 149. Page numbers for other quotations from this book are given in text.

to the duties contained in the foregoing promises, before he can assure himself of the fulfilment of the latter. And in this manner the covenant becomes mutual. God proposes his promises in the Gospel in a certain order. The man, in consequence of the law, as subservient to the covenant of grace, is bound to receive the promises in that order. While faith does this, the believer at the same time, binds himself to the exercise of a new life, before ever he can presume to entertain a hope of life eternal. And in this manner it becomes a mutual agreement. (Witsius, *Economy*, 1:288–89; emphasis is in the original)

And immediately following:

For when life is promised to him that doeth anything, we are not directly to understand a condition, properly so called as the cause of claiming a reward. God is pleased only to point out the way we are to take, not to the right, but to the possession of life. He proposes faith, as the instrument, by which we lay hold on the Lord Jesus, and on his grace and glory: good works, as the evidences of our faith, and of our union with Christ, and as the way to the possession of life. (Witsius, *Economy*, 1:289)

In these paragraphs Witsius is teaching us how good works according to the law function within the covenant of grace. According to Witsius, it is by good works of the law that we lay hold on the promised blessings of the covenant. And it is by good works of the law that the believer assures himself of covenantal salvation. Witsius' inevitable conclusion from his teaching here is that the covenant is a mutual agreement between God and man.

Using the law as an instrument whereby the church obtains a relationship with God is typical for Witsius in his covenant theology. In book four of *Economy of the Covenants*, he treats at length how the decalogue functioned within God's covenant with Israel, whom Witsius describes as "the Church of the Old Testament" (Witsius, *Economy*, 2:162). In the context of this covenant with the church, Witsius teaches how God used the law:

We are not to think, that God, by these words, required Israel to perform perfect obedience in all parts and degrees, as the condition of the covenant...Here, therefore, he requires a sincere, though not, in every respect, a perfect observance of his commands. Upon that condition he promises to them not only temporal blessings... but also spiritual and eternal. (Witsius, *Economy*, 2:181–82)

Here Witsius teaches that the church of the Old Testament only had to keep God's law imperfectly as the covenantal condition for both temporal and spiritual blessings. If this teaching seems familiar to you, it may be because Synod 2018 directly dealt with it (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 70).

While Witsius is correct to teach the necessity of good works for believers and within the covenant, he is wrong to do so in a conditional manner. Even when he explains that the condition is not a proper condition, it is undeniable that the condition of good works to be fulfilled must precede the possession of life and covenantal blessings.

To summarize the conditional aspects of Witsius' covenant theology from both books:

- Good works are necessary in order to (instrumental in) the possession (experience) of salvation.
- Good works are necessary before we can possess salvation.
- The law binds man to the covenant promises and allows man to lay hold of covenant promises.
- Man assures himself of salvation by the law.
- We must admit all of this as a condition in the covenant of grace.
- In this context, the covenant of grace is a mutual agreement between God and man.

Having looked more closely at Witsius' conception of the possession of salvation, it becomes clear that this concept cannot be abstracted from a conditional covenant. The *Standard Bearer* editorials shielded readers from the knowledge that Witsius first used the concept of the possession of salvation to declare a condition within the covenant. Thus readers have been shielded from the very context of the distinction between a right to salvation and the possession of salvation. Because the possession of salvation is the very point at which—according to Witsius—the covenant becomes conditional, one cannot take that very same point and apply it to anything else without dragging along Witsius' entire system of conditional covenant theology. Therefore, to insist that "the heart of the dispute" (Koole, 127) is a failure to accept Witsius' distinction between a right to life and the possession of life is to insist that the heart of the issue is a failure to accept Witsius' conditional covenant.

Herman Witsius may indeed have wise and judicious insights into many areas of theology. However, for those within the Protestant Reformed Churches who desire to maintain her theological distinctives, Witsius' insights presented in the *Standard Bearer* editorials must not be applied to our denomination's present controversy.

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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

We can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth—2 Corinthians 13:8.

The truth.

“We can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth.” Such is the confession of every true minister of the gospel.

Jehovah, the Lord God, is merciful, gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth. He is the rock. His work is perfect, for all his ways are judgment. A God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he. The word of Jehovah is right, and all his works are done in truth. Jehovah is good, his mercy is everlasting, and his truth endures to all generations. All the paths of Jehovah are mercy and truth unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies. Are not thy eyes, O Jehovah, on the truth?

The God of truth revealed in Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life, so that no man comes unto the Father but by him. In Christ, mercy and truth are met together, and righteousness and peace have kissed each other. When he comes, Jehovah judges the world with righteousness and the people with his truth. All who believe shall be saved. All who do not believe shall be damned. What power! What authority! Who is sufficient for these things?

We can do nothing against the truth but for the truth, for the truth is God revealed in Jesus Christ, whose word goes forth in the preaching of the gospel effectually and infallibly to accomplish the sovereign purpose of God. His truth never returns to him void. It goes forth through the ministry of the gospel to save and to condemn, to soften and to harden, to work faith and to judge unbelief, and to gather and to cut off. Everything is accomplished according to the sovereign determination of the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

Though the whole world rejects the truth and reprobates it, the truth stands uninjured; nay more, it judges all who come under it either for salvation or damnation. And let all who have heard Christ in the truth acknowledge that what they have received—faith and salvation—they have received from him through the faithful preaching of his truth and that the one by whose mouth Christ spoke was a faithful minister. They have the very evidence within them, for their faith and salvation have no other source than that Christ came and taught them in the truth.

So every minister of the word is bound to the truth. He must say with David, “I have not hid thy righteousness within my heart; I have declared thy faithfulness and thy salvation: I have not concealed thy lovingkindness and thy truth from the great congregation.” The preacher has no authority except to teach, promote, and defend the truth. Let him even be declared a reprobate among men, if only the authority of the doctrine of Christ is acknowledged, the glory of the truth is promoted, and the honor of God and Jesus Christ is secure.

There is no power or authority in the church but the power and authority of the truth, the truth worked as the conviction of the hearts of God’s people through the operation of the Holy Spirit. When the truth comes to them, they receive it, submit themselves to it, and rejoice in it.

So all who take power and authority to themselves in the church while at the same time they are enemies of the truth and do all in their power to snatch the truth away from the church are usurpers and tyrants who seek to separate Christ from his church.

For we—all true ministers of Christ—can do nothing against the truth but for the truth.

—NJL