

The background features a stylized, orange-toned illustration. On the left, a sword is shown in profile, pointing upwards and to the right. On the right, a shield is depicted, partially overlapping the sword's blade. The shield has a circular design with several smaller circles inside. The overall style is clean and modern, using flat colors and simple lines.

# SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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

Deuteronomy 33:29

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Rev. Nathan J. Langerak



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*The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved:  
he uttered his voice, the earth melted. — Psalm 46:6*

**W**hat a contrast!  
The ineffectual raging of the heathen and the effectual speaking of Jehovah God.

The proud pretention of the ungodly that they will by their raging overthrow the rule of God, and the awesome sovereignty of God, who controls all their raging for his purpose to overthrow them and bring his kingdom.

The tottering kingdoms of men and the eternal firmness of Jehovah and his purpose.

With the melting of the earth, the evaporating hope of man and the appearing of the eternal hope of the church.

The heathen make themselves mighty kingdoms in the earth. They strengthen themselves in the earth. Earthly strength—the strength of man, the arm of flesh, the sword, the shield, the chariot, the gun, and the bomb—is their only strength. The hope of the wicked is in the earth. The hope of the wicked man is in the success of his earthly plans, the enrichment of his earthly bank account, the vigor of his earthly life, and the grandeur of his earthly kingdom.

Most miserable!

Firm in their strength, the heathen rage. Malicious, murmuring, contentious, lying, and impudent rage. With their kingdoms and with their strength, they set themselves against God and against his anointed. When they rage they utter their contempt of God, his people, and his truth. They are driven by the speaker of evil himself, who moves man in his insane rage against God, his Christ, and his church.

The church, as Zion of old, stands as a besieged city. The enemies of God's church surround her. With their proud tongues they threaten, abuse, intimidate, and utter their promises of destruction. They breathe out malice and cruelty and speak their evil minds. They boast of their power. They marshal their forces to make war on Zion. They gather mighty armies, retire in secret to take wicked counsels, and employ tricks that come out of hell.

Jehovah is in the midst of Zion.

He utters his voice.

The earth melts.

Always that is the result of the uttering of Jehovah's voice: the earth melts.

Who has a voice like Jehovah's voice?

Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. With his voice a man utters the thoughts of his mind and

reveals the deepest feelings of his heart. With his voice he speaks tenderly his love for his children. With his voice he expresses his anger at a dog that threatens his children. The raging of the wicked is the expression of the vain imaginations of their wicked hearts and evil minds. In their black hearts they hate God and his truth. In their hatred they rage.

Jehovah utters his voice.

He is the God who speaks. Jehovah speaks as the living God. Absolutely independent, he lives in himself and has his life of himself. The idol cannot speak, for the idol does not live, has no thoughts, and possesses no will. Jehovah lives. He lives as the triune God. In himself he lives the perfect life of covenantal fellowship and friendship: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. His life is begetting, being begotten, and breathing. In his life he loves, hates, wills, takes counsel, and decrees.

His eternal speaking is his decree. He spoke eternally of his good pleasure to reveal himself as the only good, ever blessed, covenant God by establishing a covenant of grace with his elect people in Christ. His thoughts toward his elect church are thoughts of peace. He speaks peace to his people eternally. He wills that they may know him and experience him as their God to his glory. He wills all things in order that all things serve this purpose.

He utters his voice. His voice expresses his perfect will, the thoughts of his mind, and the desires of his heart. All things he wills he brings to pass by his voice. The very raging of the heathen and the shaking of the kingdoms of the earth are results of his speaking. All that comes to pass is nothing but the utterance of Jehovah.

The voice of Jehovah brings to pass. As the absolutely independent one, who has his life of himself and who takes his counsel within himself, his voice is absolutely independent. Never can his voice be an offer. Never can his voice be an expression of a wish unfulfilled. Never can his voice go from him and return to him void. When he speaks he carries out his perfect will and unfolds his living decree. Because it is the voice of Jehovah, it is a voice full of power. There is no resistance to what he speaks. He accomplishes all his pleasure.

Because it is the voice of Jehovah, who eternally willed the salvation and peace of his people, it is a voice full of grace toward them. Whenever he speaks it is with grace

toward his people. All of his speaking is always with grace toward his people.

In that voice there is no grace to the ungodly. It is the voice of Jehovah, the only good. In his goodness he cannot speak grace to the wicked. Whenever he speaks it is in wrath against the ungodly.

He spoke in the beginning. He spoke and it was done. He commanded and it stood fast. He said, "Let there be light," and there was light. He called into being the heaven and the earth, the sea and the dry land. He called out of the sea and from the land all plants, fish, beasts, and birds. He commanded the sun, the moon, and the stars in their courses. By the word of Jehovah were the heavens made and all the hosts of them by the breath of his mouth. Everything he made was good, perfectly sinless. All was exactly as he had purposed.

To be melted...

To melt something is to change its form. Solid snow melts and becomes water. Solid iron melts and becomes molten. Solid rock melts and flows as lava. When Jehovah utters his voice, the earth melts. The melting of the earth is the total destruction of the earth's present form. The mountains fall. The seas roar. The ground shakes. With the melting of the earth, there is the shaking of the kingdoms of the earth and all that is of the earth. With the melting of the earth, there is the total destruction of the power of man, for his power is in the earth. With the melting of the earth, there is the total evaporation of the hope of man, for his hope is only in the earth.

Jehovah utters his voice.

The earth melts.

His voice expresses his eternal will for the earth. He created the earth to melt. He willed that the earth melt. When he speaks, then, the earth melts. Always that is the case.

In the perfect universe that God created, the evil one raged. He broke the peace of heaven with his rage, and with his lies he shattered the serenity of Eden. In the shattering of Eden, too, Jehovah uttered his voice to melt the earth. His counsel was carried out.

All in his will for perfect peace. Not the peace of the earthly, but that the earthly be melted and fashioned after and bear the image of the heavenly. Jehovah spoke of that peace. His voice uttered the promise of the woman's seed to crush the head of the serpent. Jehovah uttered grace toward his people when he promised Christ to save

them from their sins, to deliver them from all their enemies, and to give them everlasting peace. Jehovah spoke in Eden of enmity, war, and raging between Satan and Christ, between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. Jehovah brings that to pass.

God uttered his voice and the earth melted. He said to man, "Return to dust!" Man, who was perfect, became corrupt in his whole nature. The very nature of the earth and of the entire creation was changed. The natures of animals were changed so that now they lust for blood and meat. The wolf ravages the sheep. The bear eats the ox. The lion devours the antelope. The strong preys on the weak. The creation that enjoyed perfection now groans and travails in bondage.

Especially at the cross of Christ, Jehovah uttered his voice to accomplish his purpose. The whole cross and every detail of the cross were the uttering of Jehovah's voice. Oh, there the heathen raged and the rulers imagined a vain thing as never before in history. They would

break Christ's bands and cast his cords away! They would put an end to Messiah's reign! The kingdoms were moved: the kingdom of the false church; the kingdom of Rome; the kingdom of Herod; the kingdom of Satan uniting them all. In all their raging they did nothing more and nothing less than what Jehovah willed.

And the earth melted!

Jehovah laid in the cross the foundation for the total melting and transformation of the earth. There he gave signs and wonders pointing to that melting of the earth. The very powers of the heaven were shaken. The sun was darkened, the stars stopped shining, and the moon did not give its light. There was a great earthquake. There Jehovah bruised the head of the enemy. There he broke their bows and cut their spears and burned their chariots in the fire. There he defeated the devil, the world, sin, death, hell, and the grave.

Jehovah spoke at the cross his will that salvation be accomplished for his people. The Word became flesh, the very Word of God embodied in Jesus Christ. The Word of God accomplished the salvation of his people and said, "It is finished." As the reward for all his suffering, God raised Christ from the dead and set him at God's right hand. And through it all he brought peace for his people. Peace with him, the living God. He reconciled to himself those who were enemies in their minds.

That Word of salvation at the cross God speaks to his people in the preaching of Jesus Christ crucified.

Because it is the voice of Jehovah, who eternally willed the salvation and peace of his people, it is a voice full of grace toward them.

Preaching is not the voice of man. If the voice of man is not full of hatred toward God and breathing out cruelty toward his people, that voice of man is impotence itself. Powerless to accomplish God's purpose or bring to pass God's will. The voice of man accomplishes nothing. But the preaching is in truth the very Word of God.

By that means Jehovah speaks into the hearts and lives of his people all the blessings of salvation. Sovereignly, with the living and abiding Word, he regenerates them. He speaks salvation into their possession. He draws them to himself and causes them to come to Jesus Christ. He utters his voice and melts hard hearts and makes them soft. He says, "Let their sins be forgiven," and they are forgiven. He calls his people out of darkness into his marvelous light. He commands the glorious light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ to shine in their hearts. He speaks peace to them in the gospel of the forgiveness of their sins and life everlasting in heaven.

Jehovah speaks to them and creates salvation in their hearts because he is the God who spoke from all eternity concerning their salvation. The salvation that he bestows with his voice is the salvation that he spoke concerning them in eternity. The God who utters his voice in the earth is the God of Jacob. The God who said eternally, "Jacob have I loved." Out of his eternal love for his elect church, he appointed his people to salvation. Out of his eternal love he also speaks to them the word of grace and salvation and realizes that in their hearts and lives.

And when the heathen rage against the church...

Jehovah utters his voice.

The earth melts.

He hardens men in that sin. He gives them over to a reprobate mind. He speaks against the hardness and impenitent hearts of men. He speaks and judgments fall on them. Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall. Nations shake. Countries tremble. Economies totter. Society is altered. The very climate of the earth is changed. Industries, plans, and routines are all changed. In the melting of the earth, the very foundation of their kingdoms and the hope of their hearts evaporate. Men are full of despair. The hearts of men quake with fear, anxiety, worry, trouble, and turmoil.

That, too, because Jehovah spoke against them in eternity. The God who said, "Jacob have I loved" also said,

"Esau have I hated." Jehovah's voice carries out his perfect will and just decree for the judgment and destruction of the world of sin and darkness and for the salvation and eternal blessedness of his people.

Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he has wrought in the earth.

In all that speaking he brings to pass his decree for the perfection of his kingdom in Jesus Christ and the destruction of the kingdom of Satan.

In all that speaking he speaks as the God of Jacob, who is with and in the midst of his people and stands in wrath against the ungodly.

When he speaks and the earth melts, kingdoms and nations tremble, and the hearts of men fear and quake at the voice of the Lord. He preserves his people by his perfect power and grace so that they cannot be moved. In the melting of the earth, their eternal hope is more and more revealed.

God will continue to speak, and the earth will continue to melt until he utters his voice one last time in this age. He will utter his voice, and the very elements of the creation will melt with a fervent heat in order to cleanse the world with fire. The very form of creation will be changed forever. The earthly will bear the image of the heavenly. Heaven and earth will be joined together and made one as the everlasting dwelling place of God and of his covenant people in Christ Jesus our Lord. Again, though far more gloriously, the cow and the bear shall feed with each other; their young ones shall lie down together; the wolf and the lamb shall feed together; and the lion shall eat straw as the ox.

So now, when we hear Jehovah's voice and we see the earth melt, the heathen rage, and kingdoms moved, let not your hearts be troubled.

God is in the midst of us. He is our very present help in time of trouble.

Know that the mighty voice of God heard in all these calamities is the voice of the God of Jacob, who in all his speaking is for his people and is never against them.

When Jehovah speaks and the earth melts, let us understand that he is working all things after the counsel of his own will to bring to pass the eternal kingdom of Christ and our everlasting salvation.

Let us be still and know that he is God.

We have nothing to fear.

—NJL

## OUR PRESENT CONTROVERSY

For the past five years, the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) have been engaged in continuous internal doctrinal controversy. The controversy has appeared at almost every meeting of Classis East since 2016, and has appeared at every synod since 2016. By now everyone in the churches is aware that there is controversy. But does everyone also know what the controversy is about? Could all identify the doctrinal issue at the heart of the controversy? In order for the PRC to do justice to the truth and to profit doctrinally and spiritually from the controversy, we must know the issue at heart. In this editorial let us make a beginning of getting to the issue of our present controversy.

To state the issue in one sentence: The controversy in the PRC is whether a grace principle or a works principle governs the believer's experience of covenant fellowship with God. At its heart the controversy is as simple as could be: grace or works? The controversy is also as serious as could be: grace or works?

The key issue is the antithesis between a grace principle and a works principle. The issue is who saves man. Does God save man? Or does man save man? Is man's salvation of God? Or is man's salvation of man? God? Or man? If God saves man, then salvation is by grace. This is the grace principle of salvation. If man saves man, then salvation is by works. This is the works principle of salvation. Therefore, when we speak of a grace principle or a works principle, we are simply describing who saves man: God, or man?

These two principles are absolutely antithetical. They cannot be reconciled. Either salvation is by grace, or salvation is by works. Either God saves man, or man saves man. There is no common ground between these two principles, but only warfare and enmity. It is God's own judgment that these two principles are opposed, for scripture constantly holds them over against each other. Speaking of Abraham's justification by faith alone, Paul writes, "Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness" (Rom. 4:4–5). On one side is the works principle: "him that worketh." According to this works principle, man saves man, for the reward of righteousness is given to him as his "debt," that is, as his earned right and as something that is owed him. On the other side is the grace principle: "him that worketh not,

but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly." According to this grace principle, God saves man, for the reward of righteousness is "reckoned of grace," that is, it is given as a free gift to one who is ungodly and undeserving of that gift.

Again, speaking of God's eternal decree of election, Paul writes, "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work" (Rom. 11:5–6). On one side is the grace principle: "if by grace." On the other side is the works principle: "if it be of works." There is no common ground between these two principles because of the very nature of grace and work. Grace is God's free and unmerited gift that has no reference whatsoever to the quality or the activity of man. Work is man's diligent and obedient keeping of God's law. If election, and the salvation to which man is elected, is given by grace, then it is entirely a free gift without any reference to man's works; otherwise grace is no more grace. If election, and the salvation to which man is elected, is given by works, then it is entirely given as the payment of what man is owed for his work; otherwise work is no more work.

Again, speaking of salvation, Paul writes, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). On one side is the grace principle: "by grace are ye saved." On the other side is the works principle: "of works." These two principles are irreconcilable due to the praise that follows from each. The grace principle means that all praise goes to God for the salvation of man, for "it is the gift of God." The works principle means that "man should boast," for salvation is "of yourselves."

Again, speaking of our salvation and our holy calling, Paul writes, "[God] hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began" (2 Tim. 1:9). On one side is the works principle: "according to our works." On the other side is the grace principle: "according to his own purpose and grace." These two principles are antithetical because Jesus Christ is found only in the grace principle and not in the works principle. God's grace is "given



us in Christ Jesus.” To be saved by works means to be saved apart from Christ. To be saved by grace means to be saved entirely by Christ. The works principle not only overthrows the grace principle; it also overthrows Christ. “I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain” (Gal. 2:21). The grace principle not only overthrows the works principle; it also establishes Christ. “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified” (v. 16).

These, then, are the two antithetical principles: the grace principle and the works principle.

Note that the antithesis is always between the grace *principle* and the works *principle*, not between grace and works. God’s grace is not at odds with man’s work. In fact, God’s grace produces the believer’s good works. Therefore, man’s work is entirely in harmony with God’s grace as the fruit of his grace and the effect of his grace. “God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work” (2 Cor. 9:8). “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). The controversy in the PRC is not whether man works or does not work. Attempts to make this the issue miss the point and only confuse the issue. The controversy is whether man is saved by man’s work or whether man is saved by God’s grace. The issue is the grace principle of salvation versus the works principle of salvation. The issue is whether God saves man or man saves man.

These two principles appear over against each other again and again in the history of the church as the great controversy of the ages. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God and knew they were naked, they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. By their own works, they tried to cover their sin and shame in the sight of God. The works principle of salvation! But God gave them the promise of the seed of the woman who would save them, and covered their sin and shame through the shed blood of an animal (Gen. 3:7, 15, 21). The grace principle of salvation! Cain brought an offering of his own sweaty labor to God—the works principle—while Abel brought a substitutionary atonement—the grace principle

(4:3–4). Abraham tried to bring about God’s promise of the seed by marrying Hagar—the works principle—while God brought about the promised seed through Sarah after they both were dead to procreation—the grace principle (vv. 16, 21). The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable boasted of his own righteousness—the works principle—while the publican cried out for God’s mercy—the grace principle (Luke 18:9–14). The Judaizers bewitched the Galatians to believe that righteousness comes by the law—the works principle—while Paul declared salvation by faith in Jesus Christ—the grace principle. Pelagius taught that man was born good and could keep himself good—the works principle—while Augustine taught man’s total depravity and need of God’s grace—the grace principle. The Roman Catholic Church taught the merit of man’s good works—the works principle—while the reformers taught salvation by grace alone—the grace principle. The Remonstrants taught salvation by man’s right use

of God’s universal grace—the works principle—while Dort taught salvation by the power of God’s sovereign grace—the grace principle. The well-meant offer of the gospel teaches salvation by man’s acceptance of God’s universal offer—the works principle—while the confessions teach salvation by God’s sovereign will—the grace principle. The conditional covenant teaches membership in the covenant by man’s fulfilling conditions—the works principle—while the unconditional covenant teaches unconditional covenant membership for the elect—the grace principle. On and on it goes.

It becomes evident that although there are two principles, there is only one salvation. God saves man! Man does not and cannot save man! “So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” (Rom. 9:16). Therefore, though there are two principles, there is only one truth. The works principle is a lie. It is false doctrine. It is heresy. It is an error out of hell (Canons of Dort 2, error and rejection 3). The grace principle is God’s own truth and the heart of Reformed soteriology.

The controversy in the PRC has been between the works principle and the grace principle. On one side of the controversy is the teaching that man’s experience of covenant fellowship with God depends upon man’s obedient good works—the works principle. On the other side is the teaching that man’s experience of covenant fellowship with God is entirely a free gift of God’s grace that is given him without any help from man’s works—the grace

The controversy in the PRC is whether a grace principle or a works principle governs the believer’s experience of covenant fellowship with God.

principle. The theology of one side is essentially Arminian; the theology of the other side is Reformed. The theology of one side is contrary to the confessions; the theology of the other side is confessional. The theology of one side is false doctrine; the theology of the other side is biblical truth. The works principle versus the grace principle!

One might ask whether this is really the issue. Has the controversy really been the works principle versus the grace principle? Has it really been heresy versus truth? The controversy is often characterized as something less than this. It is proposed that there have been mistakes, or misstatements, or lack of clarity, or confusion, or improper phrasings, or the like, but that at bottom the doctrine of the PRC is intact. This analysis of the controversy is wrong. The controversy in the PRC has not been a matter of semantics or clarity, but the irreconcilable conflict between two opposing principles: the works principle and the grace principle. Therefore this controversy has

been between an error out of hell and God's own truth from heaven. That may sound harsh; that analysis might be unwanted; but for the PRC to emerge from this controversy with the truth intact, they must see with clear eyes that the issue in the controversy is between the works principle and the grace principle.

But you don't have to take my word for it. Here is the judgment of synod regarding an integral part of the controversy: "The doctrinal error is that the believer's good works are given a place and function that is out of harmony with the Reformed confessions" (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 61, art. 62 B.1.). Good works given a place and function out of harmony with the confessions? The works principle of salvation!

Next time we will see exactly where the works principle of salvation was applied: the believer's experience of covenant fellowship with God.

—AL

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## A MATTER FOR THE CONTACT COMMITTEE'S ATTENTION

In the past two years, the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) have had two official meetings with the United Reformed Churches (URC). The first meeting took place between the PRC delegation and the URC delegation to the November 2018 meeting of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) (*Acts of Synod 2019*, 48–49, 101–2). The second meeting took place on October 23, 2019, between the Contact Committee of the PRC and the equivalent committee of the URC (*Agenda for Synod 2020*, 110–11).

At the first meeting "both parties explicitly recognized that work towards denominational unity would not be the goal of meeting, rather the discussion would center on current topics in our respective denominations" (*Acts 2019*, 101). The one topic of discussion reported on was "the use of money on foreign mission fields" (101). At the second meeting the topics of discussion were "the Federal Vision" and "missions and money" (*Agenda 2020*, 111). The Contact Committee reports to Synod 2020 its judgment "that this was a good meeting. We see no need to continue meeting in the near future unless a matter comes to our attention that could be profitably discussed" (111).

May I suggest that there is a matter for the Contact Committee's attention that could be profitably discussed.

That matter is 1924: the URC's doctrine of common grace, the URC's doctrine of the well-meant offer of the gospel, and the URC's unjust deposition of Herman Hoeksema, George M. Ophoff, Henry Danhof, and several Reformed elders. In fact, so fundamental is that matter that no further discussions of any kind should be held at joint meetings of the PRC and the URC until that matter has not only been discussed, but also thoroughly resolved by the URC's repentance for their false doctrine and for their persecution of God's prophets.

The reason that this matter is fundamental between the PRC and the URC is that the URC is responsible for the Christian Reformed Church's Synod of 1924 in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and its aftermath. At that synod the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) adopted the three points of common grace as the official dogma of the denomination. The three points teach a universal grace of God for all men, including the reprobate; God's gracious restraint of sin in the heart of unregenerate man; and the ability of unregenerate man to do truly good works. Included in the three points as a proof of God's common grace is the teaching that God graciously makes a well-meant offer of salvation to all men who hear the preaching. Herman Hoeksema, Henry Danhof, and George M. Ophoff opposed common



grace and the well-meant offer as false doctrine. They maintained that the grace of God is always particular grace for his elect alone, which grace actually accomplishes their salvation. God makes no well-meant offer in the preaching of the gospel, but makes a promiscuous call to repent and believe, and a particular promise of salvation only to those who believe, which believing is also God's gracious gift. For those three men's defense of the truth and opposition to the lie, they were deposed from office with their consistories by their respective classes in the CRC. The summary of 1924 is that the CRC adopted false doctrine and persecuted those prophets of God who maintained the truth and who rebuked the CRC for her errors.

To this day the URC remains responsible for all of the errors of the CRC in 1924. When the URC left the Christian Reformed Church in the 1990s, the URC's reasons for leaving were not their objection to common grace, to the well-meant offer, or to the casting out of what would become the PRC. The decrees of the Synod of Kalamazoo in 1924 are still the decrees of the URC, for although the URC have separated themselves from the CRC, they have never separated themselves from 1924.

Therefore, between the PRC and the URC, there is ongoing schism. Because this schism is caused by Synod 1924 and its immediate aftermath, the blame for this

schism lies at the feet of the URC. The removal of this schism can only be accomplished by the URC's repentance for their false doctrine and for their ungodly treatment of Herman Hoeksema and the others. Such repentance on the part of the URC would be the beautiful fruit of God's particular grace to rescue an entire denomination from long-standing, generational error. Such insistence by the PRC that there be such repentance would be the beautiful fruit of God's particular grace that causes an entire denomination to love her persecutor and to seek her persecutor's repentance. Until such time as the URC repents, there is no other topic to discuss at joint meetings. There is no possibility of a meeting in which "both parties explicitly recognized that work towards denominational unity would not be the goal of meeting" (*Acts 2019*, 101). There is no possibility of a meeting to discuss other important doctrinal issues, such as the Federal Vision, or important practical issues, such as money on the mission field. For the sake of God's truth and for the sake of God's grace, any official meeting between the PRC and the URC must deal with the only matter that matters between them.

We respectfully bring this to the attention of the Contact Committee as a matter "that could be profitably discussed."

—AL

## FROM THE EDITOR

The second issue of *Sword and Shield* is here! Undoubtedly you have had this date marked on your calendar and have been waiting by your mailbox with great anticipation. At least that is how it goes for me. Apparently that is also how it goes for many. At the time of this writing, the response to the first issue of *Sword and Shield* has been overwhelmingly positive. Many have expressed their appreciation for the magazine, and several have already subscribed.

About that, this is the second of three issues that will be mailed free of charge to introduce *Sword and Shield* to our readers. Beginning with the September 1 issue, the magazine will be mailed monthly to subscribers at the rate of \$24 in the USA and \$36 internationally. Subscribing is now easier than ever, thanks to an update to the Reformed Believers Publishing website: [reformedbelieverspub.org](http://reformedbelieverspub.org). You can subscribe to *Sword and Shield* online with a credit card payment, or you can find a downloadable subscription form if you prefer to mail it in. The website makes either option quite convenient.

About that, the updated website is really worth checking out. The free issues of *Sword and Shield* are

being posted there, the constitution of Reformed Believers Publishing is up for inspection, and there is a downloadable membership form for those who would like to join Reformed Believers Publishing. Application is free, and applicants will be accepted at the first annual meeting of RBP, scheduled for October 15, 2020. This is a great opportunity to witness to the Reformed faith far and wide through the publication of this Reformed magazine.

About that, we are thankful to Prof. David J. Engelsma and to the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* for granting *Sword and Shield* permission to reprint Professor Engelsma's recent review of Sam Waldron's new book, *The Crux of the Free Offer of the Gospel*. This excellent review first appeared in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 52, no. 1 [November 2019] on pages 100–15. The first installment of this reprint can be found in the pages of this issue.

About that, the second issue of *Sword and Shield* is here! Thanks be to God. May he speed the truths written herein to your heart, and the next issue into your hands.

—AL

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

## COVENANTAL ASPECTS AND THEIR COORDINATION

Covenant theology must identify, or distinguish, and speak of three aspects of the covenant: the bond; the word, or speech, identified often as promise; and the sign, seal, or token of the covenant.

A way of further distinguishing these aspects is to coordinate them. Similar: What role does each aspect have in distinction from the other? What is the role of the bond of the covenant in distinction from the role of the different tokens of the covenant? Why is it necessary, then, to give to each aspect its proper place? Why is it so important not to deny any aspect its existence or its place in the whole?

The coordination of these aspects is that the goal is first and is the essence of the covenant: the bond of fellowship and friendship between God and his people in Jesus Christ. Their coordination is also that the introduction, exercise, and fulfillment of the covenant are by the speech of the covenant. Put another way, the communion of the covenant is by communication—verbal communication between God and his people. The coordination of these aspects is, third, that verbal communication also gives signs and tokens of the covenant. Creaturely elements are brought by the word into the service of the word of the covenant, and thus into the covenant itself, to signify and seal the covenant.

In the previous installment I emphasized the need to prioritize these covenantal aspects. A proper priority among them serves well their coordination. A proper priority also makes all the difference in the profit a believer receives from the truth of the covenant. Will the covenant be strong, or will it be weak? Will the covenant be a true and lasting comfort or a fearful dependence on man's weak determination? Or will the covenant be merely an intellectual study, devoid of life and power?

Another important benefit of proper coordination is harmony and complementary character. Coordination keeps the three aspects from opposition to one another. This is perhaps the greatest danger to all debate over the covenant, whether it is unconditional or conditional. It is a great temptation to dismiss one or two aspects and then to lay hold on the remaining and make it the whole of covenant theology. There is the possibility that speech, or

promise, receives all the priority so that the bond is wholly excluded. The covenant, then, is not the end itself but becomes only a means to an end. If the covenant is thus conditional, it no longer has any real reference to the end. Conditional covenant doctrine is limited to the means of grace. It cannot consider which specific individual persons are actually saved and brought to glory. It can only generalize: believers who have fulfilled the covenant condition.

There is another possibility, that of placing all the emphasis on the covenant as a bond of fellowship. The danger is the exclusion of the proper place of covenant speech and covenant token. The danger is that the covenant becomes a mere abstraction. It exists, to be sure, but its blessed reality and benefits are left out of reach for God's covenant people. The true comfort and peace of the covenant, meant for their assurance, cannot live in their hearts and affect their lives.

A proper coordination of the three aspects will ensure that God's people have spiritual access to the bond of the covenant. By the covenant word and by the covenant sacraments, God's people are meant to know that they belong to the covenant of grace. Coordination is beautifully expressed in this phrase in the Lord's supper form: "That we might firmly believe that we belong to this covenant of grace, the Lord Jesus Christ, in His last Supper, took bread." With this proper coordination, the power of word and sacrament is that they lead to the everlasting covenant of grace exactly as the fellowship that is salvation, enjoyed in this present life and in the life to come. To be forever God's covenant people and to have God forever as our God is true, everlasting covenant blessedness.

That coordination is evident in the very phrase itself in the Lord's supper form. The aim and goal of the Lord's supper is expressed in that phrase. The point is the belief "that we belong to this covenant of grace." Belonging to this covenant of grace is the same as salvation itself, as is evident from the following language in the form: "certainly feed and nourish your hungry and thirsty souls with My crucified body and shed blood to everlasting life." And still later: "have true communion with Him, and be made partakers of all His blessings, of life eternal, righteousness, and glory."



The same phrase from the form regarding belonging to the covenant expresses the proper coordination with the other aspects of the covenant. The sacrament of the Lord's supper, a sign and seal of the covenant, is put in a relationship of service to the bond of the covenant. Why did the Lord Jesus Christ in his last supper take bread and break it, speaking the words of institution? He did so in order "that we might firmly believe that we belong to this covenant of grace." The element of speech is given its coordination in three distinct ways. Most central are the words of institution spoken by our Lord and recorded in the form. With his words he instituted this sacrament. The second way is the application of those words of institution to every particular administration of the Lord's supper for which the form is read. The third way is the entire use of the Form for the Administration of the Lord's Supper. They are together the word of the covenant, meant to bring God's people to their God as the God who feeds and nourishes their souls to everlasting life with the body and blood of his Son at his blessed table.

The three aspects are evident in their distinction and operation throughout the revelation of God's everlasting covenant of grace in the pages of holy scripture. Scripture is not merely the revelation of the covenant of grace; it is the revelation of that covenant in the three aspects. The truth of the covenant of grace is not merely taught by scripture; it is also exercised. Scripture not only declares the covenant promises of God and teaches his faithfulness to those promises, but it also records the faithfulness of God to his promise. He performs all that he has spoken.

Scripture also reveals the truth of the covenant by development. Scripture is rightly described as "progressive revelation." That progressive revelation especially involves the doctrine of the covenant of grace. The scriptures are divided into Old Covenant and New Covenant. Within each "Covenant" the truth is developed both as taught and as carried out on its pages. The heart of the covenant forever remains the same: friendship and fellowship between God and his elect people in Jesus Christ. But that heart becomes more and more visible over the development of sacred, covenant history. That heart also becomes more visible in its tokens of creatures and actions, as well as in the speech of fellowship.

Another point should be made here in connection with the controversy the Protestant Reformed Churches endured in the 1950s over the doctrine of the covenant.

Much of the controversy was over the form and content of the promise. Is the promise the speech and the words of that speech, or is it what the speech is about? As the covenant promise is "unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off" (Acts 2:39), is the promise merely the speech about the covenant that is heard and understood by all the church and all the baptized children of the church? Or is the covenant promise the salvation of God's people, the true friendship and fellowship of everlasting life? Those who stood for the doctrine of the conditional covenant argued for the former. They maintained that the promise was only the words and that fulfillment of the promise depended on whether the condition of faith would be fulfilled. Those who stood for the doctrine of the unconditional covenant argued for the latter. They maintained that the promise made and fulfilled by God alone was the substance, *what* God had promised—and would be given by grace alone—to his elect people in Christ.

This confusion must be cleared away for the sake of a proper view of the covenant. If the covenant promise is only the speech, or words, about salvation, the covenant is not salvation. Neither is salvation the covenant. The covenant is only the means and not an end. In addition, there are only two aspects of the covenant: only the covenant sign, or token, and the covenant speech, or

language. The bond of friendship and fellowship is something else. Salvation is something else. The bond is not the covenant, and salvation is not the covenant.

Conversely, if the covenant promise is what is promised, namely the bond of fellowship between God and his people in Christ, and salvation as eternal life itself, then the covenant is truly the end and goal of salvation history. Then the covenant is glorious and profound. Then the promise is truly a word of power, and then the sacraments have their rich and powerful significance.

Then also the doctrine of the covenant is worthy of all development and maintenance. It is worthy of diligent and careful study. Study of the covenant will yield more blessed knowledge and appreciation of it. It becomes delightful to see how the truth of the covenant of grace buds, blossoms, develops, matures, and ripens to its everlasting fruit in the everlasting kingdom of heaven. Edification comes from searching out its prominent features in the lives of the redeemed people of God in every generation, the generations of sacred history and of church history. Tracing

Then the covenant is glorious and profound. Then the promise is truly a word of power, and then the sacraments have their rich and powerful significance.



its lines through all history as Jehovah's faithfulness to his promise that he will be forever the God of his people in every age becomes a great blessing. Jehovah's covenant promise will be seen as sure, although the covenant people fail and break his covenant. In their unfaithfulness his faithfulness becomes clearer and more praiseworthy.

In the scripture's inspired record of creation, the particular doctrine of the covenant is already given a place of importance. Where is the covenant to be located first in the order of creation?

Prominent in most Reformed and Presbyterian circles is the doctrine of the covenant of works. The ground for the covenant of works is said to be the probationary command of Genesis 2:17. It was the threat of death that God would visit upon man were he to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which the Lord God had planted in the midst of the garden. Two twists are given to the probationary command to supply the ground for the covenant of works. The first twist turns the threat of death into a promise of life and its disobedience into obedience. A certain period of time is said to be implied, during which period Adam was to remain obedient and not eat of the forbidden tree. If Adam remained obedient during that time, God would grant what he had promised. God would remove the threat of death, and Adam and his descendants would enjoy immortality. Thus the covenant of works is that obedience merits life.

The second twist is that the promised life is not merely the continuation of the earthly life in which our first parents were created. It is heavenly life. Although I recognize that theologians are divided on this point, the most popular and attractive view is that heavenly life was to be achieved by obedience under the terms of the covenant of works. Adam was placed in a position to achieve everlasting, heavenly life. When he fell he lost as the first Adam what the second Adam, Christ, would achieve for those perished in the first. So, it is argued, the second, everlasting covenant of grace must be a proper reflection of the first, the difference being between works and grace only.

There are two points of great difficulty with this covenant of works. The first difficulty is what is stated in 1 Corinthians 15:50: "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." The second is that Adam and Christ simply do not exist on the same level. Although they are compared to each other in Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, Adam's side is only negative and Christ's side is only positive. By the man Adam came sin and death. By the second Adam came righteousness and life. The first man is of the earth, earthy; the second man is the Lord from heaven.

But the greatest difficulty with the covenant of works is far deeper. It is as fundamental as the truth of creation

itself. All things were created by Christ and for Christ, including Adam and including the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The fall of our first parents in the garden was according to the decree of God, which decree was in the service of Christ and the glory of God's grace in Christ established before the world began. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was planted ultimately in the service of the tree of Calvary's cross upon which our Lord was crucified for the new and everlasting covenant of grace.

What makes the covenant of works impossible to maintain is that there was already a covenant in place and in operation. Man was created in fellowship with his God. Created in the image of God, man was created in knowledge of God, in righteousness, and in true holiness (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). The sovereign-friend created a servant-friend. With that creation itself the two were knit together, even as the Creator breathed into the man's nostrils the breath of life so that he became a living soul. Life could not be merited, because life was already the full, glorious, and joyful possession of man. There was nothing lacking to him. There was nothing for him to gain. What was clear from the probationary commandment and threat was that everything was his to lose. "In the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die." Indeed, there was a law for the servant Adam to obey, but it was his to obey out of the life he already possessed, in grateful acknowledgment to his blessed Creator for it. It was his to obey out of the righteousness, holiness, and true knowledge of God, which Adam was created to value and treasure. In fact, it was the temptation of Satan to Eve that held out something greater and higher to attain through disobedience.

This manner of Adam's covenant fellowship and friendship with his Creator is identified in the Canons of Dordt: "Man was originally formed after the image of God" (3–4.1). This article says nothing about violating or breaking a covenant of works. Instead it refers to man's creation after the image of God and that his sin was revolt from God, casting off his servanthood in contempt of it. He violated the bond with God that he possessed from his creation.

Article 14 of the Belgic Confession has similar language: "The commandment of life which he had received he transgressed; and by sin separated himself from God, who was his true life; having corrupted his whole nature; whereby he made himself liable to corporal and spiritual death." Both articles of the confessions make clear that obedience was *in* the life Adam already possessed by virtue of his creation and not *unto* life that was potentially his by merit. His disobedience did not mean loss of potential life to be rewarded him. It meant the complete loss of what he did possess by his creation in the image of God.

—MVW

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

## THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO PESTILENCE

Pestilence is nothing new for the church of Christ. I have found especially enlightening the record of the work of Geneva's company of pastors during the periodic plagues that struck the city. They granted the right of the believer to flee pestilence, so long as they "fulfilled their duty of piety toward God and charity toward their neighbors."\* The pastors meant what they said, as a 1571 incident shows. The account is graphic.

A daughter of the [Bourgeois] family contracted the plague while in the final days of pregnancy. Fearing infection, the young woman's mother, brother, and sister abandoned her. Even when the pains of labor overcame the sick woman, neither family members nor neighbors responded to her desperate cries for help. In the end, she delivered her baby alone, all the while screaming for water and assistance. Both mother and infant died within hours. The woman's family, listening to the entire ordeal outside the family's house, had already dug a grave for the woman. The Consistory's response to this horrifying account was more than perfunctory: in addition to suspending the family members for their inhumanity, the ministers sent a delegation to the city magistrates...so that no one would suffer a similar thing ever again. (216)

In their calling to the people to do their duty, the ministers did not exempt themselves. Theodore Beza, successor to Calvin in Geneva, stated in uncompromising terms the calling of the officebearers in the face of a plague: "It would be something very shameful, indeed wicked, to even imagine a faithful pastor who abandons one of his poor sheep in the hour when he especially needs heavenly consolation" (288–89). This from a man who in his *Treatise of the Plague* showed his understanding that the plague was contagious and that to contract the plague almost invariably led to death.

The official work of the church carries on in the face of pestilence.

God promised that pestilence is one of the signs that will accompany the coming of Jesus Christ. Pestilence has

always confronted the church. Pestilence will confront the church more and more as the end draws nearer.

What must be the church's response to pestilence?

This question has been given new urgency today in light of the federal and state governments' responses to the current pestilence.

The pastors in Geneva also faced the government's intrusion into the work of the church regarding visiting plague victims. The company of pastors "rejected with strong words the magistrates' efforts" (287).

In our day to protect the citizenry, the government prohibits gatherings greater than a certain number. That these laws may also apply to other large gatherings does not take away from the fact that they *do apply* to the church. Such orders *do prohibit*—on pain of the breaking up of the church's assemblies, fines, imprisonment, or being pilloried in the public eye—the gathering of the church for worship. Currently, in many states it is illegal to worship God in public with the church.

The government simply reinforces its position that it has the authority to determine when and how the church meets for public worship by granting permission to meet again. The granting of permission to gather, however welcome that may be, hides an ominous implication, namely, that the granting of permission implies the right to withhold permission. It is simply the same issue in another form.

Because of those orders and the fear of infection, many speak and pray that the church at present is "unable" to worship together. But is it a matter of the church's inability to worship, or rather a matter of the church's decision *not* to worship? The church can, in fact, worship. We have cars, buildings, ministers, and sermons. We are able to have a worship service. Rather, consistories have made concrete decisions *not* to worship.

The question is, what is the thinking that has gone into those decisions?

What are the principles that must inform the church's thinking and thus her response to pestilence? Does the church make her decisions about public worship based on modern science, knowledge of disease transmission, an overwhelming concern for the physical health of her

\* Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 288. The page numbers for the other quotations from this book are in parentheses in the article.

members, and government orders about the size of gatherings? Does the church base its decisions about worship on image management, a fear of rousing the hatred of the community, or bad publicity? Does the civil government have the authority, under any circumstances and for any reason, to prohibit gatherings of the church for public worship? Must the church conform to those government mandates simply because they are government mandates? Is the church's coming together for public worship during a pestilence a reckless, dangerous, and hateful act toward the neighbor?

The answer to these questions begins with the confession of what the church is. The church of Jesus Christ in the world is a spiritual institution governed by Christ as her only head, king, prophet, and high priest. Christ exercises his royal government in his church through elected officebearers in consistories. The calling of the church is to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and care for the poor. She stands at the very center of all history. The world continues to exist only because God's church is in the world. The preaching of the gospel by the church is the greatest activity that takes place in the world and that to which all world history is subservient. Her overwhelming concern is the spiritual health of her members.

The public worship of God is the highest calling and sacred privilege of the church of Christ. In that worship she publicly manifests herself as church. In the fourth commandment God calls his church to worship him. Answer 103 of the Heidelberg Catechism says regarding the command to worship God, "That I, especially on the sabbath, that is, on the day of rest, diligently frequent the church of God." The manner in which God calls his church to worship him is publicly as an assembly of the people of God every Lord's day. Worshiping God in homes via livestreaming is not a legitimate substitute for public worship for the church.

The church derives her right to assemble freely from God himself. The church does not derive her right to assemble from men or the laws of men. The calling to worship God publicly in the assembly of the people of God is especially the meaning of the Belgic Confession in article 28: "It is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the church, and to join themselves to this congregation wheresoever God hath established it, even though the magistrates and edicts of princes be against it."

The civil authorities are an institution ordained by God. Referring to civil government, Romans 13:1 says, "There is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God." According to article 36 of the Belgic Confession, we believe that it is the will of God "that the

world should be governed by certain laws and policies, to the end that the dissoluteness of men might be restrained, and all things carried on among them with good order and decency." It is the calling of God to the civil government "to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state." Furthermore, it is the calling of God to the civil government to "countenance the preaching of the Word of the gospel everywhere, that God may be honored and worshiped by every one, as He commands in his Word." It is the calling of God to the civil government to allow the church to exist and to worship as God calls her to worship. The consistories also "take care that the churches, for the possession of their property and the peace and order of their meetings, can claim the protection of the authorities" (Church Order 28).

Also according to article 36 of the Belgic Confession, "it is the bounden duty of every one, of what state, quality, or condition soever he may be, to subject himself to the magistrates; to pay tribute, to show due honor and respect to them, and to obey them in all things which are not repugnant to the Word of God; to supplicate for them in their prayers, that God may rule and guide them in all their ways, and that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." The believers' calling is to obey the government's orders in their ordinary lives. The church detests any sedition, subversion, or rebellion against the God-ordained authority of the magistrates.

However, "for the sake of peace and material possession they [the consistories] may never suffer the royal government of Christ over His church to be in the least infringed upon" (Church Order 28). The calling of the church for public worship belongs exclusively to the royal government of Christ and is the sole prerogative of Christ, as God says in Psalm 50:

The mighty God, even the LORD, hath spoken, and called the earth from the rising of the sun unto the going down thereof...He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that he may judge his people. Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice...Hear, O my people, and I will speak; O Israel, and I will testify against thee: I am God, even thy God...Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High: And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me (vv. 1–15).

No order of the civil government for any reason may interfere with that exclusive right of Christ. Especially is this true in the day of trouble, as we live in at this present time. The church must worship God publicly as the church assembled by Christ.



To call a congregation to worship is no act of civil disobedience. It is obedience to God rather than to men. Civil disobedience is a political act to make a political statement, to achieve a political and earthly end. The church's gathering for worship is a wholly spiritual act in obedience to Christ her only Lord. That act is not rooted in a right granted by the Constitution of the United States. That act is rooted in the command of God and the calling of God to his church in scripture.

Such an act is not reckless either. I observe that those who have a newfound regard for human life and chastise the church for meeting and supposedly threatening human life, at the same time fight for, sanction, and support the butchery every year of millions of unborn human beings and in some cases, born human beings. The hypocrisy is glaring. The gathering of the church for worship is not a callous disregard for human health and life. It is no more reckless than going to the store or working in a factory, which many willingly do six days out of the week.

In a call to worship, the church can recognize and take seriously the reality of disease transmission. The church can recognize the freedom of the individual, according to his conscience, to avoid plagues and pestilences and even to flee from them and so to stay home from church. The church can recognize the calling to love our neighbors, including a regard for their health. Measures can be taken at worship services to minimize dangers to health, so that meeting together will not put the members of the congregation at more risk than going to work, shopping in stores, or engaging in any other activities necessary for human life.

Granting that the government does not have the authority to limit the worship of the church, does the consistory have the authority to cancel worship services, sometimes for weeks on end, in light of the reported danger of some pestilence? The consistory does cancel a service in response to other dangers, such as a threatening tornado or some winter storm. The danger of some plague may make it prudent for the church to do that for a time. However, what Calvin said of pastors really applies to the whole church: "So long as we are in this ministry, I do not see that any pretext will avail us, if, through fear of infection, we are found wanting in the discharge of our duty when there is most need of our assistance" (285).

The church derives her right to assemble freely from God himself. The church does not derive her right to assemble from men or the laws of men.

But there is more thought that needs to go into the question of the church's response to pestilence. Does the church not realize that she prays for pestilence and that God answers her prayers? She constantly prays, "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly." That prayer involves all these upheavals in the world that will increase both in frequency and intensity as God moves the world toward his determined goal.

In Revelation 8:1–5 the prayers of the saints are offered up as sweet incense before God. These are not prayers of a general nature, but prayers specifically for the coming of the end. The Lord answers these prayers. The answers to these prayers are the casting of the golden censer into the earth and the voices, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake—judgments on the earth.

Still more, the very testimony that the church bears in the world brings judgment on the world of unbelief and apostasy. Revelation 11:6 says, "These have power to shut heaven, that it rain not in the days of their prophecy: and have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to smite the earth with all plagues, as often as they will." When God honors the church's faithful testimony in the gospel by doing to the world exactly what his word says, does the church then retreat with the rest of the world into isolation? Does she cease being in that case the witness that by her public testimony and preaching brings these things on the world?

If the church tries to escape the displeasure of the world by not meeting because the world does not want her to meet, wait until the world discovers that the church is praying for all these things and that her testimony brings all these things on the world. When the church has finished her testimony, she will quickly become the two witnesses slain in the streets of Sodom and Egypt (vv. 7–8).

The church must also understand that pestilence is one of the many means by which God brings the antichrist. That is one reality that is on massive display at present. How quickly men will give up all their liberties, and how quickly the government will take those liberties. The government is a God-ordained institution, but that institution is destined to become the beast out of the sea of Revelation 13. That beast is the deified state, at the head of which will sit the deified man, antichrist, who will demand and receive from the whole world worship as God. Should not the church in the face of that reality be on the lookout and on guard against precisely that reality

in every pestilence? Satan does not miss his opportunity to aggrandize the state, which he intends to be worshiped as God, and by which he intends to destroy the church. There is something exceedingly ominous in the bold decrees against gathering for the worship of God.

Besides, the church as a spiritual institution is called to have an overwhelming concern for the souls of men and the glory of God. Her overwhelming concern is not for the bodies of men, but for the need of men to hear the preaching of the gospel, to have the sacraments, and to call on the name of God. When it comes to the question of one's physical health or spiritual health, then spiritual

health must take priority every time. When it comes to the question of fear of infection or one's calling to worship God, the calling to worship God takes priority every time.

In the face of pestilence, the church can and may come together for worship. The danger can, as much as in us lies, be addressed by all the common means employed in other areas of life. The church's coming together for worship over against government prohibitions is not a rebellious act but a spiritual act of obedience to Christ. It is a worshipful response to pestilence, which the church herself called for on the world.

—NJL

## THE BOOK OF ESTHER

# THE THEME OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

**T**he theme of the book of Esther is elusive at first. After all, the name of God is never mentioned in the book. The spiritual activities of prayer and the worship of Jehovah are never recorded in the book. All of the events of the book take place outside of Jerusalem in the far-off Persian city of Shushan. There is not so much as a mention of the temple that had been rebuilt in Jerusalem or the offerings that had been resumed on the altar. What possible message could God have intended for his church in a book such as this?

In order to discover the theme, a very important principle of biblical interpretation must be applied. In fact, it is the first of all of the principles of interpretation: scripture interprets scripture. That is to say, God interprets his own word. The whole Bible stands together as the one word of God to his church. The message of the Bible is one message. That message is proclaimed through a great variety of speech: prophecies, history, poetry, song, visions, epistles, and more. Yet the message is the same. Therefore, the word of God interprets the word of God; scripture interprets scripture. So it is for the book of Esther. The light of the whole word of God must be shined on the book of Esther. The theme of the whole Bible, which is the glory of God in Jesus Christ, must illuminate the book of Esther. The message of all scripture, which is Jesus Christ and him crucified and risen as the savior of his church to the praise of the glory of God's grace, must be brought to bear on the book of Esther. In the light of the scriptures, the theme of the book of Esther will become clear.

And how clear it becomes! In the light of all the scriptures, the theme of the book of Esther fairly leaps off the page! There is especially a word in the book of Esther, a single word, that grabs our attention as all-important. It is such a small word and so tucked away that it is hard to see it at first. But illuminated in the light of the whole word of God, that little word shines as the biggest word with the biggest significance. In that little word, the theme of the book of Esther is found. In that little word, the theme of the Old Testament is found. In that little word is found the gospel of Jesus Christ and the message of the whole Bible.

What is that little word? It is this: seed. "For Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren, seeking the wealth of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed" (Esther 10:3). There it is: seed! Seed! See how tucked away it is? It is the very last word of the whole book. Seed! One must read all ten chapters and all 5,633 words finally to come to it. Seed! But in the light of the rest of scripture, that little word—seed!—stands out as the brilliant and grand theme of the book of Esther.

The word "seed" is one of the most important words, if not the most important word, in the entire Old Testament. From beginning to end, the message of the Old Testament is the message of the seed. The seed was the content of Jehovah's first promise to his church. Speaking to the serpent after man's fall, God said, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and

her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). Her seed! The seed of the woman! This was God’s promise to his people that he would give them a seed, the seed of the woman. It was his promise to his people that the seed of the woman would bring them victory over their enemy, and thus would bring them salvation from their sin and death. What a promise this was! Adam and Eve were guilty, ashamed, miserable, afraid. By the instigation of the devil, and by his own willful disobedience, Adam had deprived himself and all his posterity of God’s divine gifts of true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. He had made himself—and the entire human race that would spring from him—so corrupt that he was incapable of doing any good and inclined to all wickedness. He was wicked and perverse. He was depraved and spiritually dead. He had corrupted his whole nature. He was fallen into perdition and ruin. From henceforth even infants themselves in their mothers’ wombs would be infected with this hereditary disease of sin and with the corruption of their whole nature (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 3–4; Belgic Confession 14–16). To his fallen, ruined people, God made the powerful, saving promise: The seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent’s head! The seed of the woman! The seed!

God repeated his promise of the seed to Abraham. “I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee” (Gen. 17:7). God repeated his promise of the seed to David. “When thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son” (2 Sam. 7:12–14).

How important was the seed! The seed would crush the serpent’s head. God’s covenant would be established with the seed. The seed would build God’s house and rule God’s kingdom as God’s son forever. How God’s people needed the seed! How they longed for him to come according to the promise of God! The entire Old Testament must be read in the anticipation of the coming of the seed. From Adam on, God’s people looked for the coming of the seed for their salvation. And come he would, for God had promised: the seed of the woman, the seed of Abraham, the seed of David. The seed!

In the fullness of time, God sent the promised seed. When we turn the page from the Old Testament to the New, the very first verse introduces us to the long-awaited seed: “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). The son of David is the seed of David. The son of Abraham is the

seed of Abraham. The seed is Jesus Christ. This is also the testimony of the Lord’s apostle. “Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ” (Gal. 3:16). The seed is Jesus Christ! Jesus is the seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent. Jesus is the seed of Abraham with whom God established his covenant. Jesus is the seed of David who would build God’s house and reign upon God’s throne as God’s son forever. Jesus is the seed!

In the light of God’s promise in the Old Testament, the word “seed” at the very end of the book of Esther becomes all-important for the book. The theme of the book of Esther has to do with the coming of the seed, Jesus Christ.

There is one more thing about the Old Testament that we must understand in order to see the full theme of the book of Esther: the seed of the woman is not the only seed. There is also a seed of the serpent. The seed of the woman is Jesus Christ and all who belong to him (Gal. 3:16, 29). The seed of the serpent are all of those outside of Christ. They are the reprobate. They are the world of godless men and women. They are those who are of their father the devil, who do his lusts, who murder, and who lie (John 8:44). God himself identified these two seeds in the mother promise of Genesis 3:15: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.”

Between these two seeds there is constant enmity. There is no unity between them, no peace between them, no common ground between them. One seed is of God in Jesus Christ; the other seed is of the devil; and what concord has Christ with Belial (2 Cor. 6:15)? All of history is a record of the enmity between the two seeds. All of the Old Testament is a record of the seed of the serpent bruising the heel of the seed of the woman and the seed of the woman crushing the head of the serpent. As much as God’s people anticipated the seed of the woman, so much Satan hated that seed and sought to destroy that seed. The devil knew God’s promise very well, for God had spoken the promise of the seed directly to Satan, who was in the serpent in the garden. God’s promise of the seed was announced to Satan as a declaration of his defeat: it shall bruise thy head!

Satan’s project throughout the Old Testament was to prevent the coming of the seed of the woman, and thus to spare his own head. Revelation 12 describes the entire Old Testament as the church’s bringing forth the seed of the woman and the devil’s attempting to devour that seed. The great red dragon, that old serpent, called the devil and Satan, “stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as



it was born” (Rev. 12:4, 9). The devil’s project to devour the seed of the woman can be seen in some of the great episodes of the Old Testament. Cain’s murder of Abel was the serpent’s attempting to cut off the seed of the woman. Pharaoh’s enslavement of Israel in Egypt, and his edict that all of the baby boys should be cast into the Nile and drowned, was the serpent’s attempting to cut off the seed of the woman. Herod’s decree to kill all of the boys around Bethlehem who were two years old and under was the serpent’s attempting to cut off the seed of the woman. There was enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent! Satan bent his seed to the purpose of devouring the Christ by cutting off the seed of the woman before he could be born.

The book of Esther records a great episode in this project of the devil. The seed of the woman was in the loins of the remnant of the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. Christ was there in Jerusalem with the Jews. If the devil could bend the power of the mighty Persian Empire against those Jews, he would be rid of the seed of the woman once and for all. Through Haman, his wicked and vain servant, Satan convinced King Ahasuerus to set a date for the destruction of all of the Jews in his kingdom. The goal was to eradicate the Christ! Even though the events in the book of Esther take place far away from Jerusalem in Shushan, all of the events were

on account of that remnant of God’s people in Jerusalem. Two seeds were at war! From Shushan came the serpent’s strike against the heel of the Christ in Jerusalem. This also explains the book of Esther’s emphasis on Mordecai and Esther being Jews, and on Haman being the enemy of the Jews. Regardless of whether Mordecai and Esther themselves were of the seed of the woman, the seed of the Jews was at stake, which seed is Jesus Christ.

In his project to eradicate the seed of the woman, the devil must fail. The promise of God is sure. The promise of God is yea and amen in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). Though the devil may plot and rage against Christ, he can still only bruise his heel. The victory belongs to the seed of the woman for the sake of the salvation and deliverance of the church from her sin and death in Adam. In Adam, all died. In Christ, the seed of the woman, all of his people are made alive. Therefore, in Shushan, Haman’s plot must also fail, and the remnant in Jerusalem must be spared, for the sake of Christ, the seed!

What, then, is the theme of the book of Esther? It is this: the victory of the seed of the woman over the seed of the serpent according to God’s promise of salvation, and worked by God’s sovereign power.

Or, to say the same thing in the language of the book of Esther: “peace to all his seed” (10:3).

—AL

## BOOK REVIEWS

# THE CRUX OF THE “FREE OFFER” IS THE CROSS! (1)

Review by David J. Engelsma

*The Crux of the Free Offer of the Gospel.* Sam Waldron.

Greenbrier, AR: Free Grace Press, 2019. 143 pages, softcover, \$18.00.

## Introduction

With the enthusiastic recommendation of such Reformed theologians as Joel Beeke and Richard D. Phillips, Baptist theologian Sam Waldron launches a vehement attack on the Reformed confession of salvation by particular grace and a vigorous defense of the theology of universal, ineffectual (saving) grace as this heresy is inherent in the doctrine of the “well-meant offer” of the gospel.

To his credit, Waldron is candid in his attack and

defense, as other defenders of the popular doctrine are not. By the “free offer,” he means a divine invitation to salvation that expresses a saving love of God for all to whom the ineffectual invitation comes, with the sincere, gracious purpose and desire of God that everyone who hears the invitation be saved. In the “free offer,” God extends His saving grace in Jesus Christ to all to whom the offer comes—extends it with the desire of love that the sinner be saved by the offer, that is, by the offering God.

It is both the conviction and assumption of this book that the crux of the doctrine of the Free Offer of the gospel is God's indiscriminate desire for the salvation of sinners. To put this in other words, at the core of the Free Offer of the gospel is what is called the 'Well-Meant' Offer of the gospel... This conviction (that the Well-Meant Offer and God's indiscriminate desire for the salvation of sinners is the crux of the Free Offer) is also the conviction of its most vocal enemies (9–10).

Whereupon Waldron adduces this reviewer's book *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* as expressing the rejection of the well-meant offer to which he and his theological allies are opposed.

Honestly, Waldron acknowledges that it is this that the avowed foes of the so-called "free offer" find objectionable—foes particularly in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC).

This is strikingly candid on Waldron's part because many advocates of the well-meant offer like to disguise the heresy, which they hold, as much as possible by carefully referring to it only as the "free offer." Thus, they hide behind the use of the phrase in the Westminster Confession of Faith (7.3) and leave the impression that they are only confessing the indiscriminate preaching of the gospel to all and sundry; the serious call to all hearers to repent and believe; and the generally announced particular promise that everyone who believes will surely be saved. This meaning of the "offer," of course, is orthodox and heartily subscribed to by the PRC.

### *What is Meant by the "Free Offer"*

In fact, this is not what such theologians mean by the "free offer." What they mean is what Waldron rightly and candidly calls the "well-meant offer." What Waldron means, and what such defenders of the "free offer of the gospel" as Beeke, Phillips, R. Scott Clark, and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (all of whom are adduced by Waldron as defenders of the well-meant offer) mean, by the "free offer" is that "God wills for them [all who hear the gospel] to be saved" (22) and that God has a "desire and intention for the salvation of men who were finally lost" (24), so that the "free offer" preacher assures everyone in his audience that "God wants him to be saved" (33).

The doctrine of the "free offer" for which Waldron contends, as do also most contemporary advocates of the "free offer," is "that he [God] would have all come to Christ" (130). "God earnestly desires the salvation of every man who hears the gospel. He sends them the gospel—with the desire, intention, and will—that they might be saved by it" (100).

As this universal will of salvation itself implies, Waldron

candidly declares that his and the others' "free offer" proceeds from a saving love for all who hear the gospel and proceeds to them all as the (would be) saving grace of God.

Waldron struggles, as well he might, with the implication of his well-meant offer, namely, that there are two, contradictory wills in God. With the will of election (which Waldron confesses), God desires and intends the salvation of some only who hear the gospel, Jacob, not Esau. With the will of the well-meant offer, God desires the salvation of all, Esau as well as Jacob. Thus, the God of the well-meant offer is in conflict with Himself, which is intolerable for a Calvinistic, indeed Christian, theologian.

Waldron makes an effort to alleviate his grave problem of contradiction in God, and that in the important matter of salvation, by recourse to a deep and murky discussion of the nature of the being of God (which discussion does nothing at all to solve Waldron's problem of a conflicted god—a god whom I would advise to make up his mind: does he purpose to save all, or some only?; does he want us to preach his will of election or his will of the well-meant offer?). The familiar appeal in defense of this contradiction in two wills of God to the oneness and threeness of God's being, as though the oneness and threeness of the being of God are also contradiction, is a complete failure. For God is not one and three in the same respects. He is one in *being*, and three in *persons*. The Trinity of God is not a glaring contradiction. The doctrine of the Trinity reveals God as incomprehensible. It does not reveal Him as nonsense.

### *"Will of Precept/Will of Decree"*

Beyond all doubt, Waldron's main defense against the charge that his theology of the well-meant offer posits two contradictory wills in God is his appeal to the Reformed distinction between the preceptive will and the decretive will of God. Again and again, Waldron falls back on this distinction in the will of God. He expresses the importance of the distinction for his doctrine of the offer early in his treatment of his subject: "First, the backdrop of this discussion is the preceptive will of God for all men" (25). He returns to the distinction at the very end of the book, where he adds to his confusion by introducing the distinction between the secret and the revealed will of God.

This means that the supposed objection to the Free Offer from particular redemption is not different in its fundamental nature from the problem relating to the tension between God's decretive (or secret) and preceptive (or revealed) will... The particular redemption of only some of those to whom the gospel is preached is not an objection. The revealed or preceptive will of God in the gospel is that he would have all come to

Christ. The revealed will of God is that in Christ, on the basis of his precious blood, there is a sufficient Savior for them (130).

Waldron misunderstands and misrepresents the distinction “preceptive will/will of decree.” The distinction is not between a desire to save some (election) and a desire to save all (the well-meant offer). But, as the wording of the distinction itself makes plain, the distinction is between a desire, or intention, or purpose, to save only the elect (the will of decree) and the command, or precept, to all who hear the gospel, that they repent and believe (the will of precept). The preceptive will of God is His command, not the expression of His purpose, or intention. A precept is a command. It is not a wish. It is exactly the idea of the distinction in Reformed theology that the Bible often teaches that God commands (preceptive will) what He does not purpose according to His decree (will of decree). Similarly, He forbids (precept) what He has decreed (decree).

Here may be difficulty for the human comprehension. But there is no contradiction. God forbade Adam to eat the fruit (precept), whereas He had decreed that Adam would eat, in order that He might carry out His purpose of salvation in Jesus Christ (decree). God forbade Joseph’s brothers to sell him into Egypt, whereas He had decreed that they would sell him, so that Joseph might keep the family of Jacob alive. God forbade all the agents of the wickedness of bringing Jesus to the cross to perform their evil deeds, whereas He ordained that they would perform them in order to accomplish the salvation of many by the redemption of the cross. God commands all who hear the gospel to believe (precept), whereas by the very preaching of the gospel He hardens the hearts of some that they not believe, according to his decretal will of reprobation (decree). What God commands is one thing (will of precept). What He decrees is another thing (will of decree). Precept and decree involve no contradiction.

When Waldron inexcusably describes the preceptive will of God as God’s *gracious intention, or purpose* to save those whom He has not elected, he completely misunderstands the preceptive will of God, and brings God into conflict with Himself. “The revealed or preceptive will of God in the gospel is that he would have all come to Christ” (130). Now God has two contrary wills: a will desiring the salvation of all and a will desiring the salvation of some only. He is a God at cross purposes with Himself. And one of these wills—the one which Waldron and his free-offer colleagues emphasize—is a failure. All who hear the gospel do not come to Christ.

Likewise, Waldron’s appeal to a distinction between the “secret” and “revealed” will of God rests on a misunderstanding of the distinction. For Waldron, God’s revealed will is His purpose that all be saved by the gospel,

inasmuch as God loves them all alike. God’s secret will, in contrast, is His election of some only. This is sheer contradiction in God with regard to the salvation of humans who hear the gospel. But this is inexcusable ignorance on Waldron’s part, ignorance that those who so heartily recommend the book ought in kindness, to say nothing of theological astuteness, to have called to Waldron’s attention. The secret will of God is what God has ordained in His eternal counsel, for example, that God would harden Pharaoh’s heart so that he would refuse to let God’s people go, in order that God might be glorified in Pharaoh’s disobedience. Pharaoh did not know this will, nor did he need to know it. Pharaoh knew, and only needed to know, God’s revealed will, which was the command of God to him by Moses, “Let my people go.” The precept did not contradict the decree. In fact, the precept served the decree. By disobeying the precept Pharaoh hardened himself so as to make himself ready for his decreed destruction.

Waldron makes the revealed will of God a purpose of God to save all who hear the gospel, in contradiction of the secret will of God’s predestination that only some be saved. Not only does this understanding of the distinction cause God to be at loggerheads with Himself and bring the gospel into utter confusion (does the God of the gospel will to save some, or all?), but it also is falsity on its very face. If the revealed will of God is taken to refer to God’s revelation in Scripture as to whether He purposes the salvation of all who hear the gospel, or of some only, the revealed will—the *revealed* will—of God plainly teaches that He wills to save some only, not all. Jesus told His enemies to their faces in John 10 that they were not of His sheep, to whom alone He willed (intended, purposed, desired) to give eternal life. It is the revealed will of God that God has no desire for the salvation of all who hear the gospel, indeed, of all to whom Jesus Himself preaches the gospel. In Romans 9, the Holy Ghost teaches that the purpose of God with some who hear the gospel is that their hearts be hardened so that they perish everlastingly. This is not the “secret” will of God, but the “revealed” will. God has made known that He does not will, or purpose, or intend, the salvation of all who hear the gospel. His revealed will clearly makes known His decree of predestination, that He purposes and intends the salvation of some only, in distinction from others for whom He purposes damnation. The revealed will makes known also that God designs and uses the preaching of the gospel as means of grace for the salvation of the elect only.

Waldron and his free-offer allies are inexcusable in their opposition to this revealed will of God. “Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth” (Rom. 9:18). The text explains God’s will in the matter of the salvation of sinners. The



text teaches that this will concerning salvation is particular, not universal. The text teaches that the will for the salvation of some only includes, as an essential aspect of this will, the will for the hardening and damnation of others. And this twofold will of God regarding salvation is part of biblical revelation. It is the *revealed* will of God. Whether they receive it by bowing to the revelation, this will of God is made known to Sam Waldron and his free-offer allies, as well as to the PRC, unless they do not have John 10 and Romans 8 and 9, and many similar passages, in their Bibles.

To Waldron and his theological allies, who forever oppose and argue against this revealed will of God, that He is merciful in the gospel to whom He wills to be merciful, withholding His mercy from others, as though this truth would render God somehow unfair, if not hard-hearted, making Him the original “hyper-Calvinist,” comes the apostolic warning, “Nay but, O man, who art

thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay...?” (Rom. 9:20).

Let Waldron and his allies consider, whether their theology of the offer would occasion such an objection and necessitate such a warning. Who would object to the teaching that God loves all with a saving love and comes to all alike with the message, “I love you all alike, that is, with a saving love, and sincerely desire to save you all; now I offer all of you alike Christ and salvation; and (as this message implies) it is now up to you”? It is inconceivable that anyone would object, “Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?” (vv. 19–20).

So important for Waldron’s defense of his theology of the well-meant offer is his mistaken understanding of the preceptive will of God that, with the exposure of this inexcusable error, his well-meant offer collapses.

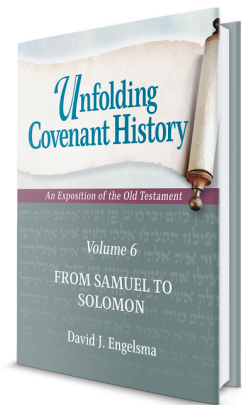
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## ***UNFOLDING COVENANT HISTORY: FROM SAMUEL TO SOLOMON***

Reviewed by Rev. Nathan J. Langerak

*Unfolding Covenant History: From Samuel to Solomon*, volume 6. David J. Engelsma. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2020. 224 pages, hardcover, \$28.95.



Professor David Engelsma has written volume six of the series on Old Testament history entitled *Unfolding Covenant History*. This series is being published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA). This is his second contribution to the series. He also wrote volume 5, which covers the history of Judges and Ruth. The RFPA is to be commended for its long-term commitment to publish this series. The series is a valuable part of the publisher’s lineup of orthodox, Reformed books and an invaluable alternative to a host of weak or erroneous commentaries on the Old Testament that flood the book market and vie for the attention of Reformed readers.

Remarkable is the unity of theology throughout the volumes. The first four volumes were written by Homer Hoeksema—and the substance of them goes back to George Ophoff and the very beginnings of the Protestant Reformed Churches in the 1920s—and the series is being continued by Professor Engelsma. Yet all the volumes speak with one voice the truth of God’s sovereign and particular grace in an unconditional covenant to the glory of God.

All the books of the series make for fascinating and

edifying reading. The sixth volume is no exception. This is true because the books treat the Old Testament history as history. Before one can be engrossed in or learn from the biblical history, one first needs to be impressed by the truth that the Old Testament is factual, infallible history inspired by the Holy Spirit. Nothing saps the reader’s fascination with the history or is so fatal to the believer’s edification from the history as an unbelieving discussion that calls into question or explicitly denies the veracity of the biblical record. Common today in Old Testament commentaries is naked unbelief in the biblical record that parades itself in the robes of scholarship and erudition. It is unbelief. It is unbelief that stems from unbelief in the infallible inspiration of scripture and the authorship of sacred scripture by God the Holy Spirit. It is easy to criticize scripture—and the activity is *de rigueur* in theological high society today—if the author were merely a man. Furthering the offense, these commentators present the supposed human authors of biblical history as incompetent and bumbling editors who created a discordant and contradictory Old Testament record drawn from

multiple sources like a badly bungled patchwork quilt. Then the authoritative teaching of the Holy Ghost in the history is easily dismissed.

The sole author of scripture is the Holy Ghost. Criticism of his book is criticism of him. Such criticism is dangerous to the souls of the writers and readers of these commentaries. The warning of Revelation 22 is rightly sounded against much that passes for Old Testament commentary today. Such unbelieving books serve to weaken and undermine the faith of the church in scripture, to take away any possibility for application of the history to the church. Further, oppressing the believing reader with the authors' unbelief, these books take away the thrill of Old Testament history. Professing to explain the history, they in fact dismantle it. No book of ancient history written by a worldly historian—Thucydides, Plutarch, or Tacitus—is treated so disgracefully by those who profess to study them, as Old Testament history is treated by professing but unbelieving biblical commentators.

Basic to biblical commentary—and especially Old Testament historical commentary—is faith in the inspiration and infallibility of scripture. The words of sacred scripture are holy and divine. They are beyond the possibility of error and above all criticisms and judgments of men. The words of scripture—including especially Old Testament history—judge all men and are judged of no man. Many a commentator falls under the judgment of James that being a judge of the law, he is no doer of the law. That lawless spirit—a refusal to be judged by the words of scripture and a refusal to have the words of scripture govern one's theology, life, and commentaries—is rife in the world of Old Testament biblical commentary. Faith in scripture, above all else, recommends this series of commentaries on Old Testament history. Every volume breathes a child-like faith in the inspiration and infallibility of sacred scripture and thus a love for the history and doctrine of that history.

In volume six the commentator and his commentary are governed by scripture's words, and he brings out the sense, meaning, and application of those words. Because of that, the commentary makes not only for fascinating reading but also edifying reading.

If Old Testament commentaries today are not irredeemably fouled by unbelief in the inspiration and infallibility of scripture, they are fatally marred by the imposition of conditional covenant theology onto the history. Conditional covenant theology presents the covenant of God—whether the theologians define that covenant as a contract or relationship—as dependent on the faith and faithfulness of the covenant people. The covenant of God is viewed as including all the circumcised—baptized in the New Testament—people of God. God's promise of salvation in the covenant is taught as given to all the

circumcised—baptized—children of the covenant. That promise of God is taught as depending for its fulfillment on the faith and faithfulness of the covenant people. Theologians only compound their error when they describe that conditional covenant as a contract or agreement.

Conditional covenant theology is an imposition on the biblical history that takes away the main lesson of that history: God's covenant as the relationship of friendship with his elect people in Jesus Christ. Beginning with the first announcement of the promise in Genesis 3:15, the history of the Old Testament is consumed by the truth of God's gracious work to bring the seed of the woman, who will crush the head of the serpent, which seed the Holy Spirit teaches in Galatians 3 is Christ. Christ is the head and mediator of the covenant, a covenant made with the elect and them only. The covenant promise to save his people from their sins and to bring them to heavenly glory in Jesus Christ is for the elect alone and is absolutely unconditional. The promise of God in the covenant depends solely and exclusively on God's work in Christ. The covenant God is faithful to maintain and perfect his covenant by the wonder of grace alone. Throughout his commentary Professor Engelsma teaches the unconditional character of God's covenant promise. Included in this—indeed essential for this—is his orthodox treatment of the truth of election and reprobation as that controls membership in God's covenant and God's covenant promise.

This comes out throughout the commentary, but perhaps most pointedly in connection with reprobate Saul. Saul was not a member of God's covenant who successfully resisted the grace and promise of God that was offered to him, and against whom God turned because Saul was unfaithful. Rather, Saul was a reprobate in the sphere of God's covenant, to whom there was no promise of God. Saul was revealed as an unbeliever in the course of God's dealings with him, and Saul came to such terrible grief on account of his unbelief and other sins. His rise and fall were not unfortunate setbacks in the unfolding of God's covenant, but a divinely decreed antithesis through which God's kingdom came in David.

That emphasis—the unconditional covenant promise of God controlled by election—does not mean that the author ignores the calling of God's covenant people to righteousness and holiness. The commentary provides clear, powerful, and moving explanations of the relationship between God's sovereignty and the proper calling of God's people in the covenant to live out of the principle of regeneration and to stand as God's friends and servants antithetically in every area of life.

Closely connected are the sharp warnings of God's just chastisements of his unfaithful servants and covenant people. I found particularly compelling in this regard the insight that in these chastisements—such as the capture

of the ark by the Philistines during the days of Eli and his wicked sons—God allows his own holy name to be besmirched, culminating in the cross. It reminds one of the sobering words of Romans 8 that God *spared* not his own Son. It is a testimony to amazing grace what it costs the living God to take his elect—but sinful—people into his covenant and to maintain that covenant with them. It is testimony regarding how far God goes in seeking their repentance and salvation from their frequent backslidings, even to the fouling of his holy name by the heathen, whom God uses to chastise and ultimately to bring his people back. His covenant he will not break, and his mercy he will never take away from them. Always what comes out in the book is that the apparent setbacks, severe chastisements, and deep troubles of God’s people—justly received by them for their sins—are according to God’s eternal decree for the purpose of the revelation of God’s grace in Christ Jesus. The covenant continues to unfold infallibly, and the kingdom always advances unswervingly.

All this means that this volume clearly and sharply teaches the truth of God’s unconditional covenant. In doing so it sets itself apart from every other commentary of which I am aware. In doing so it also gives all the glory to the faithful, covenant God, which is the purpose of the whole Bible and all of history and must be the purpose of every commentary on scripture.

There is also a needful polemic in the commentary against the ever-present danger of dispensationalism. Dispensationalism views the Old Testament nation of Israel as God’s kingdom people and the church of the New Testament as a different people gathered during a kind of interlude, or parenthesis, after the kingdom people rejected Christ. Prior to the end of the world, God will rapture the church off the earth and turn again to his kingdom people, the Jews, and form a new earthly kingdom of David in the earthly city of Jerusalem, from which Christ will rule over all the nations of the world. Besides all the absurd and bizarre aspects of this false doctrine—rebuilt temple, animal sacrifices renewed, rapture of the church, earthly opponents of Christ fighting him with guns—it denies the essential oneness of the Old Testament church and the New Testament church. It is also seriously wrong in its insistence that there will be a reinstatement of the Old Testament sacrificial economy, which is a patent denial of the one sacrifice of Christ as the only way of salvation.

Volume six treats the history of God’s covenant from Samuel to Solomon. This history includes the coming of the kingdom. Professor Engelsma makes a compelling case that the unfolding of the covenant of God involves the revelation of the kingdom of God in its typical form in David and Solomon. These two concepts—covenant and kingdom—are not to be viewed as rivals for the place of main theme of the Bible. Rather, the eternal kingdom of God

in Jesus Christ is the form that the covenant is destined to take. In connection with the truth of the kingdom, and explaining that when things went badly for the king they went badly for the people and when things were well with the king they were well for the people, is the solidarity of the king, kingdom, and kingdom people. Christ and his elect people are one. He is the head. They are the body. The welfare of the covenant and kingdom people of God is wholly wrapped up with the king of God’s kingdom. All the repeated failures of Israel’s kings, including her best king, David, demonstrate clearly that the king of that kingdom must be perfect, a king who comes only in Christ.

Professor Engelsma’s treatment of the vast amount of scripture involved in this epoch of the unfolding of God’s covenant is efficient. The book neatly divides into four sections: the rise of the omnipresent office of prophet in the nation of Israel in the person and work of Samuel, the antithesis of God’s king and kingdom in Saul, the coming of the righteous king in David, and the kingdom of peace in Solomon. The many details are organized and treated under main themes. With swift, bold strokes he tells the story and teaches the doctrine. Always the reader is brought by the details to consider the main doctrines that are being taught in the history. Throughout the commentary appropriate applications for the church today are briefly sketched. Such efficient organization of the history no doubt proceeds from the author’s complete mastery of the subject. The biblical history is full of characters, befitting the fact that it is real history full of real people. Sprinkled throughout the book are enlivening little descriptions of the various characters that populate the biblical account and still populate the history of the church today.

Summarizing the thrust of the whole book are the last words of the commentary:

To the one who cast the shadows that were Israel’s greatest kings, David and Solomon, the true Israelite looked forward in hope. His hope was not shattered by the weakness and failure of the earthly types, namely David and Solomon—David’s adultery and murder and Solomon’s idolatry. Rather, the failure of the types served to concentrate the hope upon the coming reality and to enliven the hope. The merely earthly, no matter how gifted and glorious, could not sustain and fulfill the grand hope. The Israel of God must look further and higher. To David’s greater Son and to the greater than Solomon! They did. And by this hope, they were saved.

The commentary constantly draws the reader’s attention through its treatment of the history—as history—to Christ and in him to Jehovah and his grace. No higher praise can be given. The book is highly recommended.

—NJL





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## FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

*He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.* — Revelation 2:29

**T**his was Christ's word and warning in the days of his ministry when he taught the people in parables: "He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear." Christ by his Spirit speaks the same word to all the seven churches of Asia Minor and so also to the church of Christ in every age.

The faculty of hearing is intricate, mysterious, and wonderful. Crucial for that sense in man is the ear. The ear is the instrument of hearing. Sound waves enter the ear. The mechanical movements in the ear are translated into electrical pulses and sent to the brain. There the sounds are interpreted and discerned.

Hearing is mysterious because it is a work of God. He formed the ear. There is a mysterious power in hearing. The slightest sound can alert the watchful. A moving piece of organ music or an inspiring piece of rhetoric can deeply affect the listener. Performers bring audiences to tears by their music. Generals rally their flagging soldiers by their stirring speeches. Doctrines are sunk down deeply into souls by hearing. A child learns language almost exclusively by hearing. The ear tries words like the tongue tastes meat.

It is no wonder that hearing should be able so deeply to affect man. God is the Word. The Word became flesh to reveal God.

So there is a more wonderful sense of hearing. It is the spiritual faculty to hear the Spirit of Christ. He is the breath of Christ by which Christ's word comes to his church. Faith comes by hearing. The physical sense? Yes. People must hear the gospel preached.

But more deeply in the spiritual sense, to hear in that gospel the very word of Christ carried on the breath of the Spirit. How blessed is he who hears! To hear is to have heavenly instruction, wisdom, guidance, and comfort.

And where does hearing come from? From the Word of God, the living and abiding Word of God, which is Christ. All men are deaf to the Word of God. But when in love God addresses men, women, and children in the very depths of their hearts, calls them out of darkness, and gives them ears to hear, they hear, and hearing they believe. Believing, they understand what the Spirit is saying.

The same Word of God comes by the gospel. Many have heard the word of the gospel. All through history God has spoken. The sound has gone out into all the earth. But hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. Not hearing they are not converted or healed. Not hearing they take no warning, pass on, and perish in their unbelief and other sins.

Whoever has an ear has that ear by God's sovereign work of grace. With that ear they are able to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Constantly, Christ speaks to the churches. Those who have an ear will take heed to Christ's instruction, rest on the firm foundation of the gospel, be alive to every danger and error, refuse to give heed to seducing spirits and false doctrines, try every spirit whether it be of God, listen to Christ's warnings and callings, suffer every reproach, engage in every battle, and endure every opposition, constantly directed by the Lord.

For the Spirit calls the churches constantly in the midst of a wicked and perverse world to be faithful to Christ and to his word alone.

"He that hath an ear, let him hear!"

—NJL