

The background features a stylized orange illustration. A hand is shown holding a sword diagonally across the frame. Below the hand, a shield is depicted with several circular patterns on its surface. The overall design is minimalist and symbolic, representing the magazine's title.

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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TROUBLE

*The Lord is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble;
and he knoweth them that trust in him. — Nahum 1:7*

Trouble presses on the inhabitants of the earth. Trouble lays hold on the hearts, minds, and souls of men and shakes them to the depths of their beings. Trouble shocks and astonishes. In its wake come fear and anxiety. The world is full of trouble. Trouble is what the fall of Adam and Eve into sin brought on the world.

The day of trouble.

It may be a day, a week, a month, or a year. The day of trouble is a period of time wholly characterized by trouble. In that day of trouble, there is nothing but trouble all around. Everywhere one looks there is trouble. There appears to be no way out of that trouble. The events of that day fill the souls of men with anguish.

Historically, the day of trouble was the day of God's vengeance against Nineveh, the chief city of the Assyrian Empire and the seat of the world power of that day. Assyria was vile in itself because of its sins. Assyria also afflicted and persecuted the church of God. Assyria had violently and cruelly cut down and uprooted the apostate church of the nation of Israel. In doing that, it is true, Assyria was merely an ax and a spade in the hand of Jehovah, who was punishing Israel for her impenitent idolatry, unbelief, and other sins. Yet Assyria afflicted and persecuted in pride. Assyria vaunted itself against God. Assyria proudly swept down from Israel to Judah like a wolf on a sheepfold. That bitter and hasty nation of Assyria haughtily marched up to the gates of Jerusalem and defied the God of Judah. The angel of Jehovah went out of Jerusalem and slew 185,000 Assyrians in one night. Still, that antichristian kingdom lifted itself up against God and provoked him to anger and jealousy.

So the day of trouble came on the world. It was the day of the anger and fierce wrath of God.

God is holy. In his holiness he is absolutely consecrated to the glory of his name as the only good God. God in his holiness maintains the holiness of his name over against man, who defies him. God is God, and he maintains himself as God. He marches to do battle with his enemies, and he arrays all his forces against Assyria to bring down and to destroy.

The coming of God is evident in the creation. His way is in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. When he comes in vengeance, he

affects the whole creation. It is a day of trouble for the whole creation. The sea is rebuked and dries up. Jehovah dries up the rivers and makes desolate the richest places of the earth, such as Bashan and Carmel. When he marches, the mountains quake, the hills melt, the earth and all that dwell therein are burned. When he comes against Assyria, the smoke and dust of Assyria's ruins drift on the wind. The tremors of its fall ripple across a wide swath of the earth. The shouts and cries of its distressed inhabitants are heard in the distance. When God brings down a nation in his anger, there are widespread repercussions all around the scene of destruction.

And the question must be asked: who can abide the fierceness of his anger? Can you? Can I? Can anyone in the world? None can stand before the indignation of God. None can stand in the face of his wrath in the day of trouble.

That day is every day for the wicked. That day is every day since the fall of Adam into sin. God is angry with the wicked every day. So the wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest. He blows on them, and they have no peace. That certainly must be said of our age. What terrible troubles and calamities Jehovah brings. More are to come.

The Lord also punctuates time and history with notable days of trouble—times of widespread calamity for all the inhabitants of the earth. These days of trouble may seem as a passing moment, a few hours, a day, a few weeks, or months. Then the trouble seems to pass, but another trouble will surely come to take its place. And all these times of trouble point, as so many signs, to the great and dreadful day of the Lord—the final, worldwide day of trouble when Jehovah will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land, and all nations.

In a world of trouble lives God's church, his elect, whom he loves. The calamity that comes on the world in God's fierce anger invariably affects the church. She is yet flesh and blood. She has yet her life on this side of the grave. She is deeply affected in the day of trouble. Only the church is really so deeply and profoundly moved by the works of Jehovah in the day of trouble. Only she is touched in the depths of her heart, mind, and soul by these troubles. Only she sees the hand of God behind it all and beholds in it all the coming of God. And she

must go through all the troubles of God's judgments on the world. The question can creep into her mind and press itself on her heart: will the Lord in wrath remember mercy?

A stronghold in the day of trouble.

A stronghold is an impregnable fortress. It is a great defensive power to protect. Behind its stout defenses, everyone inside the stronghold has refuge and safety during the time of trouble. The trouble that rages outside cannot harm them, move them, or destroy them.

Jehovah is the stronghold.

The stronghold is not of man or by man, and it is not of this earth. The stronghold is of Jehovah. Still more, he does not merely provide a stronghold, but the stronghold is the immutable, omnipotent, sovereign, righteous, and gracious Jehovah God himself.

Because Jehovah is the stronghold, it is impregnable. Who can overcome him? Who can destroy those whom he has determined to save?

Because Jehovah is the stronghold, it is unchangeable. He is the I AM THAT I AM. He never changes in his being, in his perfections, or in his promise to his people. Always, in every trouble, Jehovah is the same: a stronghold in the day of trouble.

Jehovah is good. Jehovah is a stronghold in his goodness.

Jehovah's goodness is his absolute ethical perfection. He is good in his being and in everything he does. He alone is good. He is absolutely good. He reveals his goodness in all his dealings with men.

In his goodness Jehovah God never acquits the wicked. He is good, and therefore he has a divine abhorrence of all that is evil. He is good, so he is determined to destroy all that is wicked. He is good, so he never calls the evil good and the good evil. He is good, so he hates all the workers of iniquity.

Because Jehovah is good, there is a day of trouble. As the good God in his holiness, he comes against the ungodly world. Because Jehovah is good, there is only trouble for the world. There is never some favor and some wrath on the ungodly world. Jehovah is good, so there is only wrath against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness. The only day there can ever be for the rebellious

world is a day of trouble. Every day is leading to the great day of the revelation of the righteous judgment of God, and that day will pass into the eternal day of trouble for the ungodly.

Because he is good, Jehovah is a stronghold in the day of trouble. In his goodness Jehovah loves the righteous and blesses them. He is ever mindful of his people. He forgives their sins. He imputes to them righteousness by faith. Freed from guilt—guilt by which they should perish with the world—and declared righteous for Christ's sake, they are worthy of salvation. In his goodness he becomes to them a stronghold in the day of trouble. He does not take them out of the trouble. The trouble will

rage all around that fortress. But he takes them into the stronghold and preserves them in the trouble.

And because the stronghold is Jehovah and he is good, such is his preservation of his saints that all troubles are for their salvation. All the troubles that surround them, that rage in the world about them, and that they experience in the world serve for their eternal profit. In the midst of all the trouble, Jehovah is good to them, only good, always good; and he causes that trouble to work for their salvation.

A stronghold to those who trust in him.

Trust is faith. Faith is confidence that God is their God. By faith they are absolutely sure that Jehovah is in control of the trouble. By faith they know that Jehovah will keep them safe in the trouble and that it cannot destroy their souls. By faith they know that Jehovah will turn the trouble to their salvation. They know the trouble must come. Their confidence is not that Jehovah will not send trouble. They know that he is good and that he will pour out trouble—nothing but trouble—on the world. They know that they are in the world and that they will go through the trouble too. They know that in the day of trouble Jehovah is a stronghold to them. They know that they are in the stronghold because they know that they belong to Jesus Christ, the revelation of Jehovah, as a stronghold.

What is the basis of their confidence in Jehovah? They know that Jehovah knows everyone who trusts in him. To know is to love. Jehovah loves all those who trust in him. Jehovah is good. Jehovah does not love

A stronghold is an impregnable fortress. It is a great defensive power to protect. Behind its stout defenses everyone inside the stronghold has refuge and safety during the time of trouble. The trouble that rages outside cannot harm them, move them, or destroy them. Jehovah is the stronghold.

everyone. He surely did not love the Assyrians, whom he came to destroy. He did not love apostate Israel and Judah. He came with wrath to avenge his cause against them with great trouble. He is a stronghold to those who trust in him because he loves them. He loves them with an eternal love. His love is ever fervent, seeks them, and desires their good. He appointed them to salvation in his love.

That Jehovah knows those who trust in him does not mean that he loves in response to their trust in him. And it does not mean that he loves everyone, desires to save everyone, opens the doors of his stronghold to everyone who reciprocates his love by trusting in him, and then he loves even more those who trust in him, and he destroys those who do not love him.

It is not that we first loved him, but that he first loved us. Jehovah's love is first. Jehovah's love is creative. The confidence of those who trust in Jehovah is the result and work of his love. Jehovah's love draws to himself those whom he loves. They trust in him because they know that he loves them. Where there is no assurance of love, there can be no confidence and trust. If I do not know that someone loves me, I will not trust him. Those who trust in Jehovah know that he loves them, and they run to him, they draw near to him, and they repose all their confidence in him as a stronghold in the day of trouble.

How do they know that Jehovah loves them? They know Jehovah as the God of the cross of Christ. The cross of Christ is the commendation of the love of God. At the cross, God himself in the person of the Son and in human flesh underwent the most terrible day of trouble that the

world has ever seen. It was a day of fury, vengeance, and fierce wrath for his adversaries and enemies. God's people, whom he loves, were his enemies! They hated God in the darkness of their minds and with the enmity of their hearts. In order to save them, he took all their sins, heaped them on his Son, and poured out unspeakable trouble on him. Wave after wave of many eternities of trouble that his people deserved all concentrated on Christ and were all condensed into a few awful hours of trouble. What a day of trouble!

A day of salvation!

There we see the love of God. God loved his enemies, who, although his elect people, were guilty by nature. In his goodness he will not acquit the guilty. In order to acquit his elect people and deliver them from trouble, he took all their trouble on himself in Christ. That is how much God loves them. He spared not himself and his own Son immense trouble, so that his people might not perish with the world in the day of trouble. He forgives their sins. He imputes to them righteousness. He draws them to himself as the stronghold in the day of trouble. As the stronghold, he ever keeps them safe.

So those who trust in him know the love of God. In the day of trouble, they run to him. In him they are perfectly safe now and forever.

A mighty fortress is our God, a stronghold in the day of trouble. In him we are safe until the day of trouble is past and the light dawns on a new creation of perfection without any trouble.

—NJL

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OUR PRESENT CONTROVERSY (3)

The present controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) has been whether a grace principle or a works principle governs the believer's conscious experience of salvation. The controversy has unfolded in two distinct phases: the lead-up to Synod 2018 and the aftermath of Synod 2018. The turning point in the controversy was Synod 2018 because that synod decisively addressed and decided the doctrinal issue in the controversy.

The first phase of the controversy was the lead-up to Synod 2018. In the lead-up to Synod 2018, the PRC taught, tolerated, and defended the heresy of the works principle over against the grace principle of salvation. At Synod 2018 Jehovah graciously delivered the PRC from her heresy. By settled and binding decision, Synod 2018 upheld the grace principle over against the works principle of salvation.

The second phase of the controversy is the aftermath of Synod 2018. The controversy in this phase is over the meaning and significance of Synod 2018. In this phase the question is whether the controversy was ever really between the truth and the lie, or whether the controversy was merely a case of misstatements and misunderstandings. This second phase of the controversy is where we find ourselves today, with some maintaining that the controversy was between the lie and the truth and others maintaining that the controversy was only a matter of confusion that had to be clarified.

Here follows a brief sketch of these two phases of the controversy. The point of this sketch is not to follow the chronological events of each phase, as valuable as that would be. Rather, the point is to highlight the main topics and issues in each phase.

Phase One: The Lead-up to Synod 2018

First, the lead-up to Synod 2018 was entirely doctrinal. The issue—the only issue—was doctrine. The issue was not persons and personalities, though there were many persons and personalities involved: a minister, protestants and appellants, a consistory, a neighboring consistory, a special committee of classis, many delegates to several meetings of Classis East, and many delegates to synod. The fact that the issue was not persons and personalities means that the issue may not be decided based on respect of persons. Whether one likes a minister or dislikes him, or has regard for a particular consistory, or likes a protes-

tant or not, makes no difference for the issue. The issue was not persons but doctrine.

Second, the doctrinal issue in the lead-up to Synod 2018 was the truth against the lie. The issue was the truth of the grace principle of salvation against the lie of the works principle of salvation applied to the believer's experience of covenant fellowship. The issue was not a matter of mere semantics and language, but the issue was the truth against the lie. It is not the case that the controversy was over a few poorly chosen words or over some unclear formulations. It is not the case that the controversy was due to excessive pickiness or some hypercritical assessments of sermons. It is not the case that everyone was really saying the same thing all along, just in different ways. The issue was not semantics but the sharp antithesis between the truth and the lie. As synod declared, there was doctrinal error, and “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).

Third, in the lead-up to Synod 2018, the lie was widespread and deeply entrenched in the PRC. The error was not limited to a handful of statements in a few isolated sermons by an individual minister. It is true that an individual minister was often in the thick of the controversy because of his repeated preaching of the lie. Because of the minister's prominence in the controversy, some might assume that he was the only one who erred, and that the rest of the PRC were free from the error. This is not the case. The lie was explicitly taught by many, including the individual minister, the consistory that oversaw the minister, the four ministers of Classis East who wrote a doctrinal statement that taught the same error, and Classis East, which approved the work of the four ministers and thus made the doctrinal statement its own.

In addition to those who explicitly taught the doctrinal error, there were many who defended the doctrinal error or failed to root out the doctrinal error when it appeared. This includes every meeting of Classis East in the lead-up to Synod 2018. There were also those who, as part of their defense of the error, charged a man who stood for the truth with being guilty of error. This includes the consistory that oversaw the man, a neighboring consistory, Classis East, and a professor in the seminary.

You do not have to take my word for it that the error was widespread. Synod 2018's judgment was that

Classis failed to deal with doctrinal error contained in sermons [the appellant] protested to [a consistory]. 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)

Classis should have advised [a consistory] to reject the Doctrinal Statement because it contains ambiguous statements and the similar doctrinal error of giving to our good works a place and function out of harmony with the Reformed confessions. (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 79–80)

Not merely an individual, not even merely an entire consistory, but *classis* failed to deal with doctrinal error! Not only a sermon or two or twenty, but *the doctrinal statement* of classis contained doctrinal error! The doctrinal error of the works principle was widespread in the PRC.

The point of this is not to sling mud. Names of individuals and consistories are deliberately omitted in these editorials, even though the names are matters of public record in the minutes of the ecclesiastical assemblies. Rather, the point is to acknowledge how widespread and deeply entrenched the error was in the PRC so that we are aware of how dangerous and how threatening this lie is to us. Among us, there may be a tendency to assume that the PRC are immune to false doctrine. It is a shock and an offense to us if someone says that we harbored the lie and even taught the lie. Especially this lie! The lie of the works principle of salvation! We think that if there is one thing the PRC have straight, it is God's sovereign grace in salvation. We think that if there is one error that the PRC do not and cannot commit, it is the error of the works principle, which is the error of Arminianism and conditionalism. The lead-up to Synod 2018 explodes that thinking. The lead-up to Synod 2018 exposes the PRC not only as being capable of teaching the works principle, but also as being guilty of it! The importance of acknowledging how widespread the error was is that we as a denomination humble ourselves before God and confess and repent of our sin of giving works a place and function that is out of harmony with the Reformed confessions.

Fourth, the turning point in the controversy was Synod 2018. In a tremendous display of divine patience with his undeserving people, God graciously delivered the PRC from our error. God's gracious Spirit led the synod to stand for the gospel of Jesus Christ, the perfect work of Christ, the unconditional covenant, and justification by faith alone over against the "doctrinal error" that "compromised" these truths (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 70).

The importance of the decisions of Synod 2018 cannot be overstated. The doctrinal issue at Synod 2018—the

grace principle versus the works principle—was every bit as weighty as the doctrinal issue in 1924—particular grace versus common grace—and as the doctrinal issue in 1953—the unconditional covenant versus the conditional covenant. In fact, the doctrinal issue at Synod 2018 was in essence the same as the doctrinal issues in 1924 and 1953. Common, ineffectual, resistible, powerless grace is a species of the works principle of salvation. So is a conditional covenant dependent on the will of the baptized child. Particular, saving, efficacious grace and the unconditional covenant dependent on the will and work of God are both species of the grace principle of salvation. Such is the importance of the decisions of Synod 2018 that in the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches, these dates stand out as great epochs of Jehovah's preservation of the churches: 1924, 1953, and now 2018.

Phase Two: The Aftermath of Synod 2018

And yet the controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches continues to this day. These editorials deliberately speak of our *present* controversy. In the aftermath of Synod 2018, the controversy has become our *evaluation* of Synod 2018. The disagreement is now our *analysis* and *understanding* of the controversy. When the members of the PRC look back at the controversy that came to Synod 2018, what do they see? Do they see a great battle between the truth and the lie? Or do they see something less than that—perhaps merely some misstatements or some confusion that had to be clarified?

It has been the position of these editorials that the controversy in the PRC has indeed been the truth against the lie. One teaching in the controversy was the works principle applied to the believer's experience of salvation. This teaching was false doctrine, heresy, and an error out of hell. The other teaching in the controversy was the grace principle applied to the believer's experience of salvation. This teaching is true, heavenly, and divine.

It is exactly here that the PRC yet disagree. It is controversial among us to say that the controversy was between the truth and the lie, between true doctrine and false doctrine. This ongoing controversy can be demonstrated.

Here is one influential evaluation of the controversy immediately after Synod 2018:

Let this be clear. Anyone who, from this date on, concerning the minister, consistory, committee to assist the consistory, or Classis East, anyone, I say, who alleges that those individuals or ecclesiastical bodies taught heresy, or justification by faith and works, or Federal Vision, or a conditional covenant, is guilty of slander. Such a one must be rebuked. Slander against office-bearers, such serious slander, is the devil's tool to

divide the church of Jesus Christ. This is the sin of schism, a sin so serious that officebearers are deposed for it. And members excommunicated for it. (“Obedience and Covenant Fellowship,” *Standard Bearer* 94, no. 18 [July 2018]: 415)

Very recently, several Protestant Reformed consistories have written letters to their congregations with their warnings and charges against *Sword and Shield*. In some of these letters, the consistories deny that the controversy has to do with the truth and the lie. From one consistory in June 2020:

Although the magazine purports the development of the Reformed truth, statements made within the publication, rather than promoting the unity of believers in that truth, promote disunity and schism. This is evident when it describes the current controversy within the PRC as being “between the truth and the lie” (Editorial pg. 7).

From another consistory in July 2020:

We are also concerned that the magazine is stating that there is a controversy between a “works principle” and a “grace principle” doctrine. They contend that the controversy has “been between an error out of hell, and God’s own truth from heaven” (July 2020 issue). They state that the magazine’s desire is to engage in this doctrinal controversy. Our consistory does not believe there is a controversy that exists between these two principles in our churches. Our consistory believes that only the grace principle is preached in our churches and is part of our doctrine.

It is evident that as Protestant Reformed Churches we do not yet speak with one voice regarding this controversy. In the aftermath of Synod 2018, we disagree over the meaning of Synod 2018.

Synod 2018 said,

The doctrinal error is that the believer’s good works are given a place and function that is out of harmony with the Reformed confessions. (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 61)

Synod 2018 said,

The doctrinal error of the sermons then compromises the gospel of Jesus Christ, for when our good works are given a place and function they do not have, the perfect work of Christ is displaced. Necessarily then, the doctrines of the unconditional covenant (fellowship with God) and justification by faith alone are compromised by this error. (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 70)

But influential and official voices in our midst are saying that there is no false doctrine, no lie, and no works principle in our controversy.

This second phase of the controversy is very important for the PRC. In the aftermath of Synod 2018, the churches must live up to the decisions of Synod 2018, which includes calling the lie what it is: a compromise of the gospel and a displacement of the perfect work of Christ. That is, the churches must be able to see and say that the works principle of salvation was taught, tolerated, and defended in our midst, and that the works principle that we taught is a damnable heresy. Living up to the decisions of Synod 2018 is not merely for the sake of following a Church Order article, as important as that is; but living up to Synod 2018 is for the sake of the truth, and for the sake of the honor and glory of Christ, whose truth it is.

If the Protestant Reformed Churches cannot or will not recognize that our controversy has been between the truth and the lie, then the PRC will fall into the lie again and embrace it again. Of course we will! If a church cannot or will not identify the lie as the lie, how can that church repudiate it and banish it? If the church cannot or will not identify the truth as the truth in opposition to every lie, how can that church maintain that truth and glory in it? God’s own judgment upon a denomination that does not know the truth, especially as that truth is opposed to the lie, is destruction. “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me: seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children” (Hos. 4:6). I will also forget thy children! The generations of the Protestant Reformed Churches are at stake in this second phase of the controversy!

Where we go from here as churches is critical. Shall we say, “There was no lie”? Then we shall have more of it, and our generations shall perish. Then the doctrine on which our children will be reared shall be, “If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do.” Our doctrine shall be,

If a man with his household was to be saved and consciously enter into the kingdom, placing himself with his family under the rule of Christ as his Lord and Savior, he was called, he was required, to respond obediently to the call and command of the gospel—“Repent and believe, that thou mightest be saved with thy house.” (“What Must I Do...?” *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 1 [October 2018]: 7–8)

Our doctrine shall be that when Christ says,

“If any man will hear my voice,” He’s not establishing, of course, a condition, there are none, but he is talking about not the condition to establish a union but he is establishing a condition that

deals with communion. Not union, that's grace, it's all grace, only grace, but communion, fellowship. (Agenda for Classis East, May 2020, 121).

And no man will be allowed to call it the lie. Indeed, our generations to come shall be required to confess the lie as the truth.

Let us say instead, "There was a lie, and we hate it and repudiate it today with all our might." Let us say, "The truth of the grace principle is so precious that we shall not

tolerate even the slightest departure from it." And let us say, "God be merciful to us, the sinners."

This, then, is our present controversy. Can we come to agree on the doctrinal issue in the controversy? Can we come to agree on that doctrinal issue as decided by Synod 2018? If we cannot come to agree, then let us at least be crystal clear on where we disagree. In this way and through this discussion, our present controversy will be profitable for the Protestant Reformed Churches.

—AL

A UNIQUE SYNOD

The Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) met from June 8–12, 2020, to attend to the ecclesiastical business of the denomination. As of this writing, the *Acts of Synod* are not yet published, so any comments on specific decisions will have to wait. Nevertheless, there is one thing that calls for the attention of the PRC, and that is the very fact of synod's meeting at all. In this year, under these circumstances, the PRC are unique in holding their annual synod at the usual time. Many denominations, responding to coronavirus concerns and regulations, either canceled their annual synods altogether (the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America, for example), or postponed them to a later date (the United Reformed Churches, for example), or postponed them with a later date or cancellation to be determined (the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, for example). Unique among all these denominations, the PRC held their annual synod at Trinity Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan.

The synod itself was unique. In order to hold the synod at Trinity, the council requested a declaration from the Board of Trustees of the PRC that the annual meeting of synod was essential for the execution of the business of the denomination. The board complied with this request. In order to hold meetings safely, strict restrictions were placed upon attendance at the pre-synodical worship service and at the meetings of synod. At the meetings of synod, only delegates, advisors, appellants, and protestants were allowed to attend. In this way, the essential business of the churches was able to be carried out.

A few reflections on synod's decision to meet. First, synod's decision to meet was good. The Board of Trustees' declaration that synod is essential is not merely a formality for the sake of the state, but a good and true reminder to the entire denomination of just how important synod is. Weighty matters, including contact with other churches,

the mission work of the churches, the seminary, and protests and appeals, are treated for the good of the denomination. Trinity church, the Board of Trustees, and synod itself set a good example for the entire denomination in pressing forward with the work of the kingdom of heaven.

Second, allow me to suggest that there may have been ways to make synod's decision to meet even better. Synod has enjoyed a large and healthy gallery over the years, especially on matters that are controversial in the churches. Members of the churches in the office of believer profit from attending the meetings of synod and hearing the deliberations. Officebearers who are not delegates to synod profit from observing the matters treated in closed session. Through no fault of the host church or of synod, that opportunity was denied to the members of the churches this year. But could there have been a way to include the members of the churches? Perhaps synod could have convened in Indiana or Iowa or South Dakota, where restrictions on gatherings were much more relaxed than in Michigan at the time, and where a gallery would have been able to observe. Or, if there was not enough time to change the venue, perhaps the deliberations could have been livestreamed so that people could still observe the proceedings from home, including members who live far from Michigan but who have a keen interest in the synod. Who knows if we will face circumstances like this anytime soon, but it would be good for the churches at least to consider these other options for the future. The office of believer in the church would profit from some such arrangement, and I suppose that synod would also profit by seeing the great interest that the members have in synod.

Third, synod's ability to meet was a gift of our God. As we consider how unique a meeting it was, may we give all glory to him.

—AL

Previously in this space, I reported that the initial response to *Sword and Shield* had been overwhelmingly positive. There continues to be much positive response to the magazine, but since that report, a tide of negative response has also rolled in. Much of that negative response has been respectful and became the occasion, if not for agreement, then at least for brotherly dialogue. A few of the responses have been venomous, revealing that the serpent himself is also reading *Sword and Shield* and is vexed by it.

Regarding these negative responses, the editors and board can say with joy what the spiritual forebears of the Protestant Reformed Churches once said about their writings. We are pleased even with the negative reception of our writings, because, as our fathers said,

Under God's blessing we were privileged to concentrate the attention of many [on errors in our midst]. This is of great value in itself. Nothing is as discouraging for a preacher as a sleepy audience; nothing so disheartening as the failure of an instructor to gain and to keep the attention of his students; and surely there is nothing so deflating for a writer as his writings lying unread in the bookstore. This was not the case for us. People have given much attention, from whatever perspective, to what we wrote. Even though many did not immediately agree with us, we were very encouraged to draw the attention of almost the entire church on one point of her doctrine. (*The Rock Whence We Are Hewn*, 162)

It remains to be seen whether we will also be able to say with our spiritual forebears,

We are thankful that many of our people not only understood the central issues that must serve as the guiding principles for the development of this part of our Reformed truth, but also were convicted of the truth of them as we presented it. (*The Rock Whence We Are Hewn*, 162–3).

In other news regarding the magazine, the letters for publication continue to pour in. There are so many, in fact, that the board approved a special “Letters Edition” of *Sword and Shield* to be published September 15. The normal editions of *Sword and Shield* will continue to be published on the first of each month, with the “Letters Edition” being a bonus issue for all our readers that will

consist entirely of letters and replies. Those who were expecting to see their letters published in this September 1 issue of *Sword and Shield*, keep an eye on your mailboxes on or around September 15. And keep the letters coming! Both for and against! As editors, we find that this adds to the interest of the magazine, not to mention that it gives us an opportunity to develop these important doctrines further.

We are also thankful to report that the financial support for the magazine has been very generous—so generous that the board approved three more issues of *Sword and Shield* to be sent free of charge to our readers. Plan on receiving this issue (September 1), the “Letters Edition” (September 15), and the next regular issue (October) at no charge. Thank you for your generous gifts.

This doesn't mean that one has to wait until the freebies run out in order to subscribe! Your subscription payment of \$24 US or \$36 international will be applied to a year's subscription beginning with the November issue. Visit the Reformed Believers Publishing website at reformedbelieverspub.org for subscription details.

Finally, plans are coming together for the first annual meeting of Reformed Believers Publishing. Here are some details to whet your appetite.

Date: October 15, 2020 (Thursday)

Speaker: Rev. Andy Lanning

Theme: “A Believer's Paper: The Freedom of *Sword and Shield*”

Although I'm sure no one could ever forget the first issue of *Sword and Shield*, here is a little refresher just in case. The editorial in that issue maintained that *Sword and Shield* has the right to comment on decisions of the PRC's ecclesiastical assemblies. The editorial also maintained that *Sword and Shield* has the right to condemn false doctrines, attitudes, or practices within the PRC. Many inferred that the editorial was also maintaining the right to condemn decisions of the ecclesiastical assemblies. Those two claims, and especially that inference, created some stir among the readership. The annual meeting will be a good opportunity to explain these claims—and that inference—and to insist on them. Make sure to mark October 15 on your calendar.

Enjoy this issue of *Sword and Shield*. May God speed the truths written herein to your hearts, and the next issue into your hands.

—AL

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

THE ENMITY OF COVENANT GRACE

Adam and Eve, the friend-servants of God, revolted from their friend-sovereign. The wondrous, blessed freedom they had received with their creation in God's image they despised. His word of warning they ignored, refusing to distinguish and discern what their sovereign had distinguished and discerned for them. They turned from heeding and obeying that word. They turned to the word of another.

They turned to the word of God's enemy. The serpent spoke his own word. He spoke his questioning word, appealing to the woman's ability to declare the word with her own mouth. He then spoke a word of defiance. By that word he tempted her to take a middle position. He gave her the demonic choice: Whose word to choose? Whose word to believe? Whose word to follow? Whose word to act upon? The word of her creator and sovereign friend or the word of this stranger who already had defied the word of her sovereign? Whose word to heed? To heed the warning of her sovereign friend or to heed the perverse promise of this stranger, the promise that dared both to twist and to contradict the warning?

In order to understand the truth of the covenant better, we must pay some attention to the tempter. He is the reason and occasion for the revolt of these friend-servants from their friend-sovereign. He is the tempter who was not afraid to slander their friend-sovereign, to twist his good word and warning into an evil, restricting word of bondage. But a proper understanding of the covenant must go further. The devil was originally a servant of Adam and Eve's friend-sovereign, created holy and upright by God. God had created Satan in great glory and honor. In the hierarchy of the angelic world, he had a place of great authority and rule. But he was tempted by his own glory to aim higher, to take the throne that belonged to his creator. Therefore, Satan staged a shameful revolt in the glory of heaven. He gained to his cause a vast number of angels, who used the power they had received directly from their creator to overthrow him.

Their desperate aim they lost. The power that had created them they could not possibly break by all their creaturely power. The heavenly rebels were deposed from their glory. They were consigned to eternal damnation and immediately placed beyond the pale of recovery.

Two more points about Satan and his demonic host serve the truth of the covenant.

First, while having similar natures, all the angels were individually created. Satan is not the natural or federal head of his host. He is head by the will and choice of that host. However, the angels did not proceed from Satan but from God their creator. As individuals, their representation by a savior is strictly impossible.

Second, for all their heavenly glory, the angels never possessed the same significance as Adam and Eve. Though created of the earth, earthy (1 Cor. 15:47), the first parents of the human race were created in the image of God, and in that image they were created for fellowship with God. The question of Hebrews 1:14, "Are they [the angels] not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" has in mind a positive answer. Another point of weakness for the erroneous covenant of works doctrine, in addition to those mentioned in previous articles, is that it fails to do justice to this earthly superiority of our first parents to the heavenly host.

To understand the covenantal nature of the fall into sin, we must consider two relationships.

The first relationship is that between Adam and Eve and Jehovah. When Adam and Eve disobeyed the word of their sovereign friend, they committed treachery and perfidy. From the viewpoint of the covenantal relationship between servant and sovereign, their sin was sheer disobedience.

What gave their disobedience its truly heinous character was manifold. It was entirely willful. There was nothing in their natures that impelled them to sin. They were created in the image of God. There was no depravity in them, no corruption of their flesh. After the language of James 1:14–15, they had no lust to draw them away and entice them. They had no outward need that compelled them to sin. Of all the trees of the garden they could freely eat. No gnawing hunger compelled them to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The first mother of the human race gave evidence from her own mouth of her understanding of God's prohibition. It regarded that very tree, and the commandment indeed came from the mouth of God. Scripture tells us of the thoughts that went through her mind as

she considered the tree in light of Satan's temptation. Her considerations brought her mind into harmony with the temptation, so that out of her own heart and mind came the outward transgression of the commandment of her sovereign friend.

There is another aspect of their relationship with God that made the sin of Adam and Eve more heinous and vile. Jehovah was not merely their sovereign. He was also their friend. In and with their entire natures, created in the way and in the life of fellowship with their sovereign friend, they despised their friend and their blessed friendship with him. As their life was fellowship with him, so they truly turned from him to depart. No longer to walk near to him and with him, who was their fellowship in life, was their deadly departure. They broke their friendship and cast off their fellowship.

There is a second relationship to consider. In breaking their fellowship with their sovereign friend, who was their maker, they forged ties of a new friendship and fellowship. No longer heeding the word of Jehovah their God, they heeded the word of another. In the language of the Belgic Confession, man gave "ear to the words of the devil" (art. 14).

These two relationships were necessary. Satan's lie was that there need not be any relationships. Satan's lie was that Eve could think, will, and act as an independent and a free agent. She could independently think about the tree whose fruit her sovereign friend had forbidden her. She could independently decide what that tree and its fruit were and what they might or might not give her should she eat of the fruit of that tree. She could then independently reach out and take with her own hand and eat with her own mouth. There was God who had spoken. There was the serpent who had spoken. There was man to decide and to choose as an independent being.

All Satan's words were a lie. It was strictly impossible for the servant to be independent. While the devil held out to Eve the prospect of independence, that prospect was sheer deceit. His purpose the devil attained, to enslave the friend-servants of his bitter enemy to himself.

Giving ear to the words of the devil, the man and the woman created in the image of God adopted to themselves a new sovereign and friend, the serpent. They were still covenant creatures, thinking, willing, and acting according to the natures with which they had been created.

Having made the devil their friend and their ally, they made Jehovah, who was their creator and their life, their

enemy. Their friendship with Satan was their enmity with God. Such is the manner of the judgment expressed in James 4:4: "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God."

Exactly this manner of judgment is the threat attached to the warning word of God in Genesis 2:17: "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." Expressing the same is Psalm 73:27: "For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee."

The actions of Adam and Eve powerfully expressed that death. Immediately, they were filled with shame, a shame of their nakedness that they instantly and foolishly remedied by fashioning garments of leaves of the trees in the garden. No longer were their bodies the instruments of righteousness, righteousness that stands before the presence of God naked and unashamed. Instead, their bodies became the instruments of sin. Theirs were the hands that reached out to pick the fruit forbidden by their sovereign maker. Theirs were the mouths that ate in disobedience to God.

Their consciences were defiled. So far from becoming gods knowing good and evil, they could no longer face each other in their nakedness. They were ashamed.

If such is what they were before one another, what must they have been before God? If the fellow servants could not stand naked and unashamed before each other, how could they stand before the presence of their Lord God? What must the revolting enemies do before the presence of their sovereign former friend who had become their enemy?

The voice of the Lord God they heard walking in the garden in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8). This was the voice of their sovereign friend, the God who had made them after his image and likeness. This was the voice of their sovereign friend with whom they before had walked and talked, for whom they had lived, and whom they had been delighted to serve. The phrase "in the cool of the day" tells us that this was a regular occurrence, well known and understood by Adam and Eve. They also knew from experience that what they heard was the voice of their sovereign friend, presenting himself in the garden in the cool of the day to enjoy fellowship with his servant-friends.

But now the deathly enmity manifested itself in the complete change in direction of this pair. Bond and ties of loving fellowship and communion, formerly

Satan's lie was that Eve could think, will, and act as an independent and a free agent.

bringing Adam and Eve with delight into the presence of their sovereign creator, were wholly eradicated from their natures. Confidence became shame. Righteousness became sin. Friendship became enmity. The way of Adam and Eve was no longer toward the voice of the Lord God. Communion with God was no longer the way of their hearts and minds. It was not the way of their bodies. The horror of their death was that they must hide themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. Their sovereign friend became their sovereign enemy. With no weapons against their former friend, and unable to stand before him, their enmity made them flee and hide.

What a wonder of grace that Jehovah God did not change toward them! As his voice, walking in the garden in the cool of the day, had been the voice of the sovereign friend, so it remained the voice of the I AM. It remained the voice of the sovereign. It remained the voice of the friend. But it became the voice of the *gracious*, sovereign friend.

That same voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day was the voice that graciously pursued after the fallen dead. It was the voice that did not leave but pursued. It was the voice that did not condemn or destroy but sought and found. It was the voice that called out to Adam, "Where art thou?" Although that voice of the Lord God uncovered the sin, the nakedness, and the pathetic excuses of the man and his wife, still that voice did not condemn or destroy.

The voice of Jehovah God walking in the garden in the cool of the day was a voice and a word of covenantal salvation. It was a word that went to the heart of the awful, deathly, and hellish covenant that enslaved man to the serpent. That horrible, perverse friendship, by the sovereign word of Jehovah, was broken.

"I will put enmity."

The protevangel, the mother promise, was a covenantal word. It was a word of powerful, sovereign friendship. The friend Jehovah will be friend regardless of the actions of the friendship-breakers. These friendship-breakers had broken friendship in their diabolical alliance with their newfound friend, Jehovah's great enemy. But the sovereign Jehovah's friendship prevailed to put enmity instead of that friendship. His friendship could not ignore that evil alliance, but had powerfully to break it. His friendship had powerfully to break the alliance with a word of covenantal friendship.

Jehovah's promise of enmity was a word of friendship. His promise was a word spoken by the gracious,

sovereign friend to bring these new enemies back into friendship, the friendship of redemption and salvation. This word was from their gracious friend to make them know that he would forever be their God. Their friendship with his enemy had not made him cease from being their friend. His salvation was gracious; his friendship, unconditional. His promise was a word for them to take to heart and to keep there. It was a word for them to hear, to understand, and to believe. That word their gracious friend gave them to keep. That promise had to be their confidence in the newly begun warfare against their former friend, the serpent. By that word they had to know that they would have the complete and final victory. It had to be their confidence and the confidence of their seed after them, the seed of the covenant. They and their seed would suffer. They and their seed would have their heels bruised. But they and their seed would have the victory according to the promise of their sovereign, gracious friend. The seed of the woman shall bruise the head of the serpent and his seed.

This word of Jehovah's friendship was the gracious gift of enmity as the gospel of Jesus Christ, the seed of the woman

that would bruise the head of the serpent.

The question must be faced here about this mother promise of enmity: How could the enmity be brought about? How could the friendship between the serpent and the first parents of the human race be turned into enmity? The grace of God's promise is the friendship of Jehovah to do what he has spoken. He is the one who by himself will put enmity instead of this friendship. He will supply the seed of the woman, who will bruise the head of the serpent. How eloquently this is described in the language of the Belgic Confession in article 17:

We believe that our most gracious God, in His admirable wisdom and goodness, seeing that man had thus thrown himself into temporal and spiritual death, and made himself wholly miserable, was pleased to seek and comfort him when he trembling fled from His presence, promising him that He would give His Son, who should be made of a woman, to bruise the head of the serpent, and would make him happy.

The mother promise was the mother promise because it was the gracious promise of Christ alone. In his sovereign friendship Jehovah gave his Son by promise to Adam and Eve and their covenant seed. His Son, the seed of the woman, would satisfy the judgment of God on behalf of

The grace of God's promise is the friendship of Jehovah to do what he has spoken.

the elect. His Son would be the friend of God to stand where the created friends fell. His Son would be the friend to establish enmity by his word and Spirit, renewing and regenerating these friends of the serpent back into the friends of Jehovah.

The distinct power of the covenant word of promise is that by it and with it, Jehovah, the friend-sovereign, gave his Son to his revolting, treacherous, and perfidious enemies, a gift to make them into his friends again. With

the promise he gave them a righteousness to make them acceptable, the ground of everlasting friendship. With the word he gave them perfect salvation and deliverance to bless their troubled hearts with the abiding peace of their sovereign friend's peace. By his promise they were delivered by the promised seed of the woman. His word, "I will put enmity," was an effectual word of sovereign grace.

—MVW

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

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

UNHOLY ALLIANCES

I thought that the question whether the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) should join the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) was settled at Synod 2017. Yet in the May 15 issue of the *Standard Bearer*, we read that representatives of the United Reformed Churches (URC) encouraged the PRC to become a member of the council in order to witness against the federal vision. What makes me wonder if joining NAPARC is still a goal of the PRC is that there is no indication in the editorial that the PRC representatives told the URC representatives that Synod 2017 decided that the PRC would not become a member of the council. Is the PRCs' joining NAPARC still an open question?

The denomination does not need the forum of NAPARC to witness against the errors of the federal vision. Theologians in the PRC have written books and articles and given many speeches against the federal vision. That witness has focused on the need for Reformed churches to reckon with federal vision's root of conditional covenant theology. Given the near total rejection of that witness by Reformed churches and theologians, there is no great hope that giving the same witness at NAPARC will suddenly change hearts and minds. Indeed, some member denominations of NAPARC, the URC in particular, boast that they have already dealt with the federal vision. Must the members of the PRC believe that now these churches want to hear what the PRC have to say?

There is also the matter of grounding a decision to join the council in the opportunity to witness against

the federal vision. If the federal vision goes away, have the PRC then lost their reason for being a member of NAPARC? There must be a deeper reason than a passing theological controversy for joining an ecumenical organization.

To be clear, the issue is not *sending observers* to NAPARC, but *joining* the council. The two issues must be clearly separated. For years, the PRC have sent observers to the council's annual meetings. The problem is that sending observers has always been intertwined with the issue of becoming a member denomination, and apparently, it still is intertwined. Sending observers to NAPARC's annual meetings creates the impression among the member denominations that the PRC still may be interested in membership. Likely, as long as the PRC send observers, the denomination will face the matter of joining NAPARC from those who are not content with sending observers but want the PRC to become a member. The sad thing is that those within the denomination who are enthusiastic about joining the council have never written a reasoned or theological argument for why the PRC should join.

Such an argument is necessary. Joining NAPARC would necessarily entail official ties and official meetings with the member denominations. How would these meetings square with the PRC's synodical decisions to reject these same denominations because of doctrinal differences? NAPARC would be the forum to cooperate with member denominations based on a supposed unity as laid out in NAPARC's constitution. Joining would also commit the PRC to the principles and practices of

the council. Prominent theologians of member denominations have made clear that among these principles is tolerating doctrinal differences in the name of unity and cooperation. The question, then, is very simple: on what basis should the PRC join NAPARC?

I appreciate a recent blog by Henry Hoekstra for its attempts to provide such a basis.* He criticizes the stance of Reverend Lanning and me in *Sword and Shield* concerning meetings between the PRC and the URC and the question of whether the PRC should join NAPARC.

My concern is not his position on meetings between the two denominations. He does not understand the position that Reverend Lanning espoused in his July editorial, which Henry summarizes this way:

Rev. Lanning's thesis is that there should be no meeting between the two denominations because meeting with the goal of denominational unity is a false unity interwoven with a compromise of the truth on the part of the PRC.

This is not true. It is the calling of the PRC's contact committee to labor with other denominations to establish official ties by working through and resolving—not ignoring or stepping around—doctrinal differences. Regarding the URC, the position is that meetings between the two denominations must have the goal of official ties; the subject of discussions must be the doctrinal differences that separate them in order to resolve those differences. Such meetings have taken place in the past, and the conclusion has been that because of serious and irresolvable doctrinal differences between the denominations no ties are possible.

My focus is Henry's criticism that Reverend Lanning and I have an "isolationist theology" because we insist that joining NAPARC would be an unholy alliance. Henry insists that this isolationist theology is rooted in denial of the perspicuity of scripture and of the catholicity of the church. His conclusion is that the PRC should join NAPARC because the denomination has so much in common with the member denominations. He represents a line of thinking that is present not only outside the PRC but also within these churches, that it is isolationist for the denomination to stand aloof from the alliance of NAPARC and that such isolationism is bad, indeed, contrary to scripture.

Henry writes that such isolationism is denial of the perspicuity of scripture. He defines the perspicuity of scripture in the words of Herman Bavinck:

The truth, the knowledge of which is necessary to everyone for salvation...is nevertheless presented

throughout all Scripture in such a simple and intelligible form that a person concerned about the salvation of his or her soul can easily, by personal reading and study, learn to know the truth from Scripture without the assistance and guidance of the church and the priest.

Henry's conclusion is that

each believer and therefore, each church denomination has the right to go with their consciences and what they believe to be true of God's Word... Thus one man may say that scripture teaches this, and the other man says I believe scripture does not teach this, and they may still have unity in that they are baptized into one baptism, members of one body, and believe in the same Spirit of Christ.

For Henry, the perspicuity of scripture allows that "we are able to disagree on certain things, and quite frankly, this disagreement is good because it sharpens the church!"

The position he espouses is a form of postmodern philosophy that there is a truth for every individual and that my truth might differ from your truth, but we should not judge. His theology is the individualism and relativism of postmodernism applied to the church and ecumenical relationships. This kind of thinking—ignoring doctrinal differences, speaking only of sincerity of conviction, no matter how wrong the doctrine, all in the name of cooperation—is ecumenical postmodernism and it is widespread.

This ecumenical postmodernism has nothing to do with the perspicuity of scripture. He confuses the objective clarity of scripture and the certainty of the Spirit's guidance into all truth with the claim of every man or church to understand scripture and to teach the truth. He confuses the perspicuity of scripture with an individual's convictions. That the scriptures are clear does not mean that everyone clearly understands them. Because a man claims to preach the truth, does not mean that he preaches the truth. Because someone is convinced—and many are—that God offers salvation to everyone who hears the preaching of the gospel out of his sincere desire that all who hear be saved, does not make it so. The individual and his convictions are not the measure of truth.

The standard of truth according to which all men's convictions and beliefs must be judged is the word of God. While Henry argues that the word of God alone must judge the individual, he, in fact, denies that an

* See <https://churchcurmudgeon.blogspot.com/2020/07/unholy-alliances.html>. All quotations of Henry are from this blog.

individual can be judged by the word of God. Rather, each individual has his own truth, which everyone else must respect as the work of the Spirit. Henry attempts to limit this by saying, “There are things that a believer must confess about God and must believe.” Such a limit is arbitrary and without any basis. Who decides what a believer must believe? What is the standard of such a decision? Taken to its logical conclusion, this thinking ends up in pure relativism, which in the end is denial of any objective truth.

Henry does not reckon with the reality of the spirit of the lie, a spirit that convinces men of lies, and about which scripture speaks in 1 John 4:1: “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.” Henry would forbid us from doing what the Spirit says we must do, which is to try every doctrine by the word of God and to determine whether that doctrine proceeds from the Spirit of God or from the spirit of the lie. Henry would have all the churches speaking different things about what the truth is, yet all agreeing to disagree in the name of toleration, cooperation, and coexistence. But the Spirit says constantly to the church, “Be of one mind, speak the same thing, and try the spirits.”

More seriously, Henry divides the Spirit. The Spirit of Christ is the one Spirit of one truth, and he does not lead one individual to believe one thing and another individual to believe an entirely different and contradictory thing about the truth of God’s word, as though the Spirit is a relativist.

His argument minimizes the seriousness of the errors that separate the PRC from other Reformed denominations, as though the errors are minor matters from a past theological age—mere trifles. He also minimizes the theological cost suffered by many of his forebears to maintain the truth. The issues that separate the PRC from other Reformed denominations involve the nature of divine grace and salvation and ultimately the very nature of God. These are the weightiest of matters, and there cannot be unity in disagreement on these things. Henry seems to have forgotten what the word of God says about unity: “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3). That is God’s rhetorical question. The answer is no, especially when disagreement involves the very truth of the gospel of saving grace.

The truth—objective, clear, and understandable—is

Regardless of how he grounds the charge of isolationism, he lays his finger on the main gripe of those who are enthusiastic for the PRC to join the council.

the only basis for unity. Unity in the truth is the only true unity. Seeking and keeping unity in the truth is one of the church’s highest callings. She does that especially in her denominational unity, wherein all speak the same thing. Belonging to the calling to keep the unity of the Spirit (truth) is maintaining separation from the lie, which threatens that precious unity, and speaking the truth against the lie. Henry’s plea for unity based on respecting everyone’s different truth is exactly the kind of plea for toleration—an unrighteous toleration—that comes in one form or another with every plea for false unity.

He also contends that refusing to join NAPARC denies the catholicity of the church, which he defines in the terms of Herman Bavinck: “The true Catholic Church embraces all believers on earth at all times and places, and outside it, there is no salvation.” Henry gives

his own understanding when he writes, “The multi-protestant denominational world is one together in the same baptism in Jesus Christ.”

Henry does not understand that the catholicity of the church is not synonymous with all baptized persons and all denominations—even if restricted to Reformed denominations—that exist in the world

today, as though all denominations and people have a secret unity because they are all united to Christ by the mere ceremony of baptism.

His understanding of the catholicity of the church in reality is an argument for the false notion of the pluriformity of the church, which teaches that each denomination is part of Christ; and although each denomination has its faults and errors, each denomination expresses some beauty of the body of Christ. The pluriformity of the church always goes hand in hand with false unity as the justification for it. Pluriformity ignores that one of the reasons for all the denominations in the world today is the presence and work of the lie. Pluriformity also ignores the reality of apostasy and the falling away of denominations because of the lie.

The catholicity of the church is an entirely different concept. It is a perfection of the elect body of Christ. Catholicity is believed now and will only be seen in its fullness in the day of Christ. Catholicity teaches that God draws his elect church from every tribe, tongue, nation, and class of people, from the beginning to the end of the world.

Confession of the catholicity of the church does not

allow us to overlook doctrinal differences in various denominations because we respect that they, whatever their faults, are one with us by baptism in Christ. I can recognize that I am one with every believer who believes the truth of the Reformed creeds and who is a member of another denomination and still criticize the doctrinal errors present in that denomination and maintain ecclesiastical distance from that denomination for the sake of the truth, without denying the catholicity of the church. Indeed, my love for the truth and desire that all come to the knowledge of the truth require that I do so.

I also address Henry's contention that rejecting membership in NAPARC is "isolationist theology." Regardless of how he grounds the charge of isolationism, he lays his finger on the main gripe of those who are enthusiastic for the PRC to join the council. In this connection, he speaks of those who have a "negative and low view [of the catholicity of the church] that cries out, 'Israel dwells in safety alone.'" I remind him that if crying out that Israel shall dwell in safety alone manifests a low and negative view of the catholicity of the church, the Spirit has a low and negative view because those are his words in Deuteronomy 33:28. The word "alone" in that verse means *in isolation*. For instance, the leper in Leviticus 13:46 dwelt alone, or in isolation. An isolationist theology is the theology of the Holy Spirit. He instructs Israel that in isolation is her safety and security. Israel is not to entangle herself in the affairs of the world by unholy alliances and world conformity. She is to live antithetically in the world as God's holy people. The same would hold true for the church. She dwells safely in isolation.

This is true for the PRC. Her safety is in refusing to entangle herself in the affairs of churches that have departed from the truth of the Reformed creeds and by virtue of their common-grace theology have entangled themselves with the world. Is she uninterested in what is going on in the Reformed church world? Does she

remain silent in the Reformed church world? Certainly not!

If the PRC would join NAPARC to avoid being isolationists and with grand visions of testifying more effectively in the broader Reformed church world, I maintain that the very opposite would be the result. Joining NAPARC would turn the PRC into silent, belly button-gazing introverts, because for fear of offending an ostensible ally she would be quiet on the very truths that give her a right to separate existence, that are to be her consuming interest in the Reformed church world and beyond, and about which she must speak loudly and boldly.

That is exactly scripture's warning in the history of Jehoshaphat's ecclesiastically devastating false ecumenism. He foolishly ignored God's word about isolation and for the sake of a common enemy boasted that his horses, chariots, and God were the same as Ahab's and then supinely sat on his throne with Ahab in the gate—offering only the most tepid objection—while the wicked son of Omri savaged God's prophet. Bad alliances lead to the silencing of the truth, even if the one engaging in the alliance is as godly a man as Jehoshaphat was. Bad alliances lead to the same kind of devastation in the church as Jehoshaphat's alliance led to in Judah: bringing the seed royal to within a hair's breadth of destruction. The churches must stand alone in the world and be convinced that their doctrine is the truth of the word of God and that their unity with any denomination must be on the basis of real unity in that truth.

At the close of his blog, Henry asks, "Is then...membership in NAPARC an unholy alliance?" My answer is yes. Joining NAPARC is a confession of unity with the other member denominations, as the council's constitution makes clear. Joining would be an unholy alliance because two would be united who do not agree on the most serious of doctrinal issues.

—NJL

THE GREATEST KING

The book of Esther opens in the days of the great Persian king, Ahasuerus. “Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus” (1:1). Ahasuerus is prominent in the book of Esther. God himself repeatedly calls our attention to him, referring to him in this book twenty-nine times by his name, Ahasuerus, and 196 times by his title, king. In a relatively brief book of only ten chapters, 225 references make Ahasuerus prominent in the book. Compare that to a grand total of zero references to God by name or title in the book of Esther, and Ahasuerus stands out, indeed.

In addition to the many references to Ahasuerus, God also provides abundant detail about the power of Ahasuerus and the grandeur of his kingdom. We are told at length of “the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty” (1:4). Nowhere else in the Bible are we given such detail about the earthly pomp and splendor of a mighty ruler—not Pharaoh in Egypt, not Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, not even Caesar Augustus in Rome. But here in the book of Esther, we are taken right into Ahasuerus’ court to sit at a royal feast with all the assembled nobility of Persia, to see the brilliant colors of the tapestries hung on the pillars, to stand upon the cool marble pavement in delicious contrast to the hot Persian air, and to drink wine while reclining upon gold and silver beds in the great king’s garden. Ahasuerus’ standard of luxury was the marvel of the ancient world, and the word of God takes us on a tour of Ahasuerus’ splendor. Truly, he was a great king.

God’s purpose in calling our attention to Ahasuerus is not to exalt Ahasuerus. Rather, by emphasizing the greatness of this earthly king, God teaches us his own surpassing greatness as the heavenly King. All the descriptions of Ahasuerus’ human glory and honor must be read in the light of God’s divine glory and honor. Ahasuerus and his kingdom may have been grand, and the details of his grandeur are impressive, but all of his glory is dingy next to the glory of Jehovah. All of Ahasuerus’ wealth is poverty, all of his power is weakness, and all of his honor is base in comparison with the great King of kings and Lord of lords.

The contrast between Jehovah and Ahasuerus comes to light when we apply that great principle of biblical interpretation: scripture interprets scripture. Just as that principle illuminates the theme of the book of Esther, which otherwise is elusive, so that principle illuminates

the greatness of Jehovah over against the greatness of Ahasuerus. In the light of all of scripture, every detail of Ahasuerus’ splendor reminds us of an even better detail of Jehovah’s far-surpassing splendor. This is true because the message of the Bible is the glory of God in Jesus Christ. That message is proclaimed in a verse like Romans 11:36, which could be considered one of the theme verses of the entire Bible: “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.” Whenever we encounter on the pages of scripture a great earthly ruler of the pagan nations, every detail of that ruler’s greatness proclaims the greater glory—indeed, the infinite glory—of the only great King, Jehovah, and his Son, Jesus Christ. Take Pharaoh, for instance, whose power was known from Africa to Asia. That great Pharaoh, and all the ancient wonders of his kingdom on the Nile, God raised up for the purpose of demonstrating that God is sovereign, that God’s will is absolute, and that God has the right and the power to harden the heart of that powerful king. “For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth” (Rom. 9:17). Or take Caesar Augustus, for instance, who was so great that yet today our month August is named after him. That great Caesar receives only a passing mention in Luke 2. “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed” (v. 1). Of all the great things that Caesar Augustus did, this alone receives a mention in God’s word, because even the great Augustus is nothing more than a footnote to the truly august King, Jesus Christ. So it is with Ahasuerus. In the light of all scripture, the details of Ahasuerus’ glory serve the exaltation of our eternal King, who alone is truly glorious.

Let us go back to the days of Ahasuerus, then, and look at this great king in the light of the rest of the Bible, that we may marvel at the surpassing greatness of our God.

Three Feasts

The events of the book of Esther begin in the year 483 BC, which was the third year of Ahasuerus’ reign. The book opens in the palace of Shushan. Shushan was a hot city. The sun was hot; the sands of the surrounding environs were hot; the air itself was hot. But the palace of

Shushan offered refreshing relief from the heat. A portico shaded a large garden from the sun, while cross breezes in the garden dried the sweat and cooled the skin. The palace of Shushan was a beautiful setting for leisurely feasts, and the book of Esther opens with three of them.

The first feast was a grand and lengthy affair for all the powerful nobles and princes of Persia and Media, which two kingdoms had been united under Ahasuerus' grandfather, Cyrus the Great. The feast lasted six full months, during which time Ahasuerus showed the nobles "the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty many days, even an hundred and fourscore days" (1:4). Very likely, this six-month feast was a council of war. At the time of the feast, Ahasuerus was planning an invasion of Greece, another mighty world power of the day. Ahasuerus was in the process of mustering one million soldiers, the largest army ever assembled to that point in history. Almost immediately after the six-month feast, Ahasuerus, his nobles, his princes, and his army would march and sail against Greece. The battles that they fought—Thermopylae, Salamis, Plataea—were among the most pivotal battles in the history of the world. The Persian invasion was eventually repelled by Sparta and the other Greek city-states, and Ahasuerus was forced to return home. Ahasuerus' six-month feast was likely the last stage of his preparation for war, during which he and his princes encouraged themselves that a kingdom so glorious and rich and honorable and majestic as the Persian kingdom would surely be victorious in the upcoming campaign.

The second feast took place immediately after the first. This feast lasted only seven days, but was no less lavish than the first. This second feast was for "all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small" (1:5). Apparently, this second feast was a kind of thank-you celebration for the citizens of Shushan, who would have been instrumental in hosting, entertaining, and serving all the princes and nobles from the vast Persian kingdom for the past six months. Now that the princes and nobles had left Shushan, and now that the busy work of hosting them was finished, it was time for the citizens of Shushan to relax and enjoy a feast of their own.

The third feast took place at the same time as the second and was a feast for the women of Shushan. While the men of Shushan feasted with Ahasuerus at the second

feast, the women feasted with Queen Vashti, Ahasuerus' wife, in another royal house in the city.

Ahasuerus' Glorious Kingdom

The word of God takes us on a tour of Persia and Shushan during these feasts. The details of the empire and the palace paint a picture of the power and the luxury that was Persia.

Ahasuerus reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces. These provinces were grouped into twenty satrapies, each ruled over by a powerful governor known as a satrap. Judea was one of the 127 provinces and was grouped into the satrapy named "Beyond the River" (Ezra 6:6). The Persian Empire was vast, encompassing peoples of many languages and cultures. Managing a kingdom with such diversity in such far-flung places was a tremendous feat, for which the ancient Persian Empire is still celebrated today.

Ahasuerus was attended by powerful servants. His nobles, his princes, and his servants represented "the power of Persia and Media" (1:3). When Ahasuerus marched to war with the assembled power of his kingdom, cities and nations trembled before him. Even though the Greeks were eventually vic-

torious over Persia, Greek historians would later describe the famed and feared Persian Immortals. The Immortals were an elite force of ten thousand soldiers, no more, no less. They were known as the "Immortals" because their number never changed. Those who fell in battle were immediately replaced after the battle, so that no matter how many of them the enemy killed, there were always ten thousand to face again the next day.

Ahasuerus' palace was designed for pleasure and to impress. It was the perfect place to while away a languid Persian afternoon. The court of the garden was open to the air, but shaded from the sun by a covering supported by marble pillars. Fastened to the pillars were tapestries and banners and streamers of white, green, and blue—the national colors of ancient Persia. To see them billowing and trailing in the breeze would be pleasant and would stir patriotic fervor, especially as plans were laid for war against the enemy.

Ahasuerus' palace was bursting with beautiful artwork. The beds in the garden upon which the king's guests would recline for wining and dining were made of gold and silver. Each guest had a golden drinking goblet

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that was a unique work of art, so that no two drinking vessels were alike. Even the pavement was a work of art—marble in the rich and impressive colors of red, blue, white, and black.

The feasts of Ahasuerus were without equal among the nations. Persian rulers took their banqueting and their drinking seriously. Even in the book of Esther, the key events take place at feasts and banquets of wine. Persian rulers were known to seek the influence of alcohol as an aid when making important decisions. After six months at one feast and seven days at another, Ahasuerus and his court were soaked in wine. We are told that there was “royal wine in abundance, according to the state of the king” and “according to every man’s pleasure” (1:7–8).

Jehovah’s Surpassing Glory

After every detail of Ahasuerus’ greatness has been noted, after every shimmer of his glitter has gleamed, the child of God concludes, “How pathetic, how puny, how empty is the great Ahasuerus.” Ahasuerus! The greatest of his time, and perhaps the greatest of all time! But to faith, Ahasuerus is nothing. For faith has seen the true King! Faith beholds even now the King of kings and the Lord of lords and his Son, Jesus Christ! And faith knows, from the word of the King, what true grandeur and true glory look like.

Did Ahasuerus have a vast kingdom of 127 provinces that was the marvel of the ancient world? How puny! Behold the vast kingdom of him who made all lands: “The earth is the LORD’s, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods” (Ps. 24:1–2).

Did Ahasuerus rule people of many cultures and languages? How insignificant! Behold the people of our God: “After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands” (Rev. 7:9).

Did nations tremble before Ahasuerus? That is, right before they sent him scurrying home? How sad! Behold the honor given to our God: “He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth. They that dwell in the wilderness shall bow before him; and his enemies shall lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts. Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him” (Ps. 72:8–11).

Did Ahasuerus have mighty nobles and powerful servants? Was he surrounded by the Persian Immortals, every one of whom is dead today? How laughable! Behold the living and powerful servants of our King: “In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a

throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:1–3).

Did Ahasuerus have riches? How poor he was! Behold true wealth: “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8).

Did Ahasuerus have grand feasts? What pedestrian affairs! Behold the wedding banquet of the Lamb of God: “Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God” (Rev. 19:7–9).

Did Ahasuerus have colorful pennants in his garden? How dull! Behold the national colors of the kingdom of heaven: “And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald” (Rev. 4:3). Ahasuerus’ banners fluttered in the breeze, but our God paints the covenant banner of heaven across the very skies!

And so it is for every detail. A pavement of marble? Ha! Try streets of gold (Rev. 21:21). Beds of gold and silver? Paltry! Try thrones in heaven where the saints live and reign with Christ (Rev. 20:4). The largest army ever assembled? Bah! Try the Lord of hosts (Ps. 24:10). Royal wine in abundance? Sour! Try the Lord Jesus Christ, whom to eat and drink is life everlasting (John 6:53–58).

God may have told us much about Ahasuerus, but the glory is all God’s. In fact, before God ever makes the first of 225 mentions of Ahasuerus, God reveals that the glory is his own. How does the book open, after all? This way: “Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus...” (1:1). Now it came to pass! That is not the same as *Once upon a time*. That is not the same as *It just so happened*. No, that is the imprint of Jehovah. Now it came to pass...because Jehovah made it come to pass. Before Ahasuerus is Jehovah. Governing Ahasuerus is Jehovah. In the days of Ahasuerus, the events decreed by the Ancient of Days came to pass.

The book of Esther opens in the days of the great Persian king, Ahasuerus. But he is only the great Persian king, and for all of his 225 references, the book is not about him. The great King is Jehovah, who kept his promise, sent the Seed, and saved his church. Behold the true King of glory!

—AL

THE CRUX OF THE “FREE OFFER” IS THE CROSS! (3)

The Crux of the Free Offer of the Gospel. Sam Waldron. Greenbrier, AR: Free Grace Press, 2019.
143 pages, softcover, \$18.00.

Well-Meant Offer versus Limited Atonement

Noteworthy also is Waldron’s laborious effort to ward off the charge that the well-meant offer necessarily implies, and leads to, universal atonement. To this issue, he devotes an entire chapter. The Baptist theologian wants to maintain limited atonement. But his valorous efforts on behalf of a limited atonement, despite his confession of universal grace in the preaching, are futile. First, he has the weight of history against him. Again and again, theologians and churches have developed the theology of the offer into the doctrine of universal atonement, as Waldron himself acknowledges. Two well-known, fairly recent instances are the Christian Reformed Church, at the prompting of its theologian, Harold Dekker, and “Reformed Baptist” theologian, David Allen—Waldron’s colleague—in his recent book, *The Extent of the Atonement*. Both of these dramatic instances of the development of the well-meant offer into the doctrine of universal atonement are known to Waldron.

Second, the doctrine of the offer carries the seed of universal atonement in itself. If God loves all with a saving love and sincerely desires the salvation of all, He must have given Christ to die for all. For apart from the cross, there is no saving grace and can be no sincere offer of salvation, that is, an offer that extends to the hearer the grace of salvation in the desire of God for the salvation of that hearer. Without a cross for all, there can be no sincere desire of God for the salvation of all, nor a sincere offer to all. Here, Waldron is hoist with his own petard. His argument is that there can be no serious call, or command, or (rightly understood) offer, without a gracious, saving purpose of God in the command. But likewise, on Waldron’s reasoning, there can be no gracious, well-meant offer without a basis in universal atonement. A love that desires salvation without hypocrisy, as surely the love of God must be, must provide for this salvation in the only source and fountain, namely, the cross. Can an offer be sincere if there is no salvation provided for and available to the one to whom God makes the offer?

If God says to a reprobate, “I love you with a saving love in Jesus Christ and ardently desire your salvation,” as is the theology of Sam Waldron, Joel Beeke, Richard Phillips, R. Scott Clark and a host of other theologians of the well-meant offer, does not the reprobate perceive God to be saying, “I gave Jesus Christ, whom I am now offering to you sincerely, to the death of the cross for you?” And is this not in fact what the preacher of the well-meant offer is actually saying? Offering salvation, he is well-meaningly offering Christ Jesus, and well-meaningly offering Christ Jesus he is offering Christ Jesus crucified and risen. There is no other salvation than that of the cross. There is no other Christ Jesus to offer than Christ Jesus crucified.

The Jesus Christ of the well-meant offer of Sam Waldron is both a deceiver and a failure. He is a deceiver in that there is, in fact, no salvation in His cross for many to whom He well-meaningly offers salvation. It is with Him as it would be with me, were I lovingly to offer a million dollars to a wretch on Skid Row, when in fact my bank account was empty. The Jesus Christ of the free offer is a failure inasmuch as many whom He lovingly, sincerely desires to save perish nonetheless.

Why are so many enamored of this “Jesus”? this Arminian and Pelagian “Jesus”? this impotent, beggarly “Jesus”?

The crux of the free offer is the cross of Jesus Christ. Is it for all indiscriminately, or for some only? Is it the source of the saving grace of God for all without exception, or the source of grace for the elect, and the elect only? And is it availing, not only in its accomplishment of redemption when Jesus died, but also today when it is preached? Or, is it inefficacious when it is preached, failing to save multitudes to whom it comes in the saving grace of God towards them? Genuine Calvinism confesses that the purpose of God with the preaching of the cross is the salvation of the elect, and the elect only, and that it is the will of God, the *only* will of God, “by the blood of the cross” “effectually [to] redeem...all

those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to Him by the Father” (Canons of Dordt 2.8).

Waldron and his universal grace allies would respond that Christ did indeed die, two thousand years ago, for the elect, but that He ought to be preached today as crucified for all who hear the gospel. If God is proclaimed as loving all with a saving love for all, the cross must be preached as a cross for all, because God’s saving love is realized and revealed in the cross of Christ. In Waldron’s theology, however confused, the former truth is the decretal view of the cross, whereas the latter is the divine will of command. But the apostle proclaimed the cross to the saints at Ephesus and to the church down the ages as a cross for the elect church and for the elect church alone: “Christ loved the *church*, and gave himself for *it* [the elect church]” (Eph. 5:6). In the language of Waldron’s confused theology, Ephesians 5 teaches that the love of Christ and the cross are particular, not as the message of the will of the decree and of the secret will of God, but as the message of the will of precept and of the revealed will of God.

After Waldron has done his very best to reconcile his “Free Offer” with limited, or particular, atonement (something impossible to be done, as Waldron himself is forced to acknowledge), he throws up his hands in despair at accomplishing this impossibility. He does this by the hoary, familiar tactic of the advocates of the well-meant offer: he appeals to “mystery.” “[I] want to admit that there are mysteries involved in the relation of the free offer and particular redemption I do not fully understand” (129). What Waldron means by “mystery” is sheer contradiction that mocks both the believing mind and the harmonious revelation of the gospel in Scripture. What Scripture and the historic Reformed faith mean by “mystery” is essentially different: a truth that is unknown and unknowable to the natural mind of man, but that God has revealed by His Word and Spirit to His church. This revelation is not contradictory, and therefore unknowable, nonsense, as is Waldron’s theology of limited atonement (the gracious will of God for the salvation of some only) and of the well-meant offer (the gracious will of God for the salvation of all humans without exception). Appeal to “mystery” by the advocates of the well-meant offer

at the point of the failure of the attempt to harmonize the offer with the particularism of the biblical gospel is both the admission of the defeat of the effort to harmonize and the warning that the free offer is the enemy of particular, sovereign grace in the body of Reformed theology, that is, in the confession of the gospel by the advocates of the free offer.

In short, the Bible does not proclaim a revealed message of salvation—a saving grace of God for everyone—that contradicts the eternal decree of election.

As for the text which Waldron makes the foundation of his defense of the well-meant offer, and with which he begins his book, John 5:34, it proves far too much, if it be explained as the expression of the well-meant offer. The text has Jesus saying to His Jewish enemies, “But I receive

not testimony from man: but these things I say, that ye might be saved.” The explanation of Waldron is that Jesus purposed, intended, desired, came into the world to achieve, and worked at the salvation of every one of the Jews to whom He spoke, indeed of every Jew of the Jewish nation at that time, if not of all time. Because Jesus came to do the will of the Father who sent him (v. 30), if it is the will of Jesus to save all the Jews, head for head, this is also the will of the Father, that is, the will of election. And, if

The crux of the free offer is the cross of Jesus Christ. Is it for all indiscriminately, or for some only? Is it the source of the saving grace of God for all without exception, or the source of grace for the elect, and the elect only?

Sam Waldron’s explanation of John 5:34 is right, this was the will of the Father in sending Jesus into the world in the incarnation, as well as the will of the Father in all the ministry of Jesus, including His redemptive death, that is, universal atonement.

But, according to Waldron, the will of Jesus and the will of the Father in sending Jesus failed, an astounding admission and a blasphemous assertion. Jesus did not accomplish the salvation of many of the Jews. The reason was that the wicked will of many of the Jews frustrated the saving will of Jesus and of God His Father. Necessarily, then, the reason for the salvation of those Jews who believed was their own will, by which they distinguished themselves from their unwilling compatriots. This blatant heresy, Waldron gladly embraces, promulgates, and defends. Denial of this teaching of Sam Waldron brands one as a hyper-Calvinist!

No doctrinal error is too much in nominally Calvinistic circles today if only it serves to defend and advance the precious teaching of the well-meant offer! To this

impotent offer (which saves not one human more than God has elected), the entirety of the gospel of sovereign, particular grace and of the Canons of Dordt is gladly sacrificed.

The contrary testimony of the rest of John's gospel is not allowed to shed light on the passage in John 5. In John 10, Jesus states that He did not come to save all the Jews. He came to save those Jews who are His sheep, in that His Father gave them to Him. There were Jews who were not His sheep. Them, He did not come to save (vv. 1–30). In John 6:38–39, Jesus teaches that He came down from heaven to do the Father's will and that the will of His Father was that He save and lose nothing of all which the Father has given Him. In verse 44, He adds that the coming to Him which is salvation is not a matter of sinners accepting Waldron's free offer, but the Father's efficacious drawing sinners to Jesus. All of this, it should be noted, belongs to the *revealed* will of God.

When Jesus declares that all His ministry has as its purpose that “ye” might be saved, His reference is to the Jewish people who are God's Israel, not every Jew who stood in His presence that day, or every Jew who was alive at that time, or every Jew who ever lived or would live. As Paul would explain in Romans 9, they are not all Israel, who are of Israel (v. 6). According to Romans 2:28–29, “he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly... But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly.” As the same apostle will clarify in Galatians 3:29, even among the physical descendants of Abraham, the Jews, it is only “if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

In John 5:34, those whom Jesus willed to save, in accordance with the Father's will of election, were the genuine Jews, all those, and those only, who were the true Israel of God, according to election. And every one whom Jesus willed to save would be saved. In them, Israel would be saved, not by their own willing, but by the will of God in Jesus Christ.

Do Sam Waldron and his free offer allies really want a gospel of a failed Jesus and of self-saving Jews? A gospel of “so that ye might be saved,” but of many, if not a majority, of these “ye” who are lost nevertheless? Is this really to be the message now of the faith of the Canons of Dordt and of the Westminster Standards? And can it really be the case that vast numbers of confessing Calvinists will allow themselves to be frightened by the bogeyman of hyper-Calvinism into embracing this heretical doctrine?

Compromise of the Gospel of Grace

The well-meant offer of the gospel fatally compromises the gospel of salvation by grace. This is the fundamental objection of the Protestant Reformed Churches to the well-meant offer. Our objection is not fundamentally that the well-meant offer, in the context of the doctrines of limited atonement and of predestination, is logically incoherent, although this is an objection, because the truth of Holy Scripture is not an unknowable mass of contradictory confusion. But the well-meant offer compromises the gospel of salvation by the grace of God. It is—essentially, inherently, obviously, and incurably *is*—the denial of salvation by the grace of God. It is the affirmation of salvation by the will of the sinner. If God loves all alike with His saving love (and the well-meant offer expresses saving love) and if in the gospel He comes to all alike with the same saving intention (and the well-meant offer has God coming to all who hear the gospel with a saving intention, even desire), the salvation of some, in distinction from others, is not the work of the grace of God (*for He is gracious to all alike, with the grace of salvation* [!]). The only explanation, then, of the salvation of some, in distinction from others, is that they themselves distinguish themselves by accepting the offer. Salvation is no longer the work of the grace of God. It is the work of the will of the sinner.

If the Reformed church world agrees that denial of the well-meant offer is hyper-Calvinism, it may slander me as a hyper-Calvinist to its heart's content.

To be sure, the theology of the well-meant offer avoids the hyper-Calvinism that it presents as the main threat to Calvinism in our day. But the reason is that it is not *Calvinism*, the Calvinism of the Canons of Dordt and of the Westminster Standards, *at all*, whether hyper-, moderate, low, or hypo- or any other modifier. It is the heresy of Arminianism, cleverly disguised as the antidote to a hyper-Calvinism, which error becomes the bogeyman that is to scare Calvinists into the opposite error of universal, ineffectual grace—the well-meant offer of the gospel.

The theology of the well-meant offer—an ineffectual grace of God for all, implying that salvation depends upon the will of the sinner—may be approved by prominent theologians and even by a majority of Reformed churches, but it is disapproved by Holy Scripture: “[Salvation] is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy... Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth” (Rom. 9:16, 18).

—DJE



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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.—2 Corinthians 13:11

Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.—1 John 4:1

Beloved, do not believe every spirit. Do not believe every prophet who says, “Christ, Christ.” For many false prophets are gone out into the world.

Try the spirits.

What an awesome calling, what a high honor, what an astounding glory, what a sacred calling God has given his beloved people! Not only does the believer have the authority to try men, ministers, elders, consistories, classes, synods, ideas, sermons, books, and articles; but also he tries spirits. He puts spirits in the docket. He carefully scrutinizes and examines that spirit. The believer passes judgment upon the spirit, and according to that judgment, the spirit is judged. According to the believer’s judgment, whether that spirit is of God or is the spirit of a false prophet, he believes or condemns the spirit.

The believer tries the spirits by trying the prophets who come saying, “Christ, Christ.” So he tries ministers, elders, consistories, classes, synods, ideas, sermons, books, and articles. Subject to a spirit must every man be, and especially must every prophet be. If the Spirit is of God, the prophet will proclaim the pure, unadulterated gospel of sovereign and particular grace. The prophet will proclaim the gospel that Jesus is come in the flesh, that all salvation is accomplished, and that all the promises of God are yea and amen in him. Holy Spirit. Blessed prophet. Blessed people who hear. And trying that Spirit, the Spirit that is in God’s people will approve of and receive his own things.

But another spirit there is. He is not of God. He is the spirit of the lie, a servant of the prince of the powers of the air, the god of this world, the great liar and murderer from the beginning. He is the spirit of antichrist, who opposed Christ in his earthly ministry, and who opposes him even now by means of false prophets motivated by lying spirits in their mouths.

Beloved, try every spirit.

It is urgent to try the spirits, because false prophets are gone out into the world. The devil is able to transform his ministers into angels of light. With smooth words and honeyed speech they convince many. Boldly and shamelessly, they claim the name of God, Christ, and the truth for their own, all the while artfully insinuating the lie into the minds and hearts of the hearers.

And there are many—legion! Heresies multiply exceedingly. Heresies increase in their deceptiveness. So many false ideas expressed in so many words by so many prophets that the hearers are left in a state of bewilderment and confusion. Failing to try the spirits, many give heed to seducing spirits and perish.

But not you, beloved! Try the spirits whether they are of God. You have an unction from the Holy One and know all things. By the Spirit that is in you, you know the truth. The Spirit that is in you knows his own things. By the Spirit you have the authority to judge every spirit whether it is of God. By the Spirit you have the power to judge every spirit. By the Spirit you will try, you will expose, and you will not believe every spirit, but only the Spirit that is of God.

—NJL