



SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Letters Edition

*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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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak



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Welcome to the special “Letters Edition” of *Sword and Shield*. This special issue is due not only to the amount of correspondence that we have received for publication, but also to the importance of the matters that the correspondence addresses. Rather than trying to include these letters in the regular issues of *Sword and Shield* over the next several months, by which time some of the matters might be far removed from the minds of our readership, the board approved this special issue exclusively devoted to these letters. This special issue will not interrupt the regular issues of the magazine, but is an additional issue to the twelve regular issues. God willing, the October issue will still be in your mailbox on or around the first of the month.

On behalf of the Reformed Believers Publishing board and the other editors, a hearty thank you to all the correspondents. Whether you have written privately to the board or to the editors, or whether you have written for publication, as in this issue, we very much appreciate your interaction with *Sword and Shield*. We believe that the truths appearing on the pages of the magazine are of utmost importance, and it is encouraging to see such interest in what is being written. We also take this opportunity to invite our readers to continue to write to us. Likely, you will be giving voice to what some of your fellow believers are thinking, as is undoubtedly true of the letters printed here. The issues are worthy of the time it takes to write a letter and worthy of the readers’ study.

Also, a warm thank you to all the readers of *Sword and Shield*. The abundant correspondence, both in support of the articles and against them, indicates a wide readership. We are grateful to God for giving us an audience on such important doctrinal issues. We are also grateful for the time that you have given us in reading, even in those matters where you might disagree with us. Whether you wait by your mailbox the first of each month to drink in *Sword and Shield* or to spit at it, we are thankful for the attention you are giving these matters.

We are still working out all of the details of how to deal with letters submitted to *Sword and Shield*. The only strict policy so far is that letters for publication must be signed. At the request of a letter’s writer, we may withhold that writer’s name from publication. Nevertheless, the letters or emails must arrive to the editor with the writer’s name. Next, although this is not necessarily a strict policy, our practice is not to edit the letters for content, spelling, grammar, and the like, but to print them exactly as we receive them. Also, writers sometimes request that their letters be published in a specific issue of *Sword and Shield*. Often this is not possible due to the necessary lead time for printing and mailing. However, we are committed to printing our readers’ letters in the earliest possible issue of *Sword and Shield*. We are as eager to see your letters in print as you are.

With that, dear readers, read on. And write on!

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

—AL

To the Editor of the Sword and the Shield:

Thank you so much for the article about Pestilence which appeared in the second issue of your publication. It was both relevant and timely to much of what is going on in the church today. There is, however, a bit more to be said on this subject. It is time to re-evaluate not only the preaching of the Word, but also how the church is managing her normal, day-to-day activities with respect to the coronavirus. Although there is no question that we have to deal with the problem of this new virus, it is also true that we are no stranger to viruses and viral infection or transmission in general...there have always been viruses, and they have always been deadly to some. Reality is that people die of viruses every day. So, the question that has to be asked with respect to SARS CoV-2 or to the disease which comes from it, COVID 19, is: **DO WE BELIEVE OUR CONFESSIONS OR NOT?** It certainly seems to be the case that we have just let the world and the media literally control us and make us live constantly in a state of fear. This is true of individual persons, but of much greater concern, it is true of the church body.

Here is a challenge for every confessing believer: search through the sacred Scriptures and find how many times the Christian is instructed...yea, commanded... not to fear. How many times do the phrases “fear not” or “do not be afraid” appear in the Bible? If you are really going to count, you will need to carve out some time for this task because the number is high. In fact, 2 Timothy 1:7 tells us that God has not given us a spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. Really let those words sink into your soul. Meditate on them. **The Bible contrasts Fear with Sanity.** So why are we adopting this worldly idea that we should change the way we worship and fellowship with one another simply because the government or the media tell us that there is something of which we should be afraid? Even the world should know this virus is not to be feared. The CDC tells us that the death rate for COVID 19 is .26%...not of the population...but of the infected. We have never behaved this way about a virus...EVER.

Still, the danger of COVID 19 is not a fabrication. Admittedly, there is a reason for concern. Some are more susceptible to infection than others and caring for those vulnerable brother and sisters is of the utmost importance. But does conceding this fact somehow supersede or undermine the principle that God does actually control our lives? These words are not some vague abstract notion

that we speak with our lips. Our days are literally numbered. The date of every one of God's precious children is already set...irrevocably. Until our specific day arrives we are bulletproof and nothing can take our physical lives. And when that day does come, no power on this earth can save our physical lives.

This is not to suggest that we throw caution and common sense to the wind as though the virus does not exist. Rather, it is a plea that we return to the normal functioning of our church life while taking reasonable precautions to respect the neighbor. Wash our hands, remain home if we are sick, be more cautious if you are in a vulnerable category. But is it possible that we are currently handling this situation backwards? Isn't it completely upside down to quarantine the healthy to protect the sick? It is one thing to be respectful of the vulnerable and those who are more concerned. But somehow, because the world has instructed us to be afraid, we are suddenly changing everything to accommodate those people to the detriment of everything and everyone else in the church?

It is well past time to return to the normal life of the church. Take common sense measures to be respectful of the most vulnerable, and get back to the business of living our lives in the body of Christ fully to the glory of God. Continue our worship services, our Bible studies, our summer discussion groups, nurseries for the children, church picnics and so on and let those who cannot or should not attend stay away. Find ways to minister to those dear ones. Don't cancel conventions, just let those who are concerned stay home. Don't do away with church functions and the communion of the saints, just let those who are concerned stay away. Fellowship, discuss, commune with one another in the body of Christ. I implore my fellow Christians and especially the church leaders to think carefully about what God calls us to do. And for the sake of all that is holy, **PLEASE** stop framing those who are not afraid as people who are selfish and do not love their neighbor. Nothing could be further from the truth. We just want to walk before God and stand firmly on our confessions rather than hiding in our homes and thinking that we somehow have more control than our sovereign saviour. Honestly, at what point do we stop letting the world tell us to be afraid when no less of a person than God, Himself, has commanded us not to be?

For God's Glory,

—Amy Bauer



June 30, 2020

Dear Editor Rev. Lanning,

I write in reference to the article “The Church’s Response to Pestilence” by Rev. N. Langerak in the July 2020 issue.

I understand the absurdity of the following statement, but it would have been nice to have had this article to ponder *before* the pandemic broke out! We need the reminders of the church’s place in the world and in history.

Those of us in the elder’s bench should look back at all the arrangements, decisions and issues since the pandemic broke out, and consider what we can and should do next time. The article brings many considerations to our attention for doing just that.

The incredible bombardment of information was nearly overwhelming at the start. How bad is this disease? Where is

it right now? How do I get it? How do I NOT get it? Who is most vulnerable? What is the government saying and ruling? What can we do to protect the congregation? At the outset, the elders, while working their everyday jobs were literally getting pounded by emails, texts, and social media feeds about it all. It was very, very difficult to sort it all out and make decisions, decisions that can have big consequences for the spiritual and physical lives of the congregation. It was and still is a heavy burden.

As our first experience with a pandemic, I will not judge that we did terribly. A good faith effort was put forth to maintain Sunday as a day of worship. Was everything done perfectly? Obviously not. Where opinions abound, only the righteous God holds the true standard. Certainly, we must all go to God in prayer and seek forgiveness for any wrong thinking or attitudes.

—Barry Warner

LETTERS: EDITORIALS

July 8, 2020

To the editor of Sword and Shield.

I am submitting the following letter with the desire that it be published in your August edition of SWORD and SHIELD. Thank you.

Rebuttal to “Our present controversy (July 2020 editorial)”

The editorial of July 2020 contained serious misrepresentations that I want to address.

First, I point out that in paragraph # 2, “grace principle” and “works principle” are new concepts or new phraseology to me. I suppose if this is a new concept that you are introducing, then it follows that you should have the right to introduce the applications of the truths, propositions, beliefs, and theories of those principles as well. You say that these two concepts stand opposed to each other as if they are mutually exclusive. Let’s see if this bold statement is scripturally true. Does this statement arise out of Scripture? Or are you making an assertion, then trying to prove this assertion using your new phraseology?

You say that “...a grace principle or a works principle governs the believer’s experience of covenant fellowship with God”. You imply that only one of your newly coined principles can be applied to experiencing covenant fellowship with God. Well that certainly is not Scriptural, and certainly not true. Just look at David as a case in point. Wasn’t David’s fellowship with God reduced or taken away when he sinned (Psalms 32:3 “When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. 4 For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me”), and tried to cover up his sin? Didn’t David experience (Psalms 32:10 “Many sorrows shall be to the wicked: but he that trusteth in the LORD, mercy shall compass him about.”) a renewed or restored experience of fellowship after he confessed his sin and returned to a way or walk of obedience? Did God’s grace bring him back? Certainly. Did God bring him back to experience covenant fellowship before(?), or after(?) David did something? After David did something. What was that physical and mental activity (the definition of work) that David did? He confessed his sin and returned to a walk of obedience, he trusted in God. I don’t see how your newly coined principles are mutually exclusive in David’s case.

As far as applying your principles to experiencing fellowship with God they are not mutually exclusive at all. The terminology you use are not a scriptural terms. Hebrews chapter 6 is one place in the Bible where the principles of doctrine and the works of man are spoken of in the same chapter. Hebrews 6 verse 1 speaks, “the principles of the doctrine of Christ”. Verse 10 of the same chapter speaks, “For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love”. These two concepts are not mutually exclusive in this chapter, unless you add the word “principle” and give it your own definition, and apply these terms to working salvation.

Grace principle, works principle? You say, “At its heart the controversy is as simple as could be: grace or works?” I Peter 1 speaks of “election...salvation...believing...grace...obedience... be ye holy...foreordained before the foundation of the world...obeying the truth,” and these phrases are not mutually exclusive in this chapter at all. By this very erroneous statement you are saying that grace and works are mutually exclusive. Where in Scripture is this proven to be true? It is true if you apply your principles to *salvation*, but not when you apply your principles to experiencing fellowship with God. Ephesians 1:4 says that God saved the elect before time by his grace and in the same verse gives the goal: “...that we should be holy and without blame...” (Eph. 1:4). This is God’s Word, and clearly grace and works are not mutually exclusive here. God foreordained that the elect should do good works. Ephesians 2:10 says “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained {or, prepared} that we should walk in them.” This is God’s Word. Now you assert that one of these truths is not the truth of God’s Word. Throw out your false assertions of this second paragraph and the whole controversy goes away. The controversy only exists in your mind. Has God said grace and works are mutually exclusive? Has anyone in this controversy said that man is saved by grace? Yes, indeed, all make this confession. Has anyone said that man is saved by his own works? No! They have not, unless of course one puts words into others’ mouths and writings. Oh yes, herein lies a problem. Some assert that they know what others mean when they say things. They interject into another man’s words and writings what they think others meant when they said certain things. So the problem is not what God says in His Word. The problem is what men say and write about what they think God’s Word should say and mean, or what another man really meant when he preached or wrote something. Some have repeatedly taken the liberty and gone to great lengths to restate what a brother has said or written. If what man says about a doctrine or concept does not fit what one

thinks God’s word says then does anybody have a license to make up new highfalutin jargon to replace God’s Word?

So I ask again, did God say grace and works are mutually exclusive? No! Are we saved by grace? Yes! Are we saved by works? No! Do I do any work, or help or contribute to my own salvation? No! No one in this controversy makes this assertion. Do works exist? Yes. God said the elect were foreordained to do works. So who is stoking the fires of controversy here?

I’m not claiming to know what every minister preaches in every one of our churches, and I haven’t read or studied all the material that went to classis or synod, but I know that God has put good elders in the churches for a good reason. One of these reasons is so they can discern the truth from the lie and then to stop the lie and promote the truth in the pulpit. It is shameful that a number of our ministers have targets on their backs. Shameful that some people go to church with a goal and purpose in mind to catch a minister in a misstatement or what they mistakenly believed to be a misstatement. All too often a statement is taken out of context or given the worst possible interpretation, and then condemned.

In paragraph 4 you state either salvation is by grace or salvation is by works. Who, pray tell, is saying salvation is by works? No one is saying that. Who, pray tell, is disputing the Scriptures you put forth? No one as far as I can see. I think you are building a case against fictitious people that don’t exist.

In paragraphs five six and seven again you put forth a good doctrinal dissertation but where is the controversy in our PRC over this?

Paragraph nine states that “the controversy in the PRC...is whether man is saved by man’s work or whether man is saved by God’s grace...Whether God saves man or man saves man.” That is not the controversy in the PRC. I believe you are intentionally misrepresenting the controversy here, without any proof.

Paragraph 11 states that the works principle is a lie, false doctrine, heresy. I agree as long as you apply this “works principle” phrase of yours to any work of man that contributes to the salvation of man. But It appears to me that there are works that are ordained by God that we should walk in them, and that is God’s Word. Are there are works of man that contribute to our salvation? Certainly not. I don’t know of anyone in the PRC who is making this false claim.

Paragraph 12 tries to clarify what the controversy is in the PRC. But wait a minute let’s back up the bus here. The previous seven or eight paragraphs speak of the “works principle” as it applies to a man’s *salvation*.

But now in paragraph 12 you change your application of your “works principle” phrase from man working to save himself, to man’s *experience of fellowship with God*. Seven or eight paragraphs on salvation by grace without works. Then you change your application from salvation of one’s soul to experiencing covenant fellowship with God. Why? Be honest here. So, the new question is not salvation by grace or salvation by works? But the new question is does your experience of fellowship with God have nothing to do with your life of good works? Certainly fellowship with God is only by His grace. But is the experience of that fellowship completely unrelated to obedience? Synod 2018 stated: “We do not experience covenant fellowship as we continue in disobedience. We experience covenant fellowship in the way of obedience, or in the sphere of holiness.” And again, “Properly expressing the relationship between obedience as the necessary way of the covenant and the experience of covenant fellowship is: We experience fellowship with God through faith (instrument), on the basis of what Christ has done (ground), and in the way of our obedience (way of conduct or manner of living).”

This whole idea of grace principle and work principle is a new concept to me. If you invented this concept or dreamt it up, then I suppose you can define the terms, but you should apply these principles fairly and honestly and where they can be applied. It is wrong to apply a principle to experiential fellowship with God, experiential well-being when you did not have experiential well being in your own definition. In your 4th paragraph you state either salvation is by grace or salvation is by works. Let’s not change paddles in the middle of the stream here by changing your premise and your definition to include experiential

fellowship with God. Is experiential fellowship by works or by grace? I don’t think grace and works are mutually exclusive here. Are you trying to trick people by twisting your own definition? You explicitly call it “the works principle of salvation” in your last two paragraphs.

In paragraph 13 you state unequivocally, and with no proof, that the controversy in the PRC has been the irreconcilable conflict between the works principle and the grace principle, between an error out of hell and God’s truth from heaven. Two principles that you say cannot exist at the same time. But I say God is a God of grace, and at the same time we can and must walk in the works that God foreordained that we should walk in them.

Your last paragraph shows the contradiction. The believer’s experience of fellowship with God is not, I repeat, not to be equated with man’s working or contributing to his own salvation. In a sense one could say that salvation happened in God’s council before time. I was saved before I was born, before the foundation of the world. After I was born I was saved entirely by sovereign grace. And before I die, I must do the works that God foreordained for me to do. And God’s grace is not excluded from these works. My works do not exclude God’s grace, but rather depend entirely upon God’s grace.

It appears to me that things didn’t go the way you wanted at Classis or Synod. So you start a magazine where you can say what you want. You present a new phrase and define its use and application. Then you claim that any who do not follow your use and application of these phrases are on the *side* of Satan by promoting an “error out of hell.”

Sincerely,

—Ron Kooienga

REPLY

I appreciate your letter very much. It is a thoroughly doctrinal letter that takes hold of the essential doctrinal issue of the grace principle and the works principle presented in the July editorial. It is also a thoroughly polemical letter that is willing to climb into the ring in order to give the July editorial a good thumping. As you deliver your jabs and uppercuts against the editorial, you also state your doctrinal position very clearly. This is all for the good. Through such a sharp doctrinal exchange, as Protestant Reformed Churches we can know exactly where we stand in our present controversy. In my judgment your letter goes a long way to advance the controversy, so that as churches we can profit spiritually from this controversy.

Round One

Your letter contends that the terms *grace principle* and *works principle* are invented and are unbiblical. You call them “new phraseology,” you say that they are “not... scriptural terms,” and you say that I “present a new phrase and define its use and application.” More importantly, you contend that the *concept* of a grace principle and a works principle is my own invention that is contrary to scripture. You call them “new concepts” and “newly coined principles.” In especially memorable language you ask,

If what man says about a doctrine or concept does not fit what one thinks God’s word says

then does anybody have a license to make up new highfalutin jargon to replace God's Word?

The terms *grace principle* and *works principle* are not unbiblical, invented terms. Rather, these terms faithfully use the very language of the Bible. Scripture often uses the terms *grace* and *works* in connection with salvation to teach that salvation is of grace and not of works. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work" (Rom. 11:5–6). Adding the word *principle* to the words *grace* and *works* is hardly highfalutin jargon.

More importantly, these terms faithfully express the very truth that the Bible teaches about salvation. *Grace principle* simply means that salvation is "of grace," exactly as the Bible describes it. *Works principle* simply means that salvation is "of works," something the Bible everywhere condemns. Whether one likes the terms *grace principle* and *works principle* or not, the doctrine expressed by these terms is at the heart of Reformed soteriology. The Reformed faith teaches that salvation is by God's grace in Christ—the grace principle—not by the sinner's works—the works principle. The July editorial did not invent or coin new principles, but faithfully described the antithesis between salvation by grace and salvation by works that is basic to the Reformed faith.

Round Two

Here things become more serious. In this round we are not dealing merely with terms but with the doctrine and theology of salvation. You contend that a grace principle and a works principle are not mutually exclusive in the experience of salvation. That is, you contend that man obtains the experience of fellowship with God by grace *and by man's works*. When I contend that only the grace principle "can be applied to experiencing covenant fellowship with God," you respond, "Well that certainly is not Scriptural, and certainly not true." You ask and answer the question: "Is experiential fellowship by works or by grace? I don't think grace and works are mutually exclusive here." Your doctrine of the experience of salvation is that man's experiential fellowship with God is by grace *and by works*.

There are especially three ways that you establish your theology that experiential fellowship with God is by grace and by works. First, you appeal to David's experience in Psalm 32. You observe: "Wasn't David's fellowship with

God reduced or taken away when he sinned...and tried to cover up his sin?" You then maintain:

Did God bring him back to experience covenant fellowship before(?), or after(?) David did something? After David did something. What was that physical and mental activity (the definition of work) that David did? He confessed his sin and returned to a walk of obedience, he trusted in God. I don't see how your newly coined principles are mutually exclusive in David's case.

Here your theology of man's obtaining conscious fellowship with God by works is crystal clear: David worked, and by his work his experience of fellowship with God was restored. Just as David's evil works reduced his fellowship with God, so David's good works restored his fellowship with God. One may not point only to grace as that which restored David's experience, but one must point also to David's works as that which restored David's experience. Your theology is that a works principle governed David's experience of fellowship with God.

The error of your theology is that it gives to good works the place and function that only faith can have. The child of God receives all of the blessings of salvation, including the experience of salvation, only by faith in Jesus Christ. This is because all of the blessings of salvation, including the experience of salvation, are in Jesus Christ and belong to Jesus Christ as that which he purchased for us by his atonement. If we are to have these blessings, they must come from him alone through the only instrument that can receive him and his blessings: faith alone.

But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness. And faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits, which, when become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins (Belgic Confession 22).

Faith—not works—is the instrument of receiving Christ. Faith—not works—is the instrument by which a man experiences fellowship with God. Because faith is not work, the experience of salvation is not by works. The works principle cannot be applied to the experience of salvation.

If you maintain your position that David's experience of salvation was restored by his obedient working, then you must also maintain that David was justified by his obedient working, that is, that David was justified by works. Psalm 32, after all, is about the forgiveness of transgressions (v. 1) and Jehovah's not imputing iniquity (v. 2), which is justification. David says about this justification,

“I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin” (v. 5). If David’s experience of salvation came by his works, so also did his justification.

The truth is that Psalm 32 teaches justification by faith alone and the experience of salvation by faith alone. David’s evil works interrupted his experience of fellowship with God, but his good works did not restore his experience of fellowship with God. What restored his experience was entirely God’s mercy, received by faith alone. David himself says this: “Many sorrows shall be to the wicked: but he that trusteth in the LORD, mercy shall compass him about” (v. 10). “Trusteth in the LORD”! That is not working but believing. That is not works but grace. It is the grace principle of salvation and the grace principle alone. Or, if you prefer, it is by grace and by grace alone.

What of David’s working and obedience? Good works are the fruit of faith. Good works always accompany faith. But man’s salvation and man’s experience of salvation do not come by those works, are not obtained by those works, do not depend on those works. Salvation and the experience of salvation are by faith alone in Christ alone because of grace alone.

Your appeal to other passages, such as Hebrews 6, 1 Peter 1, and Ephesians 1–2, must all be taken in the same light as your appeal to Psalm 32.

Second, you establish your theology that experiential fellowship with God is by grace and by works by making a sharp contrast between how God gives *salvation*, on the one hand, and how God gives the *experience* of salvation, on the other hand. That is, you not only acknowledge a distinction between salvation and the experience of salvation, but you also make a contrast and even a conflict between the two. About the antithesis between the grace principle and the works principle, you write,

By this very erroneous statement you are saying that grace and works are mutually exclusive. Where in Scripture is this proven to be true? It *is* true if you apply your principles to *salvation*, but not when you apply your principles to experiencing fellowship with God.

By this you teach that God gives salvation one way, but he gives the experience of salvation another way. Your position is that God saves man by grace and not by works. Amen. But you go on to say that this does not apply to man’s experience of salvation. God gives man the experience of salvation partly by man’s works. Your position is that salvation is by grace alone; the experience of salvation is by grace and works.

The problem with this contrast is that man’s experience of salvation is part of his salvation. All the things he experiences—his peace with God, his joy, his contentment, his knowledge and confidence of God’s nearness and love, his longing for God, his hungering and thirsting for God, his walking with God, his humility and sorrow over his sin, his desire to serve God, his praying, his obeying—are gifts of his salvation. All of these come from God through Jesus Christ. Whether we are talking about the more internal and emotional side of man’s experience—such as man’s mourning being replaced with joy (Isa. 61:3)—or the more outward and active side of man’s experience—such as man’s walking in good works (Eph. 2:10)—these are all gifts from God. These are all part of the salvation that God bestows upon man. As gifts of his salvation, they come by grace through faith, not by works.

The danger of your contrast is that when you say one part of salvation is by grace alone but another part of salvation is not by grace alone, you have thrown out grace altogether. If any part of salvation is by works, then no part of salvation can be by grace. Works have become the decisive component of salvation. Throughout your letter you repeatedly acknowledge that salvation is by grace. However, the moment you make the experience of salvation to be by works, you have overthrown all of your confession of grace. Salvation by grace and salvation by works are mutually exclusive principles—always and forever, and in any context whatsoever. Where you have one, you cannot have the other. “And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work” (Rom. 11:6).

Third, you establish your theology that experiential fellowship with God is by grace and by works by appealing to Synod 2018’s use of “in the way of obedience.” You write:

So, the new question is not salvation by grace or salvation by works? But the new question is does your experience of fellowship with God have nothing to do with your life of good works? Certainly fellowship with God is only by His grace. But is the experience of that fellowship completely unrelated to obedience? Synod 2018 stated: “We do not experience covenant fellowship as we continue in disobedience. We experience covenant fellowship in the way of obedience, or in the sphere of holiness.” And again, “Properly expressing the relationship between obedience as the necessary way of the covenant and the experience of covenant fellowship is: We experience fellowship with God through faith (instrument),

on the basis of what Christ has done (ground), and in the way of our obedience (way of conduct or manner of living).”

You quote synod in defense of your theology that the experience of fellowship is by works. You put it in these terms: “Does your experience of fellowship with God have nothing to do with your life of good works?” And in these terms: “But is the experience of that fellowship completely unrelated to obedience?” You show that you mean by these terms: “Is experiential fellowship by works or by grace? I don’t think grace and works are mutually exclusive here.”

Your contention, then, is that synod also maintained that experiential fellowship is by grace and by works.

The truth is that synod was not at all saying that the experience of fellowship is by works. Synod explicitly said that faith is the instrument of experiencing covenant fellowship, and not works.

As to the instrument: When we experience covenant fellowship in the way of our obedience, we do not experience covenant fellowship *through* our obedience, but *through* the instrument of faith. (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 72)

Synod 2018 may not be quoted in defense of your theology that the experience of fellowship is by works. Synod’s use of the phrase “in the way of obedience” may not be used in defense of your theology that the experience of fellowship is by works. Synod made clear that good works are not the instrument of experience, that is, that a works principle cannot be applied to the experience of salvation.

Round Three

You contend that there is no real doctrinal controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches. You maintain that I have invented the controversy, that I am stoking the fires of a controversy that does not exist, that I am doing so by trickery and dishonesty, and that this is some kind of temper tantrum on my part. You write: “The controversy only exists in your mind.” And: “So who is stoking the fires of controversy here?” And: “I think you are building a case against fictitious people that don’t exist.” And: “I believe you are intentionally misrepresenting the controversy here, without any proof.” And: “Are you trying to trick people by twisting your own definition?” And: “It appears to me that things didn’t go the way you wanted at Classis or Synod. So you start a magazine where you can say what you want. You present a new phrase and define its use and application. Then you claim that any who do not follow your use and application of these

phrases are on the *side* of Satan by promoting an ‘error out of hell.’”

This is precisely where your letter is such a help in our present controversy. I believe that you are giving voice to what many people in the Protestant Reformed Churches are wondering: Is there really a controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches? If there is a controversy, is it really a controversy between the truth and the lie? And even if there were a controversy, and even if it were between the truth and the lie, isn’t that finished now? Why does *Sword and Shield* maintain that this is our *present* controversy, and why does *Sword and Shield* come picking at old wounds with such sharp words?

Your letter is the answer to those questions. Your letter demonstrates that there very much is a controversy, that it is very much ongoing, and that it very much is between the truth and the lie. Very clearly, and with conviction, you have laid out your theology that man’s experience of fellowship with God is by grace and by works. Very clearly, and with conviction, you have opposed my theology that man’s experience of fellowship with God is by grace alone without the contribution of man’s works. These two theologies are irreconcilable. These two theologies are antithetical and cannot both be true. These two theologies are deadlocked in controversy to the death. One theology must survive; the other theology must die. Which theology will it be? As your letter demonstrates, these two theologies are still vying for the right to be the theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Your letter goes a long way in advancing the controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches. This is good and necessary for us as churches. It is time that we know where we stand as churches. Will our theology be that of the grace principle in man’s experience of salvation? Or will our theology be that of the works principle in man’s experience of salvation?

Synod ruled in favor of the grace principle. Synod ruled that the works principle in man’s experience of salvation is “doctrinal error” and that “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.” Synod ruled that this doctrinal error

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*, 61, 70)

And yet, these years after synod, there is not only confusion about what synod actually decided, but there are also even vigorous defenses such as yours of the works principle. The controversy is real. The controversy is current. The controversy is the truth against the lie.

My saying so is no temper tantrum against the assemblies. I am calm. But I also am in dead earnest. I mean it when I say that the doctrinal error of the works principle of salvation is an error out of hell. I mean it when I say that the Protestant Reformed Churches have been in the clutch of this error out of hell and must yet break that clutch. I mean all these things in dead earnest, not because I or my word is anything, but because God is in dead earnest about this. God says that the works principle is “another gospel” than the true gospel of Jesus Christ. And God says through Christ’s apostle:

But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. (Gal. 1:6, 8–9)

This is a season for sharp words. And it will be a season for sharp words until we as believers are no longer offended by them but are pierced by them.

Yes, I appreciate your letter very much. It is theological, and it is polemical. It shows us where we stand. May our gracious God now deliver such a thumping to the works principle that it is banished from our hearts for good.

—AL



Statement

I believe, and I am convinced that the PRC as a whole believes that Jesus Christ has provided us with our complete salvation, along with all of its benefits, full and free. We do not; neither can we fulfill any conditions to obtain any part of that salvation.

This is true for all parts of our salvation, including two very important aspects of our salvation, namely our assurance, and our experience of fellowship with God.

Works can play no decisive role in obtaining either of these.

Works are produced by grace and are simply a necessary result of our salvation. Good works can never be a fundamental ground of assurance or for our experiencing fellowship with God.

It cannot be that salvation which is *apart from works*, is *dependent on works* as a condition for some parts of that salvation, namely enjoying assurance and fellowship with God.

If we improperly give good works the role of a condition that we must meet in order to obtain these parts of our salvation we would inherently have the predilection to head down one of two paths. Either to become self-righteous and proud of our works that made it possible for us to have assurance or fellowship with God, or as would likely be the case for most, we will look at our feeble attempt to live a life of obedience and become depressed and forlorn and we will begin to spiritually doubt or salvation and our ability to have fellowship with the Holy God.

Questions

We know that our good works cannot be a condition for obtaining assurance or fellowship, but could God crown those works he performed in us by providing us with additional evidence that God is working in us, and thus confirms our assurance that we are alive in Jesus Christ both to us and others.

Could we then also say that a good prayer life, although not a condition, is a work that God uses to in some sense enrich that fellowship with Him?

Answer

If the answer can be yes to these questions, then what we have here is a mystery of God that cannot be fully explained. Somehow, mysteriously, God using our good works, not as fundamental grounds for parts of our salvation, but as a way to enrich our assurance and fellowship, not of merit, but of grace.

Even though the Holy Spirit produces the works in us, it is still biblical language to say that it is us, the Christian, who performs those acts of obedience, and who are then crowned with a richer Christian life. The Bible is full of texts describing the good works of believers. It also balances that with the truth of unconditional salvation.

Plea

If the answer could be yes to the questions above, as I suggest, then to emphasize the necessity and proper role of works does not mean that we are headed down the path

toward conditional theology on one hand, or toward antinomianism on the other hand. The believer is just emphasizing one aspect of the mystery more than the other.

It would be radicalism to expect that solidly reformed believers use the exact wording that gives a complete explanation each time they speak of our necessary life of good works. The fundamentally reformed belief of unconditional salvation has been well documented amongst the Protestant Reformed Churches for many years and we must be charitable. Radicalizing the issue causes schism. Therefore we must temper our accusations, be cautious not to jump to assumptions, and remain humble of any ability we have to more consistently and precisely explain these issues.

On the other hand, the reformed believer who often emphasizes the necessity and importance of our works and rarely explains them in the proper biblical and creedal context, as I attempted to do in the ‘statement’ above,

runs the risk of creating an unhealthy imbalance and even unconsciously having the effect of slipping into conditional theology.

We need solid balance, patience, clarity, a good dose of humility, and admission of error where error was taught or defended. Some need to be willing to listen without jumping to conclusions about what another saint means. Others need to be eager to emphatically endorse unconditional complete salvation to erase any doubt where doubt has been created during the current controversy.

We need to allow for that mystery, and to put aside arguing and division from amongst us. We can all enjoy the fundamental truth of unconditional salvation, including our assurance and our experience of fellowship with God, celebrating together with a godly life of obedience out of thanks to God. Then too, we can truly have fellowship again with one another as a united denomination.

—Rick DeVries

REPLY

I take your letter to be a valiant attempt to unify the Protestant Reformed Churches. That attempt is much appreciated and warms my heart as one who loves the PRC. For all of us in the PRC, the unity of the denomination is precious and a worthy thing to endeavor to keep.

As your letter indicates, the unification of the Protestant Reformed Churches is necessary at present, because now there is arguing and division among us. You propose that this division is not due to doctrinal differences, but is rather a matter of balance and behavior. You write:

I believe, and I am convinced that the PRC as a whole believes [the same doctrine]... We need solid balance, patience, clarity, a good dose of humility, and admission of error where error was taught or defended. Some need to be willing to listen without jumping to conclusions about what another saint means. Others need to be eager to emphatically endorse unconditional complete salvation to erase any doubt where doubt has been created during the current controversy.

Your prescription of “patience, clarity, [and] a good dose of humility” is always good medicine and is well taken. However, I am not convinced that you have accurately diagnosed the real source of division in the Protestant Reformed Churches. As I see it, the real source of division is doctrinal disagreement. To say the same thing,

I believe the division in the PRC is between the truth and the lie, which are both vying for a place in the theology of the PRC.

At the beginning of your letter, you make a statement of doctrine. Your statement of doctrine is beautiful and sound. The entire statement is worth reading again and quoting at length, but let me quote just this part:

Jesus Christ has provided us with our complete salvation, along with all of its benefits, full and free. We do not; neither can we fulfill any conditions to obtain any part of that salvation.

This is true for all parts of our salvation, including two very important aspects of our salvation, namely our assurance, and our experience of fellowship with God.

Amen and amen! That is the heart-gladdening gospel. That truth makes Jesus the Savior and denies that man is the savior. You apply that gospel truth to the exact topic that is so much at stake among us today: man’s conscious experience of fellowship with God. It is a wonderful and a sound statement.

But is it really true that everyone in the PRC would agree with that truth? Not everyone agreed with that truth leading up to Synod 2018. Large segments of the denomination set themselves against that truth and at least tolerated—and in many cases outright defended—the opposite of that truth. Even now, after Synod 2018,

I wonder whether everyone really would agree with the truth as you set it forth in your statement. Elsewhere in this very issue of *Sword and Shield* is a letter that argues that the grace principle and the works principle are not mutually exclusive when it comes to experiencing God's fellowship, and that experiencing fellowship with God is both by grace and by works. That is not doctrinal agreement but doctrinal division.

But let us assume for a moment that everyone in the PRC does agree with the truth as you have set it forth in your statement. Let us assume that everyone confesses "that Jesus Christ has provided us with our complete salvation, along with all of its benefits, full and free." Is that sufficient for a denomination? Is it sufficient that everyone confesses the truth positively? Isn't it also necessary that the church identifies and condemns the lie that militates against the truth? Isn't it necessary that the church makes this negative confession right alongside of, and in service of, its positive confession?

This negative confession is what every member of the PRC vowed at his confession of faith.

Have you resolved by the grace of God to adhere to this doctrine; to reject all heresies repugnant thereto; and to lead a new, godly life? (*The Confessions and Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*, 266)

Not only to adhere to this doctrine, but *to reject all heresies repugnant thereto*.

This negative confession is also what every office-bearer in the PRC vowed in his signing of the Formula of Subscription.

We declare, moreover, that we not only reject all errors that militate against this doctrine, and particularly those which were condemned by the above mentioned synod, but that we are disposed to refute and contradict these, and to exert ourselves in keeping the church free from such errors. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 326)

It is in the matter of this negative confession where I see the greatest doctrinal division in the PRC at present. Many of us are not yet sure whether the controversy in the PRC was between the truth and the lie. We are not yet sure whether we may call the error that was among us "the lie" or "false doctrine" or "heresy" or "an error out of hell." We draw back from saying it that plainly or are deeply offended if someone does say it that plainly. In fact, many of us are quite sure that the controversy in the PRC was not a matter of the truth against the lie. We assure each other that we all believe the same thing and that we have always believed the same thing. We gut

synod's words, "doctrinal error," of their meaning, so that they come to mean only "mistake" or "misstatement" or "lack of clarity."

With this approach to the controversy, we are unable to make the necessary negative confession. We are unable to "reject all heresies repugnant thereto" because we cannot bring ourselves to call it heresy. We are unable to "exert ourselves in keeping the church free from such errors" because we do not believe they were "errors that militate against [creedal] doctrine."

How deadly for the church! And what division follows! The church's negative confession that repudiates the lie as the lie is part and parcel of the church's positive confession of the truth as the truth. If the church will not make her negative confession, then she cannot truly make her positive confession either. The church that only says positively, "Salvation is by grace alone," but will not also negatively condemn the lie in her midst as the lie, is not really confessing, "Salvation is by grace alone." The lie is always content to skulk in the corner, ignored and tolerated, until a generation that has grown accustomed to its presence invites it to sit at the table.

If I may quote and paraphrase Rev. Gerrit Vos from almost seventy years ago, he captures what I believe is the situation in the Protestant Reformed Churches at present. My paraphrases are in brackets:

And the point I wish to make in this connection I consider important. It may remove all manner of misunderstanding. It is this: I believe with all my heart that every one of our ministers teaches what brother [Rick DeVries] quotes in this sentence. That, my dear brother, is not the question which is disturbing our churches. That which you outline is the positive side of our preaching. What divides us, according to the way I see it is this: we do not all condemn, as vigorously as we ought, the heresy of [the works principle in man's experience of salvation]. I would like to point out that such negative confession, the condemnation of all errors repugnant to the above quoted confession, belongs to, is an integral part of our duty. The [works principle] militates against brother [DeVries'] confession, as we quoted same. ("A Letter," *Standard Bearer* 27, no. 9 [February 1, 1951]: 200–201)

As for the rest of your letter, just a couple of comments. First, you write of "emphasis" and "balance." That at least implies that, in this controversy, our task is to strike the right balance between the doctrines of grace, on the one hand, and man's calling to work, on the other hand. Such is never the case. The doctrine of salvation

by grace alone does not need to be balanced with man's calling to work. Rather, man's calling to work flows from the doctrine of salvation by grace alone.

Second, with regard to the role of good works, you write about good works' confirming assurance and enriching life with God. Whatever we say about good works must be consistent with the truth that good works are always the mark of faith, but never the object of faith. Good works always demonstrate true faith as the fruit of true faith and therefore as the evidence of true faith. But the object of true faith is always Jesus Christ, revealed in God's word. Faith looks to Christ and to Christ alone,

embraces him, and finds all things necessary for salvation in him alone.

Back to your main point: By all means, let us seek the unity and peace of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Let us seek that unity and peace upon the only foundation that it can be found: Jesus Christ and his truth. Where we are yet unsure of the controversy, let us become sure. Where we are yet tolerating the error as some minor thing, let us now roar against it. To close with your closing line: "Then too, we can truly have fellowship again with one another as a united denomination."

—AL



July 11, 2020

To Rev. A. Lanning and Sword and Shield.

Having received the second issue of Sword and Shield and read your editorials in both issues, the first giving the reasons and purpose of your new organization and magazine, the second giving your views on decisions of ecclesiastical assemblies and the controversy in our churches, and since you welcome letters of criticism, please allow me to offer some words of caution.

If your purpose for existing as a separate magazine from The Standard Bearer, is to have freedom to speak publicly about ecclesiastical decisions and perceived views of brothers in Christ, with which you don't agree, and you proceed to do that without following the Biblical principles and guidelines set forth for us in the Word and our Church Order on how to properly deal with one another in our differences, then your credibility as a separate magazine and organization falls away.

Troubling it is when you label the controversy in our churches simply as between grace and works. This strikes me as a gross misrepresentation of the issues involved and a slap in the face to every meeting of Classis and Synod since 2016. If the issue was as simple as you claim, it would have been settled in 2016. But this has not been the case. To my knowledge no one in our churches has taught that we are saved by our works instead of freely by grace, and yet you are ready to wield the sword against them as if they had, labeling them as heretical, worthy of suspicion, necessitating starting a separate publishing association and magazine.

A word of caution would seem to be in order. Let us beware that in our zeal for the truth that we not appear

before Christ the King and Judge with the blood of the saints on our sword and suffer the rebuke He gave Peter in Matt. 26 : 52 (as if he needed Peter's sword), "Put up your sword into his place for all they that take up the sword shall perish with the sword." God doesn't need our "extra" efforts to preserve His truth.

Perhaps that could have been added to your list of examples in your recent editorial of grace principles and works principles. I have in mind a works principle by which we become "Jacobs" and think we need to help God along by overstating differences in order to make them sound the worst as we can to strengthen the point we want to make. Or by not acquiescing to decisions of broader assemblies, but rather setting about publicly to stir up suspicions about other unnamed office bearers by insinuating that there are those in our midst who do not agree with recent synodical decisions (and that without proof). Or of not viewing one another charitably by reading the worst possible interpretation into statements made by others. It is as if zeal for the truth means we can dismiss all judgements of charity on statements of others and one can ignore the calling, if one has charges against another, to bring them in the Church Ordained way. Such is definitely not a grace principle. It becomes plain that in one's zeal for fighting against error one can become guilty of the very "error" he opposes. I find it a bit ironic that in your zeal to oppose any suggestion that our salvation and God's cause depends in any sense on man's works or activities, you do seem to think and are ready to concede and maintain that God needs your magazine and efforts, (your good work of opposing falsehood), if His truth is going to be preserved and defended. As if that is the only work that is praiseworthy and necessary in some sense.

Also another word of caution that we can, because of our sinful nature, easily move from being zealous for the truth to creating and promoting schism in the church. Once again our sinful nature gets the upper hand. By misusing or improperly using our sword we can make ourselves unfit and unprofitable servants and soldiers in the kingdom of Christ the King. Meantime the Devil stands by with glee as we kill each other and tear each other apart with our words. We make it so easy for him to disrupt the peace and unity of the church. Good brothers, we do well to heed the warning in the conclusion of the

Canons. Having set forth the truth over against the error as to what effect that truth has on what we write and say, our Fathers advise that we “abstain from all those phrases which exceed the limits necessary to be observed in ascertaining the genuine sense of the Holy Scriptures.” This is wisdom, lest by what we say and write about brethren in the church,” we give occasion to those who would violently assail the doctrines of the Reformed faith.”

Consider.

Your brother in Christ,

—Michael Rau

REPLY

Your letter is certainly welcome, as is your criticism, as are your words of caution. It is good to have you and your letter here.

Your letter is a plea and an admonition to lay down the sword. Let us see about that advice.

Your starting point is that the controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) is not between a grace principle and a works principle: “Troubling it is when you label the controversy in our churches simply as between grace and works. This strikes me as a gross misrepresentation of the issues involved.” You do not say what the controversy is, but you make it clear that the controversy is not two opposing theologies:

If the issue was as simple as you claim, it would have been settled in 2016. But this has not been the case. To my knowledge no one in our churches has taught that we are saved by our works instead of freely by grace.

Whatever the controversy may be, then, it is not a battle between the truth and the lie. In fact, the real danger in the controversy seems to be that we make a controversy where none exists; the danger of “overstating differences in order to make them sound the worst as we can to strengthen the point we want to make”; and the danger of “not viewing one another charitably by reading the worst possible interpretation into statements made by others.”

If there is no battle between the truth and the lie in this controversy, then there is no battlefield, and a sword does not belong here. In fact, a sword is dangerous and wicked here because it will only hurt the innocent. When *Sword and Shield* comes running to this non-battlefield hacking away with its sword, it does the damage that was feared. It delivers “a slap in the face to every meeting of Classis and Synod since 2016.” It wields “the sword

against” the orthodox, “labeling them as heretical, worthy of suspicion.” The cautions are raised that “we not appear before Christ the King and Judge with the blood of the saints on our sword” and that we do not move “from being zealous for the truth to creating and promoting schism in the church.”

The sword of *Sword and Shield* has become the instrument of the enemy! “Meantime the Devil stands by with glee as we kill each other and tear each other apart with our words. We make it so easy for him to disrupt the peace and unity of the church.”

Best to lay down the sword, then. For the peace and unity of the church. Especially since there is no battle for the truth after all.

Brother, with all due respect and with all brotherly love, I will not be taking your advice. Not because I don’t need advice, but because the Captain of my salvation has forbidden me from laying down the sword. “Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. And take...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:11, 17). Jesus’ rebuke to Peter that you cite from Matthew 26:52 is not a calling to put up this sword, but to put up any physical sword in the work of the Lord. But the spiritual sword that is the word of God must not be laid down, especially in the middle of a battle against the lie.

The problem with your advice is that your starting point is wrong. There is a controversy, and it is between the truth and the lie. It is between a grace principle and a works principle. And it really is as simple as that. Why it has taken us as churches so long to see such a simple truth is a good question and worthy of investigation. But that question aside, the controversy really is a battle between the truth and the lie. Synod 2018 ruled that “classis failed to deal with doctrinal error...The doctrinal error is that

the believer's good works are given a place and function that is out of harmony with the Reformed confessions" (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 61). Synod's decision settles for us that there is indeed a battle and that the battle is between doctrinal truth, on the one hand, and doctrinal error, on the other hand.

This means that we are on the battlefield after all. And on the battlefield it is dangerous and wicked not to have a sword. God himself says so: "Cursed be he that doeth the work of the LORD deceitfully, and cursed be he that keepeth back his sword from blood" (Jer. 48:10).

Sword and Shield is not harming the innocent, as you fear. First, no individual in the PRC has been labeled a heretic, as you charge. A theology has been labeled heresy, which is much different. Second, the writers in *Sword and Shield* have been decent and orderly, not schismatic, as you charge. Third, I do not think, concede, or maintain that "we need to help God along" or "that God needs [this] magazine and efforts...if His truth is going to be preserved and defended." That is a charge so shameful and strange that I can only ask where the charity for which you plead has now gone.

And now permit me to give a little advice of my own to all who are reading this. Do not lay down the sword, but take it up. Theological battle is not easy or pleasant. It is not something that we naturally seek out. We prefer

a quiet retreat away from the crash and din of the fight. On the battlefield a voice from behind the ranks calling us to lay down our sword is tempting. That voice slackens the hand of the soldier and weakens his resolve. After all, we want peace, don't we? But know that that voice is deadly. There is no peace in turning from the fight, but only defeat for the generations to come. "The children of Ephraim, being armed, and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle" (Ps. 78:9).

Do not lay down the sword, but take it up. And take heart that the victory is already won, for the battle belongs to the Lord, to his truth, and to the Captain of our salvation. Whatever happens to us, the Lord and his truth shall prevail.

Let me conclude by quoting a little again from Rev. Gerrit Vos from the same article quoted elsewhere in this issue.

There is just one ray of light in the dark picture, and it is this: whether we remain true to the truth or not...the Truth of God will continue its victorious pathway of shining light. "For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth" II Cor. 13:8. ("A Letter," *Standard Bearer* 27, no. 9 [February 1, 1951]: 201)

—AL



To the editors of *Sword and Shield*,

I apologize for the length of this letter. However, I believe the topics which it addresses are important enough for your periodical and her readers to warrant such length. Also, out of love for the neighbor large complete quotes are provided in order to give an honest rendering of what has been said. I am writing to you because of the unusual circumstances and response of some Protestant Reformed churches to the *Sword and Shield*. These responses have been in the form of letters to their membership whereby they have warned their members regarding *Sword and Shield*. It is the purpose of this letter to show why I believe these warnings are unnecessary and unjust.

One such letter from a consistory states,

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)". The publication goes on to give itself the authority to "condemn doctrines, attitudes, and practices within them (the PRCA), (Editorial pg. 8)" that they perceive to be false, even if that criticism and condemnation is of the highest ecclesiastical assemblies of the church.

Another letter says,

We object to statements in the editorial which allude to "the lie" present in our churches, and declaration of the magazines intent to set aside good order in the churches in addressing this supposed "lie", even maintaining the right to "condemn" in their magazine the decisions of "ecclesiastical assemblies of the Protestant Reformed Churches". These statements threaten to promote disorder and a divisive spirit in our churches.

A third example reads,

Unrest stems in part from the creation of the periodical itself, but especially because of statements

made in the editorial of the June 2020 issue. It states, “Sword and Shield is...free to comment on the Protestant Reformed Churches...It is also able to condemn doctrines, attitudes, and practices within them that are false. This is true even regarding the ecclesiastical assemblies of the Protestant Reformed Churches.” The consistory informs you that such a practice is not according to Reformed church government and has potential to create schism in the Protestant Reformed churches.

As can be seen from these letters there are two main complaints. The first is the issue of describing the current controversy in our churches as being between the truth and the lie. The second is the contention that the editorial claims to itself the right to condemn the decisions of ecclesiastical assemblies instead of following proper church polity of protest and appeal when one is aggrieved by these bodies’ decisions.

With regards to the second complaint, let us examine whether or not *Sword and Shield*, as a magazine, may legitimately condemn decisions of Protestant Reformed assemblies. To help answer this we should ask whether or not *Sword and Shield* may condemn decisions of other denominational assemblies? Yes, it may. Is doing so promoting schism in the body of Christ? No, it is not. Why not? Because as the editorial told us, *Sword and Shield* “is non-ecclesiastical, in the sense that it is not the possession of or under the governance of any church institute.” Because *Sword and Shield* is not the possession of nor governed by these other denominations it is free to condemn decisions of those churches.

Likewise, *Sword and Shield* is not the possession of nor under the governance of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Therefore, it is free to condemn decisions of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Is saying this a promotion of schism in the body of Christ? No. Why not? Because since the *magazine* is free from any church governance the *magazine* is free to condemn any and all denominational decisions.

The letters of the consistories do note the correct church orderly way one who is under the governance of the Protestant Reformed Churches would address disagreement with their decisions. *Sword and Shield*, as a magazine, is not under such governance, however, the editors and current authors are under such Protestant Reformed governance. The current authors and editors are under this governance and therefore the editors and authors are required to follow the church orderly way of protest and appeal regarding decisions in the Protestant Reformed Churches. We must be careful not to confuse

and combine the magazine for her editors and authors. The two are not synonymous nor equivalent to each other. The men are under the governance of the Protestant Reformed Churches, the magazine is not. Just because the men are not at liberty to condemn decisions of the Protestant Reformed Churches in the magazine this does not mean that the magazine as an entity does not have this freedom. In theory someone who was a member of another Reformed denomination could write for *Sword and Shield* and be perfectly in his rights to condemn decisions of the Protestant Reformed Churches in the magazine. Such is the freedom of the magazine.

But did the editor in his editorial claim to himself the right to condemn decisions of the Protestant Reformed Churches in the magazine? Due in part to the paragraph’s layout, a superficial reading of this section could lead one to this conclusion. However, a careful and honest reading of what was actually written should clear up this misunderstanding. After explaining that *Sword and Shield* arises out of the office of believer we read: “*Sword and Shield* is thus free to comment on the Protestant Reformed Churches. *Sword and Shield* may evaluate these churches and offer instruction to them. *Sword and Shield* is able to commend doctrines, attitudes, and practices within these churches that are true. It is also able to condemn doctrines, attitudes, and practices within them that are false. This is true even regarding the ecclesiastical assemblies of the Protestant Reformed Churches. *Sword and Shield* may write about matters coming to the assemblies; it may state its position on those matters; and it may comment on the decisions that the assemblies make.”

The topic sentence of this paragraph is, “*Sword and Shield* is thus free to comment on the Protestant Reformed Churches.” Therefore, the rest of the paragraph must be understood under this theme of *commenting*. Commenting by commending the good. Commenting by condemning the bad. Commenting even on ecclesiastical assemblies of the Protestant Reformed Churches. The sentence that says “this is true even regarding the ecclesiastical assemblies” is not modifying the previous sentence which speaks of being “able to condemn.” The “this” in “this is true even regarding ecclesiastical assemblies” is modifying the topic sentence, “*Sword and Shield* is thus free to comment on the Protestant Reformed Churches.” We know this because the very next sentence explains what it means that “this is true even regarding the ecclesiastical assemblies.” The next sentence reads, “*Sword and Shield* may write about matters coming to the assemblies; it may state its position on those matters; and it may comment on the decisions that the assemblies make.” The

point of the editorial was not that the editors or authors of *Sword and Shield* are free to *condemn* decisions of the broader assemblies, but that the editors and authors are free to *comment* on decisions of the broader assemblies.

The editor is not advocating for nor taking upon himself the right to go against the Church Order by publicly *condemning* decisions of the broader assemblies. What the editor is telling us is that he has the right and responsibility to *comment* on decisions in our churches by evaluating these decisions and offering instruction regarding them. When a church assembly makes a decision regarding a matter before it, just as we all have the right and responsibility to discuss the implications and impact of those decisions upon ourselves, so also the editors and authors of *Sword and Shield* have the right and responsibility to comment on the import of those decisions for our churches as a whole. This is nothing more and nothing less than what we all as individual members of our churches have the right and responsibility to do. Such is not promoting schism; such is exercising the office of believer by being interested, informed, active members in the body of Christ.

As for the additional complaint, that being the editorial's description of our current controversy as a matter between the truth and the lie, this is merely an application of the editorial's position that it has the freedom to comment on decisions of the broader assemblies by evaluating and instructing the churches regarding these decisions.

The decision specifically being commented on and applied to our churches was that which was made at Synod 2018. This is clearly seen from the July 2020 editorial. In this editorial, which was titled "Our Present Controversy," a decision of Synod 2018 was specifically referenced. Per this editorial this decision was, "the doctrinal error

is that the believer's good works are given a place and function that is out of harmony with the Reformed confessions' (Acts of Synod 2018, 61, art. 62 B.1)."

Synod declared that doctrinal error was taught in the sermons protested. Is doctrinal error the truth? No. To teach error is to teach something that is false. Doctrinal error is a false teaching. It is untrue, it is a lie. Calling doctrinal error the lie does not imply that the one who taught that doctrinal error intended to lie. But calling doctrinal error the lie is to speak the truth. Calling doctrinal error the lie is to truly apply and place oneself in subjection to the decisions of Synod.

Synod 2018 sustained the protestant with regards to the fact that doctrinal error was being taught. By this decision the church of Jesus Christ has officially rejected this teaching and by doing so has labeled this teaching a lie and made this teaching heresy in the body of Christ. A heresy is a teaching which has been officially rejected by the church as a false teaching. It was the ecclesiastical ruling of the body of Christ at Synod 2018 that by this very decision made this doctrinal error heresy. Therefore, it is the bounden duty of the members of our churches to henceforth describe and call this error the lie and heresy. Doing so is the only way to truly hold oneself in subjection to the authority of the Spirit of Christ and to not be schismatic against His guiding of our churches in all truth.

It is my hope that this letter helps others understand, as I have come to understand, the correctness and necessity of the position and statements made in the first and second editorials of *Sword and Shield*.

In Christian love and submission to the Spirit of Christ,

—Matthew Overway

REPLY

I think your letter speaks for itself, so I do not intend to comment at length on it here. However, it does give me the opportunity to put in a plug for the first annual meeting of Reformed Believers Publishing on October 15. Lord willing, the speech that evening will be "A Believer's Paper: The Freedom of *Sword and Shield*." The speech will address some of the matters that you raise in your letter, including the relationship of *Sword and Shield* to article 31 of the Church Order and the false charge by some that *Sword and Shield* is schismatic. By God's grace, *Sword and Shield* is a holy endeavor. Members of the Protestant Reformed Churches may read the magazine and subscribe to it with the confidence that

they are participating in a godly project, and without any fear that they are somehow participating in schism. Your letter provides ample demonstration of that fact. Thank you.

Your letter also gives me an opportunity to invite all Reformed believers to join Reformed Believers Publishing as members. Membership is free, and applications can be found on the RBP website at reformedbelieverspub.org. Applications will be received and members will be accepted at the RBP annual meeting. Again, God willing, the RBP annual meeting will be livestreamed in some form or another, which means that believers from anywhere in the world can become members of

RBP. The constitution of RBP, which spells out the different types of membership, can be perused at the RBP website. Basically, one can be a regular member (eligible to vote on matters and eligible to be nominated for the RBP board), or one can be an associate member (eligible to speak to matters at RBP meetings). Membership

in RBP is not tied to subscription to *Sword and Shield*, so if you have already subscribed to the magazine and would like to be a member of RBP, be sure to fill out the application.

—AL



Dear Editor,

I thank you for your articles, “Our Present Controversy.” I wholeheartedly agree with your definition of the controversy: “Specifically, the conflict has been whether a grace principle or a works principle governs man’s conscious experience of the covenant and salvation” (*Sword & Shield*, Issue 3, p6).

In your second article on the subject, you distinguish between the *fact* of man’s salvation and man’s *experience* of his salvation. I agree with this distinction. You then claim that “there is no controversy regarding the fact of man’s salvation. All are agreed and have always been agreed that the grace principle governs the fact of man’s salvation” (Issue3, p8). And again, “No one applied a works principle to the fact of man’s salvation, but many applied a works principle to man’s conscious experience of his salvation.” I would like to comment on that claim.

First, while it is correct to distinguish between salvation objectively and salvation subjectively (man’s experience of his salvation), it remains that both are salvation. Therefore, when we speak of assurance, or our experience of covenant fellowship with God, we speak of salvation. The teaching that our experience of salvation is something other than salvation (be it a fruit of salvation or whatever) is wrong. I acknowledge you do not teach this in your articles. I mention it because I have come across this thinking in our PR circles as a way of minimizing the controversy. The argument goes this way: since the error condemned by Synod 2018 was only about our experience of salvation it was not a salvation issue.

Second, I believe that to apply a works principle to man’s conscious *experience* of his salvation is in fact to apply a works principle to the *fact* of man’s salvation. The sermons condemned by Synod 2018 taught that the assurance of justification was partly by works, although they purported to teach that justification itself was without works. But in its condemnation of the sermons synod did not merely say they compromise subjective justification—man’s assurance of justification; synod said they compromised the doctrine of justification by faith alone (Acts of Synod 2018, 70). Similarly, the sermons taught that our experience of fellowship with God was partly by works, although they purported to teach that the covenant itself was unconditional. But in its condemnation of the sermons synod did not merely say they compromise our experience of the covenant; synod said they compromised the doctrine of the unconditional covenant (70).

The controversy in the PRC is a salvation issue. That ought to be clear from Synod 2018 when it condemned the sermons in question declaring they compromised the doctrine of justification by faith alone. And if there is one doctrine that is a salvation issue it is justification by faith alone. For this reason, I much prefer the way you stated the issue in your first article: “The controversy [in the PRC] is whether man is saved by man’s work or whether man is saved by God’s grace. The issue is the grace principle of salvation versus the works principle of salvation. The issue is whether God saves man or man saves man” (7).

In Christ,

—Philip Rainey



Dear Editors:

The *Sword and Shield* has welcomed letters from readers...for publication, even critical letters. This letter is written to express disagreement with your explanation of this controversy. We would be grateful if you would print it

to show your readers how others look at and understand this important issue, especially because it is affecting the lives of the members of the PRC, along with our witness to the church world and the world.

You call the heart of the controversy a matter of grace

or works, and go on to describe it as the antithesis between a grace principle and a works principle; the question of who saves a man, God or man; the teaching that man's experience of covenant fellowship with God depends upon man's obedient good works, or the teaching that man's experience of covenant fellowship with God is entirely a free gift of God's grace; and therefore, a controversy between an error out of hell and God's own truth from heaven. You write that you believe there is a 'certain group' of people who, in your estimation, hold to this 'works principle' which comes out of hell.

It has become very wearying to hear over and over the words: 'when you say this, then you must believe this'. It appears that this is what your magazine is doing again, and it is causing many sorrows between family members and congregations.

You appear to have separated our denomination into 'groups of people' and 'sides', and without giving any proof, you write that in one group, fellowship with God depends upon the believer's obedient good works, and that they have fellowship with God on the condition of their good works. Has any member now (after the settled case in Synod 2018) ever used those exact words in your hearing, or are you deceiving your readers with false accusations – once again saying in effect—'when you say this, then you must believe this'.

In order for you to place people in a certain 'group' or 'side', you must ask them what they believe. The following is what we believe and what our family and friends have always confessed to believe in the past, being taught by ministers and professors who faithfully preached and wrote on how we experience fellowship with our Holy God, and the assurance of our salvation.

"Of Him, and through Him, and unto Him is all our salvation!...When you are working out your salvation you are occupied with the work of God. It is of the great and glorious Lord of heaven and earth that your salvation comes. His work it is." (H. Hoeksema, The Wonder of Grace).

Psalm 32 expresses beautifully (by the Spirit's inspiration to David) the way in which we experience fellowship with God and the assurance of our faith. David had sinned grossly and was living spiritually far from God. In His grace, God brought Nathan to David, through whose message He worked conviction and repentance in David's heart—God working in David the willing and the doing—and David working that out by faith.

We read David's experience of that work of God, in his inspired words in Psalm 32. He begins with the

wonderful confession of experiencing and knowing God's blessing upon him. Then in verses 3 and 4 he records the misery he had when living in sin and outside of the experience of fellowship with God. In verse 5 by inspiration he shows us that when he acknowledged and confessed his sin, he experienced forgiveness. In verse 7 David gives us the beautiful end of his God-worked repentance—God is his hiding place, his preserver, and his surrounding joy. This is how we understand the truth that can be so beautifully expressed in the words 'in the way of'. David's fellowship with God did not depend on his good work of repentance, nor did God's fellowship come on the condition of his good works. It was all of grace by faith.

Does this fit your principle of works? Do we fit into your 'certain group'? If so, please explain how. If not, do you know, personally, others in our denomination who believe differently than this? And how would they then explain Psalm 32?

You and your readers are strongly urged to read a Standard Bearer article on this topic: Sanctification And Assurance By Hoeksema H.C. Volume 64/1988 Issue 12, 3/15/1988.

The article begins: "*First of all, saving faith itself is assurance.*" It continues "*Why is assurance possible only in the way of sanctification*", it shows from article 10 of the Fifth Head of the Canons of Dordt how the one way of assurance is three-fold (from, from, from), and concludes with the exclusive way of assurance:

Nevertheless, the exclusive way of assurance is the way of sanctification. Outside of the latter there is no assurance possible. Without holiness no man shall see the Lord! And without holiness, therefore, no man can be sure that he shall see the Lord!

Every day he (the believer) has need to live close to the Word of God in the Scriptures, to fight the battle of faith that he may walk as a child of light in the midst of a world of sin, in order that in that way he may be conscious of the testimony of God's Spirit assuring him of his personal salvation. Only in that way, but in that way surely, can he walk in the glad assurance that he is Christ's, and that nothing can ever separate him from the love of God!" (H. Hoeksema in The Wonder of Grace)

Cordially,

—Phil and Barb Dykstra

REPLY

We gladly print your letter “to show [our] readers how others look at and understand this important issue.” I think you are correct that your letter gives voice to what others—perhaps many others—think about the controversy.

Your letter shows that there is still a fundamental question facing the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) in this controversy. That fundamental question is this: What is the controversy? We do not yet agree on the answer to this question. I maintain that the controversy is between two opposite and irreconcilable principles—the grace principle and the works principle—applied to the believer’s experience of covenant fellowship with God. You disagree with my explanation of the controversy. Our disagreement shows that this question is still facing us as churches: What is the controversy?

This question is fundamental. If we do not know what the controversy is, then we cannot learn from it. Worse, if we do not know what the controversy is, then we are going to fall into the same errors that led to the controversy. In order for the church to profit spiritually from the controversy and in order for the church to repudiate the errors in the controversy, the church must know what the controversy is. What is the controversy?

A few observations about this question. First, the controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches is strictly doctrinal, not personal. I have no interest in putting people into a “certain group.” I have no interest in separating the denomination into “groups of people.” You put those terms in quotes in your letter as though they were my terms, but to my knowledge, those are not quotations from the editorials. You write as though I am keeping a tally of who believes what and instruct me: “In order for you to place people in a certain ‘group’ or ‘side’, you must ask them what they believe.” I suppose that would be good advice if it were my goal to place people in groups, but that is not my goal and not what I have been writing about.

My interest in the controversy is strictly doctrinal. I see two contrary theologies vying for dominance in the Protestant Reformed Churches. When I speak of “sides,” I am not writing about who is on each side, but what is on each side. I maintain that the teaching on one side is divine truth—the grace principle—and that the teaching on the other side is a hellish lie—the works principle. It is worth noting that the works principle was taught, tolerated, and defended by a significant segment of the PRC in the lead-up to Synod 2018. It was not an isolated error, but a pervasive error. Even so, the purpose of

pointing this out is not to divvy us up into groups but to underscore how dangerous the doctrinal error of the works principle is to us in the PRC. The controversy is doctrinal, strictly doctrinal.

Second, it is perfectly legitimate to draw out the implications of a doctrine in order to understand and evaluate that doctrine. You lament, “It has become very wearying to hear over and over the words: ‘when you say this, then you must believe this.’” You say that *Sword and Shield* is taking up this wearying argument, and you imply that I have used this reasoning to deceive the readers with false accusations about what people believe.

This is simply incorrect. For one thing, I am not judging what people believe. My argument, and the argument of Synod 2018, has not been, “When you say this, then you must believe this.” Rather, the argument is, “When you say this, that means this.” Not: “Here is what is in your heart.” Not: “Here is what you intended.” But: “Here is the meaning and implication of your teaching.” For example, no sermon that came to Synod 2018 said in so many words, “Justification is by faith and works, and the covenant is conditional.” Nevertheless, synod rightly looked at the implications of what the sermons did say in so many words, and synod ruled:

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)

Therefore, it is no false accusation or deception to say that the controversy in the PRC is whether a grace principle or a works principle governs the believer’s experience of covenant fellowship with God. I maintain that that is a fair, accurate assessment of the controversy. And I maintain that I have Synod 2018 on my side when I say this.

However, if you demand that I produce an instance of the exact words “fellowship with God on the condition of their good works” spoken after Synod 2018, that can be done too. As I write this, there is a protest coming to Classis East in September against a sermon that taught that Christ “is establishing a condition that deals with communion. Not union, that’s grace, it’s all grace, only grace, but communion, fellowship.” At the time of this writing, the consistory has not sustained the protest.

Although the minister and the consistory acknowledge that the statement should not have been said, the consistory does not acknowledge that the statement as such is heretical. “This is a case of mis-speaking, not a statement of heresy” (Agenda of Classis East, September 8, 121, 123).

No, I do not agree that I have made false applications or false accusations when I say the controversy in the PRC is between the grace principle and the works principle applied to man’s experience of covenant fellowship with God. In fact, I contend that this must be our explanation of the controversy. If it is not, we will commit the same error again and again without ever being able to condemn it as the lie.

Third, the controversy in the PRC is not over the many statements of Protestant Reformed ministers and writers who speak of fellowship with God in the way of obedience. You quote several passages from Herman Hoeksema and Homer Hoeksema. You give your own beautiful exegesis of Psalm 32. I especially appreciated your conclusion: “This is how we understand the truth that can be so beautifully expressed in the words ‘in the way of.’ David’s fellowship with God did not depend on his good work of repentance, nor did God’s fellowship come on the condition of his good works. It was all of grace by faith.” Of grace by faith! Amen!

There are scores more quotations, if not hundreds

more quotations, that could be added to yours from many Protestant Reformed worthies. But this is not the controversy. From Synod 2018:

d) The [Consistory] Addendum contains pages of quotations teaching the “necessary way of the covenant.” However, there is no controversy between [the consistory] and [the appellant] on whether or not there is such a “necessary way of the covenant.”

(1) [The consistory] states, “As Scripture, the confessions, and Reformed men of the past have taught, God is pleased that we should experience the blessings of salvation in the way of obedience...” (Mar. 22, 2017 Letter).

(2) [The appellant] states, “I agree that I enjoy the fellowship of God as I live a life of sanctified good works. These will and must go together. There is no enjoyment in a life of debauchery” (Nov. 28, 2017 Letter). (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 74)

After all of this, this fundamental question stands before us yet in the PRC: What is the controversy? That question demands an answer. What is the controversy? Will we in the Protestant Reformed Churches be able to agree on an answer?

—AL

LETTERS: HOW OTHERS SEE US

Rev. Langerak,

Toward the end of the article of ‘How Others See Us,’ the less-than-flattering descriptions of PRC believers as cultic, spiritually abusive, and sectarian schismatics caught my eye. The counter-charge of “mockery” on your part was equally surprising. Not so much because the charges weren’t packaged in a tone and meme of disdain—they were. But precisely because during your treatment of the charges I found no evidence of careful inspection as to why Daniel Hyde and Steven Carr accuse the PRC with those charges in particular... cultic, spiritually abusive, and sectarian schismatics.

Additionally, will you clarify why you chose to respond in terms of the PRC’s doctrinal positions rather than

according to what those charges really describe—how PRC believers apply and operate out of the doctrinal and practical positions they hold? You replied with a much more easily constructed answer in terms of doctrinal differences, substituting out the question that the whole scenario begs to be answered: exactly why do Hyde and Carr (and others, as your title suggests) accuse the PRC with *these* particular charges—cultic, spiritually abusive and sectarian schismatics?

Finally, what do you believe the PRC thinks of someone who, under no occasion of conflict or Christian discipline, “leave[s] the denomination?”

Earnestly,

—Stefan Griess

REPLY

My article was not written for the purpose of a careful investigation of this mockery. The mockery of Daniel Hyde was not a conclusion drawn after a careful investigation of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) and her doctrines and practices. He gave no reasons for his name-calling. The charges are patently false. He wrote on social media to create an evil impression of the PRC. Such mockery also, then, does not warrant a careful investigation but to be called what it is.

Rather, my article was written over against the idea that has found some credence in our churches that the broader Reformed church world is looking for the PRC to give a witness to the truth—for instance, especially at NAPARC—and that the PRC will find a warm reception there with her witness. The kind of treatment that the PRC receives at the hands of respected men in that broader Reformed church world gives the lie to that idea. It shows that the PRC still stand alone with her testimony to the truth of the Reformed faith and against the departures of the Reformed church world from that truth and in the face of hatred of that witness.

The reason I made the issue doctrinal differences is that the mockery itself centered on the truth. The mockery stemmed from my criticism of Daniel Hyde for his attitude about doctrine; it centered on the supposed claim by the PRC that she is the true church; it included charges of hyper-Calvinism, sectarianism, and schism—all of which are at heart doctrinal in nature. I cannot guess how Daniel Hyde would finish his sentence about what the PRC say about those who leave these churches, which he calls spiritually abusive. But his question followed from his claim that the PRC maintain that she is the true church in the world—a doctrinal claim. Doctrine is at the heart of the offense that Daniel Hyde takes over the PRC. It is especially the PRC's insistence on the truth and adherence to that truth that offend. Equally offensive is the insistence of the PRC that adherence to the truth means adherence to the doctrine taught in these churches. The point of my article was not only that there is a lack of warm feelings in the URC for the PRC, but also that this lack of warm feelings stems from a deep doctrinal divide.

As to what I believe the PRC think of someone who leaves the denomination, sadly, there is no unanimity in our churches on that issue. I have run into those who

think it is no big deal if their son or daughter declares that he or she does not believe the truth. I have run into some who want to wish those who leave the truth God's blessing in their new church home. Others, I have found, are greatly grieved when their children leave the PRC, and these parents seriously admonish their children about this and want the church to do the same.

The better question is, what should be the word of parents, believers, elders, and deacons to those who leave under the circumstances Stefan describes? That is, “who, under no occasion of conflict or Christian discipline, ‘leave[s] the denomination.’”

This question is answered by the Reformed forms for baptism and confession of faith. There every parent and every confessing believer in the Protestant Reformed Churches confess regarding the doctrine of these churches that it is “the true and perfect doctrine of salvation.” Parents promise that they intend to see their children “instructed and brought up in the aforesaid doctrine.” Those making confession of faith promise “to adhere to this doctrine.” Regarding parents, this involves making sure that their children are in churches where this doctrine is taught. For the confessing believer, this means being a member where this doctrine is taught. If someone, then, leaves and, let us say, joins another church where this doctrine is not taught and perhaps where this doctrine is even described as hyper-Calvinism and sectarianism, that person is unfaithful to his vow, departs from the truth, and commits himself to the doctrinal errors taught in his new church home. This will have evil consequences in his life and generations under God's judgment. What is to be the word of parents, family, friends, elders, and ministers to such a one? “You sin in departing from the truth.”

To so warn someone is not spiritually abusive, sectarian, schismatic, or cultic. But such a warning is true Christian love—love for the truth and love for a life and soul.

That such an admonition is regarded as spiritually abusive—and the rest—simply demonstrates how far one himself has fallen from the truth.

The truth must be everything in our lives, and every aspect and decision of our lives must be made subservient to the truth, the truth as officially maintained by the Protestant Reformed Churches.

—NJL



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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

Then sent Sanballat his servant unto me in like manner the fifth time with an open letter in his hand; wherein was written, It is reported among the heathen, and Gashmu saith it, that thou and the Jews think to rebel: for which cause thou buildest the wall, that thou mayest be their king, according to these words. And thou hast also appointed prophets to preach of thee at Jerusalem, saying, There is a king in Judah: and now shall it be reported to the king according to these words. Come now therefore, and let us take counsel together. Then I sent unto him, saying, There are no such things done as thou sayest, but thou feignest them out of thine own heart. For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands. —Nehemiah 6:5–9

Walk about Zion and go round about her: tell the towers thereof. Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces; that ye may tell it to the generation following. Beautiful Zion is now sitting without her walls. It was a glorious work of Nehemiah to build the walls again—labor in the truth.

Sanballat, the opponent of that glorious work of building the walls of Zion, was the relentless enemy of God and his people. Four times by various methods, Sanballat tried to stop the work. Then he came a fifth time with an open letter. His words were softer than oil; he came as a friend concerned for them. It is commonly reported throughout the land, and there is a witness who is willing to testify, that the Jews think to rebel. You, Nehemiah, want to make yourself king. You have set up prophets to preach your kingship in Jerusalem. Let us take counsel together. Come and talk, and I will deliver you from the charges. But there was war in Sanballat's heart. He came to terrify the people in order to weaken their hands that the work not be done.

In such a manner have the enemies of the truth acted in every age. Before Pilate, the Jews accused Jesus of raising rebellion throughout all Jewry, forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that he was king. Tertullus, that golden-tongued orator, accused Paul of being a pestilent fellow, a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. The Roman Catholic enemies of the Reformation whispered in the ears of all the monarchs of Europe that the reformers were schismatics in the church, disobedient to government, and teachers of rebellion. So also, the authorities in the Netherlands accused Hendrik De Cock of sowing the seeds of destruction, turmoil, and division and of attempting to overthrow good order in the church. And their enemies accused Herman Hoeksema and Henry Danhof of breaking their oaths of subscription and of causing schism in the Christian Reformed Church.

There is nothing new under the sun.

There were no such things done as the enemies accused, but the enemies feigned them out of their own hearts. They tried to weaken the church that the work not be done. But God strengthened the hands of his servants.

—NJL