

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

SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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

Deuteronomy 33:29

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CONTENTS

3

MEDITATION

BLESSED NATION!

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak

5

EDITORIAL

OUR PRESENT CONTROVERSY (4)

Rev. Andrew W. Lanning

8

FROM THE EDITOR

Rev. Andrew W. Lanning

9

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

A DEFENSE OF *SWORD AND SHIELD* AND
REFORMED BELIEVERS PUBLISHING (1):

Article 31 of the Church Order

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak

16

FAITH AND LIFE

THE ETHICS OF MERCY

Rev. Martin VanderWal

19

BOOK REVIEW

ROOT AND FRUIT IN REVIEW
AND COMPARISON

Connie L. Meyer

24

FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak



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Editor-in-chief

Rev. Andrew W. Lanning

Contributing editors

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak

Rev. Martin VanderWal

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Email: office@reformedbelieverspub.org

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BLESSED NATION!

Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD; and the people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance. — Psalm 33:12

Who is your God? A god, every man must have. The only question is whether man's God is Jehovah or whether his god is the vain idol. Knowing that God is and that he must be served, men, inexcusably mad, fashion for themselves idols from their vain imaginations and worship the creature rather than the Creator. And the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold the truth in unrighteousness. The God whom they refused to worship gives them over to their vile affections and to a reprobate mind. Cursed is that people whose god is the worthless idol.

Blessed nation whose God is Jehovah.

Jehovah, he is God. He is what he is in the instant and constant fullness of his divine being. From eternity to eternity he is the same in being and in all his perfections. I AM THAT I AM is his name. There is no god beside him. There is no blessedness outside of him.

Jehovah is the creator. By the word of Jehovah were the heavens made and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth. Not evolution, not a big bang, not mutations or nature, but Jehovah made the world and all that is therein. He gave to every creature its being, shape, and offices to serve him. He made all the nations of the world and all the tribes and tongues from one man and his wife, Eve. To ascribe creation to any other is to deny that Jehovah is God.

Upon Jehovah as the perfectly self-sufficient one, all depends. The world that he made he did not forsake to fortune or chance, but he upholds and governs it as it were by his hand. He perfectly guides everything according to his counsel to his determined goal. He upholds man, so that the beating of his heart and all his native powers and gifts come from God. Jehovah brings to pass all his counsel and does all his pleasure. Nothing in heaven, the earth, or the sea—not the falling of a single hair of your head or of an insignificant sparrow to the ground—happens without his will.

Jehovah is especially revealed to be God because he brings the counsels of the heathen to nothing. Not only does he not need man or require his consent, but also Jehovah frustrates the designs of man. When the heathen gather themselves together and set themselves against the Lord and against his anointed to cast God's yoke from

them and to break his bands in sunder, Jehovah rules over them. In that gathering together they have all their wicked tricks and devices and plans. Jehovah makes them all of none effect. The heathen cannot accomplish their purposes or bring their desires to pass. Jehovah frustrates them and uses their wickedness, their evil, and their plans to carry out his plan. They think evil; God intends and purposes great good. The counsel of Jehovah stands forever and the thoughts of his heart to all generations.

The fall of man in the garden of Eden served for the revelation of his glorious purpose in Christ Jesus to put enmity between the Seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent and to crush the serpent's head. At the cross, Jehovah laid that greatest wickedness, the crucifixion of his Son, as the foundation of redemption and of the accomplishment of his eternal purpose for the perfection of his covenant and the glorification of all things in Christ Jesus. At the cross, Jehovah revealed himself as the almighty, sovereign, self-sufficient, merciful, and just God and the overflowing fountain of all good.

Jehovah as God is judge. Jehovah looks from heaven and beholds with his penetrating gaze all the sons of men. From the least of the sons of Adam to the greatest, none escape God's scrutiny in all their habitations, in their secret places, and in their public gatherings. He considers all their works. He does not see as man sees. God considers all their works with perfect vision: their designs, intentions, motives, and secrets of their hearts. So considering them, God judges. In his judgment he blesses the righteous and curses the wicked. The righteous Jehovah loves the righteous. He hates all the workers of iniquity.

This is all that matters in one's life: what does Jehovah God say about a person? For Jehovah, he is God. If a man is right with Jehovah, that man's life is right. Jehovah blesses that man with favor and wonderful grace. Jehovah is for that man, and all things are for him. But if a man is not right with Jehovah, Jehovah turns the way of the wicked upside down. God curses that man's way, overturning and overthrowing all his designs and bringing everything in that wicked man's life to vanity. That is why a horse is a vain thing for safety. Not even a king is saved by the multitude of his strength, because man ultimately has to do only with Jehovah.

The great revelation of the name of Jehovah is Jesus. A

man cannot know Jehovah rightly and savingly, and Jehovah is not one's God, apart from Jesus Christ and faith in him. Jesus is Jehovah, and he reveals Jehovah. Jesus reveals Jehovah as a God who is faithful and unchanging in his covenant promise to be the God of his people. Jesus reveals that Jehovah in his goodness, love, and tender mercy toward his people spared not his own Son. Jesus reveals Jehovah as the God who is perfect in sovereignty and who has mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he wills he hardens.

Blessed is the nation whose God is Jehovah.

Your god is that in which you trust, that which makes you happy, and that, then, which you love and worship. In whatever man places his trust, that is his god. Man may trust in horses, that is, in some earthly strength. He may trust in his own strength. He may trust, as the heathen, in Baal, Ashtoreth, or Dagon. Or, as the modern, sophisticated idolater, he may worship mammon and so place his trust in money, man, science, medicine, or technology. Man always trusts in something. Because he is man and is dependent, man must trust in something.

Whatever is man's god determines that man's life. One's life shows his god. Because Jehovah is God alone, man either trusts in Jehovah, or he trusts in some idol.

Blessed is that nation whose God is Jehovah. That people confess him to be their God. They know him. They know him rightly as Jehovah gives himself to be known. He is the God of revelation. He speaks. He speaks of himself, and that speech is his name. They know Jehovah as he is revealed in Jesus Christ in the sacred scriptures. The people whose God is Jehovah know Jehovah their God and know him as he gives himself to be known by them in truth.

Knowing Jehovah, that people trust in his holy name. With humility and patience they submit to him, for he is sovereign and not they. He knows what is wise and good for them. They expect from him all good things, for all things are his, and he is the overflowing fountain of all good. They love, fear, and glorify him with their whole hearts, so that they renounce and forsake all creatures rather than commit the least thing contrary to his will. They wait upon him as the servant on his master and the maid on her mistress. They cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and when they through weakness fall into sin, they do not despair of his mercy nor continue in sin, but turn from that sin and seek his grace, mercy, forgiveness, and help in time of need. Their souls wait on Jehovah because he is their help and shield.

Blessed nation! In the Old Testament the nation was of the sons of Jacob, the true Israelite, the seed of Abraham, whose God was Jehovah. That nation is not an earthly nation any longer. That nation is the church. She is a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,

a peculiar people, to show forth the praises of him who called her out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Blessed nation whose God is Jehovah.

That people are blessed because Jehovah chose them for his own inheritance. The thoughts of his heart from eternity to eternity are for them, to have them for his own peculiar people.

Jehovah is their God not because they chose him and made him their God. He is their God not because they cleaved unto him, loved him, submitted to him, or feared him. He is their God not because of anything—any act of righteousness—they have done. Oh, the god that must be chosen by men is not Jehovah but is an idol! He is not I AM THAT I AM, but I WILL BE WHAT MAN MAKES ME. He is an idol like Baal was an idol. Such a god is the construction of the vain imaginations of men, who made idols of silver and gold for the heathen nations in ancient times and to this day fashion new ones by their elaborate, sophisticated, and false theology in order to deceive the simple and to cause them to fall down to kiss and worship an idol.

The god who must be chosen of men is not Jehovah, for the simple reason that Jehovah reveals that he chooses his people. The same kind of false god is the god who does not choose a people at all. He loves everyone, desires the salvation of all, and blesses all. He is not Jehovah. He is not God, for the very simple reason that Psalm 33:12 says that Jehovah has a nation and a people that he chose as his inheritance, who are his peculiar treasure above all nations and every people, and who are blessed as his people.

Blessed is that people whose God is Jehovah, the nation whom he has chosen. They were chosen as a nation as one whole, united under a single head. He did not pick that nation first. He chose the head of that nation first, even our Lord, Jesus Christ. And Jehovah did not pick one particular nation out of the world. It seemed that way for many years when that nation and people were confined among one people. But he chose his people out of all the nations to be a holy nation to him. They are his elect. His elect as they were chosen by him from all eternity and that in distinction from those whom Jehovah rejected and appointed to destruction. They are his elect as they manifest themselves in the world in true churches of Jesus Christ where this God is confessed, believed, and known as he speaks of himself in the gospel. In a church where the people speak what God speaks about himself, there are the people of God, and there is that nation whose God is Jehovah. There are his chosen, who are precious and dear to him.

He chose this blessed people as his inheritance. That choice is gracious, for an inheritance is simply a gracious gift. And when Jehovah calls them his inheritance, the graciousness of his choice is further pointed out because an inheritance comes to the heirs only by death. God

chose his people as his inheritance, and that inheritance came to him and was reconciled to him only by the death of the Son of God. And Jehovah calls them his inheritance because among them, in you and with you, he dwells, blessed people whose God is Jehovah.

God dwells among them as surely as he dwelt with Israel of old. As Israel of old dwelt each man in his inheritance, so God dwells with his people. By the Spirit of Christ, he comes to us, takes his abode with us, and dwells in us. By that same Spirit, Jehovah takes the fullness of Christ and pours out upon us his heavenly graces to fill us with his fullness—grace for grace.

That Jehovah dwells with them means, first, that he forgives their sins, for the righteous Lord cannot dwell with sinners and the unrighteous. Be glad in the Lord, ye righteous! That he dwells with them means, second, that he makes them holy, for the holy God is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity.

If Jehovah dwells in them, he also makes them fruitful, as a very skillful farmer makes his land blossom, grow, and produce fruit. Christ is the vine. He is the husbandman. He sends the rain of his grace upon his people and his Spirit into them, and they bear fruit—some thirty-, some sixty-, and some one hundredfold. This inheritance of Jehovah drinks up the dew of heaven and is as a watered garden.

When the enemies come against them, Jehovah defends his inheritance because it is his and no man can trespass upon it. He preserves his inheritance, so that none can diminish it or cause any part of it to fail.

Oh, blessed is that people whose God is Jehovah, the nation that he chose as his own inheritance.

If Jehovah is their God, he is for them with all his might, sovereignty, and grace; and, indeed, the whole creation and all of history are for them. If Jehovah, God of all, lord of all, sovereign of all, is their God, that is their whole blessedness. They do not need anything more than that.

Jehovah cares for you, loves you, and gives to you from

the inexhaustible richness of his perfect goodness. That blessed people need not worry or fear what they shall eat or what they shall drink or wherewithal they shall be clothed. After these things do those who serve mammon seek. About these things the people whose god is the dollar worry. From the bounties of the world, which God made, he gives them their daily bread, and often he gives much more besides. He can keep his people alive in famine.

From the overflowing fountain of his perfectly good being, he bestows the riches and treasures of salvation that he stored up in Christ Jesus. He delivers his people from death! Perfectly blessed is the nation whose God is Jehovah.

That nation is blessed in everything. That people are blessed when he gives them joys in this life. They are blessed when, according to his infinite sovereignty and perfect wisdom, they suffer afflictions and sorrows. They are blessed in their falls, too, for they do not always trust him. They do not always rely upon him and call upon him. They wander, and they stray, and sometimes they fall deeply. Jehovah does not forsake them. He seeks them. He calls them to himself. He turns them, and they are turned. He grants unto them faith and repentance and knowledge of his fatherly goodness once again.

That nation alone is blessed. Only that people whom he has chosen and whom he has made his people are blessed. They are not blessed at all who worship Allah, Buddha, the Great World Spirit, mammon, the world, pleasure, or themselves. A man cannot serve God and mammon. Cursed is that people whose God is not Jehovah. Cursed in this life and cursed in the next. Cursed is that people whose God is not Jehovah, those whom he has not chosen but rejected. Blessed are they—only they are blessed—whose God is Jehovah.

If your God is Jehovah, he chose you to that, and you are a blessed people. Rejoice in him, blessed people.

O Jehovah, let thy mercy be upon us, according as we hope in thee.

—NJL

EDITORIAL

OUR PRESENT CONTROVERSY (4)

The Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) are in the midst of internal doctrinal controversy. The controversy is whether a grace principle or a works principle governs the believer's conscious experience of fellowship with God. The previous editorials have explained the doctrinal issue in the controversy and

have demonstrated that the controversy continues to this day.

This brings us to an important question: What now? Where do the Protestant Reformed Churches go from here? How can the Protestant Reformed Churches come to the conclusion of this controversy?

Our Current Direction

The direction that we are currently going as churches is not good. Our current direction is to fight against those who would defend the truth and who would condemn the lie. This direction will not deliver us from controversy but will keep us embroiled in controversy. Worse, this direction will leave us vulnerable to the lie and will leave our generations engulfed by the lie.

One evidence of our direction as churches is whom we discipline. To this date, three men have been placed under Christian discipline in the course of our controversy. Each of these is an officebearer in the Protestant Reformed Churches or was an officebearer at the time of his discipline. Each of these men was disciplined precisely because of his defense of the truth and opposition to the lie. Although the charges were not identical in each case, the discipline in each case was directly related to each man's defense of the truth.

Early on in the controversy, the elder who first stood up for the truth and condemned the lie was suspended and deposed from office and was made to languish under discipline for three years. The decision to suspend and depose the elder was made by his consistory with a neighboring consistory and was upheld by an entire classis when it was appealed.

More recently, a minister and a deacon in another Protestant Reformed church were relieved of the duties of their offices. They were also placed under discipline for several weeks. The minister and deacon were not finally suspended or deposed, because the consistory reversed its decision before it could seek the advice of a neighboring consistory.

Each of these men—the elder, the minister, and the deacon—was subsequently exonerated, and their discipline was declared to be in error and was lifted. Each of the men received an apology from their consistories. All three men are currently members in good standing in their congregations. The minister and deacon were also restored to the duties of their offices.

It is striking that in the entire course of our controversy, discipline has only ever been applied to men who stood for the truth and fought against the lie. By comparison, discipline has never been applied to any officebearer or member who taught the lie, tolerated the lie, or defended the lie. Our official activity of church discipline has been and continues to be entirely on one side in this controversy. Discipline has not been applied to those who taught or defended “doctrinal error” in which “the perfect work of Christ is displaced” (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 70), but discipline has been applied several times to those who defended the truth against that doctrinal error.

The official activity of Christian discipline against the defenders of the truth has not been limited to the early stages of our controversy, but has spanned the controversy from the beginning until now. Both in the lead-up to Synod 2018 and in the aftermath of Synod 2018, those who stood for the truth suffered discipline. The elder was deposed and placed under discipline in the lead-up to Synod 2018. The minister and the deacon were relieved of their duties of office and placed under discipline in the aftermath of Synod 2018.

The fact that each man was ultimately exonerated counts for something. If the churches can take hold of that direction and press forward in that direction of exonerating the defenders of the truth, that will be for the great good of the Protestant Reformed Churches. It remains to be seen whether that is the direction that we as churches will go, or whether we will press forward in the direction of deposing and disciplining the defenders of the truth.

Another evidence of our direction as churches is the official and public response of many consistories to the content of *Sword and Shield*. The consistories of almost a third of the denomination have written letters to their congregations warning their members against the content of *Sword and Shield*.

I will leave the readers to their own judgment of *Sword and Shield*, but I will tell you my opinion. In my opinion, *Sword and Shield* has been a God-glorifying, soul-edifying, church-serving magazine. No thanks to the writers; thanks only to our gracious God. If *Sword and Shield* has been anything by God's grace, it has been polemical. It has called out the lie in every rubric, both implicitly and explicitly. It has instructed the readership in the doctrinal issues involved in our controversy. It has drawn out the dangers of the lie and the continued threat of the lie to the Protestant Reformed Churches. And God has sped this polemic to the heart of the whole PRC, so that the controversy is on every mind and on every tongue. This is good for the PRC.

What has been the response of almost a third of the denomination's consistories to this polemic?

This: “The Consistory is writing to you regarding the magazine the *Sword and Shield*, that many if not all of you have received. The Consistory believes that this magazine is causing and promoting division in the Protestant Reformed Churches, and because of that felt that we should send out a letter to address our concerns with this.”

And this: “When reading the *Sword and Shield*, we urge you to exercise discernment, wisdom, patience, and charity. We caution against developing an attitude of suspicion and distrust of our pastors, consistories, fellow members, and ecclesiastical assemblies.”

And this: “Although the magazine purports the

development of the Reformed truth, statements made in the publication give evidence that the content and manner in which this is done will only cause further division, promote discord and will lead to schism.”

Accusation upon accusation that *Sword and Shield* is schismatic and disorderly and slanderous and a troubler of Israel. By comparison, no consistory (that I am aware of) has written a letter to its congregation urging the members to read *Sword and Shield*, to understand the serious doctrinal threat facing our churches, and to repent for our ignorance of and toleration of such gross wickedness. The point of this comparison is not to call consistories to write letters to their congregations, but to illustrate that the official activity of pastoral letters to the congregations has been and continues to be entirely on one side in this controversy. Letters are not written to abhor and abominate the specific doctrinal error that threatens us, but many letters are written against a publication that does abhor and abominate that doctrinal error.

The direction that we are currently going as churches is not good.

Schism?

Are we headed for schism in our current direction? That idea is being promoted as the inevitable way forward for our denomination. Fingers have been pointed at *Sword and Shield* as one of the main culprits for the supposedly impending schism. A letter to a congregation says that the “content and manner” of *Sword and Shield* “will only cause further division, promote discord and will lead to schism.”

Such accusations are foolish. The answer of Rev. Gerrit Vos when he was likewise accused of promoting a split in 1951 comes to mind:

What nonsense is this, that I would pray for a split in our churches? Anyone knowing me at all would never believe it. And it is, of course, not true. I will say no more about that; will not entertain that thought for one minute. God knows how I would rejoice if once more we would all be united, and unitedly take our strong stand against all heresies. (“A Letter,” *Standard Bearer* 27, no. 9 [February 1, 1951]: 200)

In spite of their foolishness, these accusations of schism are popular. Well, then, here is my answer to these accusations.

First, I love the Protestant Reformed Churches. I do not want a split. I am not calling for a split. I am not working toward a split. The thought of a split grieves me. I desire peace. I desire unity. I desire the preservation of the Protestant Reformed Churches and all that God has given us in our churches, our ecclesiastical assemblies,

our seminary, our mission fields, our sister-church relationships, our schools, our publications, our fellowship, and every other thing that is good and happy and blessed among us. I sing and pray the end of Psalm 122:

6. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee.
7. Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces.
8. For my brethren and companions’ sakes, I will now say, Peace be within thee.
9. Because of the house of the LORD our God I will seek thy good.

Second, there are worse things than a split that could happen to the Protestant Reformed Churches: heresy and false doctrine, which the Bible calls “divisions” (1 Cor. 1:10); compromise of the gospel, which the Bible calls “another gospel” and the perversion of “the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:6–7); apostasy, which the Bible calls “a falling away” (2 Thess. 2:3); loss of the antithesis in doctrine and life, which the Bible calls the unholy mixture of “[fearing] the LORD, and [serving] their own gods” (2 Kings 17:33); doctrinal ignorance and indifference, which the Bible calls “lack of knowledge” (Hos. 4:6); spiritual coolness toward the truth, which the Bible calls “[receiving] not the love of the truth” (2 Thess. 2:10). These things are horrifying! Much more so than a split! A church can survive a split, painful and miserable as it may be. A church cannot survive doctrinal ignorance and indifference. God will judge and destroy a church that is cool toward his truth and lackadaisical toward error. Here is God’s judgment on a compromise of Christ’s gospel: “let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8–9). Here is God’s judgment on doctrinal ignorance and indifference: “my people are destroyed” and “I will also reject thee” and “I will also forget thy children” (Hos. 4:6). Here is God’s judgment on spiritual coolness toward the truth: “And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thess. 2:11–12).

Yes, I despise the thought of a split. But I despise the thought of these other things much, much more.

Third, if there is schism in the Protestant Reformed Churches, it will not be the fault of *Sword and Shield* or of a vigorous, robust, and even boisterous defense of the truth. What is schism, after all? Schism is division and departure from the truth. Schism is defined in 1 Corinthians 1:10, where the King James Version translates the word *schisms* as “divisions.” A schism/division is when a church does not “all speak the same thing” and when a church is not “perfectly joined together in the same

mind and in the same judgment.” The mind, judgment, and speech that unites the church is the mind, judgment, and speech of Jesus Christ and his name: “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” The unity of the church is found in the truth of Jesus Christ. That truth is revealed by Jesus’ name, which is the whole content of the scriptures. If anyone departs from that truth and divides from that truth, he is guilty of schism and division. The truth unites; the lie divides.

Sword and Shield has not divided from the truth, but has taught the truth. *Sword and Shield* is not infallible and is certainly capable of error. But let anyone show in any article in any issue where *Sword and Shield* has taught a lie or doctrinal error or false doctrine or heresy.

What is more, *Sword and Shield* has promoted unity in the Protestant Reformed Churches by calling us to unity in the truth and united opposition to the lie. The controversy in the denomination has been about a lie that departed from our Reformed confessions. That is, the PRC taught, tolerated, and defended a departure from our Reformed confessions. You don’t have to take my word for it, as this was the explicit judgment of Synod 2018: “Classis failed to deal with doctrinal error contained in sermons [the appellant] protested to [a consistory]. The doctrinal error is that the believer’s good works

are given a place and function that is out of harmony with the Reformed confessions” (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 61). Out of harmony with the Reformed confessions! This means a departure from the Reformed confessions. This means contrary to the Reformed confessions. This means a division and a schism from the truth of the Reformed confessions. By calling us to repudiate the lie, *Sword and Shield* is calling us to unity in the truth of the Reformed confessions.

The accusations of schism probably stem from people being stirred up by *Sword and Shield*. Yes, people are stirred up. I am happy about this, and I pray that we are stirred up even more. Stirred up, that is, to a greater love of the truth and greater hatred of the lie. People being stirred up is not schism. Peter wrote to stir up the minds of God’s people (2 Pet. 1:13; 3:1). The church is called to be stirred up and to come awake from her spiritual sleep, her lethargy, her works of darkness (Rom. 13:11).

Schism? If it comes, it will not be by *Sword and Shield*, which is striving mightily by God’s grace for the unity of the denomination in the truth.

What then is the way forward for the Protestant Reformed Churches? It is this: We must not only all confess the same truth; we must also all condemn the same lie. That is, the way forward is one of a specific and explicit fight against our own lie. To this we will turn in the December issue, the Lord willing.

—AL

Schism? If it comes, it will not be by *Sword and Shield*, which is striving mightily by God’s grace for the unity of the denomination in the truth.

FROM THE EDITOR

Reformed Believers Publishing is excited to announce that plans have been completed for the first annual meeting of RBP. Here are the details:

Date and time: Thursday, October 15, 2020, at 7:00 p.m.

Event location: The business office of Reformed Believers Publishing at
325 84th St. SW, Suite 102
Byron Center, MI 49315

Speeches:

A Believer’s Paper: The Freedom of *Sword and Shield*—Rev. A. Lanning

Remarks regarding *Sword and Shield* and RBP—Rev. M. VanderWal

Remarks regarding *Sword and Shield* and RBP—Rev. N. Langerak

Because there are currently restrictions on the number of people allowed for an indoor public gathering, the meeting will be an outdoor event held under a tent canopy. If you know you will be attending the annual meeting in person, please RSVP to office@reformedbelieverspub.org by October 10. If you do not RSVP, you are still more than welcome to attend the meeting, but an RSVP will help the board plan adequate accommodations and refreshments.

The annual meeting will be livestreamed for the benefit of those who cannot attend in person. The livestream can be accessed through the website: reformedbelieverspub.org.

An invitation to join Reformed Believers Publishing is once again extended to all Reformed believers. Because of the unique venue and circumstances of the annual meeting, there has been a slight change in plans for how members will be received. New membership requests will *not* be voted on at the meeting but will be voted on through email a couple of days prior to the meeting and announced at the meeting. This means that the deadline for membership requests is **October 10**. If you desire to join RBP as a member, please submit the membership request form, which is available at reformedbelieverspub.org, by October 10.

We are thankful to God for making this first annual meeting possible, and we look forward to seeing you there.

We hope that you enjoyed the special “Letters Edition” of *Sword and Shield* last month. The letters showed that there is great interest in the pressing matters that our churches are

facing, whether it be COVID-19 and the church’s response to it, or the doctrinal controversy within the Protestant Reformed Churches. We continue to invite the readers of *Sword and Shield* to send in letters for publication.

With this issue, we return to the normal publication schedule of *Sword and Shield* on the first of each month. This is also the last of the free bonus issues that were made possible by your generous donations. Thank you again to all who contributed to this cause. Beginning with the next issue in November, *Sword and Shield* will be sent only to subscribers. See reformedbelieverspub.org, where you can subscribe to the print version, the digital version, or both. Whether you subscribed at the very beginning or are just doing so now, your annual subscription fee will be applied beginning in November.

With that, we hope to see you at our annual meeting. And we hope that you profit from this issue of *Sword and Shield*. May God speed the truths written herein to your heart, and the next issue into your hands.

—AL

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

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

A DEFENSE OF *SWORD AND SHIELD* AND REFORMED BELIEVERS PUBLISHING (1): Article 31 of the Church Order

With this article I begin a defense of the magazine *Sword and Shield* and of the organization that publishes it, Reformed Believers Publishing. This defense should not be necessary. It should not be any more necessary than a father should feel it necessary to defend the existence of a child whom he has begotten. It should not be necessary to defend the appearance of a Reformed organization started by believers in good standing in the churches, who love the Reformed truth, and who in that love for the Reformed truth publish a magazine to promote that Reformed truth. It should not be necessary to defend the existence of a magazine committed to instruction in the Reformed truth, to the application of the Reformed truth to every area of life, and to the defense of that truth against false doctrines repugnant to the truth. The right of the truth to exist, to rule in the church, to be heard, and to speak to every area of life in the church and world is the right of such an organization

and magazine to exist. The calling of the Lord Jesus Christ himself to believers to confess him before men is the right for such an organization and magazine to exist. Conscious of their liberty in Jesus Christ and his calling to them, believers formed Reformed Believers Publishing and now publish *Sword and Shield*.

A storm of false, unjust, and unfounded criticism leveled publicly and privately against the magazine and organization necessitates a defense of *Sword and Shield* and its publishing organization. The criticism insinuates evil motives on the part of those involved in the production of *Sword and Shield*, denies the holiness and righteousness of the endeavor, stirs up unfounded fears of bad consequences from the existence of the magazine, and creates doubt in the minds of believers whether in good conscience they may support such an organization and read its magazine. These criticisms come privately in letters from individuals to the editors of *Sword and*

Shield and from consistories to the board of Reformed Believers Publishing and to the editors' consistories. And consistories publicly criticize and issue warnings in open letters to their congregations in the Protestant Reformed denomination.

These criticisms include serious charges—explicitly and implicitly—against the magazine, its editors, and the board that publishes the magazine and thus raise suspicions in the denomination regarding this righteous and worthy endeavor. This in turn necessitates a defense of *Sword and Shield*, its origin, its right of existence, and the cause in which it is engaged.

I begin with the criticism that the organization and magazine are committed to a schismatic principle because of a wrong understanding of article 31 of the Church Order. I begin with this criticism not because it is the most important. I regard it as a distraction from the main issues surrounding the appearance of the organization and magazine and from the main purpose of the magazine. Rather, I begin with this criticism because it is the most damaging when it casts the magazine, its writers, and its publisher as an unruly mob committed to disorder and schism in the churches. Without basis, this criticism casts as the purpose and main work of the magazine to criticize synodical decisions. It is also a common theme. Virtually every open letter sent by consistories to their congregations mentions disorder and schism in some form or other. Representative is a portion of the letter from one consistory:

Although we do not discourage you from reading good reformed biblical writing, we have concerns with statements expressed by the editor in the June, 2020 issue. In particular, on page 8, 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.”

The consistory does not believe this to be in accordance with reformed church government. The Church Order in article 31, to which every office bearer subscribes upon signing the formula of subscription, states:

If anyone complain that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to a major

ecclesiastical assembly, and whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God or with the articles of the Church Order, as long as they are not changed by the general synod.

We caution the congregation not to be led astray by the false notion that one may voice objections with decisions of the broader assemblies in the way that the Sword and Shield proposes can be done. Rather, the proper, orderly and loving way to voice objections with any decision of an ecclesiastical body is by the way of protest and appeal to the appropriate ecclesiastical body.

By far this is the most fairly stated of the public criticisms. This consistory calls the position of the magazine it critiques a “false notion” and warns the congregation not to be “led astray” by it. The argument is that article 31 forbids voicing “objections with any decision of an ecclesiastical body,” except “by the way of protest and appeal.” Further, since every officebearer has subscribed to the Church Order and the Formula of Subscription, so to criticize an ecclesiastical decision is the profanity of breaking one’s vow.

Another consistory wrote to its congregation,

Finally, we warn you against disorder and rebellion in our churches. The magazine claims the right publicly “to condemn” decisions of church assemblies...While we agree that believers in our churches have the right to discuss these decisions and even to condemn these decisions by going directly to these church assemblies, we are required to do so in the proper manner...We remind you of the “settled and binding” nature of decisions by church assemblies (See Church Order Articles 31 & 35), and we remind you of the submission and order which God requires of us and to which we have vowed (See Formula of Subscription, and the third question of Confession of Faith). Be mindful that loving submission to God involves a recognition of His Spirit’s work in our church assemblies and in the hearts of all His people.

Like the other consistory, this consistory argues that article 31 allows for *only* protest and appeal and that submission to all synodical decisions is included in the vow of the Formula of Subscription.

Furthermore, the letters argue implicitly that the activity of criticizing an ecclesiastical decision, except by way of protest, is schismatic, a breaking of the unity of

the church. So another consistory has told its congregation explicitly about the writers' and publisher's

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.

Still another consistory accuses that “rather than promoting the unity of believers in that truth, [the magazine and its writers] promote disunity and schism.” The consistory points for proof to the fact that the publication gives 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 consistory maintains that

this process [of protest and appeal while submitting and with no public criticism], as it has been followed throughout our history and the history of our mother church, begins at the consistory level, and proceeds, if necessary, to the Classical level, and then finally to the Synodical level.

The message is clear. *Sword and Shield* and Reformed Believers Publishing are a dangerous magazine and organization that are committed to and promote disunity, a divisive spirit, and schism because they have a false and misleading notion about article 31 of the Church Order, on the basis of which notion they claim the right publicly to criticize ecclesiastical decisions. The only way is by protest and appeal.

To all in the Protestant Reformed Churches who espouse this position, I say, “You have forgotten your own history.” It was precisely because the founding worthies of these churches would *not* agree to that understanding of article 31, but committed themselves to criticize publicly a synodical decision, that the Protestant Reformed Churches exist. Those men defended their public criticism of a synodical decision as being in harmony with article 31 properly understood and in harmony with their oaths of subscription. In harmony with their convictions about article 31 and their oaths of subscription, they wrote in the *Standard Bearer* and publicly committed themselves to criticize a synodical decision.

The argument used to cast aspersions upon *Sword and*

Shield is the same argument that the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) used to discipline Herman Hoeksema and his consistory, Henry Danhof and his consistory, and George Ophoff and his consistory and to cast them all out of the church. The criticism against *Sword and Shield* is even more unjust because the magazine being so criticized came into being precisely to uphold a synodical decision, to elucidate it, and to instruct concerning it and the serious doctrinal issues involved in it. But such is the ignorance of the Church Order and of the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches that even a mild statement about an activity in which our fathers engaged and for which they fought and which was part and parcel of the *Standard Bearer* earns a serious charge. One would think that the critics would at least wait until the editors criticize an ecclesiastical decision before leveling charges at us and declaring before the world that we are schismatic.

The CRC's erroneous understanding of article 31 can be proven by the words of the fathers of the Protestant Reformed Churches and by the decisions of their enemies in the CRC. They threw out of the church the ministers and their consistories on a false ground and a trumped-up charge by means of the most grotesque trampling of all ecclesiastical order and decency, so that while those enemies falsely charged our fathers with overthrowing all order and decency in the church, the enemies themselves were the guilty parties.

Hoeksema stated the situation in which he and the others found themselves after the Christian Reformed Synod of 1924 adopted the three points of common grace:

The two classes [Grand Rapids East and Grand Rapids West] considered it their duty to bring the three pastors and their consistories into subjection under the ecclesiastical yoke that had been manufactured by the Synod of Kalamazoo, i.e. to elicit from them a promise of fidelity to the three doctrinal statements regarding common grace that had been adopted by that synod; or, in case these ministers and consistories should appear to be stubbornly recalcitrant, to impose the proper penalties and apply the necessary discipline.*

That determination of those two classes arose out of their understanding of article 31. Their understanding of the article was made plain by the classical decisions to depose the ministers and their consistories and by

* Classis Grand Rapids East was the classis of Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church, where Herman Hoeksema was minister. Classis Grand Rapids West was the classis of Kalamazoo Christian Reformed Church, where Henry Danhof was minister, and of Hope Christian Reformed Church, where George Ophoff was minister. The quotation is from Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America: Their Origin, Early History and Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: First Protestant Reformed Church, 1936), 13. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this book are in text.

overtures to the classes by other consistories. The consistory of Dennis Avenue CRC and the consistory of Creston CRC each wrote an overture to the classis “demanding that the pastor of the Eastern Avenue Church [Hoeksema] be requested to promise that he would abide by the ‘Three Points’” (148). Classis Grand Rapids East then decided “to demand of the consistory of the Eastern Avenue Church, that they ask their pastor whether or no he would abide by the three points of doctrine as adopted by the Synod of Kalamazoo, 1924” (149).

In defense of this demand, the classis wrote, “Obviously it was the duty of the consistory to interpellate [demand an explanation of] the pastor as soon as he publicly opposed the doctrinal decisions of the Synod in the *The Standard Bearer*” (155).

Particularly the writings of Hoeksema and Danhof in the *Standard Bearer* roused their enemies to move against these ministers. As proof of Hoeksema’s public opposition, the classis referred to the first issue of the *Standard Bearer*, in which the editors had written,

Our views underwent no change and we do not think of retreating. The editorial staff of this paper judges, that no Reformed person is able to sign the declarations of Synod (the reference is to the “Three Points”), according to their real import and tendency. It will attempt, therefore, to make the reader understand the real sense of these declarations; in order that, after sufficient study, each and everyone may act with true knowledge of his act and its consequences. (131)

The classis grounded its judgment that Hoeksema was guilty of schismatic behavior on “Art. 31, ‘...Whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote in the major ecclesiastical assembly shall be considered settled and binding...’ ...And the formula of subscription.” (156)

The classis explained its understanding of article 31 when it decided the following:

The classis informs the Consistory that these brethren [Hoeksema and Danhof] had the right to protest, but to protest does not include nor involve the right to propagate views opposed to the doctrinal decrees of Synod 1924. In case their opposition should be or should become of such a character as to call for disciplinary action, Reformed Church polity requires their respective consistories to initiate such action. (157)

And the classis decided

that according to Reformed Church polity, the decisions of our major ecclesiastical assemblies are binding for all the officers and consistories

within its jurisdiction and, therefore, also for Rev. H. Hoeksema and his consistory...In case an officer or consistory gives reason to doubt his or its adherence to these decisions, such officer or consistory may be called upon to explain their position. (Cf. the Formula of Subscription). (157)

The body also decided that classis should

require of Eastern Avenue’s consistory to require of its pastor, Reverend H. Hoeksema, that he state whether in the matter of the three points... he will submit with the right of appeal to the Confessional Standards of the Church as interpreted by the Synod of 1924, i.e., neither publicly nor privately propose, teach or defend, either by preaching or writing, any sentiments contrary to the Confessional Standards of the Church as interpreted by the Synod of 1924, and, in case of an appeal, whether in the interim he will acquiesce in the judgment already passed by the Synod of 1924. (158–59)

Hoeksema called the whole classical report “a concoction of truth and sophistry” (159). It was. Using language that sounded correct, church politically, the classis undermined good church polity and used church polity to destroy the truth. The truth must bow to the decrees of men! Sounding like high-minded defenders of church polity, the classis used polity as a weapon to silence the truth and ran roughshod over its principles. Hoeksema explained,

In its report the committee [of classis], evidently, takes the stand that agreement with the Confessions on the part of any office-bearer in the Christian Reformed Churches implies agreement with all the doctrinal interpretations by any synod. In this case synod had composed and adopted three points of doctrine, which it chose to call interpretations of the Reformed Confessions but which are in a very real sense additions to and corruptions of those Confessions. Synod had adopted these three doctrinal declarations without first consulting the churches in general. And now, according to the report of the committee of Classis Grand Rapids East, all must accept the faith of synod as their own, profess it and teach it, until another synod may be willing to listen to their grievances! All this is supposed to be sustained by Article 31 of the Church Order. (161–62)

Hoeksema summarized and criticized classis’ view of article 31: “According to the stand assumed by the report

of the Classical Committee, however, an office-bearer in the Christian Reformed Churches is bound unconditionally to submit to all the decrees of any synod. And this is popery” (162).

The view of article 31 that a Christian Reformed classis enforced with its discipline was that article 31 forbade public militancy against the decision of Synod 1924, that synodical decisions fall under the vow of the Formula of Subscription, that Hoeksema’s only legitimate recourse was an appeal, and that in the meantime he was not allowed to militate publicly against those decisions. That the eye of the classis was not merely on Hoeksema’s disagreement with the three points, but was especially on his intention to preach and write publicly against them, became clear on the floor of the classis that deposed him.

Hoeksema wrote,

Accordingly the chairman solemnly asked the pastor of the Eastern Avenue Church, whether or not he could declare himself in agreement with the Three Points adopted by Synod 1924; and whether or not, with the right of appeal, he would promise to acquiesce in these decisions of Synod and not agitate against them in speaking or writing. (204)

To which Hoeksema replied that the classis already had his answer in written form.

Thereupon some of the members of the classis began to exercise all their powers of persuasion to make the pastor submit...It was urged...Even if the pastor of Eastern Avenue could not declare himself in agreement with the Three Points, he certainly would not force his conscience by the promise to keep still about them and not to make public propaganda against them. In the meantime he could appeal to the synod of 1926 and bring his objections against the “Three Points” before that body in an orderly and legal manner. (204)

It must be stated that the origin of the Protestant Reformed Churches has as much to do with opposition to a popish understanding of article 31 as with the error of common grace. The contention of Hoeksema, Danhof, and Ophoff that they had the sacred right, the moral duty, and the divine calling publicly to oppose common grace in harmony with article 31 and the Formula of Subscription was the reason they were cast out of the CRC. In the classical grounds for Hoeksema’s suspension, the classis decided “that he had refused to promise not openly to teach, in preaching or writing, anything repugnant to the ‘Three Points’” (206).

The deposition of Henry Danhof by Classis Grand Rapids West was even more blatantly hierarchical. Hoeksema called it “the official classical bull” (244). It read: “The Classis Grand Rapids West...hereby deposes Reverend H. Danhof...on the following grounds: (a) Insubordination to ecclesiastical authority...(b) Public Schism.” The classis explained:

Through his association with *The Standard Bearer*, Reverend H. Danhof participates in organized propaganda against the officially accepted doctrine of our Church, propaganda which is making inroads upon our denominational solidarity. (245–46)

Here, as plain as day, is proof that the ground for deposing Hoeksema and Danhof was their intention to preach and write against a synodical decision, their actual preaching, and especially their association with and writing in the *Standard Bearer*. Such the classis declared to be insubordination and public schism, and the reaction of the ecclesiastical bodies was swift and brutal.

The actions of those Christian Reformed classes smack of the wicked actions of the Persian princes, who when they could not condemn Daniel on his behavior trumped up a charge to kill him on his convictions. The synod of the CRC had declared Hoeksema and Danhof to be fundamentally Reformed and had rejected the advice to discipline them, so their opponents came after the ministers regarding their convictions of the truth and their determination to teach the truth and oppose the lie.

This same false understanding of article 31 was present in Hoeksema’s own congregation. In a schismatic protest circulated among the congregation without consistorial approval and signed by fifty members of the congregation, the first demand was that “the Consistory...demand of our pastor, Reverend H. Hoeksema, the promise that henceforth, both in preaching and writing, he shall abide by the Word of God and the Confession, especially by the three points recently established by the Synod of Kalamazoo” (119–20).

Here is another example of the hypocrisy that characterized the whole movement against Hoeksema and Danhof: their enemies charged the ministers with schism and disorder in violation of the Church Order, while the enemies felt free to break or bend a rule of the Church Order whenever it suited their purposes.

The enemies of Hoeksema and Danhof in the two classes focused on that particular point regarding article 31 because Hoeksema and Danhof had made it abundantly plain at Synod 1924 that they did not intend to submit to that decision and that they would militate publicly against common grace. Hoeksema wrote,

Both the accused pastors had plainly and emphatically declared (the Reverend Hoeksema during his one speech he was allowed to make), that they did not agree with the contents of the three points and would never abide by them. Nor was the synodical decision altered when the Reverend H. Danhof delivered a written protest to synod, in which he expressed elaborately his objections against the declarations and decisions of synod regarding the three points, and plainly stated that he would employ every means at his command to oppose them. (79)

Knowing this, the synod decided not to discipline the ministers but only to admonish “the two brethren to abide in their teaching and writing by the standpoint of our Confession regarding the three points...and to express themselves carefully and with sobriety and modesty” (87–88).

The question, then, is, why did Hoeksema and Danhof consider it their duty and calling to militate against the decision of Synod 1924? What was their interpretation of article 31, an interpretation that made them write in the *Standard Bearer* against a decision of synod, which led to their ejection from the CRC and formed a vital part of the beginning of the Protestant Reformed Churches?

Hoeksema gave his interpretation of article 31:

The committee [from classis, which quoted only one part of article 31 in its charge against Hoeksema for violating the article] forgot to quote the rest of this article: “Unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God or the articles of the Church Order, as long as they are not changed by a General Synod.” This addition means that ecclesiastical decisions shall not be considered settled and binding, not even till the next general synod, if they can be proven to conflict with the Word of God. (162)

Hoeksema explained this understanding elsewhere: “When decisions of the major assembly are plainly contrary to the Word of God one may not and cannot submit to them even for two years” (163).

Rev. George Ophoff was of the same conviction concerning article 31. In a series of articles in the *Standard Bearer* entitled “Dr. Ridderbos and Article 31,” a series that I highly recommend reading, he wrote:

As we saw, according to the exponents of the hierarchy, though it has become the settled conviction of that officebearer that the classical (or synodical) decision is in conflict with the Word of God, he must nevertheless allow himself to

be bound by it, until the major assembly on its next meeting sets him free. But that officebearer may not wait with rejecting the decision. He is in duty bound before God to reject the decision immediately, seeing that it has become his conviction that the decision militates against the Scriptures. For God must be obeyed rather than men. That aggrieved officebearer does that very thing. It being impossible for him to obey man—the sovereign classis (synod)—he rejects the article, openly repudiates it. The wrath of the classis (synod) now kindles, and it deposes the man. (*Standard Bearer* 23, no. 17 [June 1, 1947]: 397)

Hoeksema, Danhof, and Ophoff grounded their actions in article 31’s exception clause: “unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God or with the articles of the Church Order.”

This clause is extraordinarily important, and its importance may not be minimized. The proper understanding of that clause is crucial.

Ophoff pointed out that his opponents by their interpretation really changed the wording of the article. He wrote,

Let us first notice that the exponents of the hierarchy, in order to make the article (31) say what they wanted it to say, had to change the article as to the form of its words. In its last section the article reads, “and whatsoever may be agreed upon by a majority of vote shall be considered settled and binding, *unless* mark you *unless* (so the article reads) it be proved to conflict with the Word of God...” But the exponents of the hierarchy have removed that word *unless* and placed in the room thereof the word *until*—it be proved (to the major assembly) to conflict with the Word of God. They did so, not, of course, black on white, but in their minds. And when they go to explaining the article they reason as if the article read *until* instead of *unless*. (*Standard Bearer* 23, no. 17: 396)

I would contend that an explanation of article 31 should begin with this clause because it must temper the understanding of every other word of the article. The clause establishes the principle that only the word of God, never the word or decisions of man, may rule in the churches and in the consciences of the church members.

Hoeksema and Ophoff evidently were convicted that an individual proves this to himself, and at that moment a decision cannot be considered settled and binding without obeying man rather than God. They evidently had the opinion that proving that a decision is contrary to

the word of God is done not only by means of protest and subjection to the decision of the church, but also by means of preaching and writing against that decision.

Article 31 was designed to give peace and order to the churches, so that the members will consider decisions of the majority at the broader assemblies settled and binding. But a church that departs from the word of God cannot have peace. And if there is a faithful prophet among the members, his calling is to give the people no peace by pointing out their departure from the word of God, calling them to repent quickly, and warning them that if they do not repent God will take away their candlestick. The CRC had three such courageous and faithful prophets. Instead of heeding their warnings, the church cast out those prophets in order to achieve a superficial and earthly peace at the expense of the truth of God.

The position of Hoeksema and Ophoff was not only that decisions contrary to the word of God *may* be publicly criticized, but also that those decisions *must* be criticized. Such criticism is a moral obligation in love for the truth and in obedience to the vow of subscription.

About the position of some delegates of Classis Grand Rapids East who urged him that a promise to abide by the three points without preaching and writing against them while he protested through the ecclesiastical channels would not bind his conscience, Hoeksema wrote,

Let it here be stated, eleven years after that memorable session of Classis Grand Rapids East, that if such a promise could, indeed, have been made without a violation of the truth and the dictates of conscience before God and the Christian Reformed Churches, the pastor of Eastern Avenue would certainly have made it...

He felt, however, that this was impossible.

He was convinced that it was absolutely impossible to preach and teach in his own congregation, without touching upon and contradicting the principles expressed in the Three Points.

And he also felt that it would be a breach of promise on his part if he should refrain from publicly warning the churches against the false doctrines adopted by the Synod of Kalamazoo. For, when he signed the Formula of Subscription he promised, that he would maintain and defend the Reformed doctrine as expressed in the Formulas of Unity. (204–5)

Therein is the key to understanding Hoeksema's position. He did not advocate willy-nilly that synodical decisions may be militated against; but he advocated that when synodical decisions are plainly contrary to the

word of God and touch the doctrine of the creeds—contradicting and militating against them—then to submit to these decisions without immediately and publicly opposing them is a violation of the oath of subscription. Publicly to oppose these decisions is a great keeping of the oath.

All those who have the view of article 31 espoused in the many open letters to Protestant Reformed congregations against *Sword and Shield* have forgotten their history. I urge them to study Hoeksema's position as he plainly explained it in his book, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*.

I also point out that one of the very first decisions of the Protestant Reformed Churches as a newly formed denomination was the Act of Agreement, in which these churches said,

Whereas the Synod of 1924, assembled in Kalamazoo, Mich., adopted three points of doctrine which, according to our most sacred conviction, are in direct conflict with our Reformed Confessions and principles;

...Whereas, by the actions of Classis Grand Rapids East and Classis Grand Rapids West, we are denied the right to discuss and interpret said three points of doctrine of said Synod. (250)

The Protestant Reformed Churches as combined consistories decided that Hoeksema's view of article 31 was theirs.

Is it yours?

Did the founding worthies of our churches have a wrong view of article 31? Were their actions on that basis schismatic, unloving, and destructive of concord and unity? Did their actions promote disorder and a divisive spirit? Are they to blame for the split between the Christian Reformed Church and the Protestant Reformed Churches? Was their insistence on the right and obligation publicly to oppose that synodical decision insubordination, rebellion, and contrary to decency and order? Were the editors of the *Standard Bearer* schismatic in writing such criticism? Was the Reformed Free Publishing Association schismatic in publishing that criticism? Did Hoeksema, Danhof, and Ophoff make themselves ringleaders of a mob in the churches committed to ecclesiastical rebellion? For remember, the Christian Reformed Church never denied these men the right of appeal. But the CRC insisted that according to article 31 and the Formula of Subscription, appeal was the only right and obligation these ministers had.

For carrying out their calling according to the proper understanding of article 31 and of their oaths of subscription, they were cast out of the church.

—NJL

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

THE ETHICS OF MERCY

Verses 1 through 3 of Romans 12, with the calling of the brethren to offer themselves as living sacrifices of thanksgiving to their redeemer in holy consecration of mind and life, supply one glorious motive: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice.”

In Romans 11:29–32 Paul explained the glory of God’s mercy according to sovereign election. That the gifts and calling of God are without repentance is due only to the mercy of God. The Gentile saints, who did not believe God, obtained mercy through the unbelief of the Jews. The unbelief of the Jews, according to the counsel of God, had its further purpose of mercy back to the Jews, as declared in verse 31: “Through your mercy they also may obtain mercy.” Verse 32 powerfully establishes the end of God’s mercy: “For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all.”

Romans 9 explains the same bond between election and mercy, and that over against the doctrine of reprobation and wrath. “[God] saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” (vv. 15–16). This contrast is even sharper in verses 22 and 23: “What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory.”

The glorious doctrine of eternal, unconditional, gracious election is necessary for the sake of the glory of God’s mercy. For God’s mercy to be as complete and abundant as it is, the doctrine of sovereign double predestination is necessary. Using the language of Romans 9:16, if salvation is “of him that willeth” or “of him that runneth,” God’s mercy is not mercy. If there is a quality or condition in man that determines the mercy of God, his mercy is incomplete. If mercy is for the deserving, it is no mercy at all. God’s mercy is for the completely helpless and the hopeless.

This is the point of the publican’s prayer in Luke 18:13, “God be merciful to me a sinner,” in sharp contrast to the Pharisee’s prayer. In the parable of the unmerciful servant

in Matthew 18:23–35, the reason for forgiveness was mercy. Out of mercy the king forgave the servant the entire debt, which he could not pay. The stark failure of the servant to forgive his fellow servant was due to lack of mercy.

Mercy characterized the entire earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, God incarnate. Repeatedly, his wonders of salvation proceeded out of his mercy. He had compassion on the multitudes, as sheep without a shepherd. His compassion led him to cast out demons, to heal the sick, and to raise the dead. His deeds were deeds of mercy.

Especially his glorious work on the cross was a work of wonderful mercy. His mercy was indeed to forgive. But his mercy brought him to his cross to work there the complete basis of forgiveness and to obtain salvation in every part for his needy people. His words on the cross were words of mercy. In mercy he prayed for the forgiveness of those who crucified him. In mercy he saw to the care of his mother, giving her to the beloved apostle, John. In mercy he promised salvation to the penitent thief.

His perfect satisfaction on the cross was the glorious, crowning work of mercy. He presented his body as the living sacrifice to his Father in the perfection of his priestly office on behalf of those whom he came to save. By his perfect salvation he obtained eternal salvation for those who were in need, in the debts of their sins and miserable under the just wrath of God. In mercy he paid what they could not pay. In mercy he offered himself as an atonement to cover the sins of those who were the ungodly and his enemies. In his mercy he obtained for them all the blessed salvation that could not enter into the heart of man to conceive.

What, then, are these mercies of God by which we are to offer ourselves as living sacrifices of thanksgiving?

First, they are the wonderful works of God in Christ that powerfully raise us out of our needy and miserable condition. They are the works that bring us righteousness to justify us from our sins and the just judgment of God. They are the works that raise us to life from our death in trespasses and sins. They are the works that bring us out of our struggles against sin and Satan in this life to the glorious victory in heaven, to live and reign with the Lamb forever.

Second, they are the wonderful works that proceed from the infinite pity and compassion of God. His pity

means that he does not abandon his needy people. His pity means that he does not judge them as their sins deserve. His pity means that he has tender compassion on them, compassion that brings him near to them to save them. His pity means that he does not work from a distance, merely sending his goodness and blessings for the welfare of his people. But in the person of the Son, the living God comes near to them, into the likeness of their sinful flesh, to take their sins upon himself and to shed his own blood for them, so that they are justified. In the person of the Spirit, he comes into their polluted natures to wash away all their pollution with his blood and to infuse his own new life into their entire natures, so that they are regenerated, converted, and sanctified.

Third, they are the wonderful works that bring the objects of his pity back to God. In their sins they have wandered far from him into paths of corruption and death. But in mercy he seeks, finds, and brings them back to himself. The mercy of the Son is to bring God's people back to the Father, forever to be blessed in his fellowship and friendship. The mercy of the Spirit is to sanctify them, so that their lives are directed to the glory of their God. The mercy of God turns those who were no people at all into the children of the living God. So his goodness and mercy must follow them all the days of their lives, until they dwell in his house forever.

One of the more powerful aspects of mercy is that its proper objects are needy. Mercy does not need to be given to the rich, but to the poor. Not to the strong, but to the weak. Not to the healthy, but to the sick. Not to the proud, but to the lowly. Not to the whole, but to the broken. Throughout God's word, but especially in the psalms, those who are in need cry and appeal to God for mercy. The oppressed and downtrodden cry out for mercy from on high. The repentant, burdened and cast down by the guilt of their sins, seek the mercies of God for their forgiveness and salvation. Those stricken with grief and sorrow over their loss look to the mercies of God to restore strength to their souls and health to their bones.

The Bible also places mercy in a strong relationship to judgment. God is a God who remembers mercy in the midst of judgment. When he punishes the nations for their sins, he remembers his people in mercy. When he punishes the nation of Israel for their sins, he remembers his elect remnant to preserve them. When he punishes the nation for their sins, gives them into the hands of their enemies, and afflicts them, he remembers his mercy and restores them. When those enemies in their hateful glee so horribly treat his people, whom the Lord has given into their hands, the Lord sees his afflicted people, is grieved with their grief, and determines to rescue them in his mercy. In his bitter lamentation over the destruction

of Jerusalem and the captivity of the people of God, the prophet Jeremiah comforts them with the prospect of God's everlasting mercies: "This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness" (Lam. 3:21–23). "For the Lord will not cast off for ever: but though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies" (vv. 31–32).

God's people, suffering the judgments of God, appeal to him for mercy. They feel those judgments upon the ungodly nation in which they live. Feeling those judgments falling upon them, affecting them deeply with troubles and sorrows, they look to their God to remember his promised mercies to them. When he afflicts them in judgment for their sins, they look to him for mercy to forgive and cleanse. They feel his judgments upon their society, their churches, and their families, and they seek God's mercy to turn, to forgive, and to restore. They take his judgments in their personal chastisements and afflictions to heart, and in sorrow over their sins, they look for his mercy.

There is an antithetical distinction of mercy. By his mercy the living God distinguishes himself from the idol gods of the heathen. "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy" (Mic. 7:18). The heathen gods demanded and required for their own pleasure and enjoyment. They were selfish and vengeful. If ignored and not worshiped, they destroyed without remedy. By gifts or glorious deeds, their worshipers could buy and channel favors from the heathen gods. Their so-called mercy was dependent on the devotion and gifts offered by those seeking mercy.

In observing the world today from an ethical standpoint, the inescapable observation is that mercy is more and more an unknown quality.

In spite of the rhetoric about the inequalities and injustices of the past, the fear is entirely justified that the present movement in culture and society, encroaching into politics and government, is a massive deception. The false charge of "racism" hurled everywhere is a thin cover for brutal and violent overthrow. Law and order are the targets in sight. Anarchy seeks to overthrow government. The movement falsely justifies itself publicly as an attempt to correct a racist past. Protest is the disguise for clear and evident anarchy. First, a number of groups that are revolutionary, according to their own manifestos, are welcomed into the movement. Second, present is an open determination to turn a peaceful, organized protest into such a violent force that it drives out law and order. The movement seeks next to organize into a substitute

“government” for the overthrown government. Finally, the speech of the leadership of this movement expresses a determination to overthrow existing order rather than to correct injustice. What is especially troubling about the latter is that many government officials are ready to appease demands that they oppose their own government and its support in law enforcement.

What does all of the above have to do with mercy? The purpose of government is to protect the citizenry from attack and to provide a stable, protected environment in which its citizens can live, worship, and carry on daily activities. In the peace of the city and nation, the people of God are able to live quietly in peace and to worship and serve their God freely (Jer. 29:7; 1 Tim. 2:2). The purpose of the state is to protect the weak and vulnerable in their lives by restraining the strong from oppressing them. The weak need protection from the strong, and the purpose of government is to provide that protection, specifically through the application of law through enforcement.

Horribly, modern government has long failed in this simple calling of mercy. Not only has government refused to protect from attack the most vulnerable members of society, but also government promotes, endorses, and financially supports the killing of unborn infants. Most governments have the same attitude toward euthanasia. We now face the grotesquely worded “mercy killing,” having moved beyond debate into practice and now into legal protection. We now have state-sponsored oppression of the most vulnerable members of society, who have no voice or will to defend themselves. Truly, the conditions described in Romans 1:31 prevail under God’s just judgment: “without understanding, covenantbreakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful.”

The institution of marriage has been under attack. “No-fault divorce” was promoted and adopted for its so-called mercy. Man decided that the necessity of being represented by a lawyer and of giving reasons that required a judge’s review before a divorce could be granted was far too difficult and heart-rending. The legalization of “no-fault divorce” has opened up divorce for every reason. Husbands can now very easily forsake their wives and children by filing for divorce, with two drastic effects. The short-term effect is that, in spite of alimony and child support, wives and children are left vulnerable and without all the other means of support necessary for flourishing and prospering in homes with healthy marital and parental relationships to enjoy and to follow as examples. The long-term effect of easily breaking and forsaking the most basic of relationships is greatly endangering the stability of society.

We are witnessing a social revolution whose end is quickly approaching. Whether that end will be the anti-Christian kingdom, a resurgence of atheistic communism,

or anarchy, the operating principle will be the same: a Darwinian process of unmerciful natural selection. Only the strong survive.

On a smaller scale, and perhaps closer to our own experiences, bullying, intimidation, harassment, and abuse of every kind are more common. The more numerous and strong oppress the small and weak. Men ignore rules established for the protection of the vulnerable. Those charged with maintaining proper order fail in their responsibilities and turn a blind eye.

Reformed ethics must be antithetical. Mercy must be its motivation, and mercy must be the principle that runs through its order.

How to be merciful? How to offer ourselves as living sacrifices acceptable to God? How to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, a peculiar people? How to walk as children of light in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation?

Romans 12:1 gives the answer: “by the mercies of God.” The calling to the “reasonable service” of offering ourselves to God as living sacrifices is by his mercies.

The meaning is that we are unable of ourselves to be priests after the example of our merciful high priest, Jesus Christ. In him alone and by him alone can we offer ourselves. We need the gospel of his mercy to us to be merciful ourselves. We need that gospel proclaimed to us. We need that gospel impressed upon our hearts by the working of the merciful grace of the Spirit. We need the Spirit to work that grace in our hearts and to renew our minds, so that we look not to our own things but to the things of others (Phil. 2:4).

To be merciful means that we must drink deeply of the fountain of God’s mercies to us. First, we must meditate on the greatness of our need and our misery by nature. We must understand deeply how helpless and hopeless is our own natural condition as guilty and depraved sinners under bondage to sin and Satan. We must know both our inability to pull ourselves out of that condition and our unwillingness even to recognize it. Second, we must know the wonder of God’s mercies, that they flow only out of his sovereign determination to show mercy to whom he will show mercy. We must know those mercies out of which he came down to us to work our deliverance by grace alone, through the gift of his Son and the Spirit of his Son. Third, we must meditate on the glorious power of his mercy to clear our debts, to free us from the bondage of our sins, and to bring us near to him. We must understand the power of his Spirit to make us, in our hearts and minds, priests to him, his grace renewing us to offer ourselves as living sacrifices of thanksgiving to him.

His mercies must make us truly merciful.

—MVW

ROOT AND FRUIT IN REVIEW AND COMPARISON

Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

—Romans 3:28

Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.

—James 2:24

Root and Fruit: Harmonizing Paul and James on Justification. Joel R. Beeke and Steven J. Lawson.
Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2020. 70 pages, paper, \$10.00.

This new little volume on the oft-supposed disjunction between Paul and James regarding justification by faith alone is concise, and it is revealing.

The book is of value because it is a recent treatment of the key doctrine and principle in scripture, justification by faith alone. The authors rightly cite Calvin regarding this centrality: “The hinge on which all religion turns, John Calvin said, is this doctrine of justification by faith” (32). It is well that we are aware of current thought on such a subject. In Romans (and elsewhere) Paul states with precise acuity that justification is by faith alone without works. James states with equal precision that justification is by works. Since there are no contradictions in scripture, how is this difference to be explained? The answer one gives to this question will reveal much. Every camp that goes under the name of Christianity claims that justification is by faith in Jesus Christ. Even Rome will agree. But is justification by faith *alone*? There’s the rub. How one harmonizes Paul and James will show how “alone” one considers justification by faith alone to be.

Rome attempts to harmonize Paul and James by saying that these two biblical writers are concerned with two different kinds of works. In Rome’s thinking Paul and James both teach that justification is by works, but Paul is merely taking the works of the ceremonial law out of the equation when he writes that justification is not by works. Rome claims that, according to Paul too, the works of the moral law—meaning obedience to the ten commandments—still contribute to one’s standing before God. Rome hides in James 2 and falsely reinvents

Paul to make it work. Over and over, Rome threw James 2 into the teeth of the reformers, who sought to proclaim the doctrine of justification by faith alone without any works at all, ceremonial or moral. The federal vision heresy uses the same explanation and sits in this same pocket with Rome.

What is the Reformed explanation for the seeming discrepancy between Paul and James? According to David J. Engelsma, “James describes an entirely different aspect of justification from what Paul describes.”¹ Paul speaks of the justification that renders us legally righteous before God in Jesus Christ alone, which righteousness comes to us by faith (our connection to Christ) alone, while James speaks of justification in the sense of demonstration. “James describes the believer’s demonstration and proof of his free justification by faith alone.”² In James demonstration (“shew me”³) and being justified are synonymous. Justification there does not refer to the actual, legal imputation of Christ’s righteousness to one’s account. It refers only to the demonstration of faith in one’s life. “Regarding its demonstration, justification is by works, by works *only*.”⁴ The word *justification* is used in two different senses.

How do Beeke and Lawson explain the difference between Paul and James? They claim to find a harmonization in seeing two different senses of justification being used as well. Their explanation of this does not match up with Engelsma’s, however. Nor is that their main explanation for the difference. The harmonization that Beeke and Lawson propose has much more to do with their view of

1 David J. Engelsma, *Gospel Truth of Justification* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2017), 423.

2 Engelsma, *Gospel Truth of Justification*, 423.

3 “Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works” (James 2:18).

4 Engelsma, *Gospel Truth of Justification*, 425.

faith. “Paul and James speak with one voice as they teach justification by faith. They just look at this faith from different perspectives” (69).

So basically speaking, Rome says that Paul and James refer to different aspects of works, Engelsma says that they refer to different aspects of justification, and Beeke and Lawson say that they refer to different aspects of faith.

How does this third option work? How does faith explain the difference?

The book opens with a scenario. Two men approach a session or a consistory in order to request church membership and to partake of the Lord’s supper. But the consistory is left in a bind. The answer the elders must give these men is not easily discerned. One man has a fine list of examples to prove his godly life, but he says nothing about having faith in Jesus Christ. The other man speaks well of his faith in Jesus Christ, but the consistory also receives a letter reporting how this man lives a very ungodly life, all of his pious words about faith in Christ notwithstanding. “He can talk like an angel, but I am warning you...” (13). How must the elders answer these men? This quandary constitutes the context of the book. In the last chapter we find out what the consistory ought to conclude. But what does all of this have to do with harmonizing Paul and James? For Beeke and Lawson it has everything to do with it, and it has everything to do with it because of their view and definition of faith.

There’s a Pharisee and an antinomian in the room.

“It is one thing...to acknowledge that it is crucial to be right about justification for many weighty reasons, but it is another to practically and pastorally answer the question *Who is justified?*” (12). We ought not pass by this introductory remark of the authors. Such a statement means that one’s doctrinal view of justification is not the central issue in religion after all, as “crucial” and “weighty” as it may be and regardless of what Luther or Calvin may have said about that. The real issue is *who*. Who? Are *you* justified? Introspection is in order. Do you possess a real and living faith, a faith that produces good works? James 2 is all about discerning a living faith in distinction from a dead faith. What kind of faith do you have? And this question is supremely important. Why? Because only one who possesses a living faith, the kind of faith that produces good works, is justified before God by that faith and is saved. This is a salvation issue for Beeke and Lawson, therefore. Or rather, it is *the* salvation issue.

There’s a Pharisee and an antinomian in the room.

Beeke and Lawson continue: “When God surveys His books in heaven and looks next to our name, He sees the perfect righteousness of Christ that has been reckoned to us on the basis of faith” (31). Again we read, “The basis for the transfer of such vast riches to our account is not simply

faith but faith *alone*” (31). The authors quote R. C. Sproul to define faith: “It is usual to analyze faith as involving three steps: knowledge, agreement, and trust...faith is trust, the essential step of committing the self to God” (38). And why should salvation that justifies us come to us *only* by faith? For two reasons, Beeke and Lawson explain. “First, Paul repeatedly tells us that it is by faith that we get into Christ” (39). “Second, justification is only by faith because it is God’s plan in saving us to engage us personally to Jesus Christ in such a way that our bonding ourselves to Jesus contributes nothing to our salvation” (39). What does all of this mean about faith for the authors of *Root and Fruit*? That faith “is a holy command, a personal necessity, and a pressing urgency” (40).

There’s a Pharisee and an antinomian in the room.

“Dear friend, have you exercised saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you know the truth? Are you persuaded of the truth? Have you acted on the truth?...have you entrusted your life to Him and His righteousness?” (43).

There’s a Pharisee and an antinomian in the room.

The authors move on to James and to a discussion of dead faith, quoting R. C. Sproul once more: “When James says that faith without works is dead, he is describing a faith that knows the gospel,” that “even agrees with it...but it has fallen short of trust in God” (48). Beeke and Lawson explain, “As described in James 2:17, there is no activating of the will to commit one’s life to Christ” (48). And further, “The only way you could ultimately know that your faith is a real, saving faith, James says, is by the objective evidence of a truly transformed life, one that produces the fruit of good works. Faith is the root; good works is the fruit” (49–50).

The antinomian is especially looming large in the room now.

A dead faith is a mere historical, intellectual faith or knowledge. The devils share that kind of “faith” too. They know God is true. In this connection the authors make a remarkable statement: “Hell is orthodox in its theology” (53). Beeke and Lawson continue, “They [the demons] are emotionally persuaded of the truth, so much so that they tremble in absolute fear. But they have not exercised their will in submission to the Lord Jesus Christ” (53).

Many people are in no better position, say the authors. “This example is set forth to be a sober warning to untold numbers of people who have a non-saving faith” (53). Beeke and Lawson continue with more remarkable statements: “Faith without works is useless for justifying...Faith without works is useless to get you into the kingdom of God. It is useless to connect you to the living God. It does not receive the righteousness that comes from God” (54).

There is a lot to take in regarding what the authors are saying thus far. Let us begin to unpack some of this.

“Hell is orthodox in its theology.” Hell has it right, too? If this statement is not blasphemous, it certainly borders on it. Hell is the home of Lucifer, the deceiver of all mankind. Hell is not orthodox. Hell knows the truth very well but knows it in order to twist it into an evil lie and trample on the name of him who is faithful and true. Hell hates the truth. That is no orthodoxy.

And what about faith? How do different views of faith harmonize Paul and James, according to these authors? Is the harmony proposed by them truly orthodox and Reformed?

The key to understanding their point is to understand that for them faith “is a holy command, a personal necessity, and a pressing urgency.” It is all about what we must do, and do urgently. We do it by grace, of course, but for all that, we must do it. Emphases are mine: “Dear friend, have you *exercised* saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?” Have you “*activat[ed]*” your “will to *commit* one’s life to Christ”? Have you *bonded* yourself to Christ? And further, “Paul repeatedly tells us that it is by faith that we *get into* Christ.” Note that: “get into.” That’s not a state of being in union with Jesus Christ, a state that happens by the irresistible work of the Holy Spirit alone given to all those elected in Jesus Christ from all eternity. Rather, the authors speak of the action of getting into that union. It is a doing, not a being. Even the demons would do well if they, along with “untold numbers of people,” didn’t fail to have “exercised their will in submission to the Lord Jesus Christ.”

If there was any doubt that the semi-Pelagian heresy of free will⁵ is running rampant throughout this book, the mention of the failure of demons rightly to exercise their wills ought to squash any such doubt. As if any demons could or would! But there is more. What about the authors’ view of faith being a command and having everything to do with our activity and exercise? Their view of faith has everything to do with what they mean by justification by faith alone, too.

They teach, “Faith without works is useless for justifying.” Let’s stop there. If faith without works is useless for receiving the righteousness that comes from God, faith alone means nothing. Faith alone means *faith without works*. A sound of Reformed orthodoxy is attempted by the authors, to be sure. A dead faith is not useful to

anyone’s justification. Only a living faith is. And a living faith produces good works. All those things are true. But that faith without works is useless for justifying does not follow. It does not follow because of what faith is, defined by the Reformed creeds and confessions and by scripture. Note once more that for Beeke and Lawson, faith has everything to do with what we do, not with who or what we are and have been made to be. Let us compare.

Article 22 of the Belgic Confession reads:

Therefore we justly say with Paul, that we are justified by faith alone, or by faith without works. However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness. 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.

The theology in *Root and Fruit* is smashed by that article alone. Besides faith without works being the only instrument of justification, the truth that faith is *not* the basis for justification is also taught in article 22. Beeke and Lawson explicitly teach that faith *is* the basis: “the perfect righteousness of Christ...has been reckoned to us on the basis of faith.” These are serious heresies that arise out of a seriously wrong conception of what faith is. What is faith’s essence, really? Is it obedience to a command, or is it something else? This is the question.

According to Lord’s Day 7 of the Heidelberg Catechism, faith is first of all and in essence our bond to Jesus Christ. Faith is our union to Christ. We are “ingrafted into Him.” “Are all men then, as they perished in Adam, saved by Christ? No, only those who are ingrafted into Him, and receive all His benefits, by a true faith” (Q&A 20). And this bond most emphatically is created, brought forth, and strengthened only by God. It is the Holy Spirit’s work alone to engraft us into Jesus Christ.⁶ Note also that our being “ingrafted into Him” is passive language. We do not bond ourselves to Christ any more than a branch grafts itself into a tree, but on page 39 the authors

5 “Therefore we reject all that is taught repugnant to this concerning the free will of man, since man is but a slave to sin, and has nothing of himself, unless it is given from heaven” (Belgic Confession 14). “...depended on the free will of man, so that it therefore might have come to pass that either none or all should fulfill these conditions. Rejection: For these adjudge too contemptuously of the death of Christ, do in no wise acknowledge the most important fruit or benefit thereby gained, and bring again out of hell the Pelagian error” (Canons of Dordt 2, error and rejection 3).

6 “Who worketh that faith in thee? The Holy Ghost” (A Compendium of the Christian Religion, Q&A 48). “Since then we are made partakers of Christ and all His benefits by faith only, whence doth this faith proceed? From the Holy Ghost, who works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and confirms it by the use of the sacraments” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 65).

of *Root and Fruit* claim that we do exactly that—we bond ourselves to Christ. The truth is that to be joined into Christ is purely a gracious gift worked by the Divine Gardener alone. And through this living union, bond, and graft, Christ the root and vine is ours, and all he has is ours—including justification. Faith is only an instrument and is the only instrument. Faith is the graft, while Christ and his work are the only basis and root. Faith is not the basis of justification. Lord’s Day 7 goes on to describe the activity of faith, which is knowledge and confidence. That changes nothing. Neither in essence nor in activity is faith the basis of our justification.

What might justification based on faith look like, though, if true? How would such a notion be manifested? The authors answer that. “So, who can be saved?...It does not matter how sinful you are or how far away from God you are; if you, by grace, put all your faith in Christ, regardless of your sinful past and present, God will justify you” (61). Justification based on faith rather than on Jesus Christ alone looks like a conditional justification, conditioned on your activity of faith and trust. Saying that “it does not matter how sinful you are” makes justification sound free and unconditional, but there is a catch. It is not free. You have to do something. You have to put all your faith in Christ. Then you will be justified and saved.

Near the end of the book the authors ask, “So, who can be saved?” They ask in the beginning of the book, “*Who is justified?*” These questions are significant. A Pharisee and an antinomian are in the room, remember, and they are waiting for an answer. According to Beeke and Lawson, neither man who came to the consistory that day can be considered justified and worthy of partaking of the Lord’s supper. One lacks the exercise of faith, which is a deep, life-committing trust in God, though he lives a morally good outward life. The other lacks the evidence of faith. He has no good works to back up his claim of trusting in Christ. There is no hope in this scenario. Indeed, no one trapped in the theology of *Root and Fruit* will ever truly be sure of his justification before God. There is no hope for anyone.

Who is truly able to place all of his trust in Jesus Christ, to obey such a holy command and pressing urgency, as the authors define faith? Who? Who is able to display a life of good works, works that are good enough to convince the holiest man of his own justification before

God? Who? If faith is man’s work (and it is if faith is obedience to a command—whether done by grace or not is beside the point), and justification is based on faith, then justification is based on man’s work. The situation is hopeless, indeed. Who can be justified by his own work? No one.

One might object that the authors qualified what they taught about that.

Allow us to ask you: Do you see fruit in your life being produced, the fruit of good works flowing from the root of faith?... We are not asking you if you are perfect or if you never sin. None of us meets that standard. But do you see within your heart a desire to follow the Word of God and the Lord Jesus Christ?

They add, “If you answer yes to these questions—even a small yes—then there is certainly a true faith rooted within you that is producing fruit” (68).

That qualification does not help when we stand before God the judge. He demands absolute perfection. We are talking about justification. How can I know I stand perfectly righteous before the thrice-holy God? Because I have a few small good works listed under my name, that’s how I can know I have faith? And if I have that kind of faith, I can know I am right before God? My sorry-looking, few, and imperfect good works will assure me? Let us see.

How did Mr. Jones, the Pharisee, do? He had a large list of good works to lay before the consistory. Apparently, they were not enough to convince him or the elders of anything. There was no profession of faith included in those works. Mr. Jones seemed to fade into the background as the book progressed, but he was rejected in the end. What about Mr. Smith, the antinomian? He fared no better. Perhaps he fared worse. He ended up on the foreground when the discussion turned to James. He had no list of good works at all to his name, so his profession of faith was not believed. He was rejected as well. Who would be left for the consistory to receive? The authors did not describe a third individual who might be invited to join in that church’s communion. I am guessing that would be difficult to do inside their theology. When faith is by definition what we do, what we do will involve much inspection and introspection. Few, if any, will pass such a test.

What is the truth? Who really are the justified ones?

What is the truth? Who really are the justified ones? Who will know they are righteous before God and are forgiven? *Sinners.* Sinners! Elect, believing sinners. That’s the gospel. God justifies the ungodly.

Who will know they are righteous before God and are forgiven? *Sinners*. Sinners! Elect, believing sinners. That's the gospel. God justifies the ungodly. "To him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness" (Rom. 4:5). Engelsma states, "Justification by faith alone answers the question, how can a sinner be right with God?"⁷ Being right with God means being right with God in our experience, or it means nothing. Our works, good or bad, have nothing to do with that knowledge. Engelsma continues:

Justification by faith alone also answers the question, whose are the works that constitute the sinner's righteousness with God?...His good works add nothing to his righteousness. His evil works do not detract from his righteousness of justification. Only the works of Jesus Christ are the sinner's righteousness in justification.⁸

And only the works of Jesus Christ constitute the basis for our knowledge of our justification. That knowledge, which is the true activity of faith, looks to Christ alone. Election in Jesus Christ is ultimately the only reason for the difference between one who is justified and one who is not. God bonds every one of his elect to Jesus Christ. In each one God "produces both the will to believe and the act of believing also" (Canons of Dordt 3–4.14). Their will to believe decides nothing. God's will in eternity decides everything. Indeed, "election is the fountain of every saving good" (Canons of Dordt 1.9). This includes justification. Significantly, God's decree of election is completely missing from the authors' thoughts in *Root and Fruit*. The omission is fatal. This lack affects everything.

The authors of *Root and Fruit* have sorely confused a beautiful picture that God gave to us from the realm of nature. Good works do indeed spring from the good root of faith. Belgic Confession article 24 speaks of this. But the article makes sure we do not confuse this fact with justification:

These works, as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, forasmuch as they are all sanctified by His grace; howbeit they are of no account towards our justification. For it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even before we do good works; otherwise they could not be good works, any more than the fruit of a tree can be good before the tree itself is good.

This is how Beeke and Lawson confuse the picture:

Paul and James speak with one voice as they teach justification by faith. They just look at this faith from different perspectives. Paul exposes those who say they are saved because they perform the law's rituals and tells them it is only by faith in Christ that they can be saved. He's burrowing down within us to examine the roots of our justification. James exposes the hypocrite who claims to have faith but whose claim is contradicted by his actions—his fruits are artificial, which, in turn, proves that his roots are artificial. Paul says that faith alone saves, and James adds that saving faith is never alone. Saving faith is a faith that works. If we are true Christians, the root of justification must produce the fruit of justification. (69–70)

What is the truth? Yes, saving faith is never alone. True saving faith will always produce thankful good works. That is James' point. The root will *always* produce the fruit. If the fruit is lacking, the root is lacking. But the root itself, which in this case is saving faith, does *not* work. That is Paul's point. Faith specifically refuses to look to good works for salvation in any respect whatsoever. Faith looks to Christ alone. The root is not the fruit. Though forever and inseparably joined, root and fruit are distinct entities and may not be confused with one another. Further, the root of justification is Jesus Christ and his work alone. Justification as our legal standing before God is a different subject with a different root. The root, or basis, of justification is not faith, our act of faith, or anything else besides Christ alone. The authors state that Paul is "burrowing down within us to examine the roots of our justification." That is exactly the wrong place to look for any root of justification. And Paul certainly is not advocating such a practice. The authors are wrong. Paul is saying we must look outside of ourselves to see our justification, outside of ourselves to Jesus Christ alone. That's not burrowing in. That's scrambling out! The confusion in *Root and Fruit* is great and multileveled. If the harmonization between Paul and James lies in the basis of a working faith, and for Beeke and Lawson it does, then when Paul speaks of justification by faith he means justification by works. That is quite some harmonization. Rome would not object.

There is a Pharisee and an antinomian in the room. And for all the book's angelic words about faith alone and Christ alone, in the end the Pharisee is on the foreground.

—Connie L. Meyer

7 Engelsma, *Gospel Truth of Justification*, 193.

8 Engelsma, *Gospel Truth of Justification*, 193.



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325 84th St SW, Suite 102
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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

And he [Jesus] came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene. — Matthew 2:23

He was called a Nazarene. On the surface this means that Jesus came from the city Nazareth. That town was a sorry collection of hovels in the hill country of Galilee. The Jews despised Galilee and said, “Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet” (John 7:52). Nazareth was the epitome of the region: “Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?” asked Nathaniel (1:46).

Nazarene was a contemptuous sobriquet by which the Jews dismissed Christ. The name expressed their loathing and valuation of Christ. On the surface the label was designed to give some cover to the name-caller so that he did not appear so evil. The name was merely a reference to Jesus’ town of origin. But behind it stood deep hatred: Jesus was worth nothing and was nothing to the Jews. He was worthy only of death. Finally, in mockery his enemies hung the epithet on his cross. Surely, the Son of man came despised and rejected of men.

He was not in fact a Nazarene in the sense of his origin. As to Jesus’ divine nature, he has no beginning and no end. He is the king eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, to whom belong honor and glory forever and ever. As the mediator he is first in the eternal counsel of God as the elect, the head and king of the church. In time he was begotten by the Holy Ghost in the virgin Mary, a Bethlehemite, and born in the city of David. Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of man, the Son of God, the Lion of Judah’s tribe, the Captain of Jehovah’s host, the Alpha and the Omega, the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world, the Word made flesh, Wonderful, Counselor, the Everlasting Father, and the Prince of peace.

And because he was all those things, God called Jesus a Nazarene. The prophets had said that long ago, so God said it. Man called Jesus a Nazarene to express contempt of him, but God called Jesus a Nazarene because the sinner must be dismissed. Man—all he is, all his thoughts, and everything he does—can be summarized in a single word: *sinner*. And the sinner is to be dismissed. Not only in time, so that he loses his place and name in the world, but also eternally in hell. When man dismisses you, he makes your life in the world difficult, but when God dismisses a man, in hatred God curses that man’s whole life, so that everything serves his destruction in hell. Man despised Jesus’ lowly appearance from the manger to the cross because man will not become nothing before God, confess his sins, and acknowledge that on account of his sins he deserves nothing in this world or in the world to come.

For such men Jesus made himself of no reputation. He became nothing in the world and went to hell in the world on the cross because that is what sin deserves. Not for his own sin, but for the sins of his people, he was called a Nazarene and became one. He became obedient unto the bitter and shameful death of the cross to accomplish his people’s salvation. Worthless to men he is, but precious to God.

And if you have Jesus in you, partake of his salvation, and speak his word in the world, you will be labeled with many false labels. Blessed are you when men revile you and say all manner of evil against you falsely. Take up your cross and follow Jesus.

—NJL