



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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NO ROOM IN THE INN

She brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. — Luke 2:7

Jesus came unto his own! What a glorious manifestation of the faithfulness, grace, and condescension of God. Who is like Jehovah, our God, who dwells on high, who humbles himself to behold the things in heaven and on the earth? God became flesh and dwelt among us. God was made man in the womb of Mary and born of a virgin. Every knee should bow at that unmistakable sign of God's wonderful grace and the fulfillment of his promise.

But his own received him not!

What a clear manifestation of the darkness, hatred of God, and total corruption that rules in the heart and nature of man. The light shines in darkness, and the darkness comprehends not the light. Whether man does not receive Christ by going on unconcerned and unchanged at his coming, or whether man does not receive Christ by going about actively to oppose him, makes no difference. When Christ comes, man does not receive him. Man will not choose Christ. Man cannot choose Christ. Man cannot will to choose Christ.

Such was the spiritual darkness of Bethlehem.

Bethlehem was the city of David. The illustrious heritage of Bethlehem was that God had called a king after his own heart from that insignificant town in the hill country of Judea. Long ago the prophet Micah had identified the village as the precise city in which the Christ child should be born: "Thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (5:2). God—whose goings forth have been from of old, even from everlasting—would come to Bethlehem!

By the mouth of all his prophets, God told Israel of the coming of his Son. "Behold, a virgin shall conceive." Israel was to look, watch, and pray for the coming of David's seed. The Lord moved heaven and earth and worked all things for the coming of that day. He moved Caesar Augustus to decree that all the world should be taxed. God motivated Joseph to take his wife to Bethlehem. God wrought powerfully in the womb of the virgin Mary, so that in her womb God became flesh. Now the moment—the fullness of time—was upon the world when God would bring forth his Son, born of a woman

and made under the law, to redeem his people from the curse of the law.

Finally, Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, and they knocked on the door of the town's inn. They entered the inn crowded with people. Joseph spoke with the innkeeper and explained that they were strangers there, that they had come because of the Roman census, and that his wife was very pregnant, indeed, ready to deliver.

But there was no room in the inn!

Appalling scene.

The terribleness of that scene was the total lack of love on the part of the innkeeper, every resident of Bethlehem, and every inhabitant of that inn. Standing before them was a woman, a member of the nation and the church, about to have her first baby, perhaps the first contractions already started, and no one could find a place for her. No one said, "I will give up my room so that she can at least have a place to rest for a while." No one said, "We need to find this woman a midwife to help deliver the baby." No one said, "Let's gather some items for the baby. Who has a crib, who has some diapers, and who has some clothes?"

There was no room for Joseph and Mary in the inn.

That was a total failure of love.

That was the rejection of Christ.

How could the people have known that Christ was in Mary's womb and that the Christ child was about to be born? Surely, if they had known that the baby was the Christ, they would have received him and found some room in the inn for his mother.

I say no. Christ could have come to them from heaven in a chariot of fire instead of in the dark womb of Mary, and there still would have been no room in the inn.

The proof is what they did to Mary and Joseph. When the innkeeper and inhabitants of the inn could not find any room; when they thought only of themselves and their own comfortable night of sleep on their beds; when no one opened either a wallet, a room, or a home; and when they all jealously guarded their own convenience from the inconvenience of a couple of strangers from Nazareth, everyone showed what was in their hearts. They showed that they had no love in their hearts for their neighbor and especially for their neighbor in need. They showed what was in their minds too. Their minds were full of selfishness as they jealously sought their own things.

If a man says, “I love God” and hates his brother, he is a liar: for he who loves not his brother, whom he has seen, how can he love God, whom he has not seen? No, they could not see God in the womb of Mary. But they could see Mary and Joseph, and they did not love them. Where there is no love, there is no faith; and where there is no faith, there is no reception of God and Jesus Christ when they come.

Such was the heart and mind of Bethlehem, and such are the hearts and minds of all men by nature. That is you and me by nature too. We are represented by Bethlehem, the cruel innkeeper, and all the merciless residents of that inn cozily enjoying the crackling fire in the fireplace, eating a hearty meal, sipping wine, and delighting in convivial chatter, while casting uncaring glances from time to time in the direction of the exhausted woman in labor at the counter and the man pleading with the innkeeper for a room—any room, a corner. All hearing and agreeing with the cold response of the innkeeper: “You may stay in the barn.” They all watched unmoved as the needy couple turned away from the counter with pain on their faces. All callously stared as Mary and Joseph walked out the door and trudged across the yard to the stable. The residents could probably hear the sounds of intense labor coming from the barn as a new mother brought forth her firstborn son. None of them lifted so much as a finger to help!

The army of angels, preparing to herald the birth of Christ, could have burned the inn to the ground. That is what Bethlehem deserved. The angels saw that terrible scene as they prepared their ranks for the coming of the Christ. Surely, they saw the appalling effect that sin had on flesh: the Word became flesh, the Word came unto his own, and his own received him not.

What had man become in his sin? An utterly wretched creature, lost in the blackness, hatred, and cruelty of his own God-hating heart. The blackness of his heart evidenced by his cruelty toward his neighbor. Each man looking on his own things and not on the things of others. Each man esteeming himself and his comfort and glory above all else. The revelation of his enmity against God. Man’s heart has no room for Christ. Even if he would have come in a golden chariot from heaven instead of in the womb of a virgin, the outcome would have been the same.

What more evidence was needed to show how absolutely necessary was the coming of Christ, for the Word to be made flesh, to save his own from such darkness?

So Mary brought forth her firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger.

A gracious contrast!

Do you see the gracious, divine contrast with the selfish, unbelieving mind of Bethlehem? It is there for all to learn in those words: she brought forth her firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger. In these words is a different mind at work—a divine mind. There is a gracious and merciful mind. There is a mind full of love for such undeserving, sinful, wretched men. Because man was so sinful, bound in his sin and his blackness, Jesus had to come to free him from that bondage.

Born of a woman, the firstborn of that virgin girl. He was truly man, if his birth from a woman said anything at all about him. He had been conceived in her womb by the power of the Holy Ghost. Jesus was the true offspring of Mary. She carried him for nine months, as any other baby, and she gave birth to him. Joseph served as the midwife.

Laid in a manger!

Man, in his celebrations of Christmas, inasmuch as he pays any attention to the Christ of Christmas, always tries to clean up and to beautify the manger scene. But the manger scene was dirty. Mangers are feeding troughs of hay covered with animal slobber. All around that manger was the stink of a cattle shed. You can say that Mary as a mother made that manger as clean and as comfortable as she could for her baby, but it was still a rough-hewn trough. The manger was a scene of humiliation, poverty, dirt, and animal muck.

That manger was a testimony against man and his unbelief. Jesus was laid in that manger because there was no room for him in the inn. He was laid in the manger as the mark of his deep humiliation, his abject poverty, and his total rejection by man.

The manger was also the revelation of his glorious mind. In that stable, in that child, in those swaddling clothes, and in that manger was revealed the lovely, gracious, divine mind of the Son of God toward his people, whom he loved from all eternity.

The one who was swaddled had swaddled the whole

The manger was also the revelation of his glorious mind. In that stable, in that child, in those swaddling clothes, and in that manger was revealed the lovely, gracious, divine mind of the Son of God toward his people, whom he loved from all eternity.

world in his care since he made the world in the beginning. He was rich beyond all measure, and he was high beyond all praising. He is God. He is the Word of God by whom all things were made and without whom was not anything made that was made. He is the light of the world; the Son of God; God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, being of the same essence with the Father.

He became poor. The sapphire throne he exchanged for a stable floor. He who is and remains true and eternal God became a man, a lowly man, a baby, and was laid in a manger. Deliberately, sovereignly, graciously, as the choice of his mind and the desire of his heart, he came into the world as a man and was laid in a manger. He did not think on his own things.

The fact that there was no room in the inn and that he was laid in the manger is God's word about Jesus Christ as the bearer of the sins of his people. He was laid in a manger because he bore the poverty, guilt, shame, and misery of the sin of his people that rested upon him as their representative. The poverty and shamefulness of that sign are the poverty and shamefulness of sin, which takes away man's right to a place in the world and deserves every misery.

Sin is the cause of all man's misery. By nature we are all guilty of Adam's sin, so that everyone is conceived and born in sin, a God-hater and a neighbor-hater. Every moment of every day, in all that we do, we increase our debt by our own actual sins. Because of sin, we are liable to every misery, even to condemnation itself. Because of sin, man has no room in his heart for God, does not choose God, opposes God, and would perish in his sin. Because of sin, man is cruel and unmerciful toward his neighbor.

Upon such miserable, helpless, worthless men God had mercy and tender compassion and willed their eternal salvation. Because he had mercy on them, God himself became a man to bear their sins, and as a man he humbled himself to the bitter and shameful death of the cross. Because God laid on him the iniquity of us all, the babe was laid in the manger and there was no room for him in the inn.

The manger was a prophetic sign of how Jesus' life would end. The wood of the manger would become the wood of the cross. The sign and shame of the manger would become the sign and the curse of the cross. The world and the false church would crowd him out of the world and onto the cross as an outcast, a rebel, and a blasphemer, and he would be forsaken of God in the hellish agonies of the curse of God.

If he were born in a splendid palace and clothed in royal purple, there would have been no gospel in his birth.

He was born poor; he took on the form of a servant; he was obedient unto death so that by his poverty his people might be made exceedingly rich. By his grace he makes room for himself in the hearts and lives of his people. He forgives their sins; he opens their hearts, and they receive him. To as many as receive him, to them he gives power to become God's children. If you receive him, that is not of you. It is of God. He entered your heart and changed your heart from a merciless, cruel, God-hating and neighbor-hating heart to a heart that loves God and the neighbor.

Cause for rejoicing!

Not the superficial, carnal celebrations of the world.

Celebrate, first, by a deep and sincere sorrow over your sin. If there is not that in the Christmas party, there is no celebration of Christmas.

Let us also rejoice by heartfelt thanksgiving and joy in God as the God of our salvation, who in Christ became flesh for us, who was born lowly and suffering for the sake of our sins, who took away our sins on the tree of the cross and earned for us perfect righteousness, worthy of eternal life, and every blessing of salvation. There is no celebration of Christmas without this.

Let us celebrate, too, by putting off that old mind of Bethlehem and putting on the new mind of the Son of God, after whose image we have been recreated. This is the true celebration of the truth that Jesus was laid in the manger.

Do you see that in Mary and Joseph? Do you see their gladness for the salvation that came to them in Mary's firstborn? Do you see how they abased themselves? Do you see how they were partakers of his reproach? Behold Mary as she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes. Behold his grace evident in her already. She became his mother. He made her such.

We may blame the Bethlehemites as though we would have received Jesus. We might say, "I would have given up my room for Joseph and Mary. I would have invited those strangers from Nazareth into my home, and she could have delivered the baby in my living room. I would have paid for her to go to the local doctor, or I would have at least helped that poor virgin woman." Another might boast, "I would have bought a house for baby Jesus. I would have stayed up all night with him if he were crying. I would have nursed him myself. I would have changed his diaper."

He still comes to you.

He comes to you in ministers who preach the word. He comes in saints—even those whom many despise—who speak to you the truth. Whoever receives them receives Jesus.

He comes to you in the form of our little children, God's heritage, who come into the world helpless and

ignorant of God, and we must care for them and teach them. It requires that we give ourselves, that we abase ourselves, that we have the mind of Jesus Christ and not the mind of the Bethlehemites.

He comes to us in the form of the saints in need, in some trouble, in some affliction, or in need of comfort.

To celebrate Christmas, we must abase ourselves.

That as husbands we deny ourselves to please our wives, as Christ emptied himself for his church; yea, even as he is the head of his church and gives himself to his church in love.

That as wives we submit to our husbands as the church submits to Christ.

That as officebearers in the church we be servants of Christ and thus also of all who are Christ's, not lording it over the heritage of Jesus Christ but ruling in wisdom and in humility and offering ourselves with the mind of Jesus Christ on behalf of the congregation.

Let every member of the body of Jesus Christ seek the advantage and salvation of the other members of the body of Jesus Christ.

Let us rejoice!

Out of joy and thankfulness for our salvation that came to us when Jesus was laid in a manger because there was no room for him in the inn.

—NJL

EDITORIAL

OUR PRESENT CONTROVERSY (5)

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 salvation. In the lead-up to Synod 2018, the false doctrine was taught, tolerated, and defended that the believer's assurance and conscious enjoyment of salvation were due to his good works. Synod 2018, by the grace of God, exposed the doctrinal error in our midst and demonstrated that the error militated against our Reformed confessions. In the aftermath of Synod 2018, the churches remain divided over our evaluation of the error that was exposed by Synod 2018. Was that error conditional theology, a lie out of hell, false doctrine, and heresy? Was it contrary to the Reformed confessions? Or was that error something much less, perhaps merely poor phrasing, confusing language, and generally excusable mistakes? Did the error perhaps not actually contradict and deviate from the Reformed confessions? Such is the state of our doctrinal controversy today.

This division in the PRC over our evaluation of Synod 2018 is major. If the PRC cannot condemn the error as deadly false doctrine, then the PRC are not united as a denomination. Our unity is not only that we confess the truth positively together, but also that we condemn together every lie that militates against that truth. If some are condemning our error as a lie, and some are failing to condemn it as a lie, and yet others are maintaining that

it was no lie, that is division. Worse, if the PRC cannot condemn the error as deadly false doctrine, then the PRC will remain susceptible to the error and will eventually embrace that particular lie as the truth.

Therefore, the urgent question for the PRC is, how can we be delivered from our error and thus come to the conclusion of our controversy? The good news is that there is a way forward for a denomination that has erred and that is convulsed by doctrinal controversy. The situation is not hopeless, and the controversy need not be endless. By God's grace the Protestant Reformed Churches can come to blessed unity and peace in the truth. To this question we now turn: What is the way forward for the PRC in our present controversy?

Official Instruction

First, the way forward is official instruction in the decisions of Synod 2018. Such instruction is necessary for a denomination in the aftermath of major doctrinal decisions. In controversy the churches' work is not finished with the meeting of synod. The meeting of synod is really only the beginning of the churches' official work. At synod the controversy is deliberated, judged, and decided. These synodical decisions are necessary as synod's judgment of the controversy in the light of God's word as expressed in the Reformed confessions. Synod's decisions declare what is true doctrine in the controversy and what is false doctrine in the controversy. When those decisions

are made according to the truth of God's word, they are settled for the members of the denomination and binding on their consciences. Therefore, synod's decisions are necessary for the settling of doctrinal controversy in the denomination.

However, the churches' work is not finished with the settled and binding decisions of synod. Those decisions must be brought to the members of the denomination. The churches must instruct the members in the meaning of the decisions. The members of the churches must know the doctrinal issues that came to synod. The members must be informed exactly what the controversy was about. The members must be taught precisely what the doctrinal error was in the controversy. The members must know exactly where the word of God and the confessions condemn that error as the lie. They must know precisely how that error militates against the truth. They must know the magnitude and the danger of that error, so that they abhor and repudiate that error. The members must be taught exactly what is the true doctrine that stands over against the lie. They must be shown the beauty of that truth, which truth glorifies God and saves their souls. The members must be reminded that we as churches are susceptible to error, as the controversy proved. The members must be encouraged to be on their guard against the error and to know and embrace the truth. Synod's settled and binding decisions are only the beginning of the churches' work in settling doctrinal controversy. Those decisions must also be delivered to the churches through official instruction.

This official instruction of the members of the churches has biblical precedent. Acts 15 records a major doctrinal controversy in the early church. The controversy was the age-old conflict between the true doctrine of salvation by grace and the false doctrine of salvation by works. It was a controversy between the grace principle and the works principle of salvation. On one side were certain men who came to Antioch from Judea, teaching the brethren, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved" (v. 1). On the other side were Paul and Barnabas, who had no small dissension and disputation with those men. The question in that controversy was whether the Gentiles had to keep the law of Moses in order to be saved. The basic issue in the controversy, then, was whether salvation was by the keeping of the law—the works principle of salvation—or whether salvation was by grace through faith in Jesus Christ—the grace principle of salvation. The controversy was brought to an assembly of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for their consideration, judgment, and decision. In the course of the deliberations, Peter expressed the doctrinal truth of the grace principle that carried the day: "We believe that

through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they" (v. 11). The assembly of apostles and elders grounded their doctrine in the word of God. The elder James quoted the prophecy of Amos to demonstrate that the salvation of the Gentiles was biblical: "To this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written..." (v. 15).

Having decided the controversy, the assembly at Jerusalem took steps to instruct the members of the churches in its decisions (Acts 15:22–35). The assembly wrote a letter to the church in Antioch stating the decision of the assembly. The assembly also sent an official delegation to Antioch with the letter, which delegation consisted of Paul, Barnabas, Judas Barsabas, and Silas. When the delegation arrived in Antioch, the men gathered the multitude of the church together and delivered the letter from the assembly. The church in Antioch read the letter in the presence of the delegation. Judas and Silas exhorted the brethren and confirmed them, apparently regarding the doctrine that had just been upheld by the assembly in Jerusalem. Later, when Paul and Silas went through the churches that had been established on Paul's previous missionary journey, they instructed the churches in the decisions of the Jerusalem assembly. "As they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem. And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily" (16:4–5). All of this demonstrates the care and pains that the apostles and the Jerusalem assembly took to instruct the members of the churches in the decisions of the assembly.

So also the Protestant Reformed Churches must move forward in our controversy by the official instruction of the members of the churches in the decisions of Synod 2018. The churches have begun this official instruction through the printing and distribution of the *Acts of Synod 2018*. Every household in the PRC has or could have a copy of these decisions. This is a good start, but much more could and should be done by the churches. Because the oversight and instruction of the congregation is the responsibility of the consistory, consistories should take the lead in instructing their members in the decisions of Synod 2018. For example, the consistory could host a public reading of the decisions of Synod 2018 to the congregation over the course of several designated evenings, just as the letter from the Jerusalem assembly was read in the presence of the delegation from Jerusalem. The *Acts of Synod 2018* may be in every household, but perhaps there are members who have not yet gotten around to reading the *Acts*. Perhaps there are members who are daunted by the *Acts* and who do not know where to begin in trying to digest the controversy. A public reading of the decisions would at least ensure that the members of

the congregation have heard firsthand from the *Acts* what was actually decided. They will hear from that reading what the doctrinal issues are, what the doctrinal error was, and what the truth is over against the error. Very likely, the congregation's gathering together to hear the decisions read will spark conversation and further study together. If nothing else, the consistory will signal by this public reading that it is good and holy for members of the churches to hear about the controversy, to read about it, and to discuss it together. Members who perhaps have been under the mistaken impression that silence is the holiest approach to the controversy will be liberated to read, hear, learn, understand, and confess the truth as it is being sharpened through the controversy.

Consistories can be as creative as they would like and go into as much depth as they deem beneficial for their members. During the reading of the decisions, consistories might highlight certain pages, passages, phrases, and words that are especially important for understanding the controversy. Because synod rightly grounded its decisions in the Reformed confessions without explicitly citing the scripture passages upon which those confessions are based, a consistory might prepare a list of biblical passages for its members as a kind of compendium to synod's decisions. A consistory might ask its pastor to give a speech or a brief summary of the decisions. Neighboring consistories might work together to host a speech by a professor or even to host a conference for a day or a weekend with a panel of speakers. A consistory might even overture synod to ask synod to host a speech or a conference that could be livestreamed to the denomination. The possibilities are endless, but the point is that consistories should take the lead in the official instruction of their members in the decisions of Synod 2018. Through this official instruction, under the blessing of God, the members of the PRC can come a long way in our understanding of the doctrines and decisions of Synod 2018, and thus can come a long way toward unity in our evaluation of those decisions. As did the Jerusalem assembly, let us gather the multitude together and deliver the epistle, which when we have read, we shall rejoice for the consolation (Acts 15:30–31). And so shall the churches be established in the faith (16:5).

Polemics

Second, the way forward for the Protestant Reformed Churches is polemics against our own error. Polemics is fighting. Polemics is fighting against the lie that militates against the truth. Polemics is the order of the day for the PRC. Our polemical activity, our fighting, must not be general or external. Our fight must be specific and internal. Our polemics must be against ourselves. That is, the

PRC must fight against the lie that has been among us and that has troubled us. Our fight against ourselves must be vigorous. It must be a fight to the death, so to speak. One principle must prevail, and the other principle must be vanquished, driven from the field, and destroyed in the PRC.

The calling to fight is unpopular. The calling to fight against ourselves is especially unpopular. Fighting, especially fighting ourselves, is painful. Besides, it seems backward that the solution to a doctrinal controversy is to press the controversy. It seems that if we want to come to the end of this controversy, we must not *keep* fighting, but we must *stop* fighting. Polemics would only seem to inflame the controversy, not settle it.

In spite of its unpopularity, polemics against the lie is necessary. Now is not the time to cease hostilities, but to dig in and to bear down in this fight. Certainly, let our fight not be personal and bitter. Certainly, let us work together in this fight against the lie. But let us fight. And let us fight harder!

The church and her members are called to fight against the lie in our midst. Fighting the lie is not merely an option for the church that she may take or leave at her convenience. Fighting the lie is her solemn obligation before God. The church and her members are exhorted, "Ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). Contending is fighting and that earnestly. The faith which was once delivered unto the saints is the truth of the word of God. Therefore, contending for the faith means fighting against the lie that compromises the truth, opposes the truth, and thus denies the truth. This is the polemical calling of the church. She must be a contending, fighting church.

The church is called to fight because her God is a fighting God who hates the lie. Jehovah "is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he" (Deut. 32:4). Jehovah contends against the lie through Jesus Christ, who is the truth, the Word made flesh, who came to the earth to fight. The Prince of peace, who brings the peace of heaven to God's elect people through his death and resurrection, did not come to send peace on the earth, but a sword (Matt. 10:34). The Prince of peace came to fight. He came to tell the truth and, telling that truth, to fight the lie and the Liar (John 8:44–45). Wherever the Prince of peace goes by his gospel throughout the earth, there follows peace with God for his people but warfare and contention against the lie and the Liar. So also the church that the Captain of our salvation gathers to himself is a fighting church. She is the church militant. In Jesus Christ she is the seed of the woman, who is at enmity with the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). She

wears the whole armor of God (Eph. 6:11–20), and she is saved by Jehovah, the shield of her help and the sword of her excellency (Deut. 33:29). In the great battle of the ages, she prevails through Jesus Christ her savior, so that her enemies are found liars unto her, and she treads upon their high places (v. 29).

For the PRC this means that our solemn obligation before God is to fight against the lie that has been exposed in our midst. When synod said there was “doctrinal error” among us that “compromises the gospel of Jesus Christ” (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 61, 70), that was a call to arms for us. The faith which was once delivered unto the saints was compromised by us, and we must now “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3). When the lie is exposed, God calls to the church, “Contend! Fight!”

The question is not, do we feel like fighting? The question is not, will fighting be pleasant for us? The question is only this, was the truth compromised? Then we are called to fight the lie that compromised the truth.

The church’s condemnation of the lie is an integral part of her confession of the truth. By its very nature the truth stands opposed to the lie. By its very nature the truth is antithetical. The truth that a man is justified by the faith of Jesus Christ stands opposed to the lie that a man is justified by the works of the law (Gal. 2:16). The truth that God’s blessing rests upon those who are of faith stands opposed to the lie that God’s blessing rests upon those who are of the works of the law (3:9–10). Therefore, the church that confesses the truth must also condemn the lie. If the church does not condemn the lie, her confession of the truth will be swallowed up by the lie, just as Israel’s toleration of the Canaanite altars led to her being swallowed up by Canaanite idolatry (Judges 2:1–5).

How does the church fight against the lie? First, the church fights the lie by identifying and exposing the lie as a lie. The nature of a lie is that it masquerades as the truth. The lie cloaks itself in the language of the truth so that it can pass itself off as the truth. The lie deceives so that those who tolerate and embrace the lie do not know that it is the lie but think that it is the truth. False apostles and deceitful workers transform themselves into the apostles of Christ; and no wonder, for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:13–15).

The good news is that there is a way forward for a denomination that has erred and that is convulsed by doctrinal controversy. The situation is not hopeless, and the controversy need not be endless.

The church contends against this deception by exposing the lie for what it is. She knows all truth from the word of God and judges all things in the light of that word (1 Cor. 2:12, 15). By this word she is able to discern the truth from the lie. By this word she is even able to try those who say they are apostles and are not and find them liars (Rev. 2:2).

Second, the church fights against the lie by condemning the lie. It is not enough only to identify and expose the lie; the church must also condemn the lie and repudiate it. When the apostle rebuked the Galatians for their toleration and acceptance of the Judaizers’ error, he condemned the error as “another gospel: which is not another” (Gal. 1:6–7). He condemned the error as “pervert[ing] the gospel of Christ” (v. 7). He pronounced a curse and an anathema upon those who would teach the error (vv. 8–9). Indeed, the entire epistle stands as one sustained condemnation of the Judaizers’ error.

So also today the church fights the lie by condemning the lie. She calls it the lie, hates it as the lie, repudiates it as the lie, and puts it out as the lie. She sets her sights on the lie and raises her spiritual weapons against it. In her sermons she fights the lie by bringing God’s word to bear against the lie, exposing it as the lie against the truth, and condemning it as antithetical to God and Christ. In the hearts of her members, there is revulsion of the lie, hatred of the lie, and zeal against the lie. In her ecclesiastical assemblies she discerns the lie and judges righteous judgment against it. In her writings she is specific and explicit so that there is no ignorance about the wickedness of the lie. In her heart and by her words, and according to the word of God, the church fights the lie by condemning the lie.

It is especially in the matter of polemics against the lie that the PRC must yet make progress in our controversy. There has been a tendency among us to minimize the seriousness of our doctrinal error. That minimizing of our error is deadly and will lead to the demise of our denomination, just as the minimizing of false doctrine has led to the demise of many other denominations in the history of the church. It is time that we stop minimizing our error and instead reject the error. To this we will turn next time, the Lord willing.

—AL

The world cannot wait for the end of 2020. Before it began 2020 was hailed as the year of 20/20 vision or some variation of that play on the measure of good eyesight. In 2020 humanity would congratulate itself on how clearly it sees and how enlightened it is. In 2020 humanity would look far forward and see all the dazzling possibilities of what man can achieve. Our sovereign God, who sits enthroned in the heavens and before whom all the nations are as nothing and less than nothing and vanity, cut man's vision short by visiting misery and destruction upon the earth in 2020. Jehovah turned man's triumph into ash, so that man now curses 2020 and wishes it to be finished. What humanity willfully forgot is that 20/20 vision is only the measure of man's eyesight, and man is blind. He lives his life in the spiritual darkness and sightlessness of sin. Man might be bedazzled with himself, but there is no true light there. Man's only hope is Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, who calls his people out of darkness into his marvelous light. And what light is the Light! How bright is he who is the brightness of God's glory and the express image of his person! In his light we see light. In his light we know all the things of God that he has revealed. In his light we see the kingdom of heaven and walk in it. In his light we have illumination for our feet and a light upon our path. In his light we have much more than the blind 20/20 vision of man, for in his light we see God.

2020 was not the year of 20/20 vision, but it was *anno domini*, the year of our Lord. His footsteps have echoed loudly this year. He comes, and he comes quickly. And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!"

We hope you are edified by this final regular issue of the year. One of the pleasant surprises we have enjoyed in publishing *Sword and Shield* is how many readers have submitted their own articles for publication in the magazine. When Reformed Believers Publishing published its first issues, we wondered how much interest there would be even in *reading* the magazine. We have been delighted to hear from so many who have felt compelled also to *write* an article here and there for the magazine. We find this to be a powerful expression of the fact that *Sword and Shield* is a believer's paper. We are thankful to God for those men and women in the office of believer who have readily and cheerfully employed their gifts of writing for the advantage and salvation of other members (Heidelberg Catechism, A 55). We also think that the contributions are adding a nice flavor and a pleasing sound to the magazine. The voice of the magazine is not and need not

be this or that editor, but the voice of God's people as we together confess our Savior. What a spiritually exciting project to be part of!

In this issue we welcome Mr. Samuel Vasquez and his contribution on a timely topic in the Protestant Reformed Churches: biblical counseling. That topic is certainly ripe for some lively discussion and some biblical examination among us, and we trust that Mr. Vasquez' article will get us started.

Also, we thank the Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA) and Professor Engelsma for allowing us to republish his timely and necessary review of Dr. Richard J. Mouw's latest book. Professor Engelsma's review was originally published on the RFPA's blog on September 23, 2020, at <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/once-more-dr-richard-j-mouw-on-common-grace>. Dr. Mouw's book and Professor Engelsma's review remind us that the issue of common grace is alive and well and that there is still work for the Protestant Reformed Churches to do in their polemic against common grace and their development of the truth.

In this issue we also introduce a new rubric: A Word in Due Season. "A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word spoken in due season, how good is it!" (Prov. 15:23). Rev. VanderWal gets this rubric going with an explanation of heresy.

Finally, we are very happy to announce plans for two special editions of *Sword and Shield* in the near future, the Lord willing. The first special edition will commemorate the first annual meeting of Reformed Believers Publishing, held in October. The issue will feature the comments, speeches, and reports that were delivered at the meeting, along with some photos of the evening. God has gone before the magazine and prepared its way, and the occasion of the first annual meeting is a good opportunity to commemorate his guidance. Keep an eye out on or around December 15 for this Annual Meeting Edition.

The second special edition is another Letters Edition. Your letters have continued to come in at a steady pace, and we are grateful for your thoughtful comments, questions, and criticisms. Look for this Letters Edition on or around January 15. As usual, these special editions will not interrupt the regular editions of *Sword and Shield*, so you can still look forward to the magazine the first of each month as well.

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

—AL

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 (3): Their Origins

I began a defense of *Sword and Shield* and Reformed Believers Publishing (RBP) in the October issue because the appearance of *Sword and Shield* has occasioned a storm of unjust criticism that casts doubt on the righteousness of the endeavor. This criticism has been public and private. Publicly it appeared in letters from consistories to their congregations in which elders charged *Sword and Shield* and RBP with schism. I have answered these critics regarding their wrong understanding of article 31 of the Church Order and of the Formula of Subscription. The understanding of article 31 promoted by these consistories is essentially the same understanding the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) used to cast out Herman Hoeksema and others during the common grace controversy in the denomination in 1924. The understanding of the Formula of Subscription by some of these consistories—according to which they suppose that the vow of subscription binds every officebearer to every synodical decision and to the Church Order—is simply mystifying. Their interpretation stands against the plain meaning of the words of the Formula, by which the officebearer subscribes not to the Church Order but to the three forms of unity.

I turn now to criticisms regarding the origins of RBP and its magazine *Sword and Shield*.

One consistory told its congregation,

We object to the content of the editorial appearing in this magazine. We find that it lacks candor and transparency in stating the reasons for the publishing of another magazine in our denomination. No mention is made of the criticism and dissatisfaction with the *Standard Bearer* out of which this magazine arose. Rather, the editorial leaves the impression of a cordial relationship existing between these two magazines. This is misleading.

How the consistory came upon this information, I do not know. The elders do not disclose the source of their information. The documents on which they could have

based their assessment were not sent to them and are not their property.

The article in *Sword and Shield* that they so criticize is not misleading. It did not seek to leave an impression. It was not the intention of the founders of RBP and of *Sword and Shield* to make the issue with their magazine the problems that they had with the *Standard Bearer*. *Sword and Shield* came out of a spirit that sought to promote the truth in every area of life and to condemn the lie that militates against the truth. *Sword and Shield* arose out of a desire to have a magazine to do this that met the founders' expectations. But since this consistory has now made public what the founders of RBP sought to keep private, I will explain the origins of RBP and its *Sword and Shield*.

In May 2019 a group of men, members of the Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA) and subscribers to the *Standard Bearer* (*SB*), gathered to address a letter of concern to the RFPA board about issues that the men had with the RFPA and its *Standard Bearer*. The letter to the board stated the men's convictions that the *SB* is deficient in polemics; that the freedom of the magazine is in jeopardy as a forum for debate on the current doctrinal issues; that there has been censorship of articles and letters; that the relationship between the RFPA and the *SB* has changed from its historic position; that the current relationship is that the RFPA is a mere printer and mailer of the *SB*, whose content is under the sovereign control of the writers; that the *SB* has not instructed its subscribers regarding the recent doctrinal controversy in the PRC and has not provided leadership in that controversy; and that the *SB* has instigated criticism of Herman Hoeksema's understanding of faith and the call of the gospel in his sermon regarding the Philippian jailor, which criticism on the pages of the *SB* these men found objectionable. The group of men did not merely assert these things but provided to the RFPA board lengthy documentation of every complaint. The intention of the group of concerned men was that the board would acknowledge and address these issues, and if the board did not, the men

were prepared to call for a special association meeting to treat these matters.

This action the men believed was not only their right but also their calling. The RFPA constitution, under which the organization operates, states in article 5.D: “Other meetings may be called by the Board on its own motion, or *upon written request from any fifteen Regular Members*” (emphasis added). The letter of concern sent by the group of men constituted the beginning of their grounds for calling a special association meeting. Membership in the RFPA obligated them not merely blindly to support the organization and its paper regardless of their convictions, but also if they had concerns to address them to the board. The men’s membership in the RFPA obligated the board to take these concerns seriously, to address them, and according to the constitution to honor the request for a special meeting. The men of the RFPA can and may judge the content of their magazine. This group of men was not satisfied with their magazine. Some may disagree, but that does not take away the right of these men to criticize their magazine and, if necessary, to call for a change to it. This is what membership in the RFPA means. All members have a say-so in the organization and in its magazine, which one supports by his membership.

The men are members of the RFPA and/or ardent supporters of the organization and readers and subscribers of its *SB*. The men have given of their blood, sweat, and tears for the organization and its magazine. They have supported faithfully and financially the organization and its *SB*. The men came together because of their mutual concern for the tone, content, and direction of the *SB*. When their concerns were dismissed and even evilly characterized, and the request for a special association meeting was denied—based on the evil characterization of the concerns and contrary to the RFPA’s own constitution—only *then* did a new organization and the plans for the publication of a new magazine that met the men’s expectations begin to take concrete form.

This action of forming a group of RFPA members to address a letter to the board has been characterized as schism and raising discord, sects, and mutiny in the church. The group of men has been called a secret society, a schismatic group, and any number of other false and scandalous names. Some of the men have been formally

charged at the consistory level with schism for even forming and participating in such a group.

Such an outrageous charge of schism against the group and its actions originates in a deep misunderstanding about what the RFPA and the *SB* are. Many in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), and this includes many officebearers and church members, have the understanding that the RFPA and its *SB* are quasi-ecclesiastical arms of the PRC. Editorship at the *SB* is viewed as something akin to an office in the churches. Many do not understand that the *SB* is *not* a denominational magazine and that editorship of the magazine is just that, editorship of an independent paper. The RFPA, which owns and publishes the magazine, is *not* an ecclesiastical organization. The letter *F* in the acronym of the name RFPA stands for *free*. Free indicates that the publisher and its

magazine *do not belong to and are not under the control of any ecclesiastical organization*.

Hoeksema explained his understanding of the word *free*:

Of this truth the Standard Bearer means to be a *witness*. I use this term to distinguish the nature of its testimony from the official preaching of the Word of God through the instituted Church, whether in the ministry of the Word within the Church, or in

its missionary work to the ends of the earth. Our publication has sometimes been called a missionary. Strictly speaking, however, this is not correct. Christ has committed the task of preaching the gospel, not to individuals, nor to an association or to a Bible Institute, but very definitely to His chosen and called apostles, and in them to the Church. And for this purpose He also gave unto His Church in the world pastors and teachers, that through them the Church might fulfill its calling and mission to preach the Word. But the Standard Bearer, and the association that sponsors its publication, are not a part of the Church as an institute; they belong to the Church as an organism, and they function in virtue, not of the specially instituted offices, but in virtue of the office of believers. It is with this distinction in mind that we speak of our publication as a *Witness*.

It is also with this distinction before our consciousness that we say that the Standard Bearer is *free*, and that the society that sponsors it calls

RBP and its *Sword and Shield* are not ecclesiastical in any sense. Like the home and school and other societies, RBP and *Sword and Shield* belong not to the institutional life of the church but to its organic life.

itself the Reformed *Free* Publishing Association. The freedom we thus denote is not akin to doctrinal licentiousness. We do not intend to separate ourselves from the institute of the Church. The very fact that we adopted the name *Reformed* Free Publishing Association, and that, therefore, we place ourselves on the basis of the Reformed Confessions, indicates the very opposite. But free we are in the same sense in which our Christian Schools are free schools. The Standard Bearer is not an official church organ. It is not sponsored by the church as institute. And this freedom implies that we are not hampered by purely institutional bonds, and are not motivated by mere, formal, institutional considerations or prepossessions. In 1923 the institute of the Christian Reformed Church meant to silence our testimony. They closed the official organs to us. They tried to put the yoke of the Three Points upon us. They cast us out of their fellowship. Much of this action was motivated by personal opposition, and the desire to maintain so-called “rest” in the churches, the rest of corruption and death. But the Standard Bearer remained free. No institution controlled it. Its voice could not be silenced. And free it should remain. Unhampered by considerations that are foreign to the love of Reformed truth, our publication purposes to continue to maintain and develop the truth as our God delivered it to us! (“The Standard Bearer As A Witness,” *Standard Bearer* 22, no. 6 [December 15, 1945]: 129)

The fact that the organization is not ecclesiastical means that actions by the members of the organization are not done within the church institute but only within the organization and membership of the RFPA. Such actions cannot be schismatic for the very reason that schism is the sin of dividing in the church. The RFPA is not the church but a free association. Letters by a group of members to the board cannot be schismatic any more than a letter from a group of members of some insurance association to its board would be schismatic. Besides, the actions of the men were in harmony with the constitution of the RFPA.

In this regard I quote from Rev. Hoeksema’s speech to a gathering of the RFPA in 1945:

This also implies that the Standard Bearer is *yours*. It is not an organ of any consistory, classis, or synod. Nor is it under the sovereign control of the editors that fill its pages. It is *yours*. Even as our free Christian Schools are not ultimately controlled by the teachers, but by the parents; so the Standard Bearer, though its contents are the

care of its editors, is *your* paper. (“The Standard Bearer As A Witness,” 129)

Because the *SB* is not the organ of any consistory, classis, or synod, is not the editors’ or the writing staff’s, but is the instrument of the association that owns and publishes it, it is also the obligation and calling of the members of that association to judge whether its magazine and organization are living up to their history and purpose. If association members believe that the magazine and organization are not living up to their history and purpose, the members have the right to address these matters with the board and finally with the association.

This erosion of the understanding of the word *free* also explains why publishing a new magazine is viewed as semi-, if not *de facto*, schismatic. Such an attitude must also, then, condemn Hoeksema and the men who supported him for the publication of the *SB*. From the minutes of the original meeting of the organization that would eventually become the RFPA, we read:

1. The first meeting was held at the home of Rev. H. Hoeksema, Eastern Avenue, Grand Rapids, April 8, 1924. (Notice that this was about five months before *The Standard Bearer* was actually begun and nearly nine months before the Protestant Reformed Churches came into existence. H.H.)

2. This meeting was opened with prayer by Rev. H. Hoeksema.

3. Fifteen brethren were present, who unanimously decided to organize as a Publication Committee and to discuss that same evening matters pertaining to the support of the brethren ministers, Rev. H. Danhof, of Kalamazoo, and Rev. H. Hoeksema, of Grand Rapids, in the publishing and sending out, as well as also the bearing of expenses in connection with the publishing of brochures, and, if possible, of a paper.

The reasons for this weighty step were the refusal and return by *De Wachter* of a series of articles written by the aforementioned ministers for our Reformed people. In order to be able to answer all the various writings coming from one side—and sometimes besmudged with personal hatred—this was the only way to offer the aforementioned ministers the opportunity to defend themselves against their attackers in the eyes of the Reformed reading public. (“The Standard Bearer in Retrospect,” *Standard Bearer* 50, no. 2 [October 15, 1973]: 33)

I remind everyone that this organization was formed while all those men were members of or ministers in the CRC and in the middle of a massive struggle in that church for the truth. In forming this organization were Hoeksema

and Danhof and the fifteen men who supported them being schismatic in the CRC? Were they guilty of being members of a secret society in the CRC? Did they seek the approval of the consistories of the CRC before publishing their magazine or mailing it to the various homes of the members of the denomination? They did not. In the climate in which they operated in the CRC, it is unlikely that any consistory would have granted approval, and more likely that many would have moved to crush the organization and its magazine and charge sin for supposedly making inroads on the unity of the church by their magazine, as would later be proved true when the involvement of Hoeksema and Danhof with the *SB* was the ground for their discipline—and the charge was schism.

Likewise, RBP and its *Sword and Shield* are not ecclesiastical in any sense. Like the home and school and other societies, RBP and *Sword and Shield* belong not to the institutional life of the church but to its organic life. Their right to exist rests on the calling of the believer to witness to the truth—a witness that is separate and distinct from the official witness of the church institute. RBP and *Sword and Shield* are not under the control of consistories, classes, and synods but under the control of a volunteer association of like-minded believers, who operate under a constitution and carry out their purpose by means of a board and a staff of writers.

One consistory wrote to its members,

We believe that something done in the conviction of promoting truth in our denomination would have sought the support of consistories who are the very ones called of God to maintain the truth and watch over the faith and life of their members.

We find this disturbing. If a magazine purports to promote the truths of the Reformed Faith, why would it not give prior knowledge of its publication to consistories called by Christ to maintain the Reformed Faith? If the magazine's promoters intend to target the members of our church, why would they not seek the concurrence of the elders of our church before doing so?

This act has not produced confidence in the magazine.

Another consistory wrote,

We did not provide the publishers of this magazine with the addresses of our members nor did they seek the consistory's approval to mail the magazine to the members of our congregation. We believe that the publishing and mailing of a new magazine to our members with the stated purpose of promoting the truth in our

denomination would have sought the input and permission of our consistory that is called of God to maintain and proclaim the truth and watch over the faith and life of its members.

The problems these consistories have with the magazine's promoters targeting a congregation's membership without the concurrence and permission of the elders betray ignorance of the RFPA's promotion of its magazine, the *Standard Bearer*. Many times, probably in these consistories' own congregations, the RFPA board would notice that many members of a certain congregation did not subscribe to the *SB*. So the board targeted those members without ever asking the consistory's permission. The RFPA also belonged to book associations for the purpose, among others, of obtaining mailing lists in order to mail its magazine to households belonging to congregations of other denominations and did so without seeking any consistory's approval for doing so.

A consistory can be disturbed that RBP did not seek its permission to send a magazine to the home mailboxes of its members only because the elders do not know the origins of the RFPA and its *SB*, and they reject the very idea of a witness to the truth that is separate and distinct from the witness of the church institute, which idea is at the heart of the existence of the RFPA and its *SB* and also of the existence of RBP and its *Sword and Shield*. The position of these consistories is essentially that *only* the church institute witnesses, and the church institute has control, or at least the say-so, regarding every witness that may come from believers. Such a position is really a rejection of the very origins and right of existence of the RFPA and its *SB* and now also of RBP and its *Sword and Shield*. If the church institute gives its permission for the existence of this witness, the church institute can also withhold its permission, and such an organization and such a witness lose their right of existence.

This idea the members of RBP reject. The witness of believers in their office of believer is distinct from the witness of the instituted church. This witness to the truth does not rest on consistorial approval and does not need consistorial approval to carry out that witness. This witness does not rest for its validity upon the endorsement of the church institute and is not made less credible if one, several, or many consistories, even an entire denomination or the whole world, disapprove of it. This witness of believers does not need and will not seek permission from any consistory for the right to speak, write, mail, or email the truth. From Christ directly, by virtue of their anointing, believers have the right to speak. The right of this witness to exist is derived from the believers' calling in the office of believer to witness to the truth, the fact that the witness is the truth, and the fact that the truth

is over all and judges all. The believers' right to promote that witness in whatever way necessary rests on the right of the truth to be heard and the calling of believers to sound out their witness to the ends of the earth.

It has become plain that these consistories have even lost sight of the principle of article 30 of the Church Order: "In these assemblies ecclesiastical matters only shall be transacted." It is highly ironic that these same consistories, which declare before the world that RBP and *Sword and Shield* are schismatics on the basis of article 31 of the Church Order, appear not to have noticed article 30. Ecclesiastical matters have to do with the preaching, the sacraments, and discipline. The consistories complain that RBP has not consulted them and that they did not know that *Sword and Shield* was going to be sent to the home mailboxes of members of their congregations. Some consistories have been so bold and lordly as to tell their congregations that they are writing to RBP to demand that their members be taken off the mailing list of *Sword and Shield*. One consistory has informed its congregation, "We also intend to request that the publisher immediately remove the members of ___ from their mailing list." I wonder if these consistories know of all the magazines that are sent to their members' home mailboxes. I wonder if any of these magazines are so full of evil as to be condemned out of hand by the consistories.

These consistories have claimed the right to endorse or not to endorse magazines, to enter into the content of magazines via public letters, and even to demand of publishers that they not send their material to the membership of these consistories' churches. Is endorsing magazines consistorial work? Has the content of the members' home mailboxes been the work of the consistory? Does a consistory have the right to tell a publishing organization to whom it may and may not mail its material? Are these consistories now going to enter into the content of the *SB* or of the *Beacon Lights* via public and open letters to their congregations? Are consistories going to begin examining what periodicals and blogs the members subscribe to and read, and endorse this or that one and condemn publicly this or that one? If they are, I have a list of popular blogs and periodicals against which these consistories can start warning their congregations and sending letters to the publishers of these magazines and blogs telling them to cease and desist sending them to their members, because some of them contain serious false doctrine and some pretty wild ideas about the Christian life.

This position of a consistory's right to endorse some magazines and to condemn others leads to another question: what about the office of believer? Do I not have a right to subscribe to some religious magazine I want to read, even if it is heretical, in order to educate myself? Do I not have the ability to try every spirit whether it be of

God and to cancel my own subscription if I do not want some magazine? What if a church member subscribes to and reads the now proscribed *Sword and Shield* after the magazine failed to receive the elders' imprimatur? Is the consistory going to discipline that member? If members of a church become members of RBP, will they face charges of schism from their consistory?

Many of these consistorial letters warn congregations about schism caused by *Sword and Shield*. One consistory wrote, "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." Not only might the *Sword and Shield* cause schism, which I suppose is bad enough, but in the eyes of this consistory it *will only* cause division and promote discord, and *will* lead to schism. Let this be put to rest! If *Sword and Shield* writes the truth, it cannot be charged with schism, for schism is never the fault of the truth but always the fault of the lie and those who reject the truth. The truth only ever builds unity.

The purpose of RBP and its *Sword and Shield* in their origins is wholly edifying and positive. The members of RBP desire to have a magazine that will promote the Reformed truth in every area of life with vigorous and engaging articles that maintain and develop the truth. They desire to have a magazine that is answerable to, is interested in, and responds to the membership of the organization that owns and publishes it. While the content of *Sword and Shield* is the care of the editors, the magazine is subject to the judgment of the organization that owns it. The members desire to have a paper that is free, so that writers are, in fact, solely responsible for the content of their own articles and can write according to their Spirit-wrought convictions. The members want a paper that invites the reading public, whether friend or foe, to write in. The members want a forum where candid, open, and lengthy debates via letters and guest articles can take place about important doctrinal and practical issues of the day. The members want an organization that stands behind and takes responsibility for the content of the magazine that it owns and publishes and desires with all its resources to promote the truth and to defeat the lie.

What Herman Hoeksema said about the *Standard Bearer*, the members of RBP say about *Sword and Shield*: "*Sword and Shield* remains free. No institution controls it. Its voice cannot be silenced. And free it should remain. Unhampered by considerations that are foreign to the love of Reformed truth, our publication purposes to continue to maintain and develop the truth as our God has delivered it to us!"

—NJL

A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word spoken in due season, how good is it!—Proverbs 15:23

HERESY (1)

Heresy and Schism

The Bible has much to say about heresies and schisms.

The word *heresy*, like its adjective form *heretical* and its personal form *heretic*, is from the Greek word *hairesis*. It means sect or party, a division within a larger group that distinguishes itself according to a teacher or a teaching. So the Bible speaks of the “sect” of the Pharisees (Acts 15:5; 26:5). There is also “the sect of the Sadducees” (5:17). The accusers of Paul also used this Greek word to describe the apostle’s relationship to Christians: “a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” (24:5). The use of this word in 2 Peter 2:1 is different. This passage refers to “false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them.” There the word “heresies” refers to the actual teachings that draw lines of division in a group and form smaller groups within the group.

The other word, *schism*, can refer to a physical rent or tear. Jesus used this word in his parable of a garment in Matthew 9:16, saying that when a new patch is sewn on a rent in an old garment, the rent, or schism, is made worse because of the newness of the patch. Paul used the word in a figure of speech to talk about division in the body of Christ: “that there should be no schism in the body” (1 Cor. 12:25). First Corinthians 1:10 and 11:18 use the word to refer to divisions in the church itself. See also John 7:43, 9:16, and 10:19, which note the effect of Jesus’ preaching and miracles that the Jews became divided on whether Jesus was the Christ of God.

The Bible also defines several points of relationship between these two words, *heresy* and *schism*.

The most fundamental relationship is that of cause and effect, division being the cause and sect the effect. To use the words directly: *schism* causes *heresy*. Splitting, tearing, and dividing are actions that result in their effects of parties, sects, and groups in the church. What scripture teaches us is that men themselves split up the church. The action belongs to them. They work, and the result of their work is that parties are formed. In this relationship heresies—parties or sects—are the effect of the teaching.

Then where do heresies as false doctrines and teachings come in? They are sometimes the tools, or instruments, of men who cause division in the church.

There are two types of schism in the church. One involves false doctrine, and the other does not.

The one kind of schism we see in operation in 1 Corinthians 1, 11, and 12, which were referenced earlier. The members of the church drove this kind of division, which resulted in parties. Paul and Apollos had preached the gospel to the church at Corinth. The church members there heard the gospel of Christ. They had also heard about the apostle Peter. Paul, Apollos, and Peter were the servants of Jesus Christ. They all preached the same gospel of Christ. But the Corinthian church divided itself, with each division claiming a special allegiance to one of these men. In doing so, the members were schismatic. They rent the body of Christ into factions.

The other kind of schism in the church is driven by an individual leader or leaders of the church. The apostle Paul warned about that when he met with the elders of the church of Ephesus: “Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:30). Men worked in this way: they spoke these perverse things, twisting the truth into unique teachings and asking for allegiance to themselves. They were successful, “draw[ing] away disciples after them.” According to 2 Peter 2:1, these are the “damnable heresies” that false teachers bring in.

Another relationship that the Bible gives between heresy and schism is that they are wholly united as means to destroy the church of Jesus Christ. That unholy union is all the more striking when we consider that each has a different purpose with its destructive power. Schism takes aim at the church of Jesus Christ in its unity. But heresy as doctrinal error takes aim at the truth to destroy it. How are schism and heresy then united against the church? Their union is due to the spiritual nature of the church of Jesus Christ. The foundation of the church of Jesus Christ is the truth as it is in Jesus Christ.

The spiritual character of heresy, in the service of schism, is that it tries to remove the truth from the church and the church from the truth. This is why the apostle in Acts 20:30 warned the Ephesian elders that men arising from among them would “draw away” men after themselves. They would not remain with the truth and therefore would not remain with the church. They would be drawn away out of the church.

Note well an important implication of this: there is no schism with the truth and in the truth. The true church

of Jesus Christ must endure schism, but the faithful in Christ are never schismatic. Schism always comes from false doctrine in the church, what is paraded for truth and disguised as truth. Sometimes the heretic has deceived himself, and very often those following him are deceived. But the truth does not change. They are still heretics. Their tool is heresy. The consequence of their doctrines and the doctrine of those following them is schism.

The third relationship taught by the Bible is that heresy is the tool of schismatic persons. John Calvin's statement must stand here: "Ambition is the mother of heresy." The Bible makes clear in its warning about heresy that the men are always prior to the teachings they teach. Heresies are marvelously imaginative and inventive. There is always a malevolent brilliance to heresies. Men in their pride suppose themselves to be superior. They do not begin thinking themselves to be superior to the truth or to Christ, who is the truth. But they suppose themselves to be superior to the books they have read or to the truth of the confessions they have studied or to faithful men who have gone before them. There is a schism already forming in their hearts and minds that breaks them from their bonds and ties to the truth. Schismatic persons become enamored with the novelties they have found, even thinking them to be found in God's word. They also wish to have their ideas reflected and echoed by others. So they seek to persuade by all kinds of means: personality, emotion, authority and weight of office, and approval of men. They are effective in persuading. They draw men after them. They are encouraged in thinking that they are correct, that they have some new truth from the Bible to promote. They are justified by the Christians that follow them and give their approval.

But the stubborn facts remain. Their teachings are not those of the Bible. Those teachings are not orthodoxy, but heterodoxy. Their errors are wanderings from the truth. It matters not what approval they receive from men or how many follow them. It matters not whether they are vindicated by ecclesiastical assemblies. They have followers, but those following them are not following Christ. They are leaders, but they are not leading for Christ, and they are not led by Christ.

Therefore it is the duty of every church that would be a faithful church of Jesus Christ to be discerning. It is the duty of every Christian that would remain a true Christian, faithful to Jesus Christ, to be discerning. Discernment is the practical exercise of the knowledge of the truth of God's word, the sole authority for faith and life, to apply that knowledge to every teaching presented and found. That application of knowledge is for the purpose of holding fast to that which is good and avoiding the appearance of evil.

Discernment must see through persons and offices. It must set aside emotions, the weight and influence of men, the fog of confusion, and the appeal of ease and convenience. Discernment must be the love of 1 Corinthians 13:6. It must be the carefulness of 1 John 5:21. It must be the love of the freedom described in Galatians 5:1.

Distracted Confusion

Moving from the teachings of scripture about heresy to their application presents some difficulties.

Application is certainly necessary. This is clear from the warnings of scripture. There will arise false teachers in the church. These false teachers will use their "damnable heresies" to gain their followings and will disrupt the communion of the church as they work their schisms. The church is called to heed these scriptural warnings and to make proper use of them, applying them to specific, concrete situations before them. The church must clearly identify certain teachings as heretical and their teachers and followers as heretics. This judgment is part of the work of discipline, which is necessary for maintaining purity of doctrine in the church. This is one of the main purposes of deliberative assemblies in the churches, as scripture makes clear in Acts 20:28–30, Titus 1:9–11, and 2 John 10.

This necessity of application for the purposes of Christian discipline affects the word *heresy* in two distinct ways, one way following upon the other.

The first way is the actual and proper use of the word *heresy* and its relationship to schism in the church. As noted before, Christ himself built the church of Jesus Christ upon the truth of his word. Ephesians 2:20 calls attention to this character of the church as a spiritual building. It is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone. The church, resting on that foundation, is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15). The church is called to find its essential unity in the fact that the members together agree in the truth (1 Cor. 1; Eph. 4).

False doctrine, error, heresy, and unorthodoxy all represent a doctrine or a body of doctrines that is opposed to the doctrine of the apostles and prophets. The very nature of all these words signifies a standard by which they are judged to be deviations from the truth. False doctrine, error, heresy, and unorthodoxy are not in harmony with the truth of God's word but militate against it. As speech, they contradict God's word. In that opposition to God's word, they are opposed to the church in the church's unity and in its very existence. False doctrine is the enemy of the church; the enemy of Christ, the head of the church; and the enemy of the truth.

* John Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 2:258.

False doctrine, error, heresy, and unorthodoxy are destructive of the church. Schism is caused by the introduction of false doctrine into the church. That doctrine grows among the members of the church and weakens their hold on the truth. They are confused by the false doctrines, which are promoted by authoritative leaders and prominent members. The members of the church find the false doctrines appealing, more appealing than the truth. They begin to follow, then to confess, these false doctrines. Seeking to justify their hold on error, the teachers find reasons to make the truth distasteful. Then they work to find scriptural passages that condemn the truth and favor their error.

The orthodox in the church oppose this state of affairs. The faithful seek to have Christian discipline applied and judgment made by authoritative deliberative assemblies in the church. The faithful look for the ecclesiastical bodies to declare that the troublesome, false teachings are heretical. The consequence of such a judgment is that the persons who hold to the false teachings are rebuked and called to repent and to repudiate the false teachings. Should those holding the false teachings fail to submit, they would become the objects of Christian discipline, as outlined in Lord's Day 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

What role do the words *heresy* and *heretic* have in all this?

In an ecclesiastical, church political context, these terms have certain, definite meanings. *Heresy* is that doctrine or teaching judged by an ecclesiastical assembly to be contrary to that system of truth upheld and maintained by that ecclesiastical assembly. Because heresy has this certain, definite meaning, a doctrine or teaching cannot be half heresy or nearly heresy. It is heresy, or it is not heresy. It also means that an ecclesiastical assembly cannot say that a doctrine or a teaching is only an *error* or a *misunderstanding*, as though it occupies a lower position than heresy. Church assemblies may not determine some kind of graduated scale of doctrinal error in the church, finding some doctrinal errors to be lesser than others.

We can look at article 80 of the Church Order for proof. The article mentions, among other sins, "false doctrine or heresy." We may not suppose that these two are distinguished, so that one is considered bad and the other less bad. It is not as though false doctrine is different than heresy. Heresy is false doctrine. The distinction between heresy and false doctrine is that an ecclesiastical assembly declares a false doctrine to be heresy. However, even without an ecclesiastical declaration, a false teaching is still false doctrine and therefore serves as a ground for the suspension and deposition of officebearers.

A few examples may be helpful. We can speak of the doctrine of justification. The doctrine of justification by faith alone without works was the material principle of

the Reformation. The doctrine of justification by faith alone without works was central to the Reformation. The Reformation had its energy and momentum out of that doctrine as the doctrine of the gospel. As has often been expressed, the Reformation was "the light after the darkness." The counter-Reformation, having its summit in the Council of Trent, declared the doctrine of justification by faith alone a heresy and those who held to it heretics. Defining the doctrine, the Romish church declared it heretical. Applying the doctrine to the Reformation and to those professing and confessing it, the whole movement was declared heretical and its leaders heretics worthy of temporal and eternal punishment. The false church determined justification by faith and works to be orthodox and justification by faith alone without works to be heresy.

In the same manner we must speak of the orthodox churches of the Reformation. Although by ecclesiastical decision Rome determined that the whole Protestant Reformation was heretical, the Reformation paid no heed. It stood upon the ground of scripture alone with its teaching from scripture alone of justification by faith alone. What the Romish institution judged to be heretical was truly orthodox. The doctrine of justification by faith alone was declared to be orthodox, and justification by faith and works was declared to be heretical. An interesting side note is that both the Roman Catholic and the Reformed deemed the anti-trinitarian Servetus a heretic.

Another example is the rise of Arminianism in the Netherlands. Its advocates claimed the freedom to preach it as a system that did justice to the role of man in salvation as well as to the commands, warnings, and promises of the Bible. They claimed faithfulness to the Protestant Reformation and its doctrines. But the Synod of Dordt identified that teaching with the heresy of Pelagianism, declaring heretical that system of teaching known as Arminianism. It mattered not at all how much the Arminians claimed to be orthodox and denied they were teaching error. The Arminian party was cast out of the Reformed churches of the Netherlands for its heresy.

Another different example is the teaching of the federal vision. Presently conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches and denominations cannot see their way to making decisive judgments about the doctrines of the federal vision. They are unwilling to call the teachings heresy and their professors and confessors heretics. They are also unwilling to discipline them.

We can also see an example in the Protestant Reformed Churches. On the basis of the Reformed creeds, these churches judged that the teaching of the conditional covenant was heretical. Officebearers were disciplined for teaching the doctrine of the conditional covenant.

Scripture uses the word *heresy*. Church decisions use

the word *heresy*. Preachers, theologians, elders, and believers use the word *heresy*. In the use of this word, two points of significance are always joined together. The first point is that *heresy* must be attached to some teaching. It is a label. The same thing is true of the word *heretic*. It must be attached to an individual. The second point is that *heresy* identifies something as evil. It is strongly negative. Heresy is a really bad teaching. A heretic is a bad person. That a teaching is heresy means that it must be excluded from the church. That someone is a heretic means that he must be excluded from the church by Christian discipline.

It can happen that the second point of significance, with its strong emotional content, overtakes the first point. Then problems result. Doctrinal precision is lost. The truth becomes lost from sight, and the destructive character of the error is minimized. The question is no longer asked, what was taught? The question becomes rather, is the person who taught heresy good or bad? A perverse kind of reasoning can be employed. "He can't be a heretic. He is nice." "He can't be a heretic. He is helpful." "He can't be a heretic. He has been good for the church." "He can't be a heretic. See how people love and respect him." "He can't be a heretic. He is a holy man, upright in his walk, full of good works and devotion to family and church."

Another consequence is that the term *heresy* becomes liable to redefinition. Its objective character is stripped away, and its subjective character becomes all-embracing. A heretic can only be a heretic if he is malicious toward the truth. He cannot be a heretic if he at one time and place confesses the truth even though at another time and place denies it.

With the above mindset in view, there arises another problem. The word *heresy* becomes such a negative word that substitutes are designed, and those substitutes are meant to take away the real force and impact of the truth. So, first, *heresy* is dropped in favor of *error* or *mistake* or even *confusion* or *misunderstanding*. Confusion results. The first two terms, *error* and *mistake*, are objective. They apply to the content of teaching. But the last two terms, *confusion* and *misunderstanding*, are subjective. *Confusion*

and *misunderstanding* are able to exist either in the mind of the speaker or in the mind of the hearer. The consequence is that false doctrine can hide in the confusion generated by the use of these different words.

There is another side to the above problem. The substitution of "gentler" words also introduces a division. The individual in question is declared to be *in error* or *confused*. But the very fact that he is *in error* or *confused* is made into a ground for declaring that he is not a heretic and that he cannot then be guilty of teaching heresy.

Through the real abuse of words and language, an individual can be defended instead of being declared guilty.

A decision about "error" and "confusion" can be taken as a declaration of innocence. The word *heretic*, so far from having any concrete meaning or significance, becomes only a slur. If one uses the term *heretic* or *heresy*, he is accused of being a hateful bigot.

Another consequence of this change in meaning is that deliberative assemblies become hampered in the work of defending and maintaining the truth of God's word against attack. If church assemblies indeed take up the work of dealing with doctrinal error and must in the course of that work define a teaching as heretical, they know they will be judged as harsh and hateful. They know that if they ascribe this heresy to an individual, they will be judged as harsh and hateful. As a consequence they may choose

a different pathway. Skirting these loaded, hateful terms, they will soften their language. They will identify teachings as "error," "untrue," "incorrect," or "unorthodox." But when they do so, they will face an uphill battle for acting decisively upon their judgment. They will have to face the argument that imposing discipline is reserved for heretics. Since these questionable and controversial persons are not heretics, the church cannot possibly discipline them.

It is no surprise that men who love the truth and desire its preservation in their churches are inclined to give up in the face of such word games.

What is to be done? What guidance is there from scripture and our Reformed creeds?

—MVW

There is a schism already forming in their hearts and minds that breaks them from their bonds and ties to the truth. Schismatic persons become enamored with the novelties they have found, even thinking them to be found in God's word. They also wish to have their ideas reflected and echoed by others. So they seek to persuade by all kinds of means. . . They are effective in persuading. They draw men after them.

THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

I would like to address the issue of the sufficiency of the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the context of the local body of believers for the salvation of elect sinners in every area of their lives, from birth to death. I realize you are well aware of much of what I am going to address in this article, because it is nothing new. Though this is the case, I feel the need to present some points of concern for your consideration. I would like to utilize fundamental scripture texts to point out that the Institute for Reformed Biblical Counseling (IRBC) is unbiblical, not Reformed, and very deceptive. Dr. Martin and Deidre Bobgan have thoroughly documented the dangers of the so-called Christian psychology movement and the biblical counseling movement (BCM) in their books *Psychoheresy* and *Against "Biblical Counseling": For the Bible* and *Biblical Counseling Reviews*. Some of their books can be downloaded for free from their website at www.psychoheresy-aware.org/mainpage.html.¹ Dr. Bobgan was part of the biblical counseling movement for sixteen years and is very knowledgeable in this field of study.

I have done some research on the biblical counseling movement in the United States. Many churches and learning institutions have embraced this counseling model to address the needs of suffering saints in their congregations. Some of these include the Master's College and Seminary, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), Reformed Baptist Churches, United Reformed Churches (URC), the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, the Westminster Seminary, and the Southern Baptist Convention. This list does not infer that all churches within these denominations are part of the biblical counseling movement but rather that the counseling and training of biblical counseling methodologies can be found within these groups.

As the Bobgans point out, "Dr. Jay Adams...is regarded as the father of the biblical counseling movement."² Adams' book *Competent to Counsel*, which was

published in 1970, was the catalyst of the BCM. One reason he wrote this book was to counter the influence of psychology, in order to help those in need. Dr. Clyde Narramore was the pioneer for the integrationist movement of psychology and the Bible, which preceded the biblical counseling movement. Later on, others, such as Dr. Bruce Narramore and Dr. James Dobson, joined the integrationist movement. The psychoanalysis / psychological / psychiatric movement preceded these movements.

The BCM has been in existence for over forty years and has branched out to infiltrate the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRC) through the IRBC. First Corinthians 1:22–23 states, "The Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness." In order to give emphasis to the primacy of preaching, the scriptures also state in 1 Corinthians 2:4–5, "My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." This is opposed to the position of the IRBC on its website, where it says, "All truth is God's truth."³ This is a completely false statement because that which psychology states is true is according to the wisdom of man, and that which scripture says is true is according to the wisdom of God. The BCM has transitioned from a position held by the executive director of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, Dr. Heath Lambert—"Counseling is a theological discipline"⁴—to a position held by Dr. David Powlison from the Biblical Counseling Coalition, "Biblical counseling *is* a psychology. It *is* a psychotherapy."⁵ Before there was psychology, there was philosophy, and this is the point of departure. Once the IRBC begins to train elders, pastors, and seminary professors in biblical counseling, it will inevitably lead to the influence of psychology in the preaching. This is unbiblical.

1 Although I do not endorse their books for their doctrinal or theological content, I specifically recommend the Bobgans' research for a thorough and accurate assessment of the subject matter.

2 Martin and Deidre Bobgan, *Against Biblical Counseling: For the Bible* (Santa Barbara, CA: EastGate Publishers, 1994), 10.

3 <https://www.reformedbiblicalcounseling.org/about/>

4 Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 11.

5 <https://vimeo.com/36063151>

The IRBC is not Reformed. During the Protestant Reformation there was no biblical counseling in its present format as promoted by the IRBC website:

The seven steps we use in our counseling methodology model are as follows: 1) Provide Perspective, 2) Collect Data, 3) Identify / Prioritize Problems, 4) Direct or Confront the Counselee, 5) Establish Directives / Secure Commitment, 6) Provide Hope, and 7) Assign and Evaluate Homework.⁶

The Canons of Dordt, the Belgic Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism make no mention of this methodology of edifying the church. Our Church Order has no reference to this model to help console the suffering. Calvin did not use this strategy in the church of Geneva. TULIP has nothing to do with this form of counseling. Where did it come from? A quote from the IRBC website gives us a perspective on this matter: “The person who should rightfully be credited for discovering the majority of the underlying principles of these steps is Dr. Jay Adams.”⁷

There has always been counsel from scripture but without the influence of philosophy, psychology, and psychiatry. Dr. Jay Adams learned the methods of therapy before writing his book on counseling. Although he was against those psychiatric methods, his plan was to come up with a better way to help people. The BCM uses the Bible, the Reformed confessions, and Calvin to make biblical counseling Reformed. It never was. It is not, and it never shall be.

The IRBC is very deceptive. Its website states the following:

The Institute for Reformed Biblical Counseling believes that both counseling and associated training should arise from within the local congregation and be conducted under the oversight of elders. IRBC functions under the oversight of Cornerstone United Reformed Church of Hudsonville, Michigan, which partners with conservative reformed confessional congregations in the United States of America and Canada.⁸

There is more to this on their website. IRBC has a counseling center at Grace Immanuel Reformed Baptist Church, Bethany URC, and Central Avenue CRC. At the CRC center the staff is three women and five men.

What is not on the website is the suggested fee for

those who can pay it. There is no information regarding the fee for the training to be a biblical counselor. The IRBC does not give the names of the counselors, only pictures of staff.

The problem here is that the IRBC portrays itself as functioning under the direction of biblical Church Order. However, what is not stated on the website is its position on a conditional covenant, common grace, the federal vision, and divorce and remarriage. Dr. Jay Adams and Dr. David Powlison wrongly hold to divorce and remarriage as being permitted by certain conditions in scripture. We in the PRC are opposed to the Reformed Baptist position on the covenant and baptism. We are opposed to the CRC in its heretical teaching of common grace. We are opposed to the URC and their toleration of those who teach the federal vision. We are also opposed to their indifference and apathy toward the biblical doctrine of an unconditional covenant, as their desire to unite with the Canadian Reformed Churches shows so clearly. The IRBC is ecumenical, and its partners belong to denominations that hold to heretical teachings. We should not send offerings to the IRBC, nor should we refer our young people, ladies, and children to be indoctrinated by pastors, elders, and women who were not taught at our seminary and who are not members of our churches.

First Corinthians 12 teaches the importance of the diversity of gifts by the same Spirit in the body of Christ. Ephesians 4 states that God gave gifts unto men, such as pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, and for the edifying of the body of Christ. Colossians 3:16 teaches us that we need to teach and admonish one another. This is all in the context of the body of Christ. The good Lord has given us family, friends, deacons, elders, and pastors. We have Bible studies, the sacraments, catechism, our schools, sound biblical teaching, and most of all the powerful preaching of the gospel. It is sufficient for marriages, young people, and grieving saints. It was sufficient for the church under the persecution of the Roman Empire. It was sufficient for the church in the Reformation. It was sufficient for our forefathers in 1924. It was sufficient for the PRC in 1952–53. And the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ is sufficient for us today in the year 2020.

—Samuel Vasquez

⁶ <https://www.reformedbiblicalcounseling.org/seven-steps-of-reformed-biblical-counseling/>

⁷ <https://www.reformedbiblicalcounseling.org/seven-steps-of-reformed-biblical-counseling/>

⁸ <https://www.reformedbiblicalcounseling.org/about/>

ONCE MORE, DR. RICHARD J. MOUW ON COMMON GRACE

All That God Cares About: Common Grace and Divine Delight. Richard J. Mouw. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020. 176 pages. Paper, \$20.90. Hardcover, \$22.06.

Introduction

In this new book, Reformed theologian Richard J. Mouw pursues the defense of a common grace of God that he began in 2001 with the publication of his book, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001). In the new book, as he did also in his preceding work, Mouw very much takes into account the rejection of the theory of common grace by the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). This, as well as his significant development of the theory of common grace, makes the book of great interest, if not importance, to all thinking members of the PRC.

Indicating the importance of his subject to the former professor at Calvin College (now University) and now-retired president of Fuller Theological Seminary is that he addresses the book not only to Reformed and Presbyterian Christians, but also to all evangelicals.

The aspect of common grace that is the concern of the book, as it was also the concern of his earlier book, is a favor of God toward and a power of God working good in the ungodly that enable them to perform good works in the sphere of culture, with which works God is pleased. By culture Mouw means, roughly, everyday life and especially the sphere of the arts and sciences, what we may call “high culture”—poetry, literature, music, sculpture, and the like. Mouw mentions such unbelievers as Hemingway, Emerson, and the painter Picasso, the last of whom ought to have been omitted on strictly artistic grounds. There is even a reference to the exploits of a baseball team, the Los Angeles Dodgers (where a reference to the Cubs would have been less outrageous).

There are noble activities in history that are performed by the ungodly, and there are impressive and useful (and, apparently, entertaining) accomplishments done by the wicked. The explanation, according to Dr. Mouw, very much influenced by the theology of Abraham Kuyper, is a common grace of God.

Mouw's concern, therefore, is not the aspect of the theory of common grace that is its most grievous error, namely, a well-meant offer, which is the teaching of

universal, resistible, *saving* grace. Mouw's interest is “cultural” grace. It is the aspect of the theory of common grace that occupied the Christian Reformed Church in all of its three points of common grace, with the exception of its confession of the well-meant offer in the first point. The subject of the book, therefore, is that aspect of common grace that is not the greatest concern of the PRC and to which these churches have not paid the greatest attention in their polemic against that theory. One benefit of the book to the PRC will be the impetus to a more thorough examination of cultural common grace and a more carefully stated objection to it.

An Important Distinction

There is an important distinction between the work of the ungodly as the activity itself of the ungodly and the product of that activity. If the Dutch painter Jacob van Ruisdael was an unbeliever (which I do not know), his activity of painting the marvelous skyscape *The Storm* was sin on his part. This is not the eccentric judgment of the PRC. This is the creedal judgment of the Reformed confession in question and answer 91 of the Heidelberg Catechism. The only work, *in the sense of activity*, that is good is one that proceeds from a true faith, one that is done according to the law of God, and one that is done to the glory of God. As a formerly Reformed man, Dr. Mouw knows this and once subscribed to it.

With this the Presbyterian creed, the Westminster Confession of Faith, is in full agreement in chapter 16, section 7, and Dr. Mouw, now a Presbyterian, is bound by it. All deeds of the unregenerate “are therefore sinful, and cannot please God.” God has no delight in the acts or deeds or doings of Ernest Hemingway or of Picasso (especially not those of Picasso) or of the Los Angeles Dodgers. On the contrary, God abominates them.

But this does not put the deeds themselves, that is, the products of the working of ungodly men and women, off-limits to the Reformed Christian as though the painting itself or the musical piece or the poem were sinful. Sin, no more than grace, is not in things. Whereas the activity

of the unbeliever Ruisdael (if he was an unbeliever) was sinful, inasmuch as he did not paint to the glory of God, the painting itself is lovely, and a Reformed believer may stand admiring it in the Louvre for a good half an hour, only then to move on to the *Mona Lisa*, and may wish that there were copies that could be hung in one's home and study.

This distinction between deed as the activity of the unbeliever and deed as the product of the activity is one that must be clear in the minds of all those who consider the theory of cultural common grace. It is a distinction that the opponents of the PRC ought to keep in mind. In their rejection of cultural common grace, the PRC are not world-fleeing Anabaptists. They are not grunting primitives. It is a distinction that the PRC themselves must keep in mind. Condemning all the working of the unbeliever as sinful, we do not despise and reject the cultural products themselves: Ruisdael's painting; Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*; Housman's poems (I choose him deliberately); the preservation of a society of liberty by a few courageous statesmen, for example, Winston Churchill; and the like. Mouw's book should serve to the end that this important distinction lives in the theological minds of all Reformed and, it could be hoped, evangelical Christians.

Grace or Providence

The explanation of these lovely, instructive, rousing accomplishments of the ungodly is fundamental in the controversy over common grace that Mouw carries on. For Mouw and his numerous cohorts, the explanation is a common grace of God. The explanation is *grace*. For the PRC and their spiritual allies (may their tribe increase), the explanation is creation and providence. God created the human race with many (cultural) abilities. In the fall humans lost most of these abilities. Some few remain. By the working of providence, which is God's upholding and governing of the human race, various humans retain and develop certain of these gifts and abilities. The explanation is *providence*.

This aspect of the controversy over common grace also is not the odd thinking of the PRC, which other Reformed thinkers may dismiss out of hand. It is the creedal Reformed theology of the Canons of Dordt 3–4.4. There remain in fallen mankind “glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge...of natural things,” for example, how to paint *The Storm*. Mouw refers to this first part of the article of the Canons of Dordt. But he overlooks the last part of the article. There the article concludes, decisively regarding the controversy over cultural common grace: “This light, such as it is [note this ‘such as it is’: the Reformed faith does not get overly excited about Ruisdael and Beethoven, much less about Picasso, or even about the entirety of high culture], man in various ways

renders wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God.”

Not the PRC, but the Reformed creed, rules common grace out of the realm of the culture of ungodly man and society.

Common Grace and the PRC

Of special interest to the Protestant Reformed reader is Mouw's reference to the PRC and their theologians regarding the issue of cultural common grace. In addition to the references, he states their position honestly as the concern for the antithesis. He frankly states that he takes Herman Hoeksema “seriously.” An honest and honorable man, as many of the foes of the PRC are not, either by ignoring these churches altogether in their discussions of common grace (I predict that the men of the United Reformed Churches will be able to review Mouw's book without any mention of the PRC) or by misrepresenting them as Anabaptists (which slander Mouw expressly repudiates), Mouw acknowledges the real threat to common grace of worldliness. He instances the example of Dr. Quirinus Breen, whom the common grace of the Christian Reformed Church of 1924 carried away into the world. Mouw is frank that the sorry history of Breen “does serve as a significant reminder to me personally about what can happen when the neo-Calvinist theology of common grace comes to be disconnected from the doctrine of the antithesis.” He tells us that he deliberately reads the Protestant Reformed men in order to maintain the antithesis in his own thinking.

Of great importance regarding Mouw's development of the theory of common grace is his finding this grace in what he describes as God's drawing near to all humans in the covenant. Now common grace is rooted in the covenant. Mouw has the covenant right—God's closeness, or fellowship. But does he not perceive that this makes common grace a saving grace? God's covenant is established with Christ and humans who are in Christ (Gal. 3). Determined as one may be to distinguish common grace from saving grace, grace is grace, and grace is divine delight in Christ, in those who are washed in his blood, and in the works that are done to glorify God. Cultural common grace cannot avoid taking form as universal saving grace.

The controversy over common grace continues, develops, and sharpens.

The PRC continue to have a high calling regarding this controversy, which, contrary to the thinking of some, is far from dead.

Dr. Mouw is not reviving a moribund issue. He is bringing into the light a doctrinal and ethical reality that is thriving in the darkness.

—Prof. David J. Engelsma



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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

Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you: and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men: for all men have not faith.—2 Thessalonians 3:1–2

Dear brethren, with this last issue of the year, we beseech you with the words of the apostle Paul to the Thessalonians: “Pray for us!” Oh, the fervent, effectual prayers of the righteous man avail much. Pray for us. Pray for every faithful minister of the gospel who preaches the word of God in truth. Call on our God, draw near to him, and pour out your hearts to him. Give thanks to him and bless his name for his truth; for the faith and life that the truth works, strengthens, and preserves; and for faithful ministers to proclaim it. Because the truth is glorified in you.

Pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course. That it might not be hindered by opposition, by the fear or the favor of men, or by all the ineffectual devices Satan raises against it. Pray that the word of the Lord might run like it is—the almighty word of God, irresistible and unstoppable—like the white horse and his mighty rider galloping through history. For it is the word of the Lord. Free it is. Absolutely free. Free from all criticism. Free from all judgments of men, and free to judge all. Free to rule over all and bend all to its service—even the opposition. Being free, it will run its course according to the sovereign will of God to accomplish freely his purpose to gather his own and to harden unbelievers.

Pray that the word of the Lord be glorified. Pray that when it lays hold on men to save and to bless them, that then all the glory of the mighty and effectual working of that word may redound to the glory of the Lord. Is that not what it has done in you, so that the word having laid hold on you, you give thanks to the Lord and worship him for it? Pray that all glory for his word and for all its effectual working, calling, justifying, sanctifying, creating, renewing, and causing us to walk in all good works—for we are his workmanship—that it all may redound to the glory of the Lord, so that no man may boast.

And pray that we be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men.

How do not these unreasonable and wicked men hate the truth, oppose it, and try to stop the word from having its free course and bringing all glory to God in the salvation of his people! They raise malicious slanders against it. They try by rumor, intimidation, and threat to stop the mouths of the preachers, writers, and speakers of that truth. O Lord, deliver us!

Their opposition is simply proof that they do not have faith. Otherwise, they would receive the word of the Lord anon with joy, eat of it, drink of it, live by it, and rejoice in it, praying themselves that it might have free course and be glorified even as it is in them. But they oppose it, do these unreasonable and wicked men, and so condemn themselves as unbelievers. For all men have not faith.

Pray that the Lord may deliver his servants who speak his word from such unreasonable and wicked men, in order that the Lord’s servants may speak his word clearly and boldly for the salvation of his church and to the glory of God alone.

—NJL