



SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Letters Edition

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

Deuteronomy 33:29

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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak



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Another lovely lot of lively letters has landed in our laps here at Reformed Believers Publishing. As usual, the topics that our correspondents have written about are the most important matters in the world, for they are the things of the kingdom of God. Thank you to the letter-writers in this issue for taking the time to set pen to paper and to mail off your submissions.

Keep the letters coming. The board and the editors are

convicted that these matters are edifying for the readership. Friend or foe, you will be given space to have your say so that the word of God can be brought to bear on these things.

Dear reader, there is wealth of topics to digest in this issue. Read on, and may God speed the truths written herein to your heart and the next issue into your hands.

—AL

LETTERS: CONTROVERSY

Brethren,

It's hard to know how to start this letter. As I look back through my 88 years, much of which was spent in the office as elder, I am deeply saddened by the situation we currently find ourselves in as churches once again. I went through the 1953 controversy when "conditional theology" raised its ugly head. That was a hard fought battle for the truth, but it was a serious error in which everyone knew what was at stake. Sadly, we lost half of our churches and half of our ministers. They had the Concordia back then. At the end of the trouble, they were all set to start a new organization of churches. "Where are they now?"

The first I came across the recent and current trouble, was at Hope Church. Sitting in the back pew of church, I observed a couple that were watching the minister like a hawk watching a rabbit. From time to time, they would nod at each other and quickly write something down in a notebook. Sadly, I also witnessed this same behavior back in 1953. I mentioned what I had witnessed to my relatives who attend Hope Church, and they immediately knew who I was talking about.

We all know the events that took place at classis and synod until this issue was settled. However, that wasn't good enough for some people. Enter the "*Sword and Shield*"! In this pamphlet it was and is still written, that the Protestant Reformed Churches are the false church because it is believed that salvation is obtained by works righteousness. That sure was a new one to me! I've taught Catechism for many years, and we all know that salvation is given to us by grace. The more I read, the more the old ways become more apparent. When points of doctrine are taken out of context, one can make anything sound completely different than "it's real meaning". The Ole Devil doesn't change all that much,

does he? He loves it when this is done to God's Word. So after all this time, "Congratulations" you have been able to cause a lot of controversy. Churches have been destroyed, families have been broken up, mission's work has come to an end—"the Devil loves this", and you have used the old straw-man method of making something false stand up and then burning it down! People are now going to church, not to hear what God has to say, but to see what they can catch the minister saying, which could then be twisted around so that he can hopefully be destroyed. No need to go and talk to the minister in the way of Christian brotherly love, for it was said in a public place, therefore take it immediately to Classis! Where is brotherly love? All our ministers and elders have a target on their backs. Not sure how it is out East? but out here it is NOT considered good form to shoot people in the back.

Ministers are God's representatives and God's mouth pieces to us. When we look at what they have for their life's work, compared to the rest of us: they have families as we do, a 24 hour job, they must come up with 100 plus sermons a year, take part in all the work of the churches in general, and work with all the members of the flock and their individual needs. I really don't know how they do it. God gives them special grace to bare this as well as these current hard times. Now on top of all this, they have one more great problem... "they are humans"! So, if you wait and sit in church like a Cooper's Hawk waiting for a chance at a rabbit; you'll probably get a chance for them to have a slip of tongue. How many of you can preach 100 plus sermons without ever saying anything wrong or not quite right? How many times have you spoke in a speech or a discussion, and afterwards thought about how you could of said it differently or more precisely?

What have we learned from all this? First of all Classis and Synod should first look at God's Word and what it says about the specific case that is before them. A great deal of trouble can be avoided this way. When God tells us that women are to be silent in the legal matters of the church, we don't say: "Well she has the office of believer!" The women in Paul's days tried this as well. Paul didn't say "*Monsma and Vandellen*" says this or that. You have done that, and now we see what a terrible price we have all had to pay. Go ahead with man's reasoning, and I'll go with what God has very plainly written to us about this.

Back in 1953 they didn't even have the internet blogs to sit and gossip on. The least little thing can be blown completely out of proportion. A person doesn't have to live long these days, to see what a force for evil the internet has become. The thing that makes me feel bad is how easy people can be riled up by this tool of the Devil, forget their upbringing and quickly believe all that is being misconstrued about the Protestant Reformed Churches.

When my children talk to me about these troubling things and wonder where it all will go, I tell them about 1953 and how half of the churches' people, ministers, and buildings were taken, giving them a good start at a new denomination. Yet....where is that denomination now? The most important question is..."where are that denomination's children?" They are all gone. All those I knew and

grew up with, lost all their children. How terribly sad. Paul warns us in the Bible about the wolves that will rise up, not from the world, but from out of the flock that will seek to destroy God's church. The Devil will come to us as an angel of light.

Now today, we have three ministers raising a lot of trouble through lies and false charges. We remember that God is in control. Go to church! Listen to what God has to say to you by means of His ministers, sing praises to His glorious Name and be thankful that our salvation is all of grace, knowing that if it were to depend on our works, which are as filthy rags, we would be in terrible trouble.

That leads me to the problem of what to do with the "*Sword and Shield*". I have been taking them up to our elk camp at 9500 ft. to use as back up toilet paper in my out-house, but to no avail. At least the paper itself is high quality, but this makes it rather painful to use. However, it does work great to kindle my wood fires in my stove in the shop each morning. Now that winter is past, I don't need or want any more of them. Thank you!

Regards,
Ray Ezinga

May all things be done in meekness and in love...

You have my permission to print this in the *Sword and Shield*

REPLY

Reading your letter was like sitting around a campfire in the mountains listening to an old-timer spin a great yarn of a tale. (And by the way, I mean no disrespect when I call you "old-timer." Unless I miss my guess, I think you wouldn't mind being described that way yourself, up at your elk camp, with your reminiscing on your 88 years and Cooper's Hawks and "the Ole Devil." If your letter doesn't sound like a man who relishes being an old-timer, then I don't know what does.)

Like any great yarn, your letter tells a fascinating tale. And like most great yarns, not a word of your letter is true.

You see, in your tale as you tell it, the problem these past years in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) has been the bad behavior of some bad folks, especially those out East. There was that couple with their notebook in Hope church who watched the minister like a hawk watching a rabbit. (Ah, yes, but there was also a gentleman in Hope church that day from out West who took up his high perch in the back pew, from which he could keep a keen eye on said couple, after which he made a meal out of them to his relatives, so that one wonders

who really was the hawk and who really was the rabbit in this story after all. But let us pass over that so as not to interrupt the tale.)

Then there were those loveless ole upstarts at *Sword and Shield* who accused the Protestant Reformed Churches of teaching that salvation is obtained by works-righteousness. And behind these ole upstarts was the "Ole Devil" twisting everything all out of context, so that poor ministers and elders kept getting shot in the back. Really, though, everyone knows that salvation is by grace! And everyone especially knows that the Protestant Reformed Churches could never teach anything other than salvation by grace! (Ah, yes, but Synod 2018 said that there was "doctrinal error" in the PRC and that the doctrinal error displaced Christ, compromised justification by faith alone, compromised...what's that? You've heard this already and you're dead sick of hearing it all the time and you want to get back to the story? Okay, then, never mind.)

Then there were those loud women who wrote protests. Women! Writing protests! 'Nuff said. (Ah, yes, but where were all the men? Especially men who had lived a

good long time in the churches, and had spent many of their years as watchmen on the walls of Zion in the office of elder, and who fancied themselves to be real men out in their camps. Men who would probably know what to do if a lion or a wolf came into the elk camp. But men who didn't even pucker out the smallest blurb of a warning on their trumpets when lions and wolves stole into the sheepfold of Christ. Methinks these men not only like the church's women absolutely silent, but they like themselves and all the church's men silent as well. Life is just smoother that way. Yes, yes, I know, back to the tale.)

Then there were those pesky bloggers. Just when everything was being nicely swept out of sight under the rug, a new post would appear and throw everything into the uncomfortable glare of the light. (Ah, yes, but what does anyone have to say about the actual content of the blogs? The blogs have revealed the grossest false doctrine, corruption, hierarchy, schism, and all manner of other wickedness in the Protestant Reformed Churches. Those revelations have been supported by pages and pages of documents. But of course, no one can say anything against the actual content, and so they resort to muttering about "gossip" and "completely blown out of proportion" and "riled up by this tool of the Devil." So, let us clamp our hands ever more firmly over our eyes so as not to see the blogs, and let us continue the tale.)

In your tale as you tell it, the problem was strictly the bad behavior of bad folks, but the problem was not false doctrine. Emphatically, the problem was not false doctrine. Now if you want to talk about false doctrine, you've got to go all the way back to 1953. There was false doctrine. There was some real conditional theology going around then. Everyone knew what was at stake, and that's what a real hard-fought battle for the truth looks like. But that was the last time that false doctrine entered the Protestant Reformed Churches, and that's the last time that false doctrine ever could enter the PRC. Today, it's bad behavior. Not false doctrine but bad folks.

Well, sir, nice story. It is an interesting yarn, but it is bunk. It is a tall tale.

The fact of the matter is that the problems in the PRC were and are false doctrine. What more can I write that has not already been written in hundreds and thousands of pages? Here is the theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches today in a single sentence: If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do. That was written in 2018, but I don't put it in quotes or cite the source for it because I don't mean it as a quotation of one sentence that a man once happened to write. I mean it as the *summary* of the whole theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches today. The sermons and the writings all drive home that doctrine: If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do. After all of the qualifications and explanations and evasions have been made, that theology still stands in the PRC: If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do.

That theology killed a denomination.

Which brings us back to your tale. It is really a bedtime story. After the telling is finished, everyone will stretch and yawn and climb sleepily and happily into their tents. Their consciences will be salved with the knowledge that all is well in the Protestant Reformed Churches and that nothing could ever be really, truly wrong in the PRC. The problems that the PRC had were just some bad people doing some bad things, but we all know deep down that the Protestant Reformed Churches could never depart from the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. And when the tent catches fire with the burning embers of man's doing for his salvation, no one will know. Your bedtime story and a hundred like it will have hushed everyone into a deep sleep. They all will be dreaming happy dreams of grace, which they will have wrongly come to understand means that God makes something of a man, so that if a man would be saved, there is that which he must do.

The tents are on fire, but who wants to deal with that? Let's have a story instead.

Enjoy elk camp.

And stay warm.

—AL



Dear Editors

I am writing to ask for your help in leading a layperson to better understand *exactly what*, if anything, are the doctrinal differences *officially* between the PRC and the RPC. I humbly request that you stick to interacting *only* with these direct quotes below taken from binding decisions of the PRC Synods that I believe reflect some of the important doctrinal stances established by the PRC. Please *do not* refer to sermons,

SB articles, emails, blogs, etc. or give your opinions on whether the decisions are correctly being implemented or not. If you have no issues with these decisions themselves, simply write, we believe these decisions are biblical and creedal. If you object to any of them, please *precisely and concisely* explain what you object to in the decisions below and give biblical and creedal support for your objections. Thank you for reading this request and I look forward to your reply.

Acts of Synod Quotes

2018

“Obedience—the obedience God requires and the obedience we gratefully give in a life of good works according to the power of His Spirit working in us—is never a prerequisite or, a condition unto, or the basis for, or an instrument/means unto or the way unto, but always a fruit in the covenant relationship, and as we walk in the way of obedience we experience covenant fellowship with God. Obedience never gains us or obtains anything in the covenant of God. Though we may lose the experience of covenant fellowship by continuing in disobedience, we never gain it by our obedience, but it is restored by faith in Christ and in the way of repentance.”—Pg 73

“If we will speak of God causing us to experience the blessings of salvation, then we must speak of faith, which is the one and only instrument. We must say, God causes us to experience the blessings of salvation through faith. Again, we experience the blessings of salvation through faith (instrument), on the basis of what Christ has done (ground), and in the way of our obedience (way of conduct or manner of living).”—Pg 76

“Our obedience is the fruit of faith and way of conduct in the enjoyment of covenant fellowship. We have fellowship with God only through faith in Christ and His perfect righteousness, and in the enjoyment of that fellowship with our holy God we must and do walk in good works of gratitude which are the fruits of our faith.”—Pgs 81, 82

2020

“Use of the words ‘according to’ to connect the reward of grace to deeds done in faith, however, is biblical (Rom 2:6, II Corinthians 5:10) and does not therefore conflict with the declaration of LD 7 that ‘everlasting righteousness, and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits.’ Both statements are equally true and not mutually exclusive.”—Pg 36

2021

“Teaching that repentance comes before certain blessings does not deny that repentance is always born of faith. Repentance arises out of a faith that is persuaded that God is plenteous in mercy and that He abundantly pardons for Christ’s sake. Also, faith is indeed the sole instrument whereby the believing sinner receives God’s pardon in Christ. In addition, to say that we enjoy God’s pardon in the way of repentance and that repentance occurs temporally prior to the reception of God’s pardon by faith does not mean that repentance is a basis for or instrument of, or condition to that pardon. We repent as the fruit of God effectually renewing us to repentance by his Word and Spirit and that repentance is “the required way to seek and find forgiveness from a merciful God.” (Englesma). This is how God has marvelously ordered our salvation.”

“The Bible distinguishes between repentance and good works. Matthew 3;8 7 Acts 26:20”—Pgs 123, 124

In Christ,
Rick DeVries

REPLY

With the quotations you present from Synod 2018 and Synod 2020, my only disagreement is with the use of Romans 2:6, which Synod 2020 used as a proof for the following decision: “Use of the words ‘according to’ to connect the reward of grace to deeds done in faith, however, is biblical.” With the use of that verse I have here no creedal objection. However, I take exception to using that verse to support the decision of synod for two important reasons. First, the context of the beginning of Romans 2 is the strict application of the law *apart* from the gospel of Christ and, therefore, apart from faith in Christ (see Rom. 3:19–21). Second, federal visionists use Romans 2 as a ground for their doctrine of justification by works in the covenant. It should be noted that other Reformed theologians, noting this use in federal

vision theology, deny that it applies to believers justified in Christ.

The longer quotation you provide from pages 123–24 in the *Acts of Synod 2021* is too confusing to express clear agreement or disagreement. The confusion is in the sentence that is partially a quotation: “We repent as the fruit of God effectually renewing us to repentance by his [Word] and Spirit and that repentance is ‘the required way to seek and find forgiveness from a merciful God.’ ([Englesma]).” If “the required way”—that is, repentance—is *the good thing we do in order* to seek and find forgiveness, then that statement is not orthodox with scripture and the Reformed creeds according to the decision of Synod 2018, which you quote from page 73 of the *Acts of Synod*.

Let me be perfectly clear about this because I believe

that the above quotation from Synod 2021 touches on the heart of the controversy.

First, while repentance is the way that the Christian experiences salvation, that experience must never become a basis for theology. When Christian experience becomes the basis of theology, especially the doctrine of salvation, Arminianism is the inevitable result.

Second, this awaiting blessing—that is, “forgiveness from a merciful God”—is apparently directed as a *motivation* to the potential penitent, making his actual reception of forgiveness contingent on *his* actual repentance. God *requires repentance of him, that is from the penitent*, as something he must *do* before God will forgive him. Again, this is contrary to the doctrine that repentance is itself a gift of God’s mercy that he *graciously* works in the heart of the regenerated sinner. In other words, the Reformed doctrine of the order of salvation insists that every part of salvation is from God and God alone, nothing of man or from man intervening. Positing repentance as “the required way” in a relationship consciously to receive following blessings, I understand to be contrary to the Canons of Dort. I quote Canons 3–4, rejection 8:

For this is nothing less than the denial of all the efficiency of God’s grace in our conversion, and the subjecting of the working of Almighty God to the will of man, which is contrary to the apostles, who teach: *That we believe according to the working of the strength of his power* (Eph. 1:19). And: *That God fulfills every desire of goodness and every work of faith with power* (2 Thess. 1:11). And: *That his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness* (2 Pet. 1:3). (*Confessions and Church Order*, 173)

I also understand making repentance “the required way” in a relationship consciously to receive following blessings to be contrary to the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord’s Day 32, where the necessity of all our good works, with true conversion as the heart’s beginning of a walk of all good works, is the work of Christ, who “renews us by His Holy Spirit after His own image” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 120).

I would like every reader of *Sword and Shield* to take a close, careful look at the quotation given from pages 123–24 of the *Acts of Synod 2021*. I invite further correspondence from any reader who is able to shed any light on the quotation of synod. All of the decisions quoted above have to do with the case of a minister who eventually felt compelled to resign from the gospel ministry ostensibly because he was confusing in his efforts to explain the doctrines of salvation, assurance, and good works to the congregation in his preaching and teaching. Is this last quotation from the Protestant Reformed synod any clearer?

God’s people, purchased with the blood of Christ, have the right to the clear preaching of the word of God; clear writing in their denominational magazine; and clear, understandable decisions from their synodical assemblies, especially those decisions that are meant to express orthodoxy on the subject of grace and good works.

The Reformed reader is compelled to ask himself, “What is hiding in this confusion? What am I not meant to see?”

I would like every member of the Protestant Reformed Churches to bring this quotation from Synod 2021 to his elder or minister and ask him to explain it to that member’s satisfaction. If the officebearer cannot, the decision ought to be found disagreeable and rejected.

—MVW



Brothers of faith in Jesus Christ,

Although I am not PR or RP, I still consider both of these fellowships as brothers and sisters in the Holy Catholic family of faith. My son and wonderful daughter-in-law and their family are represented in both. Thankfully, in spite of this division, they still enjoy family fellowship. This is the way it should be! However, in their broader family and church ties, there is separation, bitterness and anger over this divide, causing much pain, even in some marriages. I have many lovely relatives where this divide is having its negative impact as well. So sad! As an outsider, so to speak, and with others like me, seeing this causes us to shake our heads. Not so much that we think ourselves

better but how the Devil must be rejoicing. His chief desire is to divide.

However, on a positive note, I appreciate the openness of the *Sword and Shield* to allow even outsiders to contribute to this discussion. It is hard me to understand your struggle and division when you all agree that works have nothing to do with salvation. This issue, the sovereignty of God over everything and the will of man under that sovereignty is an issue that individual Christians, churches and denominations, have struggled with since the beginning of time. Scripture is true in all of its statements about God. So when we read in Genesis 6:6 “The Lord was grieved that He had made man on the earth,

and His heart was filled with pain”, in Exodus 32:9-1 how God changed his mind in wanting to get rid of the wayward Israelites and starting a new nation with Moses, how God again and again got frustrated, angry, and grieved over Israel’s hardness of heart and in Rev. 3:20 Jesus patiently stands knocking at the door of His Church and waits for whomever will open the door so he can come in; these verses then are hard to explain when we know God’s divine plan has already been decreed before creation. Do we take these sentiments of God seriously or do we just avoid delving into this realm?

Could these seemingly irreconcilable truths both be true for God? I think to be in tune with Scripture we may have to conclude that they both are true. This is where the sovereignty of God and mans responsibility seem to conflict. Sometimes we may have to let some of these seemingly inexplicable inconsistencies be what they are. God is way too complex for man to totally explain.

In regard to this, I was doing some thinking about the crucifixion of Christ. There were three crosses with three men, one on the right and the other on the left, with Jesus Christ in the middle. Three men hanging and all in excruciating pain! These three men seemingly were worth our moral wrath, however, the verbal abuse from those around the crosses were being directed towards the Man in the middle. One of the thieves suffering next to this Man was giving Jesus the same verbal abuse. Why the wrath concentrated mainly on this Man? This question had to be going on in the minds of the two men suffering alongside Jesus. By their comments they knew about Him, they had heard about His miracles and even His power to raise people from the dead, but watching Him—? He didn’t curse like those around and on the crosses did. In fact He prayed that God would forgive them because they did not know what they were doing. Then in all His pain, this Man cared deeply about his mother and her future.

These two thieves had to be doing some serious thinking. In fact one of them also hurled insults at Him, “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” The other thief rebuked his fellow thief. “Don’t you fear God,” since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what we deserve. But this Man has done nothing wrong.” This man then said, “Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” Two men on crosses but only one acknowledged Him before men and asked Jesus for forgiveness. I would imagine Jesus was encouraged and pleased. Jesus whose image we are created in, had feelings!

Most of us would say, “This thief was saved totally by grace for he had no evident works.” He indeed was saved totally by grace; however, there were some very signif-

icant “works” expressed in his confession, (that is, if we can agree that even our written thoughts about Jesus are ultimately “works”.) This thief HUMBLED himself, RECOGNIZED his sinfulness, PUBLICLY confessed his sinfulness before men, CONFESSED Jesus as Lord and SOUGHT forgiveness! Five good “works” that are absolutely necessary to be saved. These “works”, again of grace, shows the EVIDENCE of our salvation. Jesus, himself said that “He who confesses me before men, him will I confess before my Father who is in Heaven.” This thief couldn’t keep his mouth shut, for as Scripture says “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” He recognized his unworthiness and recognized this very special Man as who He was, the only Man able to save! Jesus granted his request! The thief’s spoken “works didn’t save him, Jesus mercy did. But these thief’s “works” are recorded through all of history as a testimony of God’s purpose of coming to this earth. It is also a testimony of what happens to a person when the Holy Spirit comes to take over a persons life. Works are a natural result. As James says “Faith without works is dead.” This is why on the judgement day our works will be on display not for God to see but for us to see. Our works just show each person whose god we had been serving.

To sum up what I am trying to say; For the thief to declare what he did, he had to have a heart softened by the Holy Spirit. Because of these good spoken “works”, this thief became the first recorded convert to recognize who Jesus really was. This thief was not a robot! We are not robots either. Living in the Spirit and the Spirit living in us, we have freedom to bring either praises to our God, or disappointment by silence and/or disobedience. It can’t be any other way! God has emotions. Being we are created in His image we were given that gift as well! So may I strongly encourage each side to become Spiritually emotional. Help all who are involved in this controversy to see the pain in your fellowship and to pray for each other. Maybe pray a prayer something like Jesus prayed. “Father, please let us forgive each other for it seems we may be doing something contrary to your will. Others outside our denomination are watching and if we are desiring to represent Christ well, may our rhetoric with each other be brotherly and attractive. If differences arise as they will within any fellowship, help us to speak the truth in love. Lord, help us to let the Light of Jesus so shine before men that they may see our good works of gratitude and mirror your love and so to glorify You our Father who is in Heaven.”

My brothers and sisters of faith, let us all seek to mirror Jesus Christ well!

Humbly submitted,
Carl Smits

REPLY

I agree that division in the church of Jesus Christ is indeed a grievous matter. So grievous is it that it represents one of the severest temptations that ever confronts office-bearers and church members.

It is true that the unity of the church is a precious gift from the head of the church himself, who suffered and died on the cross for his one bride. It is true that the unity of the church is the fruit of Jesus' prayer in John 17:11 that those whom his Father had given to Christ "may be one." It is true that the church is enjoined in Ephesians 4 to maintain the unity of the church in the bond of peace. It must also be recognized that the unity of the church of Jesus Christ is of great benefit to the members of the body of Christ. That unity is an important part of the strength of the church as the body of Christ. In that unity the members are able to rejoice in one another and serve one another. That unity is a powerful testimony to the world of the power of God's grace to fill his people with love for one another, a love that is clearly not of this world.

However, Jesus also said something about division. He spoke about division not merely as an *effect* of his coming into the world; he spoke of it as his *purpose*. Matthew 10:34 is first a denial: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth." He even repeated it: "I came not to send peace." That sharp, repeated denial Jesus followed with an emphatic affirmation: "I came...to send...a sword." That division, which Jesus said he came to send, is the deepest kind of division. It is exactly the division that you mention in your letter. "I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household" (vv. 35–36). In the following verse Jesus identified that division as a temptation: "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." Then Jesus spoke of the bearing of that division as a cross. "He that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me" (vv. 37–38).

This purpose of Jesus in coming into the world is directly connected to his cross. As you mentioned the two thieves on the cross, the cross of Christ itself was the division between the two. Before their crucifixions the two were united. They were united in their crime, united in their condemnation, and united in their blasphemy of Christ for a time (see Mark 15:32). But then there was division, a division wrought by the cross and which was the fruit of that cross. The two were divided by the sword that Christ came to bring. The cross of Christ turned the thieves' friendship into enmity. The regenerated,

converted thief rebuked his fellow thief, "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?" (Luke 23:40).

The cross of Jesus Christ is this division for two reasons.

The first reason is that the cross is not the redemption of all men. It is not the redemption of all the Jews. It is not the redemption of every human being in the world. It is the redemption of only the elect, those given by the Father to the Son before the world began. Their redemption by the cross is the cause of division. They are redeemed out of the world of darkness and sin to be a peculiar people, children of light. As the world hated Christ, so the world must hate those who are of Christ.

The second reason is that the cross is itself offensive. The scandal of the cross is that it is the necessary ground of the redemption of ungodly sinners. "They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31–32).

However, the question still remains: Is the grievous division you address in your letter the above kind of division, or is it another kind? Is it caused by the offense of the cross? Or is the division caused by quarrelsome, brawling persons who have been so caught up in their quarrel that the result has actually been a church split? Is the division the cause of persons who have been so unable to "forgive and forget" that they have ruptured a denomination by their desire for revenge? Is the division the result of a magnification of personalities, egos grown to such a size that they simply cannot dwell under the same roof?

I want to assure you that if the cross of Jesus Christ is *not* the cause of this division, it can only be sinful. This division must then be repented of. Everything must be done to heal the breach in the glorious name of the head of the church, in whom the body has all its unity. If I were for a moment doubtful whether the truth of the gospel were not at stake in this controversy, I would never have participated in it, and I would be laboring with might and main to end it. But let me be clear: I am convinced that there is ultimately one reason for all the action taken against me and others, ecclesiastical and otherwise. That one reason is the gospel of the cross of Jesus Christ, the cross that redeems not good men but sinners. Men were targeted and ultimately cast out of the Protestant Reformed Churches because they publicly labored to have the decisions taken by the Protestant Reformed Synod of 2018 carry their weight and force through that denomination for the sake of faithfulness to the gospel of the cross of Jesus Christ.

I find it noteworthy that the various points you make in your letter can be applied also to the controversy with Arminianism that led to the Synod of Dordt. Some of your points can even be applied to the controversy of the Protestant Reformation. They can be found in the histories written about the beginning of the Protestant Reformed Churches and the split of those churches in 1953. God is sovereign, *but* man must be responsible.

You write, “I think to be in tune with Scripture we may have to conclude that they both are true.” You write, “Five good ‘works’ that are absolutely necessary to be saved.” But then you write, “The thief’s spoken ‘works’ didn’t save him, Jesus mercy did.” You need to choose, Carl. Both cannot be true. Are you going to choose the cross or “Five good ‘works’ that are absolutely necessary to be saved”?

The last part of your letter is most poignant. What you write is true: “Others outside our denomination are watching.”

What are they seeing? If they are looking through carnal lenses, they must see only reason for the further deploring of the church and its treasure of the gospel of the cross. They will see nothing at stake and contemptuously wonder why men are sacrificing so much for nothing at all.

But if they are looking spiritually, they will understand that this is the division promised by Christ. They will rejoice to see that in these latter days there are still those who magnify that grace by bearing their crosses, while feeling in their hearts the sharpness of the sword that their savior came to bring.

“They that sow in tears shall reap in joy” (Ps. 126:5).

—MVW

LETTERS: CHURCH ORDER

Rev. Lanning and to whom it may concern,

To begin, I apologize for the length of this question, but context is absolutely necessary for the reader. In my reading of our church history regarding Church Order Article 31, I came across the report of the CRC Synod of 1926 which came up with a recommendation regarding whether a Classis has the right to depose a consistory. The report, translated in late 1958 and early 1959 issues of the *Standard Bearer* by Rev. Vanden Berg, stated that “a Classis has the competency to depose from office a consistory that makes itself unworthy.”¹

Now, I have read through Rev. Ophoff’s understanding of Classis rights and responsibilities in contrast with the CRC’s report to the Synod of 1926. He states the following in one of the many articles he wrote on the topic,

Thus, according to this article, no Consistory may say to a number of other Consistories, “Thou shalt,” or, “Thou shalt not,” which means that according to this article the character of the jurisdiction of one Consistory over others, and of one Minister over others and of one Elder or Deacon over other Elders and Deacons is *advisory* and not *mandatory*.²

And the following in the same article, “The statement of Art. 79, “the Consistory shall depose officebearers,”

certainly is equivalent to the statement, “Classis (Synod) shall not depose officebearers.””

Understandably, Classis has the right and obligation to advise and help congregations that have corrupt office bearers, but the obligation is not, according to Rev. Ophoff, to depose.

As I read through both positions, something came to mind. The CRC Synod report attempted to support its position by building up Classis’ power with regard to Article 31. The position, which is the PRC’s position according to its Synod of 2004, is that the protestant must protest and appeal Classis/Synod decisions that offend them by protesting while submitting to the decision in question. What seems to be the case with such a position is that Classis and Synod have a binding power that binds even unscriptural decisions upon the church until the Classis and Synod revoke the decision.

Some will disagree with this assessment and say that protesting and appealing is abiding by the “unless” of Article 31, while they also say that there is a proper way to address this disagreement with a decision and the word until comes into play by saying the decision is binding and settled until the decision is validated by the assemblies. Such a position was the Rev. Vanden Berg’s,³ but there is no essential difference in principle between his and the

1 G. Vanden Berg, “The Conclusion of the Report,” *Standard Bearer* 35, no. 11 (March 1, 1959): 260.

2 George Ophoff, “Dr. J. Ridderbos and the 800 Zeros,” *Standard Bearer* 23, no. 15 (May 1, 1947): 349.

3 G. Vanden Berg, “Article 31,” *Standard Bearer* 34, no. 7 (January 1, 1958): 161–62.

PRC position because there is still an obligation to submit to the assemblies' decisions for a time and that is the commonality that is being focused upon.

To justify this position, reference is often made to an argument that the only other solution is to allow the believer to decide what is and is not binding upon them based on what THEY feel is scriptural. I notice with this argument that such an argument makes scripture to be a subjective document upon which there can be varying viewpoints. This argument, then, makes the claim that a Classis or Synod has the power to make the decision no longer binding and settled, but not what God convicts upon the conscience of the believer.

Now, this argument adds by transcending the advice of the multitude of counsellors, saying that they have consciences too that made them make the decisions that they did. Such a position was Rev. C. Hanks's.⁴ While that is a legitimate position to take on certain topics, when it comes to judging what is and is not scriptural, the fact that some men made decisions in unity and others do not agree does not mean a decision is or is not scriptural or mean that that decision ought to or ought not to be obeyed and submitted to. The only standard can be the holy scriptures.

Proceeding, my previous point about making scripture into a subjective document returns because in contrast, the Classis and Synod are then made the absolute standards in certain cases. So when the Report of the CRC Synod understands that a Classis has the duty to depose an unfaithful consistory, then it takes a view that Classis has the power to strip office-bearers of their position because Classis is absolutely right and has the power to do so. Such a position seems righteous on the face of it in that it is removing wicked men from being damaging to the church, yet it does not take into account when a Classis is wrong and does not question whether God has given an ecclesiastical body that power.

I should briefly note two points. I am not making the claim that Classis cannot advise deposition, but always it is the consistory's responsibility to carry out what it determines is right and scriptural after hearing Classis' advice. Additionally, I am not saying that a Classis is helpless when a Consistory is unfaithful: the Classis can vote to remove the Consistory from enjoying fellowship with the federation of churches; the Classis can vote to not accept her delegates to the Classis; finally, the Classis can call the faithful congregation out of the Consistory to reconstitute a new church. These notes will hopefully provide more explanation to the discussion.

Continuing, to prevent having hierarchy in the church, balances have been put in place to make the Classis have an

advisory role and not one where it can mandate anything it wants. Cases that a Classis can enter into are these: what the congregations request as a need for the churches in general; what cannot be finished at minor assemblies; and what is appealed from minor assemblies. This range of areas does give Classis a wide area that it can speak to, but it does not give the power to say, "You must!"; Instead, it gives the authority to Classis itself the right only to advise the Consistory to go this way or that and if it is biblical advice, then that is as good as scripture telling the Consistory "you must!" But the Classis cannot say the "you must", forcing the consistory to do this or that. All of this does not remove from the power that a Classis has to tell a consistory that it must obey the truth, and it does not remove the obligation of the Consistory to obey but it balances a major assembly's power with that of the scriptures, the consistory's God-given power, and the office of the believer.

All the above is a much-needed context. The fathers of the PRC seemed to have definitive stances on these topics of article 31 and the deposition of office-bearers and consistories after dealing with being expelled from the CRC and seeing the Liberated Churches expelled out of their mother church for the same reasons, but it seems to me that the PRC in 2004 deviated from Rev. Hoeksema and Rev. Ophoff on these topics. I admit that I have much more learning to do on these topics and I may have missed a very important aspect of this debate or even misinterpreted our forefathers. So to conclude this letter, my questions are as follows:

1-Does the RPC still abide by the PRC Synod of 2004's explanation of Church Order Article 31?

2-Do the editors have a strict interpretation of article 31 in which there is no addition of the word "until" in any aspect of it whatsoever?

3-Is there a legitimate argument for submitting to ecclesiastical decisions that oppose the Word of God, while an aggrieved one protests and appeals (apart from cases in which office-bearers has sworn an oath to uphold the Three Forms of Unity and changes doctrinally to opposed/change them- see the Declaration of Principles)? **Note that I do NOT ask this question: Is there a legitimate argument for submitting to ecclesiastical decisions that an aggrieved one feels opposes the Word of God, while an aggrieved one protests and appeals?** I do not ask this question because it gets into that subjective view of the scriptures, which is not beneficial.

4 Cornelius Hanks, "Should Article 31 Be Revised and/or Clarified?," *Standard Bearer* 32, no. 7 (January 1, 1956): 161-63.

4-Is there a legitimate case to be made for a Classis deposing a Consistory that has become unfaithful?

Again, apologies for the long letter, but I hope it is beneficial to the reader and provides a clear context for why I write concerning this topic. This context I hope you see as relevant when considering Synod 2004 and what potentially the RPC still holds to as well and where the RPC will go in

the future with regard to the above topics. I understand that the editors do not have a strictly denominational paper and cannot speak for the denomination as a whole, but seeing as all the editors are now RPC perhaps they could clarify where they personally stand. Thank you for your writing!

Yours in Christ's service,
Derrick Span

REPLY

Thank you for your thoughtful letter on this important subject. I appreciate your efforts to bring out the differing opinions on the subject in the Protestant Reformed Churches but most of all your direct questions at the end.

Before answering the questions, I want to call attention to a couple of issues that I think will help clarify both what you are developing in the body of your letter and your questions at the end.

The first issue is the autonomy of the local congregation and, more specifically, the autonomy of the consistory as those officebearers who are called by Christ to care for his church as manifested in the local congregation. One can speak more particularly of the office of elder. Do the elders rule over the flock as those appointed by Christ or not? Do they rule at the behest of or on behalf of the broader assemblies of the denomination or on behalf of the denomination itself? This first issue can be called the material principle of Reformed church government. It is the essence of Presbyterianism, and that in clear contrast to the hierarchy or collegialism of Episcopalian government or the Roman Catholic papacy.

The second issue can be called the formal principle because it provides the ground for the Presbyterian form of government over against the hierarchical. This second issue is scripture alone. Reformed church government, the autonomy of the local congregation derived from the rule of the office of elder, is the teaching of scripture. At the same time, as stated by article 32 of the Belgic Confession, those ruling the church must see to it that all of their rule may not bind the consciences of those over whom they rule.

These two issues taken together mean that article 31 of the Church Order *must* have the words “unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 390).

Before getting to your questions, let me issue a couple of caveats.

The first is that I do not intend to speak in behalf of my fellow editors or in behalf of the denomination of the Reformed Protestant Churches. I believe my fellow editors and I are largely in agreement, but I do not intend to speak for them in the particulars. Much less do I want to speak in behalf of the Reformed Protestant denomination. I wish decisions of Reformed Protestant consistories and meetings of Reformed Protestant classes not to be bound by the sentiments of this editor! Let the word of God alone rule!

My second caveat is that consistories in their deliberations must recognize differences among the decisions they take. Many different kinds of decisions are taken. Consistories must wisely consider how to deal with a decision if a protest is submitted against it. Sometimes a decision will be best deferred in its execution if it is protested. Another decision ought not be deferred, especially if there would be no consequences if it were found to be erroneous. Still another decision might be highly provoking when understood in the light of a protest. It ought to give any Reformed deliberative assembly pause to hear one or more of its officebearers or members say, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29), rather than rushing to charges of slander and schism. How do consistories best honor the office of believer when receiving protests as the exercise of that office?

That having been said, the answers to your questions are the following:

First, Synod 2004 of the Protestant Reformed Churches took the following decision:

Article 31 declares that whatever is decided by a major assembly by majority vote, relative to an appeal, must be considered settled and binding—“unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God or with the articles of the Church Order.” *The implication here is that one may indeed*

*attempt to demonstrate to an ecclesiastical assembly that its decision conflicts with the Word of God or the Church Order, but during the process of protest and appeal he must submit to the decision by which he is aggrieved.*¹

By no stretch of the imagination can “unless” be twisted into *until*, as this decision by its “implication” does. The term “unless” used by article 31 of the Church Order does not have a temporal reference but a logical. It does not pose a time frame but grants an exception.

Though excluded by article 31, there are still two things that can be said about such a temporal reference as “unless.” The first is that, completely apart from the consideration of article 31, the word of God requires submission to those whom Christ has placed in authority in the church, the elders.

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you. (Heb. 13:17)

The fifth commandment also requires this submission, as explained in Lord’s Day 39 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

The second thing that can be said is that it is incumbent upon Reformed deliberative assemblies to make abundantly clear that their decisions indeed are the expressions of Christ’s rule over his church by his word. If the deliberative assemblies cannot make it abundantly clear, the delegates should ask themselves whether they should take a decision at all.

An important question to ask about the decision of Synod 2004 is whether or not this decision is itself “settled and binding.” This decision is quoted in the green binder entitled *The Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*. However, it is found in the section beginning on page 106, which section is labeled “Explanation of the rules for Protests, Appeals, and Overtures.” Is this “explanation” itself a rule, or is it an explanation of the rules? In addition, there is this sentence on the same page: “A concise explanation of the ecclesiastical rules involved is the burden of what follows.” This sentence also indicates that what is presented is not itself a rule but an explanation.

It should also be noted that the issue raised in the quotation has been one of longstanding debate not only

in the Protestant Reformed Churches but in those other denominations holding to the same Church Order of Dordrecht. If the Protestant Reformed Churches want to consider their “implication” of article 31 as settled and binding, they certainly have the right to do so by a majority vote of a synod. But in my judgment the Reformed Protestant Churches must maintain article 31 as written in the Church Order of Dordt without any such “implication.”

To answer your second question: yes. In addition to the above, let me emphasize your point that to introduce the temporal reference *until* into article 31 wildly distorts the nature of the article. Far beyond making a decision of a deliberative assembly objective, the word *until* actually makes that decision absolute. Or, in a paradoxical way, absolutely conditional. A decision would thus be absolutely settled and binding until such a time that the same deliberative assembly would have proved to itself that such a decision was contrary to scripture.

Third, yes, but the particular circumstances must be taken into consideration. Whether yes or no largely depends on whether the decision prohibits the office-bearer or member from faithfully carrying out the duties of his office to which Christ has called him. I can appreciate your distinction between objective and subjective. But the “settled and binding” side will tend to argue that the particular grievance is subjective, while the aggrieved will counter that it is objective. In such cases it behooves a consistory to be considerate of the office of believer and the necessity of honoring the believer’s conscience before his God.

Fourth, my answer here is absolute. No! It is absolute with the absoluteness of Rev. Herman Hoeksema, with all his abhorrence of it as “collegialism,” both in his book *The History of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* and in the Declaration of Principles. It should also be noted that Van Dellen and Monsma grant exceptions in particular cases (reflecting on the events subsequent to the Synod of 1924 and trying to justify them). However, they also stress that such instances are contrary to the nature of Reformed church government.² The deposition of officebearers is the exercise of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, which authority Christ has given only to the local congregation and which keys are exercised by its officebearers alone. Just as a classis or a synod cannot excommunicate a member, neither can these assemblies depose officebearers.

—MVW

1 “Explanation of the rules for Protests, Appeals, and Overtures,” in *Acts of Synod 2004*, 150; emphasis added.

2 Idzerd Van Dellen, Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House), 160, 327–29.



Dear Rev. Langerak,

You brought up an issue in your September *Sword and Shield* article, *Synod's Letter of Reconciliation: An Evil Business*, that has been a concern of mine for many years. What follows is the quote from your article and my concerns.

More serious, the letter does not pass the basic ethical test, something that would seem to be a very important concern for a denomination that is bent on driving out antinomians of every stripe. A judge cannot sit in trial of his own judgment, unless the judge is God. So, for instance, in the Old Testament the ruling of a local judge was able to be appealed to another court. The same judge did not sit in judgment of his own ruling on appeal. But at synod, trumpeting their own righteousness and holiness before the world, many of the men of Classis East, the synodical deputies of Classis West, and the professorial advisors—all of whom played a very large role in the destruction of Reverend Lanning—sat in judgment of their own judgment. They were the instigators, the judges, the jury, the appeals court, the supreme court, the executioners, and the media team all wrapped up into one. The world—the ungodly world—would blush at the corruption of justice in such a system. And such judgment is repugnant in the church of Christ, where justice and mercy are to be preserved with the greatest fidelity.

The system of delegating to the assemblies in the PRC has been a concern of mine for years. When a protestant has a protest to his consistory, which protest then goes to classis, are the delegates from that consistory allowed to vote on that protest? If so, are they not then judges sitting in trial of their own judgment? Should that protest go to Synod, are not many of the delegates—at least all the ministers of that Classis represented at Synod—doing the same, namely, judges sitting in trial of their own judgment? The system is broken! The way of protest and ap-

peal is broken! Sure, it's there, the possibility of it, but the appeals and protests are made to the same men over and over again. How then can one even hold a slight hope for a different verdict? This practice has lent itself to horrific hierarchy over the years.

We stand in a unique position right now, at the very beginning of a new denomination. We have been told repeatedly that our new denomination is a reformation, and I believe that with my whole heart. Are we committed only to doctrinal reformation? Or are we also committed to practical reform? Are we in a position *right now* to change some of these practices? If this practice was not acceptable in the case of the deposition of Rev. Lanning, then how can it possibly be acceptable for us as a denomination going forward? What steps are being put in place to prevent this in our fledgling denomination, where office bearers are few in number, which could lend itself even more to this problem? Is it possible to implement term limits on elders, in order to prevent “career eldership”, which was also a problem in our former denomination? Is it possible to have a rotation of delegates at the assemblies and not necessarily election of delegates to assemblies? Is it possible to even have assembly meetings where ministers are not delegates? Is it possible to have a man other than a minister preside over the meeting? (I do realize these last 2 questions would involve change to, or at the very least, discussion on Church Order Art. 41.) These issues are all connected, and the questions should be raised. I also acknowledge there could be a valid concern of making too many rules. I might add, I was encouraged by decisions of our recent Classis meeting to not limit some committees to office bearers, but to appoint male confessing members of the denomination. God be praised!

I look forward to some discussion on these questions, and hope to hear some practical ideas for change going forward.

Thank you for your faithful writing and defense of the truth.

Rebecca Kleyn

REPLY

Rebecca raises good questions. I was inclined simply to answer in order the questions that she raised. But on further reflection I want to make some general points about the corruption that those in the Reformed Protestant Churches have experienced and what the churches need to be on guard against going forward.

We saw a massive corruption of church polity in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), some of which I pointed out in my article referred to above. In short, that corruption was the dread error of hierarchy in the church of Jesus Christ. There was widespread corruption of power in other areas of the church as well. I saw this for

years in the churches prior to the split of 2021 and was on the receiving end of it. I said in a speech once that I had been charged with sin so many times that I stopped counting. Many times my writings were subjected to censorship and were slandered behind my back. The editors of the *Standard Bearer* were some of the chief perpetrators of the corruption. I soon realized that the men who were charging me with sin did not care about sin. But they were using charges of sin as a club in the church to intimidate and enforce conformity. As part of this intimidation and forced conformity, these men charged sin against me to the consistory of Crete Protestant Reformed Church, and the charges were so scurrilous that even that consistory could not approve of them.

The editors brought similar charges against Reverend Lanning to the January 2021 meeting of Classis East of the PRC to test the wind—they admitted that much on the floor of classis—and the committee of preadvice made a valiant and deceptive effort to give the charges traction. But the editors' charges were so transparently false and self-serving that even their own colleagues in Classis East could not sustain them.

I see in the Lord's providence that I had to go through all those earlier charges of sin so that when Crete's elders charged me with sin, I could see that they too did not care about sin but were using charges of sin either as a convenience or as a club to enforce man's wisdom in the church.

Recently Prof. H. Hanko has come out with his view of church power in which he sounds like John Eck, the great champion of papal power against Martin Luther.¹

The ministers of the PRC are now making it more and more clear that their position on church power and church authority is Roman Catholic: it is rule in the church from the top down, by the will and whims of man, by the wisdom of man, for the good of man and not by the will of Christ, the word of Christ, and to the glory of God. Rule strictly subservient to the word of Christ in the scriptures is the only rule in the church that scripture knows, but the Protestant Reformed ministers will have the word of God only so long as it conforms to their wills.

I say these things only by way of example, and I could multiply examples. The larger point is that there was a cesspool of corruption that was hidden by a thin veneer of respectability that the Lord has now exposed and will

continue to expose because that corruption angers him. It was a beastly polity.

Defining the organization of a troop of monkeys, an anthropologist wrote,

Many primate species keep the peace by establishing and then enforcing hierarchies with demonstrations of aggression, and when push comes to shove, physical power. When these hierarchies are contested...life in primate groups gets distinctly edgy and unpleasant.²

Such is the church polity of the Protestant Reformed Churches and worse. It is hierarchy enforced by false appeals to unity, rewards, mutual back-scratching, threats, intimidation, manipulation, accusation, bribes, backstabbing, and finally by ecclesiastical murder. Full of man in doctrine, the PRC must also have a church polity ruled by man.

Perhaps we think: "What can we do to prevent this in the Reformed Protestant Churches? Can we multiply laws and regulations to ensure that this does not happen in the Reformed Protestant Churches?"

In short, the answer is no. No amount of rules will prevent hierarchy. I am not against rules in the church. We have the Church Order. But I am against the multiplication of rules. It is an attempt to legislate righteousness in the church. Righteousness in the church is the work of the Word and the Spirit of Christ. No amount of rules is a substitute for the Word and the Spirit of Christ. Hierarchy begins in the corrupt human nature. Beginning there, hierarchy is not satisfied until it has the whole church under its control and casts Christ out of his own vineyard. It must be remembered that hierarchy is fundamentally antichristian. And such is the deception of the human heart that it will bend to its own service even good rules.

I give as an example what the Protestant Reformed Churches did to the Church Order. We are learning now that the PRC completely overthrew the idea of article 31, so that men's decisions must be submitted to even if they conflict with the word of God.³ I am becoming convinced that the interpretation of article 31 that says that someone who is convinced that a decision of an ecclesiastical assembly is contrary to the word of God may only appeal

1 See "Letter from Prof. Herman Hanko," in *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 13 (February 1, 2022): 23–25.

2 James Suzman, *Work: A Deep History, From the Stone Age to the Age of Robots* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021), 188.

3 See "Explanation of the rules for Protests, Appeals, and Overtures," in *Acts of Synod 2004*, 150. Synod 2004 adopted the following "explanation" of article 31: "The implication here [of 'unless it be proved...'] is that one may indeed attempt to demonstrate to an ecclesiastical assembly that its decision conflicts with the Word of God or the Church Order, but during the process of protest and appeal he must submit to the decision by which he is aggrieved." See Barrett Gritters, "What Do *You* Think about Synod's Decisions? The Reformed Prohibition of Agitating," *Standard Bearer* 96, no. 19 (August 2020): 439–42. See also Profs. Dykstra and Gritters, "The Proper Understanding of Article 31 of the Church Order," a paper distributed unofficially throughout the PRC and found at <https://astraitbetwixtwo.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Gritters-Dykstra-Article-31.pdf>.

the decision, and he must keep quiet in the meantime—which is not the historically Protestant Reformed interpretation—was an attempt to make sure that a stubborn and public militancy against false doctrine, as had happened in 1953, did not happen again and to manage the churches so that no controversy could, as many would suppose, get out of hand.

Further, the PRC corrupted the Formula of Subscription, so that the churches teach now that when officebearers sign the Formula, they subscribe to synodical decisions, which I most certainly did not agree to when I signed the Formula. I subscribed with my signature to the three forms of unity alone.

By means of a novel definition of *schism*—which amounted to saying something bad about respected men or pointing out that the emperor is buck naked—the PRC used articles 79 and 80 of the Church Order, regarding suspension and deposition, to persecute the righteous. The PRC have no use for article 55—which speaks of militancy against false doctrine and heresy—and pretend it does not exist, except for churches other than Protestant Reformed. In addition, the denomination teaches that on the basis of article 14, which speaks of a minister's asking for a leave of absence, ministers for any reason can be taken off the pulpit by force.

Further, one could make a good case that the denomination's process for calling missionaries is a fundamental corruption of article 4, regarding the lawful calling. In the Protestant Reformed process for calling a missionary, the foreign or domestic mission committee provides the local calling church with a list of men the committee has deemed acceptable, from which list alone the local church may call a missionary.

I do not know how many other articles of the Church Order the PRC have corrupted, but all the bellyaching about the “church orderly way” is laughable in this light.

The Church Order is a good set of rules, and we follow it. However, when men who are bent on ruling the church themselves and managing the church according to their own whims take hold of that good document, then they corrupt it and twist it for their own purposes. They are very much like the political liberal judges who find every sort of *avant-garde* and popular social change in the Constitution of the United States.

It is not the rules that are the issue. The principles of good church government are laid out in scripture and are easily known. The men who are put into office are the issue. When officebearers love the truth; love the glory of Christ, the head of the church; love the churches; and love their brethren, the churches will not have a problem. For example, it is not the institution of church visitors that is corrupt, but when corrupt men are put into

that position, then they work havoc in the churches. It is not the system of protests and appeals as such that is corrupt—honorable men would recuse themselves from judging their own cases—but the corruption is dishonorable men who sit in judgment and act as God, judging the appeals of their own cases.

I note that in article 30 of the Belgic Confession on the government of the church, the article explains the grand things that belong to church government. Then the article says,

By these means everything will be carried on in the church with good order and decency, *when faithful men are chosen according to the rule prescribed by St. Paul in his epistle to Timothy.* (*Confessions and Church Order*, 65; emphasis added)

The issue is the men in office. The failure of the PRC and its doctrinal and church political demise were the result of the men who were put into office. There were ministers who did not know—who obviously and painfully did not know—the gospel. Yet they were not only put into office but were also elevated in the church to the highest positions of influence and power: they were made church visitors; served continually on self-perpetuating church committees; were appointed to special committees to help churches in trouble; and were made professors. The qualifications for elder became contributing a lot of money to the kingdom causes, being able to get along with others, having the gift of gab, or being a buddy, and not having a profound understanding of doctrine and the mysteries of the faith and a love of the Protestant Reformed truth.

It is becoming increasingly clear that, for the most part, many officebearers were ignorant of what the concept of Protestant Reformed truth meant; some of them loathe that term. The men who are chosen for office, for good or for evil, lead the church, and in the PRC the men of the church led her straight into error. Chosen to office were unfaithful men who perjured themselves, were more concerned for their honor than the honor of Christ, were more concerned about an outward conformity and a superficial peace than about contending for the truth; they were men who, when the truth was compromised, refused to stand for truth and thus forsook their offices; and not being content with their own unfaithfulness, they forbade the faithful from defending the truth, behaved as lords in the church, and ruled by their wills and not God's will.

The most important point that can be made to the newly formed Reformed Protestant Churches is that faithful men be chosen to serve in the offices. Let those men demonstrate that they know what the truth is, that they love the truth, and that they are willing to risk all for the truth's sake. We

must be done with church managers and people pleasers; vain and superficial men; men who, if they are not appallingly ignorant, are rankly carnal. The churches need men after God's own heart, men who meet the qualifications for office of 1 Timothy 3. We need to beseech the Lord to spare us from hirelings and to send us such faithful officebearers.

The Lord sent the unfaithful men to the PRC in his judgment on her because he determined evil against her, and he carried out the judgment by means of those men who now congratulate themselves for their faithfulness and preen themselves on the accolades of many.

Also, regarding the matter of making rules, I adhere to article 29 of the Belgic Confession:

The marks by which the true church is known are...in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the church. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 62–63)

Jesus Christ is head of his church, and he rules by means of his word and his Spirit. That is the only word to which the people of God may listen. If they hear any other, no matter how highly placed, they are unfaithful.

I also adhere to article 7 of the Belgic Confession:

It is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures...

Neither do we consider of equal value any writing of men...nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees, or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, for the truth is above all. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 26–28)

And I adhere to article 32 of the Belgic Confession:

Though it is useful and beneficial that those who are rulers of the church institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the church, yet they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, hath instituted. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 66)

When men who believe these things taught in the Confession are put into office, then hierarchy is the more readily kept out of Christ's church. Again, the issue is what men are being put into office.

Regarding the specific questions of the letter, I would like to say a few things.

Rebecca asks, "When a protestant has a protest to

his consistory, which protest then goes to classis, are the delegates from that consistory allowed to vote on that protest?"

The answer is no. That is not ethical.

She makes the same basic point in her question about synod: "Should that protest go to Synod, are not many of the delegates—at least all the ministers of that Classis represented at Synod—doing the same, namely, judges sitting in trial of their own judgment?" In other words, how do you ensure as best as possible an impartial judgment?

That issue in the PRC, which has only two classes, was most glaring at synod. There was a proposal to synod several years ago to divide the PRC into three classes. The delegates and advisors at that synod, at which I was a delegate, were extremely resistant to the proposal. They were protecting their power. They were terrified of a classis that did not have one of them in it to manage things. It would have helped solve the problem of impartial judgments, in that when a protest from one classis came to synod, the delegates from that classis would not vote on the protest. I do not see how the problem of impartiality could have been avoided aside from dividing the denomination into three classes.

To my mind, however, the bigger issue is the unofficial meetings that take place prior to the meetings of classis and synod, in which meetings the issues are debated; so that when a matter comes to the floor, it has virtually been decided already. It is decided in meetings before the meetings. Delegates to broader assemblies ought not discuss the matters on the agenda beforehand. They should deliberate on the floor of the assembly.

Regarding the Reformed Protestant denomination, the matter of hierarchy has been faced already. It is shocking to me that hierarchy so readily was in the thinking of the assembly and so easily ruled to make a decision. That shows that hierarchy is an ever-present danger. Hierarchy is in our blood.

Therefore, Rebecca's concern about what the Reformed Protestant Churches are doing to be on guard or to put into place practices to guard against hierarchy and corruption of church power is good. She suggests some practical things: terms limits for elders, rotation of delegates to the assemblies, and no ministers presiding over the assemblies. While I do not agree with the suggestions, the discussion is a good one and could be profitably had by the churches.

How do we, with our very small number of elders and ministers, keep lording out of the churches?

I would say this: let everyone first guard his own heart.

—NJL

Dear Editor-in-chief,

The doctrine of repentance has been an important thread that has run throughout the controversy in the PRC since 2015. In the October 15 issue of *Sword and Shield*, much was written describing what repentance is NOT. For example:

“I deny that repentance is a means unto the end justification and that faith is the means unto the end justification. I deny this in two senses. First, I deny that repentance and faith are both means unto the end justification. Faith’s relationship to justification and repentance’s relationship to justification are fundamentally different.” (NJL page 13)

“it is an error to make repentance to be the same as faith. Repentance is not faith, and faith is not repentance.” (AL page 35)

I would like to encourage you, as editor-in-chief, to lay out positively your understanding of the doctrine of repentance. I believe that we would all benefit from further writing on this important doctrine. My questions include: What is a Biblical definition of repentance? What

role and function does repentance have in the life of the child of God? How does repentance relate to fellowship with God and assurance? How does repentance relate to forgiveness of sins both objectively before God and subjectively in our own consciences? How is the call to repentance to be preached both in the world and in the Church from week to week? Is repentance to be considered primarily law or gospel? How does repentance logically relate to faith, justification, and sanctification? Is repentance to be considered a good work that man performs by God’s grace or is man passive in repentance? Is repentance to be considered a means unto the remission of sins or should repentance be considered a fruit of faith (flowing out of faith’s assured knowledge of forgiveness)?

I pray that God will sharpen us as we seek to grow in our understanding of the glorious doctrines of salvation in Christ our Savior!

“For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.” Romans 11:36

Respectfully,
Kent Deemter

REPLY

Introduction

Now, here is a letter with some meat on its bones. “I would like to encourage you, as editor-in-chief, to lay out positively your understanding of the doctrine of repentance.” Oh, is that all? And in my reply I am to connect the doctrine of repentance with forgiveness of sins, assurance of salvation, covenant fellowship with God, God’s bar of justice, the human conscience, the gospel, the call of the gospel, the law, faith, justification, sanctification, good works, grace, passive versus active, the doctrine of the means of salvation, and the doctrine of the fruit of salvation.

Our correspondent, who writes utterly sincerely and in good faith, is looking for a book or at least a lengthy series of articles. And what a book or series that would be. I agree wholeheartedly with him that “we would all benefit from further writing on this important doctrine.” And without any guile, I do sincerely thank him for raising such a glorious topic as repentance for the benefit of the readership.

But our poor correspondent has asked for *my understanding* of the doctrine of repentance. Whereas the doctrine of repentance could fill an ocean, my understanding of that doctrine could fill a sippy cup. That is the way I feel more and more about the unsearchable riches of Christ as God continues to work reformation in his church. As the Lord recovers the gospel to us in all of its liberating freedom, the riches of Christ become ever more unsearchable in their value. They are infinite and marvelous and staggering. The unsearchable riches of Christ are Christ, and he makes the silver of our salvation to be as abundant as the stones upon the ground and the gold of our salvation to be the pavement of the streets. So it is with the doctrine of repentance. As soon as I try to gather it up, I see that my hands are laughably inadequate to hold the great riches of it.

So in this reply I will not be writing a book. But I am eager to set forth what little I know, for even that little is to me a great and inestimable treasure of my Lord.

Definition

Here is my definition and doctrine of repentance: Repentance is the believer's spontaneous love for God as that love comes into contact with and hates the believer's own sin and corruption.

My explanation of that definition is that, in its essence, repentance is love for God. Repentance is not a complicated and perplexing thing to know or to explain in the life of a child of God, but it is simply love for God. Such love is the fruit of faith, and it springs forth spontaneously from faith. When the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed to an elect sinner, the Holy Ghost brings Jesus Christ himself to the sinner. The Spirit works faith in the heart of the elect sinner, producing in the sinner both the will to believe and the very act of believing. Faith is that believer's connection with Christ, through which he receives Jesus Christ and all his benefits.

The Spirit-wrought fruit of faith is love for God. This love beholds God as absolutely lovely. This love desires God's fellowship as the one thing that it seeks after. This love desires to obey God and to please God and to do every good work. This love is the inevitable fruit of the elect sinner's faith. Christ comes to the elect sinner through faith, making him a new man and causing him to live a new life and freeing him from the bondage of sin. The Spirit causes love to spring forth from that faith instantly and spontaneously. In the moment of the elect sinner's believing, he loves God as the sure fruit of that faith.

The believer who loves God is still a sinner. He has only a small beginning of the new obedience of love. He yet carries with him his totally depraved old man of sin. As love for God blossoms from faith in the heart of a man who is still a sinner, that love instantaneously comes into contact with the believer's sin and corruption. Love recoils from that sin and hates that sin as abomination. God alone is absolutely lovely to the eyes of love, and all this sin that a man finds in himself is filthy in the eyes of love. Love mourns that sin and is appalled by that sin and is full of zeal and revenge against that sin. The believer is filled with godly sorrow over his sin, indignation over his sin, and vehement desire against it. All of this sorrow and vehemence is the believer's repenting (see 2 Cor. 7:11). And the believer's repenting is simply his love for God as that love comes into contact with and hates his own sin and corruption.

My basis for this definition of repentance is the biblical word for repentance itself, used in such passages as Mark 1:14–15. "Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom

of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel." The word "repent" means *to change one's mind*. The change in repentance is that the elect sinner now loves God with his mind instead of hating God. The change in repentance is also that the elect sinner now hates sin instead of loving sin.

My basis for this definition of repentance is also Lord's Day 33 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Lord's Day 33 deals with the doctrine of repentance, which it calls "true conversion." The Reformed doctrine of repentance is that repentance is "sincere joy of heart in God" and "sincere sorrow of heart that we have provoked God by our sins" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 121).

On that basis I define repentance as the believer's spontaneous love for God as that love comes into contact with and hates the believer's own sin and corruption.

Implications

With this definition of repentance, we can sketch some of its implications. First, repentance is not faith but the fruit of faith. Repentance is love for God, which love is obedience to the law. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God... with all thy mind" (Matt. 22:37). Therefore, repentance is a good work. We could say that repentance is the first good work produced by faith. When love for God first blossoms out of faith as its instant and spontaneous fruit, in that same instant it comes into contact with and recoils from and mourns over the believer's sin. This is why the call to repent is made right along with the call to believe. Not because repentance is faith or the means of salvation with faith, but because repentance is the first and inevitable fruit of faith.

Second, repentance is not a means of salvation. Faith alone—worked by the Holy Ghost in the elect sinner's heart by the preaching of the gospel and confirmed by the use of the sacraments—is the means of salvation. Repentance is not a means unto the remission of sins. Only faith is. God does not grant justification through repentance but only through faith. God does not forgive our sins through repentance but only through faith. So also for all of the blessings of salvation: justification and sanctification are all through faith, not repentance. Though repentance springs from faith as its fruit from the very instant that a man believes, that repentance has no bearing whatsoever on that man's remission of sins or his justification. The reason that God saves his people only through faith is because of faith's object: Jesus Christ. The reason that God does not save his people through their work, including their work of love and their work of repenting, is so that no man may boast (Eph. 2:8–9). Faith in Jesus Christ is the means of salvation, and repentance is its inevitable, spontaneous, and instantaneous fruit.

Third, the believer's assurance is not due to or by means of his repentance. The believer's assurance is faith alone in Christ alone. The believer's repenting does not restore to him the comfort of his salvation. The believer's repenting does not restore to him the blessed experience of fellowship with God. The believer's repenting does not bring him the knowledge of his forgiveness. The believer's repenting does not give any answer whatsoever to the believer's troubled conscience. The believer certainly has assurance. But the entirety of the believer's assurance is faith alone in Christ alone, and the believer's assurance is not at all his repenting or due to his repenting. How could it be? The believer has peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ, and the only way the believer has Jesus Christ is by faith (Rom. 5:1). Nothing else may take the place of faith or share a place with faith in the believer's peace with God. If anything else takes the place of faith or shares a place with faith, then the believer's peace with God is not Christ alone but Christ and something of the believer. Especially repentance and other good works of love may not share a place with faith in the believer's peace with God. Then the believer's peace with God—which includes all of his assurance and experience—depends on how well the believer did his works. Instead of having peace, the believer would be plagued by the doubt whether he repented hard enough or was sorry enough for his sin. Only being justified by faith does the believer have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is why the teaching that in some sense a man's activity of repenting precedes God's activity of remitting his sins is so deadly and wretched. In such a teaching the believer does not have Christ alone for his salvation, but the believer is cast for his salvation on the rocks of his own imperfect love and his own imperfect repenting and his own imperfect sorrowing for his sins. I wonder if those today who are teaching that man's activity precedes God's activity in salvation can actually make it their personal confession. Let them stop talking in the abstract about salvation. Let them stop saying this: "Repentance precedes remission of sins."¹ Let them instead climb into heaven, and let them stand before the awesome majesty of the thrice-holy God, and let them say to God's face, if they can: "God, my repenting

of my sins precedes thy remitting of my sins." And if they cannot look the holy God in the eye and tell him that, then let them also stop telling everyone else back here on earth, "Repenting precedes remission of sins."

The reality of repenting and all of love's other works of gratitude is that they have nothing to do whatsoever with the believer's justification and assurance of his justification. His justification is by faith in Christ irrespective of any of his good works, including his repenting. In the words of the Belgic Confession, article 24: "It is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even before we do good works" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 53).

Fourth, repentance inevitably accompanies faith as its spontaneous fruit. Where you see repentance in a man, there you see his faith. This is why the scriptures sometimes speak of repenting unto salvation or repenting in order to be forgiven. For example, Peter's call to the people amazed at the healing of the lame man: "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; and he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you" (Acts 3:19–20). The meaning is not that the people's remission of sins would be because of or by means of their repenting. Rather, Peter speaks of repentance as the inevitable and indelible evidence of faith in Christ, by which faith they would be saved. The last evidence that they gave was unbelief, for they had "killed the Prince of life" (v. 15). Salvation from their sin, which salvation was pictured by the healing of the lame man, was "through faith in his name" (v. 16), that is, faith in Jesus, "the Prince of life." The evidence of their faith, because it is the unmistakable and inevitable fruit of faith, would be their repenting and turning from their sin.

Conclusion

That probably does not answer every question that was posed in the letter. Hopefully this at least gives us the lines along which all these and other related questions can be answered. May God establish his gospel and open a door of utterance for his church to preach "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).

—AL



1 David J. Engelsma, "Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc? Non! Or, Don't Kill the Rooster!," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 8 (October 15, 2021): 8.

Dear Editor,

I write in response to the article entitled “Chanticleer” in the October 15, 2021 Letters Edition of *Sword and Shield*. At the outset, I would like to thank you for the article. I found it very helpful and insightful. However, I was left a bit confused by a couple statements made in this response to Professor Engelsma and therefore write seeking clarification.

In this article, the following teaching of Professor Engelsma (which he correctly asserts is also the teaching of the PRC) is condemned: “The PRC teach that repentance is the (God-given and God-worked) means unto the remission of sins. As means, repentance precedes remission of sins; as end, remission of sins follows repentance” (pg. 12).

However, while the article rejects the teaching that repentance is a *means unto* forgiveness, the article maintains as truth the teaching that, in time, repentance *precedes* forgiveness: “As to time, I know and everyone knows and no one is denying that faith precedes justification, that repentance precedes forgiveness, and all the rest” (pg. 12). “We are justified in the way of repentance? I will grant that, although now I am going to ask Professor Engelsma to explain that, because I see how corrupted that language has become. The phrase *in the way of*, which Hoeksema offered as a solution, is now being used to bring in a freight train load of false doctrine. And it is becoming increasingly clear that those who are doing it cannot stay with the phrase *in the way of*. They said previously, “in the way of,” wink, wink, and now they want to make sure that their audiences do not misunderstand. They are being forced to come out with what they believe, and what they believe is “means unto” and “because of” and “conditioned on.” We are justified by means of repentance? I absolutely deny that. That cannot be” (pg. 13).

In response to this article, I would like to make clear that I most certainly and unashamedly do deny that repentance precedes forgiveness in time. The whole point of my protest to the May 2020 meeting of Classis East, and a main contention of one of the protests to Synod 2020 and Synod 2021 was that *repentance is not an activity of the believer that temporally precedes the blessing of experiencing the forgiveness of one’s sins*

Why do I so vehemently deny this?

I reject this teaching because such a *temporal* relationship denies the true, *essential* relationship between repentance and forgiveness. The teaching that repentance is before forgiveness in time denies the very *essence* of repentance as the fruit of faith and the very *essence* of forgiveness as the free gift of God in Christ through faith *alone*. The true, *essential* relationship between these two is that repentance is the fruit of knowing the forgiveness

of sins through faith (that is, faith *alone*, apart from any repentance). One cannot maintain that repentance is the fruit of faith and maintain that repentance is before forgiveness in time without maintaining a contradiction. Such, I contend, is logical nonsense.

The Heidelberg Catechism teaches:

1. Repentance is “a sincere sorrow of heart that we have provoked God by our sins, and more and more to hate and flee from them” (HC QA 89).
2. As such, repentance “procede[s] from a true faith” (HC QA 91).
3. Faith is “an assured confidence, which the Holy Ghost works by the gospel in my heart; that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sin, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits” (HC QA 21).

Therefore, that repentance is the fruit of faith means that repentance is the fruit of being assured of one’s forgiveness. In other words, the *essential* relationship between the two is that repentance is the fruit of experiencing forgiveness through faith. Such an *essential* relationship demands a certain *temporal* relationship because one’s experience in time cannot be different than reality. I readily grant that the actual time lapse between forgiveness and repentance is next to 0, which is why we understand the order of salvation to be a logical rather than a temporal order. Repentance is the immediate and inevitable fruit of having the love of God spread abroad in our hearts. It is as immediate as the product of a chemical reaction. The love of God forgiving our sins in Christ is shed abroad in our hearts by the Spirit through the preaching of the gospel, and we repent before our infinitely gracious and merciful God. Thus, it is impossible that one know the forgiveness of sins and yet continue impenitent in sin. Nevertheless, there can be *no repentance* unless there is *first* the knowledge of the love of God in Christ freely forgiving all of our sins.

Furthermore, the temporal order must be *first forgiveness and then repentance* because God works in us as rational, moral creatures. As rational, moral creatures, we have a reason for everything we do. Why do we repent? We repent because we love God. Repentance is “a sincere sorrow of heart that we have provoked God by our sins, and more and more to hate and flee from them” (HC QA 89). Repentance, therefore, is an expression of our love for God and our hatred for sin. And why do we love God? We love God “because He first loved us” (I John 4:19). And how do we know the love of God? “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live

through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:9,10). The forgiveness of our sins in Christ is *the reason* why we repent. To repent for any other reason is not true repentance, but is a sorrow only for the consequences of sin. To repent for no reason at all but simply as a result of God commanding us to “Repent!” in His Word is to repent as a stock and block.

Truly, it is God’s gift of faith that changes our attitude toward God and sin. Truly, we repent by faith. That is, we repent out of the assured confidence that our sins are forgiven, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits. How, then, can it possibly be true and something not to be denied that “repentance precedes forgiveness” in the order of salvation? Furthermore, what exactly is the cor-

rect understanding of “we are justified in the way of repentance?”

Again, I appreciate the article, but am compelled to respond because I definitely have denied, and remain convinced that I must deny, the teaching “that repentance precedes forgiveness.” May God use all of our discussions for the establishment of His truth among us to the end “that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:” (Eph. 4:14, 15).

Sincerely in Christ,
Sara Doezema

REPLY

Introduction

I appreciate this letter. It gives an opportunity to address on the pages of *Sword and Shield* the matter of the order of salvation—in Latin, the *ordo salutis*.

The order of salvation may be defined as the order in which the Holy Ghost applies to the elect the benefits of salvation merited by Christ the mediator and ordained for them by God the Father.

The order of salvation has always been the subject of debate, not only among the Reformed but also among the Reformed and the Lutherans and others. I think that much of the debate is useless wrangling about words or an attempt to justify one’s own pet ideas about salvation or to introduce false doctrine in the churches. It is especially the last point that bears repeating at this time. At the present time in the Protestant Reformed Churches, the idea of the order of salvation is being corrupted in the interest of justifying false doctrine in the churches.

I am not willing to throw out the order of salvation yet, but if it keeps producing the kind of worthless and ultimately deceptive and misleading theological debate that it has, then I do not need to talk about an order anymore. I can explain the truth of salvation without speaking of an order, and I have always regarded the order of salvation as more of a theological convenience than a theological necessity. The order of salvation is a useful theological construction to explain the various benefits of the covenant of grace and of union with Christ. But the order is not the be-all and the end-all of theology or soteriology.

Besides, Reformed theologians have made a hobby of coming up with different orders. And off the top of my head, I can come up with four or five different orders of salvation that I can defend for one reason or another and depending on how finely I want to parse the various works of salvation. The order could be faith, regeneration, calling, faith, conversion, justification, sanctification, and glorification. Or the order could be regeneration, calling, faith, justification, conversion, sanctification, and glorification. Or the order could be calling, faith, regeneration, calling, faith, conversion, justification, and glorification. You get the picture.

Since the concept of the order of salvation belongs to Reformed theology and has a long history in Reformed theology, we must understand the order and talk about it.

Arguing the Same Way

About the letter in general, I do not agree with the logic of Sara’s letter and with her conclusions, in the main. She uses undefined terms or defines terms for her own purposes. For instance, she uses the language “*essential* relationship.” She ends up with the following order of salvation: regeneration, calling, faith, justification, and conversion; although I do not fault her for that, and in some ways I find that order appealing.

Almost every theologian who has ever touched the order of salvation has added to it, taken away from it, or rearranged it as he sees fit.

In the end I find that the letter proceeds from the same mistaken view of the order of salvation that it ostensibly

seeks to combat. This view is that the order is about time and what happens in time and in man's experience and that the main thing with the order of salvation is the order.

Sara betrays that this is her understanding of the order when she says, "Such an *essential* relationship demands a certain *temporal* relationship because one's experience in time cannot be different than reality."

I do not know exactly what she means, but what she makes clear is that the essential relationship of the order of salvation *demand*s a certain temporal relationship. With that I disagree. As proof I cite the logical relationship between the order of God's decrees and the temporal unfolding of the decrees. The order of the decrees is Christ, predestination, the fall, and creation; but the temporal order of the unfolding of those decrees is the very opposite. So I disagree with Sara's point that "an *essential* relationship" *demand*s "a certain *temporal* relationship."

She also says, "I readily grant that the actual time lapse between forgiveness and repentance is next to 0, which is why we understand the order of salvation to be a logical rather than a temporal order." Her concern is time. The time is next to zero or basically simultaneous. Thus she says that is the reason we call the order logical. But we do not call the order of salvation logical because the time among the elements is virtually zero. For instance, that we are regenerated a split second before we are converted; or, in her example, that we are justified a split second before we repent.

We call the order logical because there is no time in the order at all. It is not a temporal order at all. So I will agree with Sara in her proposed order, but then I will say that the order itself is not the point of the order of salvation either. Sara is concerned that we experience forgiveness before we repent or that we know our justification before we repent. I leave it to God what experience he will give man and in what order.

God held the Philippian jailor—he is a common theme these days—over hell, and the man in desperation cried out, "What must I do to be saved?" I do not find Sara's order of salvation in that story, and neither do I think the correct order in which the jailor experienced things is or ought to be the main point of scripture in that passage.

Reverend Koole used considerations about the order—first regeneration, then calling, then repentance, then faith—to justify his Arminian explanation of that passage and his calling Reverend Hoeksema's exegesis of the passage nonsense. The whole Protestant Reformed denomination is awash in the view that the order of salvation is about time, and that understanding of the order

is being used to bring in false doctrine and to call the gospel nonsense.

The Lord gives to this one and to that one their own experiences.

Luther was troubled with terrible guilt for many years, so that Luther said that he even loathed the thought of God until Romans 1:17—"Therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith"—was opened up to him, and the blessed gospel of justification shown its light into his darkened soul. I do not find the letter's *order of salvation* there either.

It appears to me that Sara argues the same way as those whom she opposes. The view of the order of salvation that she seeks to combat is that there are God-wrought activities (or experiences) of man that precede blessings of God. The order that she proposes in replacement is simply a reorganization of the order in a way that she supposes eliminates activities (or experiences) of man that precede works of God. In short, she proposes an arrangement in which she supposes that experiences line up with the theology of the order.

But the principle both of the order that she rejects and the order that she proposes is the same. The principle is that the order is mainly about man—his experience and his activities—and about explaining man's experience in a theologically correct manner by an appeal to or by the creation of a correct order of salvation.

That principle is mistaken. The order is *not* about man's activities or the correct order of man's experience. The order is *not* even mainly about an order. I am not willing yet to throw out the idea that there is an order of salvation and that the order is logical, but the order—the precise, definite order—of the application of salvation is *not* the point. Surely then, the order may not be pressed into providing a theological rationale for man's experience and man's activities. For that reason when someone argues about experience strictly on the ground of the order, I will concede the point. So you want to say that repentance precedes justification; fine. You want to say that the order is justification, then conversion; that is fine. You had better define your terms, but I can see both orders.

The classic Reformed order of salvation, if we may use the word *classic* in connection with the order of salvation, is regeneration, calling, faith, conversion, justification, sanctification, preservation, and glorification.

What the Order Is

In that light and for the sake of Sara and others, I take up a broader explanation of the order of salvation. Over against the Protestant Reformed position on the order

of salvation that there are God-wrought activities that precede God-wrought blessings and that there are God-wrought activities that are means unto the acquisition of other God-given blessings, I reject that position as a fundamental corruption of the order of salvation. To those who would contend against the Protestant Reformed position, I caution them not to contend for a novel order but to insist that the Protestant Reformed Churches have corrupted the order of salvation in order to carve out a place for man in his salvation. Contending against that corruption, I say that the order of salvation is not about where man's activities—God-wrought or not—are included, so that by doing them man brings about the next installment of his salvation or the next blessing. And over against Sara's view of the order of salvation, the order is not about what man experiences first and then second or about providing the correct theological framework for that experience by developing a new order of salvation.

Turning to the issue of the order of salvation, there are some profitable things that we can say about it.

I have said before and will say again that at the point of union with Christ and regeneration, the elect child of God receives all of salvation as a complete whole, or what scripture calls the gift of the Holy Spirit or the earnest of our inheritance. Salvation is one complete, organic whole, not a series of steps or stages along which man advances. We receive complete salvation in our union with Christ and according to God's eternal appointment.

The ground for this truth is Canons 1.17: "Godly parents have no reason to doubt of the election and salvation of their children whom it pleaseth God to call out of this life in their infancy" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 159). Salvation here is union with Christ and the reception of every benefit of salvation in that union as determined by God's decree. Without a single activity on their part, these elect children have all of those benefits at the point they are called to glory. As little as their activities have to do with receiving the benefits of salvation, so little do adult activities have to do with receiving this or that benefit of salvation. The activities of self-conscious members of Christ are not means unto receiving the next installment of salvation's benefits. The activities are fruits of the benefits given.

The ground for my assertion that we receive all of salvation at the point of union with Christ is also the Reformed baptismal form, which calls the elect infants of believers "sanctified in Christ" (*Confessions and Church*

Order, 260). These infants have not believed, have performed no activity, have obeyed no commandment, and have not even heard the gospel, and they are sanctified. They are sanctified as infants and without their activity. "Sanctified" in this instance is not a reference to one particular benefit of salvation but is a summary of the whole of their salvation in their union with Christ their savior. You could without any injustice or without doing any violence to the meaning of the phrase "sanctified in Christ" translate it as union with Christ. The elect infants of believers are one with Christ, and so they are regenerated, are called, have faith, are justified unto eternal glory, and are sanctified as saints.

There is the question, then, why even speak about an order of salvation? Is not salvation accomplished and perfect in Christ? The answer is that when we speak about the order of salvation, we are not speaking about the accomplishment of salvation at the cross but are speaking about the application of salvation to the elect in their hearts and lives. The salvation in Christ must come into their possession. The Holy Ghost applies salvation to them. This application of salvation is what is treated in the order of salvation.

Then do we not receive all of salvation completely at the moment of our union with Christ? Yes. Yet that whole salvation is like a diamond into which one beam of light is refracted into its many colors. There are many benefits that scripture teaches us belong to our salvation. It is in this connection that we speak about an order of salvation. The purpose of the order is to explain the different benefits of salvation.

Herman Bavinck explained the reason that theology regarded an order as necessary: "Inasmuch as all these benefits of Christ are not an accidental aggregate but organically connected, the Holy Spirit distributes them in a certain order."¹

Exactly what Bavinck meant by "accidental aggregate" is not clear. I think what he meant has to be understood in light of the task of the preacher and the dogmatician. All the benefits of Christ are an aggregate. They are one organic whole called *salvation*. Yet these benefits are not simply heaped together. There is a relationship among them. Bavinck described that relationship as "organically connected," and I like that description. Stop thinking about the order of salvation as linear. It is organic, as a vine and its branches. Christ is the root, and out of him all blessings flow. The order is logical, and the logic that governs the order is the logic that says that God must be glorified in Jesus Christ in everything.

1 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 593. Subsequent quotations from Bavinck are given in text.

The Minister's Task

That aggregate of salvation has many benefits, all interconnected. It is the task of the dogmatician and the preacher not merely to say the word *salvation* or even to repeat over and over that salvation is all of grace or that salvation is all of the Lord. But it is the task of the preacher and the dogmatician to explain with each blessing of salvation and in the interconnectedness of the various benefits of salvation how salvation is of the Lord and to show forth and declare the glory of God and the excellence of his grace in Christ. The order of salvation is about salvation and that salvation is of the Lord, and that logic must govern every explanation of the various benefits of salvation and also the explanation of the interconnectedness of those benefits. For example, in connection with conversion, the task of the dogmatician is not to explain that now man becomes active in order next to be justified. In connection with justification by faith alone, the task of the dogmatician is not to show how man is active in faith in order to be forgiven. The task is to show the glory of the grace of God in the work of man's conversion. In connection with justification by faith alone, the task is to show how justification by faith alone makes justification wholly without man's works. The dogmatician is to be a minister of the glory of God and not a false prophet for the glory of man.

Regarding the relationships among the various benefits of salvation, the minister's task is to unfold those relationships so as to magnify God and his grace. For example, man is dead in trespasses and sins, and he must be made alive in order to hear the call. God must make man alive, and making him alive God must call man; so the logical order is regeneration and calling. He is the God who calls the things that are not as though they were and who raises the dead. Without faith no man can repent or be justified; so the logical order is faith, conversion, justification. God works faith, God converts, God justifies. Without being freed from the guilt of sin, no one has the right to be freed from the bondage and pollution of sin; so the order is justification and sanctification, and the mercy and justice of God is magnified. There is an internal beauty and harmony in the whole work of salvation that reveals the glory of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

When theologians and ministers make it their business to use the order of salvation to explain how man must do this in order to get that or that God makes man active in order that man can then receive something from God, that is a base and nefarious corruption of the order of salvation.

Bavinck also pointed out the necessity of defining our terms dogmatically versus simply transferring scriptural terms into our discussions. I would add that this holds sometimes for the creeds too. Sometimes, the creeds use

the word *regeneration* to refer to what we call conversion or sanctification, for example in Belgic Confession 24. So Bavinck said,

Regeneration, faith, conversion, renewal, and so on, after all, here frequently do not denote consecutive components on the road of salvation but sum up in a single word the whole transformation that takes place in humans. (589)

And quoting W. Schmidt, Bavinck wrote,

Its [scripture's] expressions are, so to speak, collective concepts, which do not denote either the individual states, levels, degrees, or phases of development, but the completed fact itself. (589)

In other words, when scripture, for example, uses the word *regeneration*, it does not necessarily mean what dogmatics calls regeneration, but scripture sometimes uses the word *regeneration* as a one-word summary of the whole of salvation. Or if the text is focusing on faith, as far as scripture is concerned, when God bestows faith that man is saved from hell and death and is delivered into heaven. And the same can be said for the other benefits of salvation, for example the calling. Being called, a man is saved. He is saved completely in that calling, and that calling is really a one-word summary of his whole salvation. So 1 Peter 2:9 says, "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

Bavinck continued,

It is the calling of the dogmatician to proclaim the full counsel of God and to disclose all the benefits that are included in the one splendid work of salvation...their duty is not to repeat Scripture literally word for word but to discover the ideas that are concealed in the words of Scripture and to explicate the relationships between them. (590)

The point of the order of salvation then is twofold. First, it is to disclose all the benefits in the work of salvation. Second, it is to explain the relationships among the various benefits. In the order of salvation, there is distinguishing that takes place within the whole work of salvation, wherein each benefit is examined, and there is an exploration of the relationships among these various benefits.

The order is not temporal at all. Whatever happens in time, whatever the temporal order of the experience of salvation may be, that is not the business of the order of salvation. It is concerned with the benefits as such and

with the relationships of those benefits to the others; and in all of those explanations, both of the benefits and of the relationships, the order is concerned to show the glory of God and Jesus Christ his Son.

Non-Negotiable

In discussing the order of salvation, there are a number of inflexible propositions.

First, it is a God-glorifying order. It is properly theological. It teaches from beginning to end and at every point in between that salvation is of the Lord and through the Lord and to the Lord, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Second, the source of all salvation treated in the order of salvation is election. What is given in the order of salvation was decreed for and given to the elect in eternity in God's counsel. In eternity the elect are saved. So in the order of salvation we are not studying what man does to be saved but what God gave to his elect in eternity.

Third, the benefits are completely and solely acquired by Christ. All that is applied to the elect was acquired first by Christ at his cross. There is nothing that is given that was not first acquired. For example, Christ acquired for his elect the right to believe, the will to believe, and the believing itself. The salvation that is applied was merited for the elect wholly at the cross. At the cross the elect were saved without any activity of theirs. In the order we study what is perfect in Christ and what from him is applied to his elect without their works or activities, but with all works or activities being fruits of that application. The activity is to be connected backward with the gift of salvation, of which the activity is the fruit, and not to be connected forward as a condition or a prerequisite or the means unto the benefit that is discussed afterward.

Fourth, the worker of salvation is the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit of Christ saves in unfolding God's decrees and in applying unto the elect the benefits of Christ's cross. We might say that the personal agent in the application of salvation is the Spirit of Jesus.

It is wicked in the study of the order of salvation to make that order about what man does and which by doing man brings about the next installment of salvation. The study of the order of salvation is in a very real way a special study of the work of the Spirit of Christ. He may not be dishonored in his work of salvation, as though his role were to make man active so that man can receive the next benefit of salvation. The Spirit of Christ regenerates, he calls, he converts, he works faith, he justifies, he sanctifies, and he glorifies.

Fifth, the beginning of this order is union with Christ and inclusion in the covenant of grace. That union with Christ is before all. The elect are joined with him and are bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. In that union the whole Christ is theirs; and in the order of salvation, we are explaining what becomes theirs in Christ with that union.

Sixth, the order is strictly logical. It is as strictly logical as the order of God's decrees. Time is not a consideration. We speak in the ordering of the decrees of first, second, and third, and time is strictly excluded. Likewise, there is no time in the order of salvation at all. The moment the elect are united to Christ they participate in all of his salvation. The order of salvation is to explain that salvation. The logic of the order is the logic of Romans 11:36: "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen."

—NJL

LETTER: NATURAL LIGHT

As a waiting member of Reformed Believers Publishing and a contributor to the magazine (re: Langerak's response to his isolation and separation theology) I want to write in response to Mouw's comments on John Calvin and Vadsquez's comments concerning Christian counseling. My comments surround truth being found in all men. Mouw is correct when he makes this assertion. The Canons of Dordt state that man has natural light in himself whereby he can tell the difference between good and evil, have some knowledge of God, virtue, natural things, good order, etc (3rd & 4th Head, article 4). The truth found in all men

is not saving in nature. But how can we deny this truth? No one is saying that we do not use our Reformed antenna when we receive Christian counseling, let alone every word that comes out of the mouth of man. It is a dreadful error to deny the truth of natural light in all men for it stunts Christian growth and hinders activity in the world (mainly Christian witness).

Thank you for taking your time listen. My hope is that these comments will be a helpful contribution to the Sword and Shield.

Henry Jonathan Hoekstra

REPLY

It must not be forgotten that there are two sides represented in article 4 of the third and fourth heads of doctrine. Just as the decision of the Christian Reformed synod in 1924 declared this article to be a ground for the teaching of common grace, Dr. Mouw does the same. Both emphasize the first part of the article as that ground, but both also overlook the second part to great peril.

I can appreciate that in your letter you omit the term *common grace*. I am relieved of the duty to engage on the matter of terminology. But I do not see your letter any more convincing for its omission.

I wish, however, that I had a little more to go on from your words “The truth found in all men is not saving in nature.” What do you mean? What does Dr. Mouw mean? Is “the truth” what remains of the knowledge of God, etc., in fallen man—the first part of the article? Or is it what man does with that knowledge—the second part of the article? A man observes that the star he views is so many light-years away from earth. He speaks of the earth therefore as being at least that many years old, the light requiring that amount of time to traverse the distance from that star to his eyes. Is the distance true? Does the truth of the distance make the period of time true? Is the truth comparative? Is the truth of God’s word to be compared with anything that proceeds from man’s mouth? Are both worthy of our trust? Do we have two authorities by means of this statement—“truth that is not saving in nature”—the Bible and man?

Yes, how many agree with you when you point out this article of the Canons as a ground for your assertion about the thoughts of men. But there is one insurmountable obstacle that all of these people ignore. That obstacle is the second part of the article. That second part, not to mention the fact that the whole article is contained under the third and fourth heads of doctrine, is not about how good man is and how man has truth that is not saving. The article is about how *bad* man is. It is about the *total depravity* of man, the *T* of TULIP.

The second part of the article says more about the “glimmerings of natural light” than that they are “not saving in nature.” The second part draws a comparison from lesser to greater with its coordinating conjunctive phrase “so far...from.” With this phrase the Synod of Dordt did two things. The first was that the synod drew a very clear distinction between “the glimmerings of natural light” as the remains “in man since the fall” and man’s actual use of those glimmerings. Your brief letter does not reckon with that distinction and simply speaks

about “truth found in all men.” To make this distinction clear by exaggeration, the blind man can stand in the light of the noonday sun; but for all his ability and purposes, he might as well be enveloped in the greatest darkness; it makes no difference. The point of the Canons is not to praise man but to declare his depravity. The point is not “the glimmerings of natural light” but what man does with them.

One additional thing the synod did with this comparative phrase was to move the point from bad to worse. To express the structure of Canons 3–4.4 a little differently: It is bad enough that this light of nature is insufficient to bring man to a saving knowledge of God and to true conversion; even worse, man is incapable of using the light of nature aright even in things natural and civil. Even then, the worst news of all is told last. The synod first gave a reminder of the objective nature of the “glimmerings of natural light” with the phrase “such as it is.” Then the news: “Man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it [this light] in unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 167).

Far better it is to appropriate the various things you mention under the Reformed creedal term *the providence of God*. How much more blessed it is to receive all things not from men but from our heavenly Father, in and for the sake of Jesus Christ and in and for the sake of particular grace in him! How much better to know that with Christ all things are ours and that in the light of his cross all things must be for us and nothing against us (1 Cor. 3:21–22; Rom. 8:37). Vastly superior it is to know that God is a God of means and that his means also comprehend the productions of men, both the righteous and the wicked.

The providence of God is also a powerful protection from an erroneous need to judge. Who is reprobate? Who is elect? Whose word can I trust? Can I trust a doctor without knowing whether he is elect or reprobate? Can I buy from a store or shop whose owner I don’t even know? Whose thoughts are right, saving, or non-saving? Is there truth found in all men, or is there truth found on the lips of all men?

How the child of God must heed the judgment of the truth of God’s word: “Yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged” (Rom. 3:4).

—MVW



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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence,
and the violent take it by force. — Matthew 11:12*

The violent! They are the opposite of the men who are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to their fellows, “We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.” Those children are the men of “this generation” (vv. 16–17).

Those men were perverse! Over against the kingdom of heaven, they always had an excuse why they would not enter. Were they not present even when the law and the prophets painted beautiful images on the door of the kingdom of heaven, which was closed during their time?

Then John the Baptist came. He preached that the kingdom of heaven was near at hand. The door of the kingdom was ready to be opened. In John’s appearance and preaching he called to the children of his generation to go out of the world. But John irritated them, and they went and stood before him and played the flute and said, “John, you must dance!”

But John remained in the desert and said, “I cannot dance. I am not the bridegroom. I am a Nazarite.”

And they said that John had a devil. And they went not into the kingdom.

Then the bridegroom came! He ate, and he drank. He was not a Nazarite. He had overcome the world. He stood in the midst of death and said, “I am the resurrection and the life!” He did not mourn, but he danced. He came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance! He had no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Over the sinner he rejoiced.

But the Lord irritated the Jews, and they stood before him singing lamentations and said, “Jesus, you must weep.”

But Christ said, “I cannot weep. I am the bridegroom. The kingdom of God has come.”

And they said, “Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.” And they went not into the kingdom.

Such men had no spiritual power to enter into the kingdom of heaven. They were lovers of this world. It makes no difference how you preach the kingdom, whether you weep as the Nazarite or whether you rejoice, standing in the liberty of victory; these people never go into the kingdom. John wept, and the people said, “If you do not dance, you have a devil.” And Jesus danced, and the people said, “If you do not weep, you are a devil!” But they went not in.

The violent are the true seed of Israel, who had long looked for the fulfillment of the promise. They stood in the old dispensation at the door of the kingdom. On the door of the kingdom, the law and the prophets had painted many pictures of what lay behind that door. John came, and the door stood ajar. It was but a moment then—the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, the Pentecost Spirit—and the door would be flung open. The violent were men of faith and hope who could wait no longer. They rushed in by force. There were many obstacles: their own flesh, the devil, the wicked and apostate church, and the rejection of the kingdom by the multitude. There was the slander and ridicule that they must share with the king of the kingdom. And with violence they rushed the door of the kingdom. They put their feet in the door. They said, “If the door opens completely, we will certainly go in.” Such they were. Such they are always.

What a contrast! The perversity of the men of this generation with their many excuses for never entering the kingdom over against the violent ones who storm the kingdom of God!

—NJL