



# SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Repentance and Remission

*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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Editor-in-chief  
Rev. Andrew W. Lanning

Contributing editors  
Rev. Nathan J. Langerak  
Rev. Martin VanderWal

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Signed letters and submissions of general interest may be sent to the editor-in-chief at [lanning.andy@gmail.com](mailto:lanning.andy@gmail.com) or

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Byron Center, MI 49315

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Reformed Believers Publishing  
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The doctrine in this special edition of *Sword and Shield* is the heart of the gospel: justification by faith alone. That doctrine is taken up on these pages in the relationship between repentance and remission of sins. Once again, this special issue is occasioned by the writings of Prof. David J. Engelsma, who is professor emeritus of dogmatics and Old Testament studies at the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Several people have reported that Professor Engelsma's latest writings are being passed around as the definitive explanation of the relationship between repentance and remission of sins. It is also being reported that Professor Engelsma's latest writings make the issue of repentance and forgiveness so clear.

However, the editors of *Sword and Shield* have not found his latest writings to be clear at all but to be full of error and confusion. We thought it worthwhile to address the doctrines of repentance and remission of sins, at least for our own benefit and understanding and hopefully for the benefit of the readers as well.

We have also heard that the same people who find Professor Engelsma's writings to be so helpful are also discouraging everyone from reading *Sword and Shield* or other sources that are friendly to the Reformed Protestant Churches. This strikes me as very odd, although not entirely unexpected at this point. Weren't these the same people in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) who constantly accused the Reformed Protestant Churches of following a man? But now when the doctrine of justification by faith alone is being subverted, the members of the PRC are told that they should only read one man?

This mentality is not unexpected because the Protestant Reformed denomination is very quickly adopting more and more of the characteristics of Rome. The PRC's compromise of justification by faith alone is the heart of it, so it is no wonder that the members also now have a list of officially approved reading material and a list of forbidden reading material.

Contrary to the PRC's prohibition against reading *Sword and Shield*, the editors of *Sword and Shield*, the board of Reformed Believers Publishing (RBP), and the association of RBP encourage the readers to read as widely as possible in this controversy and to discern the truth from the lie. In fact, this issue of *Sword and Shield* will print for your easy reference the two documents of Professor Engelsma in question.

The first document is Professor Engelsma's approved transcript of his Reformed doctrines class in January 2022. This transcript was edited by Professor Engelsma and distributed to the email list of the Reformed doctrines class per Professor Engelsma's instructions, from whence it was distributed far and wide.

The second document is Professor Engelsma's privately published paper, *Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*. In this document the professor takes issue with an article that the undersigned wrote in the February 15, 2022, issue of *Sword and Shield*. For the sake of easy reference, both the reply article and the letter that occasioned the article are reprinted in this special edition.

Finally, each of the editors of *Sword and Shield* contributes an analysis of Professor Engelsma's doctrine and the PRC.

This special edition can be considered as part one. We plan to continue our analysis of Professor Engelsma and the Protestant Reformed Churches in the regular April edition of *Sword and Shield*. In light of the fact that this issue already has an abundance of material, we thought it best to hold some of it until the next issue. Rather than run another special edition in April, we will include that material in the regular April issue. All of this, the Lord willing.

There is nothing more important than the truth of justification by faith alone.

What Professor Engelsma and the Protestant Reformed Churches have done to this doctrine is stunning.

Let the readers discern the truth and damn the lie.

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

—AL

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# *Copy of the Lecture on “Antinomism” Given to my Reformed Doctrines Class on January 26, 2022*

by David J. Engelsma

## **Answer to Submitted Question Occasioned by the Previous Class**

### **Question (by a member of the class)**

In light of your instruction concerning antinomianism, justification, and sanctification, how are we to understand passages in the Bible that clearly teach that *if* I do something then God will do something. *Are these not demands with conditions?*

Following are a few passages teaching “if then.”

2 Chronicles 7:14: “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”

Matthew 6:14, 15: “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

John 11:40: “Jesus saith unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?”

Exodus 19:5: “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine.”

### **Answer**

Allow me to add one more such text to the list. I add it because my explanation of this text occasioned the new church, the Reformed Protestant Church, to devote almost an entire issue of its paper, *Sword & Shield*, to an attack on me as a Pelagian, semi-Pelagian, Arminian free willist, and federal visionist. At this point the editors ran out of epithets, which put an end, no doubt to their dismay, to their name-calling.

The text is James 4:8: “Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.”

My explanation of this text will at the same time explain, or at least give the sense of, the passages with which my questioner confronts me. First, it is clear as the sun in

the heavens that the text teaches an activity of ours in the sphere of salvation, namely, drawing nigh to God, that precedes God’s activity in some sense of drawing nigh to us: “he will [thus and then; note the future tense: ‘will’—DJE] draw nigh to you.” One who cannot or will not notice that the text plainly teaches a certain activity of ours that precedes an activity of God is disqualified as a teacher of the Word of God, and a teacher at all, so plain, so explicit is the text: “draw nigh to God [in the present], and he will [in the future] draw nigh to you.”

For being faithful to the statement of James, “draw nigh...and he will draw nigh,” I became the object of the condemnation of the editors of the new magazine, who overlooked that their condemnation in fact fell upon James, who teaches “draw nigh...and he will draw nigh,” and upon the Holy Ghost, who inspired “draw nigh...and he will draw nigh.” As for me, I would be fearful of calling a writer of Scripture and the Holy Ghost Pelagians, Arminians, and federal visionists. It is one thing to amuse oneself, and one’s readers, by calling Protestant Reformed ministers names; it is another thing to contend with James and the Holy Ghost.

To do justice to James 4:8 by affirming that the text teaches that there is a certain aspect of salvation in which our activity precedes a certain aspect of God’s activity of saving us does not imply that James teaches that the believing sinner is first in salvation and that God is second, as my critics so eagerly and typically rashly charge against James and me. For the truth of the text is that we draw nigh to God by virtue of God’s drawing us nigh to Himself. The full truth of the text is, “I will draw you nigh to myself by the Holy Ghost, so that in the way of your drawing nigh to me, I will draw nigh to you.” God is first in this aspect of salvation also. He draws us to Himself, *and He draws us nigh to Himself by the admonition of James 4, “Draw nigh to God!” By the admonition that so offends my critics!*

My critics in the new church are scared to death of admonitions, as though admonitions imply some dependency of God upon the one to whom He gives the admonitions.

This is their doctrinal weakness. And it will destroy them and their churches. They fail to take note that God uses admonitions to safeguard His children from evil and to draw them back to Himself. For all their proud clamor that they, and they alone, remain faithful to the Canons of Dordt, they are ignorant of Canons, 3/4.17: “Be it far from either instructors or instructed to presume to tempt God in the church by separating what He of His good pleasure hath most intimately joined together. *For grace is conferred by means of admonitions*; and the more readily we perform our duty, the more eminent usually is this blessing of God working in us,” etc. [emphasis added—DJE].

God draws us to Himself by sovereign grace, so that we heed His admonition and draw nigh to Him in lively faith and repentance. Thus and then, He draws nigh to us in our experience of the intimacy of the covenant.

I observe in passing that although my critics were fierce in their condemnation of my explanation of James 4:8, they offered no explanation of the text themselves.

I explain the sense of the entire list of “if then” texts that my questioner presents to me by a brief explanation of another of the passages, Matthew 6:14, 15. God not only wills to forgive our debts to Him, but He also wills that we forgive each other. Therefore He instructs us that He “will” {note well the future tense—DJE} forgive us *when we forgive each other and in the way of our forgiving each other*. He warns us that if we refuse to forgive each other, neither will He forgive us. I suppose that if I explain Jesus’ word about forgiveness, as I do, as meaning that there is a sense in the sphere of salvation in which our forgiving each other is first and in which God’s forgiving us follows, my critics, forgetting that they are criticizing Jesus Himself, will accuse me of putting man first in salvation. They will then exalt themselves as always putting God first, also in Matthew 6, as though I do not.

What they ignore and want their audience to overlook is that the text itself teaches that our forgiveness in the text is first and that God’s forgiveness follows [“your heavenly Father *will* also forgive you,” that is, after you forgive—DJE]. Their criticism, therefore, falls upon Jesus Himself for “putting man first in salvation.” My warm, brotherly advice to them is, “Be careful! Be careful not to criticize Jesus and not to be more orthodox than Jesus!”

But Jesus’ teaching and my explanation do not put man first in this aspect of salvation. For the truth is that we forgive our brother because God works in us the willing and doing of forgiving each other (cf. Philippians 2:12, 13). God wills to save us in such a way that we actively love and serve Him. He does not will to drag us to heaven like a piece of dead meat. So He makes us willing and active in living the Christian life that pleases Him. He works in us

the willingness to forgive our fellow saints. He does this by means of the exhortation and admonition of Matthew 6. Only in the way of our actively forgiving each other do we experience the forgiveness of our sins by God. And the experience of forgiveness is the forgiveness of the passage.

Matthew 6 does not put man first in the aspect of salvation it refers to. It keeps God first. God works in us naturally unforgiving sinners so that we forgive each other. In this way, we experience God’s forgiveness of sins. And God works the willingness to forgive by the admonition of Matthew 6, something that my critics are fearful of and opposed to, regardless of all the admonitions in the Bible and regardless of the Reformed instruction of Canons, 3/4.17. Whatever may be their motive, they twist the Scriptures to suit their arbitrary theology, rather than to allow Scripture to form their theology. And I get the distinct impression that their unholy motive in this is that they may crow that they are more orthodox than anyone else: “We are the people, and the truth will die with us; you are required to agree with our arbitrary theology and then bound to join our schismatic church.”

I continue my explanation of Matthew 6, by applying the passage. When you wives make up your mind (usually with good reason) not to forgive your husbands for their latest sin against you, God brings Matthew 6 to your minds, so that you do forgive, and thus preserve your marriages. He is first in the matter of your forgiving, and you are dependent upon Him and His mighty grace, which He exercises by means of the admonition of Matthew 6. Do not, in an unhealthy fear, ignore or criticize the admonition of Matthew 6, as do the theologians of the Reformed Protestant Churches, but heed it and obey it.

With these detailed explanations of some of the texts that one of you has put to me, I consider that I have at least in general explained them all. I will, nevertheless, add the following comments concerning the Reformed understanding and handling of these and all similar passages in Scripture.

First, we must do justice to the teaching of these verses: a certain work of God’s salvation follows an activity of ours, and if we fail in this activity, we will not enjoy that particular work of God, but suffer painful chastisement, for example, living without the experience of the forgiveness of our sins, as is the warning of Matthew 6.

Second, all is God’s salvation, and He works—*He works*—in such a way that an activity of ours (which is God’s work in us) precedes an activity of His: our forgiving precedes His forgiving, so that if we do not forgive, neither does He forgive us. Denying this, the theologians of the Reformed Protestant Churches have a very difficult time explaining the fifth petition of the model prayer.

Third, this aspect of salvation is not conditional, because all is His work, including our forgiving each other, and the order of the work describes the way in which it pleases Him to work, that is, He moves us to forgive each other, which moving includes the admonition to forgive each other. He forgives us *in the way* of moving us to forgive each other. This expresses God's will concerning His way of saving us.

Fourth, we must do justice to all of this; we may not ignore this aspect of salvation by teaching that God will forgive us, even though we refuse to forgive. This is really the teaching of my critics, who charge me (and Jesus) with putting man first in a certain aspect of salvation, because we teach that our forgiving our brother precedes God's forgiving us. Their teaching is: God forgives you even though you do not forgive your brother.

Fifth, the texts do not teach a conditional theology, because a conditional theology makes salvation depend upon the sinner. This was the nature of the theology that the Protestant Reformed Churches rejected in 1953. It was, and is, a theology that has God graciously promising salvation to, with a will to bestow salvation upon, every baptized person. Whether this promise and will are realized, however, is said to depend upon the baptized sinner's fulfilling the "condition" of faith and obedience. The passages referred to by my questioner do not teach such a conditional salvation. Rather, they teach the way in which it pleases God to save His elect, redeemed people, and the way in which He accomplishes their salvation.

### **Antinomism (or, Antinomianism)**

We come now to the subject that brought out such a large crowd on this cold, snowy Michigan evening: antinomism, or as it is also called, antinomianism.

I confess at the outset that I have, and have throughout my entire ministry always had, a special interest in this heresy. This was not because of my seminary training. Antinomism was hardly mentioned in my seminary classes; (I corrected this weakness in my own instruction). All the emphasis was upon Arminianism, specifically in the form of a well-meant offer of the gospel. I graduated with very little knowledge of the error of antinomism. But my first charge was a congregation the members of which came out of the German Reformed tradition. That tradition was influenced by the Dutch/German theologian Herman Kohlbrugge. He was inclined to antinomism (in controversial grace, I state his weakness mildly). The doctrinal weakness of my first congregation was not Arminianism, but antinomism. I was forced to learn and deal with this corruption of the gospel. This included reading carefully Kohlbrugge's commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, the shortest section of which is the explanation of the third part of the

Catechism and the beginning of which section is the question, "what is the most thankful creature of God?" to which the answer given is "the dog." Thus, the holy life of the believer in obedience to the law is disparaged.

I read, in the original German (the two rudely bound volumes are not translated into English), the sermons of Pastor Michael Hofer, which carried on the antinomism of Kohlbrugge and which had been the staple of the persons who later became the founding members of the congregation of which I became the pastor. In these ways, I acquainted myself with the characteristic teachings of antinomism.

I considered it my calling to remain in this congregation until the theology of antinomism, and its manifestation, particularly, in the holy life of marriage, had been thoroughly rooted out of the thinking and practice of the congregation. Some colleagues unkindly wondered aloud whether I intended to remain there forever, but there was a reason in antinomism for the lengthy pastorate. God used this pastorate to make me knowledgeable of this threat to the Reformed faith and to the Reformed churches.

The name of the evil itself explains what the error is. "Anti" means "against"; "nomism" derives from the Greek word for "law": *nomos*. Antinomism is a false doctrine that in a specific way is opposed to the law of God, specifically the ten commandments of Exodus 20, which are explained and applied to the Reformed congregations in the third section of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Antinomism denies that the Christian is bound by the law of God as the guide, or rule, of his holy life. Accordingly, the church must not teach the law as binding upon the believers. For a church to do this is to compromise the gospel of salvation by grace. When the heresy develops in a church or in a minister, there is no preaching of admonitions or of commands, how the people of God ought to live. Sensing the need for admonitions concerning the Christian life, some ministers, ridiculously, inform the congregation that God *wishes* them to live in a certain way. The antinomian minister will not use the word "must" in his instruction concerning the holy life of the members of his congregation. This would compromise the gospel of grace. If he is compelled to recognize the word "must" in Question 86 of the Heidelberg Catechism, "why *must* we still do good works?" his explanation is that we will necessarily perform good works. By the work of the Spirit in us, we cannot but perform good works. But the idea of being obligated to perform good works is anathema to the antinomian. To his way of theological thinking, the idea that God requires His people to perform good works of obedience to the law is "works-righteousness."

When antinomism has developed fully, it takes the form of the teaching that professing Christians may, and even

should, freely and grossly live in sin, the more vile the better, in order to enjoy the fullness of God's forgiving grace. This was the advanced form of antinomian doctrine, and corresponding practice, found in the church of Thyatira according to Revelation 2:20-24. The female preacher taught the congregation to commit fornication and deliberately to practise idolatry. This behavior was not "merely" the sin of worldliness, not even advanced worldliness. It had a doctrinal basis. That basis was knowing "the depths of Satan," in order thus to know the heights of forgiving grace. The theology of Pastor/Theologian Jezebel was antinomism developed to the furthest extent: "Let us sin that grace may abound."

Although Luther definitely was not an antinomian and although rightly understood his startling statement was not antinomianism, but strong response to legalism, in making the statement Luther flirted dangerously with the heresy of antinomism: "Sin bravely!"

Antinomism is the teaching that one should not be bound by the law, and even that one should violate the law deliberately, *because salvation is by grace, apart from works*. Antinomism is not merely the doctrine that the Christian may sin freely. But it is the teaching that he may do so *because of grace*.

Here is the hallmark of antinomism: grace rejects the law. The charge of the antinomian is that teaching the law as the rule of the Christian life is a form of the heresy of salvation by works, the error condemned by Galatians and repudiated by the Reformation. O, how Kohlbrugge and his disciples extolled justification by faith alone, so that salvation is by grace alone! How they warred in every sermon against every notion that good works contribute in any way to the salvation of the sinner! How they disparaged even the good works that the believer performs by the Holy Spirit of sanctification! An elder in the German Reformed Church in Nebraska out of which the members of my first congregation had been expelled for confessing what the Heidelberg Catechism teaches about prayer in Questions 116-119 had declared in his Sunday School class, "our prayers do not get any farther than the ceiling of the room in which we make them." Where antinomism reigns, there is no place for good works whatever, including prayer.

Holy Scripture warns against the heresy of antinomism. The classic passage in the Old Testament, which I preached vigorously in my first charge, is Jeremiah 7:8-16: "Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not; And come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, *We are delivered to do all these abominations?*" The prophet judges this expression of antinomism as "lying words, that cannot profit." God Himself, who is not impressed by the antinomian

theologians' rejection of giving admonitions to the church in the interests of grace, issues the sharpest of admonitions: "I will cast you out of my sight." God abominates antinomism, and antinomian teachers.

The New Testament likewise recognizes the danger of antinomian heresy to the church of the New Testament and inveighs sharply against it. Significantly, the New Testament warns against the heresy as invariably an erroneous response to the gospel of grace. Where grace is taught, Satan will threaten the gospel with the false doctrine of antinomism. Then it also is made plain that the error is grievous. Having taught justification by faith alone apart from works of obedience to the law in Romans 3, Paul asks at the end of the chapter, "Do we then make void the law through faith?" (v. 31) His response is the strongest negative in the Bible, "God forbid." Similarly, having finished his treatment of justification by faith alone, on the ground of the obedience of Christ alone, in Romans 3-5, Paul considers the antinomian response to this gospel of grace, apart from the law, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" (Romans 6:1). Obviously, already in Paul's day, antinomism was a real threat to the gospel of grace. The apostle's response to his question is again a vehement "no": "God forbid" (Romans 6:1). The same rejection of the notion that the gospel of grace implies that the law is evil is found in Romans 7:7, indeed throughout the seventh chapter of the book of Romans. And, as I already pointed out, Revelation 2 contends with antinomism as a threat to the gospel of grace already in the days of the apostle John.

Now I expose the false doctrine, with regard to its fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel's rejection of the law; in light of the rightful place of the law in the Christian life; and by the authority of the Reformed creeds. Contrary to the exclusion of the law from the gospel as though law and gospel are absolute opposites, the Bible applies the law to the Christian who is saved by grace alone. Nor is this application only that the law reveals the Christian's misery. The application is also that the law is the necessary rule of the Christian's thankful, holy life, a rule that the Christian is commanded, enabled, and empowered to obey. Romans, which teaches justification by faith alone (in chapters 3-5), goes on at once to command the justified believer to obey the law of God (in chapters 6, 7, and 12-16). In the apostle's own language, grace does not void the law, but establishes the law (Romans 3:31).

Likewise, Galatians, which is *the* book of the Bible that proclaims and defends justification by faith alone and that condemns the heresy of justification by works of obedience to the law, calls the justified believer to obey the law, expressly warning against antinomism as it does so.

Brethren, ye have been called unto liberty [the liberty of justification by faith alone—DJE]; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself (Galatians 5:13, 14).

The error regarding the law that the Bible condemns is making obedience to the law the sinner's righteousness with God and thus the basis of his salvation.

The truth about the law with regard to its place in the Christian's life is that God binds the law upon the believer, and the believer strives to keep the law, as the expression of his gratitude for God's gracious salvation of him. This place is honorable, important, and, indeed, necessary.

This is the authoritative confession concerning the law and its place in the life of the believer of the Reformed creeds. These creeds, therefore, are the blessed safeguard of Reformed churches and Christian against the dread evil of antinomism.

In Question 86, the Heidelberg Catechism declares that believers "must...do good works." The explanation of the ten commandments that immediately follows makes clear that the good works in view are deeds done in obedience to the law of God, so that, contrary to antinomism, the law is binding upon believers. The full phrasing of the question in Question 86 makes plain beyond any shadow of a doubt that the Catechism is deliberately contending with the heresy of antinomism: "since then we are delivered from our misery *merely of grace, through Christ, without any merit of ours*, why must we still do good works? [emphasis added—DJE]"

Indicating the Reformed faith's detestation of antinomism, Question 87 goes on at once to consign the full-fledged, impenitent antinomist to perdition: "no unchaste person [or any other impenitent law-breaker-DJE]...shall inherit the kingdom of God."

Emphasizing the role of the law in the life of the Christian as the rule of his holy life, the Catechism then proceeds to a detailed explanation of the ten commandments, one of the longest sections of the Catechism. According to the Catechism, in these commandments God makes known how we *must* behave towards God and what *duties* we *owe to our neighbor*. He enjoins; requires; forbids; commands; and wills to have the law strictly preached. These verbs chase Kohlbrugge, Hofer, Jezebel, and all antinomians, including fledgling antinomians, who hesitate to call church members and others to repent, believe, and obey the law, out of the Reformed community, indeed out of the camp of Christianity.

In one of the most splendid, and for the church today timely, articles in the Belgic Confession, the Confession

denies, contrary to antinomism, that "justifying faith makes men remiss in a pious and holy life." The creed insists that the believer who is saved by grace, apart from works of obedience to the law, is, nevertheless, bound to live in obedience to the law: "...the practice of those works which God has commanded in His Word." The Reformed view of the place of the law in the life of the believer is "that though we do [and are required to do—DJE] good works [in obedience to the law—DJE], we do not found our salvation upon them" (Belgic Confession, Article 24).

With all Reformed churches the Protestant Reformed Churches must be vigilant against antinomism. They must approve the preaching of obedience to the law as an aspect of holiness, which is the saving work of God. They must approve preaching that proclaims that the believer "*must*" obey the law. They must judge opposition to the preaching of the law as the authoritative rule of the Christian life as serious error, one of the two main heresies in every age that attack the gospel: Arminianism and antinomism. Augustus M. Toplady has famously written that Christ is always crucified between two thieves: Arminianism and Antinomism.

The Protestant Reformed Churches confess that Christ perfectly obeyed the law for the elect and in their stead and that He imputes this obedience to us by faith alone. They add that this is true of the saving work of justification. There is another saving work of Christ. This consists of infusing His righteousness into the elect believer, so that he actually obeys the law himself, although not yet perfectly, but only in beginning. This is Christ's saving work of sanctification, a work that does not suffer in comparison with justification. Opposition to the false doctrine of antinomism has as its purpose honoring Christ Jesus as a complete Savior. He does not only save from the penalty of sin; He saves also from the power of sin. Antinomism presents Christ as an incomplete Savior, and thus as inglorious.

If a minister loudly and persistently condemns the above doctrine and defends antinomism, he must be disciplined as a heretic.

### Peroration

There is something humbling, something discouraging, something absurd about the need in a Reformed church in AD2022 to contend with antinomism, as though the teaching of obedience to the law and the necessity of a life of good works were evil doctrines. Has it come to this, that holiness of life, the binding authority of the law of God, and the lively performance of good works are suspect in a Reformed church? Is a Reformed church ignorant, or afraid, of the truth that a life of the zealous performance of good works in obedience to the law is the purpose of God with all His salvation of us? At this stage of the history of Re-



formed Christianity, does not every Reformed Christian know that the active Christian life of obedience to the law is the very purpose—the *goal*—of God with His justification of her members? Justification by faith alone does not end in itself, but in a holy, God-glorifying life of gratitude.

Our trouble is not that we justified Christians dare to be somewhat active in a life of good works, but that we are not nearly active enough. Our sin is not that we prize a life of obedience to the law too highly, but that we do not esteem it nearly highly enough. The weakness of the Reformed pulpit is not that it calls too vigorously for the holy life, but that it comes short of doing justice to holiness as the goal of God with all the gracious salvation of sinners. “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16).

Has it truly come to this in a church that claims to be Reformed, that it confirms the charge of Rome that the gospel of grace leads to an inclination to live contrary to the law of God in all manner of sins, as though this were the implication and natural effect of grace? Shall a Reformed church lend credence to this God-dishonoring, Christ-shaming, Holy Ghost-despising theology by its

opposition to the law of God and its nervousness about obedience to this law?

Not the Protestant Reformed Churches!

As for us, our confession is that the work of grace is a “sincere joy of heart in God through Christ, and with love and delight to live according to the will [law—DJE] of God in all good works” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 90).

Thinking creedally, when the danger is that of attributing too much to the good works of believers or even of making good works the basis of justification, the Protestant Reformed Churches confess, with the Heidelberg Catechism, that “the holiest men...have only a small beginning of this obedience” [to the law of God—DJE]. When, on the other hand, the antinomians so stress the natural depravity of the believer as to deny the reality of his performance of good works, the Protestant Reformed Churches respond, with the Belgic Confession, that “these works, as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, forasmuch as they are all sanctified by His grace” (Article 24).

Between the two thieves is Christ!

## LETTER: REPENTANCE

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

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## 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.

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.

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."<sup>1</sup> 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

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.

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

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## *Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*<sup>1</sup>

by David J. Engelsma

In the February 15, 2022 issue of the magazine, *Sword and Shield* (hereafter S&S), an editor accused me of “teaching that man’s activity precedes God’s activity in salvation” because I teach that “repentance precedes remission of sins.” The charge, that one teaches that man’s activity precedes God’s activity in salvation, is, of course, damning, which is exactly what the editor unbrotherly and unkindly intended. In reality, the charge is absurd—as absurd as it would be to charge a Reformed scientist with denying the providence of God simply because he stated that the growth of plants follows the shining of the sun.

His reference was to my assertion that in a certain aspect of God’s work of salvation God works in such a way that He moves us to act in order that He may then act in the way He has determined. In that particular aspect of salvation, God works in such a way that our activity (which He accomplishes) precedes His activity. The

precise reference was to His act of the forgiving of our sins. Our repenting precedes His remission of our sins. My statement was as follows: “It pleases God...to forgive in the way of the sinner’s repenting...Neither is repentance the cause of forgiveness...[As an aspect of faith it is] the (God-worked) means. It is not the cause...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” (unpublished paper, “*Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc?*” *Non!*, or, “Don’t Kill the Rooster!”)

Everyone can see that my affirmation of repentance preceding remission is radically different from the description of this truth by the editor of S&S. My statement does not deny God’s being first in salvation. With regard to the issue at hand, repentance and forgiveness, I confessed that our repenting is the gracious work of God in us (II Timothy

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<sup>1</sup> Privately published paper by David J. Engelsma. Copies are available from <engelsma@prca.org>

2:25): God moves us to repent so that in the way of our repenting He forgives. The presentation of my statement by the editor of *S&S* leaves out that God moves the elect sinner to repent and that He does so by His efficacious call, “Repent!”

There are three possible explanations of this misrepresentation of my affirmation of the biblical doctrine that repentance precedes forgiveness, and is the way to receive forgiveness. One is that the editor is ignorant. Conceivably, one who does not apprehend the difference between my confession of the order of God’s work of salvation in “The Rooster” and his misrepresentation of it as teaching that man is first in salvation is ignorant.

But the editor of “*S&S*” is not ignorant. On the contrary, he is a bright theologian.

The second possibility is that he is lying—deliberately misrepresenting me so as to convince his adherents of the necessity of his abandoning the Protestant Reformed Churches and so as to gain more followers. This is a popular, if despicable, tactic on the part of theologians. To win their church battles, they deliberately misrepresent the doctrinal position of their adversary. This is sin, and sin of the most dishonorable sort. It is a falsifying of the truth and a blackening of the name of fellow Christians in the sphere of the church of Christ, where truth ought to rule, and with regard to the precious gospel. There, love of the brother ought to reign. And the motive for this kind of behavior is ignoble, unworthy of one who claims to be a servant of Jesus Christ: advance oneself.

I cannot believe this of the editor of *S&S*. Regardless that he has slandered me and my colleagues, with evident hatred of us, I persist in regarding him as a brother in Christ—a brother in serious error, but a brother nonetheless. I, therefore, reject this option as explanation of his misrepresentation of my explanation of the relation of repentance and forgiveness. He does not, I persist in believing, with malice aforethought misrepresent me so as to gain his own personal advantage and discredit me.

This leaves only the third option: he is honestly mistaken. Despite the efforts of myself and of the assemblies of the churches of which I am a member, he does not understand that God works this aspect of salvation in such a way that He (sovereignly) moves the elect sinner to repentance so that, following this repentance, He may forgive. This mistake is serious enough. It stands uncomprehending before the petition of the model prayer, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” To say nothing about the obvious relation between our forgiving each other and God’s forgiving us, the petition has the penitent sinner requesting forgiveness of God. The penitence that prompts the request for forgiveness precedes God’s forgiveness

of the penitent sinner. How a believing member of the church, to say nothing of a minister, can fail to see the order of God’s work of forgiving sinners is a mystery to me. But so it is, evidently.

Add to this that a minister, by virtue of his office, often calls on members of the congregation who are walking in sin. Does he not urgently call them to repent so that they may be forgiven? Does he not call them to repent in so many words? Does he not utter the promise of the gospel that everyone who repents is (then, and in this way) forgiven? And when God blesses his pastoral call, does he not witness, as it were with his own eyes, that forgiveness follows repentance? Surely he does not declare to the sinning member, “You are forgiven, now repent.”

Plain as this is to me, apparently it is not plain to the editor of the “*S&S*.” For teaching this, the PRC are false and I am a heretic, and even worse, if the epithets hurled at me mean anything. Our difference over this relation of repentance and forgiveness seems to be the main doctrinal issue between us, or, at least, very close to the heart of the main issue.

I explain, therefore, to my mistaken brother, and beloved former student, yet once again, that our believing precedes God’s justifying us and that God’s remitting our sins follows our repenting, and that this order of God’s saving us does not compromise the truth of salvation by grace alone.

God saves. God is not only first in our salvation; He is exclusive in our salvation. That is, He alone saves; He saves in the entirety of salvation. Neither do we save ourselves in any respect, nor do we cooperate in our salvation, nor does salvation depend on us. God saves, and He saves in a certain, important order of this salvation, specifically in that aspect of salvation that consists of the forgiveness of sin. He is pleased to forgive in the way of moving us to repent of our sins. Therefore, He sovereignly causes us to repent. Following our repentance, and in the way of our repenting, He forgives. This is not only a “logical order,” whatever this may be, but the order is the sinner’s experience of forgiveness. When he repents, God forgives. If he refuses to repent, God does not forgive. When David repented of his sin with Bathsheba, God forgave, and for the first time in months David experienced forgiveness (II Samuel 11). David himself tells us that he was unforgiven so long as he did not repent, in Psalm 51. As a penitent sinner, he pleads there for forgiveness, the lack of which in his impenitent condition he experienced as the breaking of his bones by God. God’s work of bringing David to repentance preceded God’s work of forgiving David’s sin. Forgiveness followed repentance.

I confess to feeling foolish in belaboring this fundamental truth of the Christian faith, especially in the

awareness that some of the Reformed churches are following the schism in the Protestant Reformed Churches and who are probably as mystified over the purported doctrinal difference as am I. This order of God's work of salvation is not an arcane mystery for learned theologians to puzzle over, but the daily confession and experience of every believer. It confronts every believer daily in the petition of the model prayer: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Leave out of consideration that forgiveness here follows the believer's activity of forgiving his neighbor: "as we forgive our debtors." The main thought of the petition is that the penitent sinner asks for forgiveness: forgiveness follows penitence; repentance precedes remission of sins.

Time and space would fail me to quote all the passages of Scripture and the creeds that teach that repentance precedes forgiveness, or, what is essentially the same truth, that believing precedes justification, and that repentance is required for forgiveness.

I continue to explain.

To deny that forgiveness follows repenting leads to the conclusion that repentance follows forgiveness, thus turning a basic biblical truth and Christian reality on its head: "be forgiven in order to repent." In fact, the implication of the theology of the editor of "S&S" is that the sinner has forgiveness without repenting. This, apparently, is now the gospel-message of the Reformed Protestant Church. That this fear is not without its basis in the writing itself of the editor of "S&S" is evident in the same "Reply" to which I have referred earlier.

Repentance is not a means unto the remission of sins...God does not forgive our sins through repentance but only through faith...*Repentance has no bearing whatsoever on [a] man's remission of sins...* Teaching that in some sense a man's activity [deliberate refusal to state the truth as "God's work of causing the sinner to repent"—DJE] of repenting precedes God's activity of remitting his sins is so deadly and wretched...(emphasis added).

An aspect of the mistake concerning repentance on the part of the editor of "S&S" (which I mention in the hope that recognition of this mistake may incline him to recant his error that repentance does not precede remission as the God-ordained and God-worked way unto the remitting of sins) is that apparently the editor does not know that the Reformed tradition follows Calvin in regarding repentance as an aspect of faith. Repentance is not a "good work" of the sinner that is a "fruit" of faith produced by the sinner, but an element of faith itself (cf. his *Institutes*, 3.3.1: "Both repentance and forgiveness of sins...are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith...Repentance...is also born of faith"). The editor makes repentance a "good work" of the sinner, which greatly aids him in his (practically fatal; that is, fatal to Christian practice) denial that repentance is the way to forgiveness.

Forgiveness without repenting is not the Reformed faith. Having established that repentance is "an evangelical grace [not a 'good work' of the sinner—DJE]," and that it definitively consists of "grief for and hatred of sins, [not the 'love of God,'" which is rather the source of repentance than the identity of it; cf. II Cor. 7:9–11—DJE] the reformed

Westminster Confession of Faith states that repentance is "of such necessity to all sinners, [so] that none may expect pardon without it" (15.1–6).

Forgiveness without repenting is not Christianity: "Forgive us [penitent believers—DJE] our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12).

My Reformed Protestant (erring) brother ought to correct his mistake of misrepresenting me with regard to the order of God's first bringing the sinner to repentance and God's work of then forgiving the sinner.

I urge him also to open his eyes to the fundamental Christian truth that God works in such a way that our repenting precedes our receiving the gift of forgiveness, so that the necessary call of the gospel is, "repent that you may be forgiven" (cf. Mark 1:15; Mark 2:17; II Cor. 7:10; Luke 13:3, 5; Luke 15:11–32).

Our believing precedes God's justifying us and...God's remitting our sins follows our repenting.

## MAN BEFORE GOD... DEVELOPED

### *Introduction*

Professor Engelsma's latest papers are being passed around by many as the definitive answer to whether man's activity precedes God's activity in the forgiveness of sins and salvation. I have read these papers several times. I have underlined many passages. I have jotted many notes in the margins and in a separate notebook. I have looked up the quotations. I have labored to grasp the arguments. After all of that, I can say that Professor Engelsma did indeed come very close to ending the controversy in the first paragraph of his paper, *Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*. There Professor Engelsma acknowledges that if my charge against his theology is correct, then it is a "damning" charge for his theology.

In the February 15, 2022 issue of the magazine, *Sword and Shield* (hereafter *S&S*), an editor accused me of "teaching that man's activity precedes God's activity in salvation" because I teach that "repentance precedes remission of sins." The charge, that one teaches that man's activity precedes God's activity in salvation, is, of course, damning, which is exactly what the editor unbrotherly and unkindly intended.

"Damning." I agree wholeheartedly. This is why *Sword and Shield* has condemned Professor Engelsma's theology in the strongest possible terms as Pelagian and Arminian. Though Professor Engelsma takes umbrage at that condemnation—as if the editors were merely hurling epithets at him and being unkind to him instead of carefully, painstakingly analyzing his doctrine and providing copious quotations to demonstrate our charges—the condemnation is right to use such strong language. The teaching that man's activity precedes God's activity in salvation ought to be damned, by Professor Engelsma's own acknowledgment.

"Damning." Yes! I wish that Professor Engelsma would take hold of that word in his own heart and repudiate his own teaching with all of his considerable force. I hate the theology that Professor Engelsma teaches these days. It stinks of hell. I mourn my professor's fall into such gross false doctrine. This false doctrine will be the one thing that he leaves to the Protestant Reformed

Churches as his legacy and as hers. All of his sermons, his books, his *Standard Bearer* editorials, and his lectures will be forgotten, or at least they will become mere historical artifacts. But the theology that he has made to live and breathe in the PRC for the rest of her generations is that man's activity of repenting of his sins precedes God's activity of forgiving man's sins. The professor has always had the theological power of ten other men. With regard to strength, he has been a mighty Samson among the judges of Israel. Even now, when he is well into his fourscore years because "strength be great," he still writes with more weight than all of his Protestant Reformed colleagues combined. While his hair is yet grown and he yet has strength, let not the mighty judge of Israel help to build the temple of Dagon in the exaltation of man, but let him pull down the temple of man, man, man—on his own head and as the last act of his ministry and of his life, if need be.

"Damning." If Professor Engelsma believed that and took hold of it, then *Sword and Shield's* controversy with him would be finished, at least on that front. But he does not believe it and does not take hold of it. Rather, the professor calls the charge absurd, as if he has not taught and does not teach that man's activity precedes God's activity in salvation. If that were all, it would not be so hard to demonstrate (again) that Professor Engelsma has indeed taught and does indeed teach that man's activity precedes God's activity in salvation.

But Professor Engelsma goes further. He develops his false doctrine. In his endless attempts to restate and reformulate and clarify and prove his false doctrine, he begins to bring out explicitly its implications. It is inevitable that development occurs in the doctrine that man's activity precedes God's activity in salvation. Principles work through. Through Professor Engelsma's latest writings, we can mark the development of the error occurring before our very eyes. So the controversy continues. For the sharpening of the truth and the comfort of God's people, the controversy continues.

### *What the Issue Is*

What I so strongly object to in Professor Engelsma's teaching is that there are aspects of man's salvation in which man's activity precedes God's activity, and that

in these aspects of man's salvation, God's activity waits upon man's activity before God's activity can follow. Over against Professor Engelsma, I maintain that salvation is of the Lord and that man's activity is always the response to God's activity and the fruit of God's activity, and never the prerequisite for God's activity or the condition for God's activity.

The question that separates us is this: Is there a vital aspect of man's salvation in which man's activity precedes God's activity, in which God's activity waits for man's activity, and in which God's activity then follows man's activity? In Engelsma's latest documents that question has to do with man's activity of repentance and God's activity of forgiveness. In the vital aspect of man's forgiveness of sins, does man's activity of repenting precede God's activity of forgiving, so that God's activity of forgiving waits for man's activity of repenting, and God's activity of forgiving then follows man's activity of repenting? Professor Engelsma says, yes. I say, no.

It is necessary to state again the issue between us because Professor Engelsma continues to confuse and misrepresent the issue. The professor has repeatedly tried to convince everyone that the issue is about some other thing than whether man's activity precedes God's activity in salvation.

In June of 2021, Professor Engelsma tried to make the issue the call of the gospel and the real spiritual activity of God's people. He told all who would listen that I do away with the call of the gospel and that I deny the real spiritual activity of God's people. His framing of the issue this way was silly. Did he not know that I was deposed from the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) exactly for calling the Protestant Reformed Churches to repent of their false doctrine? Of course he knew this, for he himself called me into his office two days after the sermon for which I would eventually be deposed to tell me that I may never criticize my own denomination from the pulpit, even if my own denomination had fallen into false doctrine. I considered it odd at the time, and I still consider it odd now, that the one who is supposedly the champion of the call of the gospel called me into his office to tell me to stop issuing that call with regard to the false doctrine of my own denomination. I speak as a man and as an utter fool and blushing crimson to have to say it, but if there has been anyone who has issued the call of the gospel in the PRC and who has called the members of the PRC to the real spiritual activity

of repenting and turning and being converted and believing, it was I. Professor Engelsma completely confused the issue by framing it as though it were my inability or refusal to utter the call of the gospel.

Next, in a lecture in January of 2022, Professor Engelsma tried to make the issue antinomianism. In the published version of his lecture, he contended against the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC). In his lecture he accused the RPC of being opposed to God's law, being nervous about obedience to God's law, denying the obligation to perform good works according to God's law, and rejecting God's law in the name of God's grace.

Professor Engelsma's framing of the issue as antinomianism was deceitful. It was deceitful because Professor

Engelsma never demonstrated the supposed antinomianism of the Reformed Protestant Churches. He defined antinomianism. He condemned antinomianism. He nearly sang an epic ballad of his own heroic battles against antinomianism. And he lamented that at the late date of AD 2022 the PRC had to do battle against antinomianism in a Reformed church. In all of this, Professor Engelsma never showed that the

Reformed Protestant denomination is actually guilty of the miserable heresy of antinomianism. He left it as a foregone conclusion. He left it as common knowledge. No proof necessary!

And it is a good thing for Professor Engelsma and his churches that no proof is necessary for them to believe that the Reformed Protestant denomination is antinomian, because no proof can be found. The Reformed Protestant Churches love the law, preach the law, sing the law, and obey the law. We just don't want to be saved by the law. We don't want to be saved by the "Thou shalt" and the imperatives in the Bible. We want to be saved by the "It is finished" and the indicatives in the Bible.

When Professor Engelsma and his sympathetic audience gathered on that snowy evening for his antinomianism lecture, they could all nod their heads and waggle their eyebrows and nudge their elbows knowingly at each other, happily shivering with the certainty that lurking just outside the warm and holy glow of the PRC were those wicked, law-hating, antinomian RPs.

Now Professor Engelsma tries to make the issue that God himself works man's repentance. He tells his readers

Professor Engelsma goes further. He develops his false doctrine. In his endless attempts to restate and reformulate and clarify and prove his false doctrine, he begins to bring out explicitly its implications.



that *Sword and Shield* has misrepresented his position because when *Sword and Shield* accused him of teaching that man's activity precedes God's activity in salvation, *Sword and Shield* left out the fact that Professor Engelsma teaches that God moves the sinner to repent.

Everyone can see that my affirmation of repentance preceding remission is radically different from the description of this truth by the editor of *S&S*. My statement does not deny God's being first in salvation. With regard to the issue at hand, repentance and forgiveness, I confessed that our repenting is the gracious work of God in us (II Timothy 2:25): God moves us to repent so that in the way of our repenting He forgives. The presentation of my statement by the editor of *S&S* leaves out that God moves the elect sinner to repent and that He does so by His efficacious call, "Repent!" (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

Professor Engelsma is mistaken that *Sword and Shield* has left out the fact that he teaches that God moves the sinner to repent, to draw nigh to God, or to do any of the sinner's other activity. *Sword and Shield* has acknowledged that Professor Engelsma teaches that God moves the sinner to the sinner's activity. Interested readers can see this for themselves in volume 2, number 5 (August 15, 2021), page 29, first column, last paragraph.

But Professor Engelsma's complaint that we left something out is a distraction from the real issue between him and *Sword and Shield*. The issue is not whether the sinner's repenting is the gracious work of God. Everyone agrees that God moves a sinner to repent. Rather, the issue is whether God's activity of forgiving the sinner's sin waits upon the sinner's activity of repenting. For that question it makes no difference whether one confesses that the sinner's activity of repenting is from God. The question is not about where the sinner's activity has come from. The question is whether the activity of God in forgiving the sinner's sin waits upon the sinner's activity of repenting. It is conditional theology to teach that man's activity precedes God's activity in such a way that God's activity waits upon man's activity. That is conditional theology, whether one teaches that man's activity is from himself or that man's activity is from God.

All of the other things, then, that Professor Engelsma keeps writing about and speaking about are not the issue. This is the issue between us: Does God's activity of forgiving the sinner's sin wait upon the sinner's activity of repenting of his sin?

This is quite an issue. It is nothing less than the doctrine of justification. Does God's activity of justifying the sinner wait upon the sinner's activity of repenting?

## *Is the Charge Absurd?*

Professor Engelsma says that my charge against him is absurd.

What is my charge against him? This: Professor Engelsma teaches that man's activity precedes God's activity in salvation. This is how Professor Engelsma understands my charge, and this is also how I understand my charge. Never mind for the moment that my charge actually goes further than Professor Engelsma has stated it. I also charge that Professor Engelsma's doctrine is the doctrine of prerequisites. I charge that his doctrine is the doctrine of conditional justification and conditional salvation. I charge that his doctrine denies justification by faith alone and teaches justification by the works of man. I charge that his doctrine of repentance and the remission of sins is not Reformed at all but Arminian and Pelagian. I warn the men who truly believe and practice Professor Engelsma's doctrine of justification as he teaches it in the year 2022 that they will go to hell and perish everlastingly. But leave all of that aside for the moment. Let us deal with my charge as Professor Engelsma states it.

In the February 15, 2022 issue of the magazine, *Sword and Shield* (hereafter *S&S*), an editor accused me of "teaching that man's activity precedes God's activity in salvation" because I teach that "repentance precedes remission of sins." (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

About my accusation Professor Engelsma says, "In reality, the charge is absurd" (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*). The professor maintains that I have misrepresented him, and he offers three possible explanations for my supposed misrepresentation. He rejects the first two explanations and stands on the third.

There are three possible explanations of this misrepresentation of my affirmation of the biblical doctrine that repentance precedes forgiveness, and is the way to receive forgiveness. One is that the editor is ignorant...

The second possibility is that he is lying—deliberately misrepresenting me so as to convince his adherents of the necessity of his abandoning the Protestant Reformed Churches and so as to gain more followers...

This leaves only the third option: he is honestly mistaken. Despite the efforts of myself and of the assemblies of the churches of which I am a member, he does not understand that God works this aspect of salvation in such a way that He (sovereignly) moves the elect sinner to repentance so

that, following this repentance, He may forgive.  
(*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

Well then, is my charge against Professor Engelsma absurd or not? Have I misrepresented him, or have I faithfully and accurately represented him? Is it true or isn't it that Professor Engelsma teaches that man's activity precedes God's activity in salvation?

My charge is simple to demonstrate (again). Here follow quotations from Professor Engelsma's own writings from June of 2021. These quotations are from his letters dealing with my sermon on Malachi 3:7, preached within the last year, and his own sermon on James 4:8, preached many years ago. The underlining is mine.<sup>1</sup>

We do draw nigh to God; God calls us seriously to do so; and there is a sense, a certain, specific sense, in which our drawing nigh precedes God's drawing nigh to us. To deny this is to contradict the inspired Word of God. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum, June 14, 2021)

A member of the church, who considered himself the most orthodox member of the congregation and probably of the denomination, if not of the catholic church of all time, objected to my sermon because I did justice to the obvious truth that there is a sense—one, specific and very important sense—in which our drawing nigh to God, in the language of the text, precedes God's drawing nigh to us and in which sermon I vehemently exhorted the congregation, including the ultra-orthodox member, to draw nigh to God. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 16, 2021)

Even one who is “mentally challenged” can understand James to be teaching that it is our solemn, serious calling to draw nigh to God; that in a certain sense our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us; and that it is not Christian orthodoxy to deny our serious calling or that in a certain sense our drawing nigh to God precedes His drawing nigh to us. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 16, 2021)

First, to repeat, there is a vitally important sense in which, in our salvation, our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us... Second, this sense has to do with our experience of salvation, which is not an unimportant aspect of our salvation. When we draw nigh to God, by faith

including faith's repentance, God draws nigh to us in our experience. We have the consciousness that God is our near-by friend and that we are close to Him, in His bosom, which is Jesus, so to say. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 16, 2021)

Let all us “idiots” look closely at James 4:8. And let us see with the eyes of faith, not blinded by a man-made scheme of ultra-orthodoxy, eyes that understand the clear teaching of God's Word, that there is an important sense in which our drawing nigh to God, by the effectual allure of the promise that in this way God will graciously draw nigh to us (than which experience nothing is more precious), precedes God's drawing nigh to us.” (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 16, 2021)

Question to AL: does he deny that God draws nigh to us in the way of His drawing us nigh to Himself, so that our drawing nigh to Him precedes our experience of His drawing nigh to [us]? (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 17, 2021)

God is always first in salvation, but with regard to the assurance of salvation He works in the order of drawing me to Himself as the way to draw nigh to me. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 17, 2021)

Otherwise even AL will have to acknowledge to his congregation that there is a sense in which our returning to God, by the effectual power of the grace of God in the call, precedes God's returning to us, who have gone astray. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 17, 2021)

Let AL and his audience ask the question of himself and of themselves in light of Malachi 3: does the passage not teach that there is a sense in which Israel's returning to God, by His efficacious call, precedes Israel's enjoyment of these blessings. This does not mean that man is first. To charge this against one who rightly explains Malachi 3 is not merely a reprehensible tactic by which one thinks to win an argument, but also the twisting of Holy Scripture by which one opposes the way of God's saving work with his people. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 17, 2021)

<sup>1</sup> The quotations can be found in *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 5 (August 15, 2021): 10–12, 23–24, 31.

Presenting my thought as man's preceding God is sheer falsehood. The truth is, as I also made plain, that our drawing nigh to God, by His effectual call, precedes God's drawing nigh to us in our experience. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 17, 2021)

Let me state this once again, more simply. In salvation as the matter of our consciousness, or experience, of God's drawing nigh to us in the assurance of His love and the sweet experience of the covenant of grace, God draws us to Himself (thus He is first in the matter of experience) in such a way that we actively draw nigh to Him by a true and living faith (which faith as a spiritual activity of knowing Him in Jesus and trusting in Him), so that in the way of this our drawing nigh to Him He may draw nigh to us in the experience of His nearness in Christ. In this specific sense, our drawing nigh to Him precedes His drawing nigh to [us]. This is the plain meaning of James 4:8: "Draw nigh to me, and I will draw nigh to you." This is the plain meaning of the text as it stands in all its perfect clarity before every reader, especially before a minister of the Word. Our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum, Terry Dykstra, and Andy Lanning, June 21, 2021)

The charge is not absurd but well established. Professor Engelsma teaches emphatically and insistently that man's activity of drawing nigh to God and returning to God precedes God's activity of drawing nigh to man and returning to man. The fact that man's activity of drawing nigh and returning are the works of God is not the issue. The issue is that God's activity of drawing nigh to man and returning to man follows—and waits upon—man's activity of drawing nigh to God and returning to God.

In September of 2021, Professor Engelsma carried his line of thinking into the doctrine of justification. I very much appreciate that he did this. Now we do not have to wait a generation, or even a few years, for the evil fruits of Professor Engelsma's false doctrine to be seen. The man is a theologian to the bitter end. He did not leave it to the succeeding generation to develop his doctrine that man's activity of drawing nigh to God precedes God's activity of drawing nigh to man. Within a mere few months, Professor Engelsma himself carried his line of thought into the

doctrine of justification and the remission of sins. Again, the underlining is mine.

Justification, or forgiveness, follows faith, as the end follows the means. Faith precedes justification. Repentance precedes remission of sins. But because it pleases God to justify by means of faith (believing), and to forgive in the way of the sinner's repenting, justification is not caused by faith. Neither is repentance the cause of forgiveness. Faith is the (God-worked) means. It is not the cause...

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. Similarly, believing is the (God-given and God-worked) means unto justification; as end, justification follows faith.

Do the theologians of the RPC deny this? Do they deny that the end follows the means? Do they deny that the (God-worked) repentance of the sinner precedes forgiveness? Do they deny that an active faith precedes justification? Do they deny the teaching of James 4:8 that an important aspect of salvation has God's causing us to draw nigh to Him precede His drawing nigh to us. Is this now the rock-bottom, doctrinal validation of their separate existence? Is this in the end their "here we stand"?<sup>2</sup>

In January of 2022, Professor Engelsma continued his insistence that in some sense man's activity in salvation precedes God's activity in salvation and that in justification, in some sense man's activity of forgiving his neighbor precedes God's activity of forgiving him. The quotations are all taken from *Copy of the Lecture on "Antinomism" Given to my Reformed Doctrines Class on January 26, 2022*, by David J. Engelsma. Again, the underlining is mine. All other brackets and emphases are Professor Engelsma's.

The text is James 4:8: "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you."

My explanation of this text will at the same time explain, or at least give the sense of, the passages with which my questioner confronts me. First, it is clear as the sun in the heavens that the text teaches an activity of ours in the sphere of salvation, namely, drawing nigh to God, that precedes God's activity in some sense of drawing nigh to us: he *will* [thus and then; note the future

2 David J. Engelsma, "Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc? Non!, or, 'Don't Kill the Rooster!'" September 8, 2021; <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/post-hoc-ergo-propter-hoc-non-or-don-t-kill-the-rooster>. See also *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 8 (October 15, 2021): 8–9.

tense: ‘will’—DJE] draw nigh to you.” One who cannot or will not notice that the text plainly teaches a certain activity of ours that precedes an activity of God is disqualified as a teacher of the Word of God, and a teacher at all, so plain, so explicit is the text: “draw nigh to God [in the present], and he will [in the future] draw nigh to you.”

I suppose that if I explain Jesus’ word about forgiveness, as I do, as meaning that there is a sense in the sphere of salvation in which our forgiving each other is first and in which God’s forgiving us follows, my critics, forgetting that they are criticizing Jesus Himself, will accuse me of putting man first in salvation. They will then exalt themselves as always putting God first, also in Matthew 6, as though I do not.

What they ignore and want their audience to overlook is that the text itself teaches that our forgiveness in the text is first and that God’s forgiveness follows [“your heavenly Father *will* also forgive you,” that is, after you forgive—DJE]. Their criticism, therefore, falls upon Jesus Himself for “putting man first in salvation.” My warm, brotherly advice to them is, “Be careful! Be careful not to criticize Jesus and not to be more orthodox than Jesus!”

First, we must do justice to the teaching of these verses: a certain work of God’s salvation follows an activity of ours, and if we fail in this activity, we will not enjoy that particular work of God, but suffer painful chastisement, for example, living without the experience of the forgiveness of our sins, as is the warning of Matthew 6.

Second, all is God’s salvation, and He works—*He* works—in such a way that an activity of ours (which is God’s work in us) precedes an activity of His: our forgiving precedes His forgiving, so that if we do not forgive, neither does He forgive us. Denying this, the theologians of the Reformed Protestant Churches have a very difficult time explaining the fifth petition of the model prayer.

In February of 2022, Professor Engelsma again insisted that man’s activity of repenting precedes God’s activity of forgiving and that God’s activity of forgiving waits upon man’s activity of repenting. These quotations are taken from Professor Engelsma’s privately published paper, *Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*. Once again, the underlining is mine.

His reference was to my assertion that in a certain aspect of God’s work of salvation God works in such a way that He moves us to act in order that He may then act in the way He has determined. In that particular aspect of salvation, God works in such a way that our activity (which He accomplishes) precedes His activity. The precise reference was to His act of the forgiving of our sins. Our repenting precedes His remission of our sins. My statement was as follows: “It pleases God...to forgive in the way of the sinner’s repenting...Neither is repentance the cause of forgiveness...[As an aspect of faith it is] the (God-worked) means. It is not the cause...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.”

This leaves only the third option: he is honestly mistaken. Despite the efforts of myself and of the assemblies of the churches of which I am a member, he does not understand that God works this aspect of salvation in such a way that He (sovereignly) moves the elect sinner to repentance so that, following this repentance, He may forgive.

I explain, therefore, to my mistaken brother, and beloved former student, yet once again, that our believing precedes God’s justifying us and that God’s remitting our sins follows our repenting, and that this order of God’s saving us does not compromise the truth of salvation by grace alone.

Time and space would fail me to quote all the passages of Scripture and the creeds that teach that repentance precedes forgiveness, or, what is essentially the same truth, that believing precedes justification, and that repentance is required for forgiveness.

And now after Professor Engelsma has written all of that, month after month, with all the force and persuasion that he is able to bring to pen and paper, he finds it absurd that I would accuse him of teaching that man’s activity precedes God’s activity in salvation?

How absurd.

### *First Development: “As We Forgive Our Debtors”*

In his latest articles Professor Engelsma has developed his false doctrine. He makes explicit what was implicit in his previous formulations, and he does this in especially three areas.

First, Professor Engelsma teaches that God's forgiveness of the sinner follows—and waits for—the sinner's forgiveness of his neighbor. According to Professor Engelsma, the sinner must do the good work of loving his neighbor and forgiving his neighbor's trespasses against him *before* God will forgive the sinner his own trespasses against God.

The professor taught this in response to the question of an astute listener. Whether the listener actually believes the implication of his question, which is chilling, or whether the listener was trying to lead the professor to see his own error, the question is astute.

In light of your instruction concerning antinomianism, justification, and sanctification, how are we to understand passages in the Bible that clearly teach that *if* I do something then God will do something. *Are these not demands with conditions?* (Copy of the Lecture on "Antinomism")

The listener then listed four passages. One of these passages was Jesus' explanation of the fifth petition of the Lord's prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Jesus explained in Matthew 6:14–15, "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Astoundingly, Professor Engelsma answered his listener by insisting that the sinner's activity of forgiving is first and that God's activity of forgiving follows. Professor Engelsma insisted that the sinner's loving good work of forgiving his neighbor *precedes* God's forgiving the sinner his own sins.

I explain the sense of the entire list of "if then" texts that my questioner presents to me by a brief explanation of another of the passages, Matthew 6:14, 15. God not only wills to forgive our debts to Him, but He also wills that we forgive each other. Therefore He instructs us that He "will" {note well the future tense—DJE} forgive us *when we forgive each other and in the way of* our forgiving each other. He warns us that if we refuse to forgive each other, neither will He forgive us. I suppose that if I explain Jesus' word

It is necessary to state again the issue between us because Professor Engelsma continues to confuse the issue and to misrepresent the issue. The professor has repeatedly tried to convince everyone that the issue is about some other thing than whether man's activity precedes God's activity in salvation.

about forgiveness, as I do, as meaning that there is a sense in the sphere of salvation in which our forgiving each other is first and in which God's forgiving us follows, my critics, forgetting that they are criticizing Jesus Himself, will accuse me of putting man first in salvation. They will then exalt themselves as always putting God first, also in Matthew 6, as though I do not.

What they ignore and want their audience to overlook is that the text itself teaches that our forgiveness in the text is first and that God's forgiveness follows ["your heavenly Father *will* also forgive you," that is, after you forgive—DJE]. Their criticism, therefore, falls upon Jesus Himself for "putting man first in salvation." My warm, brotherly advice to them is, "Be careful! Be careful not to criticize Jesus and not to be more orthodox than Jesus!" (Copy of the Lecture on "Antinomism")

It makes absolutely no difference for the professor's position that he goes on to teach that God is the one who causes the sinner to forgive his neighbor. It makes

no difference that he teaches that God is the one who makes the sinner willing and active. It makes no difference that he teaches that "God works in us naturally unforgiving sinners so that we forgive each other." All of that is true. But none of that is the issue! The issue is this: Must I perform the good work (by grace, of course) of forgiving my neighbor's trespasses *before* God will forgive my trespasses? Does God's forgiveness of me *wait* for my forgiveness (by grace, beloved) of my neighbor?

Professor Engelsma's answer is so astounding because it is a naked doctrine of justification by works. It is not a disguised doctrine of justification by works. It is not a doctrine the implication of which is justification by works. It is not a doctrine that someday will lead to justification by works. Rather, Professor Engelsma's doctrine today is justification by works. It is the naked teaching that the sinner's justification is by his loving good work of forgiving his neighbor.

If anyone needs it demonstrated further that Professor Engelsma is teaching justification by works, then consider this. The forgiveness of sins is justification.

“We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of sins for Jesus Christ’s sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied” (Belgic Confession 23, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 51). On the other hand, forgiving our neighbor is a good work of love for the neighbor in obedience to the second table of the law. “What doth God require in the sixth commandment? That I lay aside all desire of revenge” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 105, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 129–30). To teach that God’s justification of us waits upon our forgiveness of the neighbor is to teach that we are justified by that work.

If anyone needs it demonstrated further that Professor Engelsma is teaching justification by works, then consider this. These are the professor’s own words, in which he teaches that our work of love precedes God’s work of forgiving us and that if we fail in our work of love, then God will also not perform his work of forgiving us.

First, we must do justice to the teaching of these verses: a certain work of God’s salvation follows an activity of ours, and if we fail in this activity, we will not enjoy that particular work of God, but suffer painful chastisement, for example, living without the experience of the forgiveness of our sins, as is the warning of Matthew 6.

Second, all is God’s salvation, and He works—*He works*—in such a way that an activity of ours (which is God’s work in us) precedes an activity of His: our forgiving precedes His forgiving, so that if we do not forgive, neither does He forgive us. Denying this, the theologians of the Reformed Protestant Churches have a very difficult time explaining the fifth petition of the model prayer. (*Copy of the Lecture on “Antinomism”*)

What then is the explanation of the fifth petition of the Lord’s prayer? And what is the explanation of Jesus’ words, “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:14–15)?

First, the explanation is that God’s forgiveness of our sins is due entirely to the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Our justification is not the reward, the result, or the consequence of what we have done. Our justification does not follow our work. Rather, our justification is God’s imputation of the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ to us. Not our love, not our obedience, not our work, not our forgiving our neighbors, and not any other work of ours explain God’s forgiveness of our sins. Only the perfect work of Christ, including his bearing our curse in our place for all our sins, explains God’s forgiveness

of our sins. And by the way, where is this work and righteousness of Christ in Professor Engelsma’s theology? In his speech and his letter, he hardly mentions the righteousness of Christ in connection with the forgiveness of our sins, but he mentions always and again man’s work as preceding the forgiveness of sins. The truth is that the forgiveness of our sins is founded upon Christ’s substitutionary atonement.

13. Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree:
14. That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Gal. 3:13–14)

Second, we are justified by faith alone. We are not justified by our forgiving our neighbor or by any other good work of the law. We are not even justified *in the way of* forgiving our neighbor or *in the way of* any other good work. Faith does not do anything or give anything or contribute anything but only receives what God has done and given and bestowed. Faith is alone in justification. Faith is passive in justification, which means that it does not work, and it *is* not work for justification. Faith’s whole power is not at all the man who believes but the object of faith, which is Jesus Christ.

10. For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.
11. But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith. (Gal. 3:10–11)

Third, God’s forgiveness of our sins is before—absolutely and entirely before—our forgiveness of our neighbor. We do not love, we do not work, we do not obey, we do not forgive our neighbor until *after* we have been forgiven. This is true from all eternity, for the Lamb has been “slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8). In God’s counsel we are righteous in Christ, long before we ever forgive any of our neighbors. This is also true in our own lives. We do not love, we do not forgive until *after* we have been forgiven. “For it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even before we do good works; otherwise they could not be good works, any more than the fruit of a tree can be good before the tree itself is good” (Belgic Confession 24, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 53–54).

Fourth, the reason that we love God, love our neighbor, do good works, and forgive our neighbor is never in

order that we may be forgiven our sins by God. The only reason that we love and obey, including the love and obedience of forgiving our neighbor, is that we have already been forgiven our sins by God. Our obedience, including the obedience of forgiving our neighbor, is the fruit of our justification and the fruit of faith.

41. There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty.
42. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?
43. Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most. And he said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged.
47. Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.
48. And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven. (Luke 7:41–43, 47–48)

Fifth, our forgiving our neighbor is a mark and evidence that we have been forgiven of God. Our forgiving is not that which precedes our being forgiven by God. Our forgiving is not that by which (or the way in which) we are forgiven by God. Rather, our forgiving is the mark, the proof, the evidence that we have already been forgiven by God.

Q. 126. Which is the fifth petition?

A. *And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*; that is, be pleased for the sake of Christ's blood, not to impute to us poor sinners our transgressions, nor that depravity which always cleaves to us; even as we feel this evidence of Thy grace in us, that it is our firm resolution from the heart to forgive our neighbor. (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 51, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 139)

Sixth, the man who refuses to forgive his neighbor shows evidence that he himself has not been forgiven. His refusal to forgive is not the reason that he is not forgiven, any more than his obedience is the reason that he is forgiven. Rather, his refusal is the mark that he himself has not been forgiven.

44. And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head.
45. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet.

46. My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment.

47. Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little. (Luke 7:44–47)

14. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you:

15. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matt. 6:14–15)

Let us call men to forgive each other their trespasses, as Jesus himself taught. Let us impress upon men the urgency of forgiving each other their trespasses as the mark and evidence of their own forgiveness, as Jesus taught. Let us warn men that if they do not forgive each other, they show evidence that they are not forgiven themselves, as Jesus taught. But let us never, never make God's forgiveness of men's sins follow upon and wait upon men's forgiveness of each other. Jesus never taught that.

Professor Engelsma's doctrine of forgiveness is not a matter of friendly debate between two denominations or between a few ministers in a magazine. It is not a friendly back-and-forth between theologians, whether they are bright or otherwise. Men who believe and practice Professor Engelsma's doctrine of justification will go to hell. Those who believe and practice this—"Our forgiving precedes His forgiving, so that if we do not forgive, neither does He forgive us"—are under the wrath of God now and forever, except they repent and believe in Jesus Christ alone. Men who believe and practice Professor Engelsma's doctrine find their justification in the law. They find their remission of sins in their loving good work of forgiving their neighbor. Those who find their righteousness in the law have no righteousness, for the only righteousness of the sinner can be his righteousness in Jesus Christ by faith.

According to the word of our Lord himself, the man who seeks his righteousness in his own righteous deeds does not go "down to his house justified," but he goes down to hell unjustified (Luke 18:14). According to the apostle, those who seek their righteousness of the law are "not justified by the works of the law" but remain unjustified, and their doctrine means "Christ is dead in vain" (Gal. 2:16, 21).

All who have followed Professor Engelsma in his latest doctrine, you are to repudiate him and to let him be accursed (Gal. 1:8–9). Though he be an apostle, though he be an angel from heaven, and though he has meant much to you and to the churches, you are to let him be

accursed. His gospel is not the gospel of justification by faith alone but the damned error out of hell that righteousness is by the works of the law.

### *Second Development: "In Order That"*

Professor Engelsma's second development of his error that man's activity of repenting precedes God's activity of forgiving is his teaching that God works man's repentance "in order that" God may then forgive man's sins. The underlining in the following quotations from *Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken* is mine.

His reference was to my assertion that in a certain aspect of God's work of salvation God works in such a way that He moves us to act in order that He may then act in the way He has determined. In that particular aspect of salvation, God works in such a way that our activity (which He accomplishes) precedes His activity. The precise reference was to His act of the forgiving of our sins. Our repenting precedes His remission of our sins.

God moves us to repent so that in the way of our repenting He forgives.

This leaves only the third option: he is honestly mistaken. Despite the efforts of myself and of the assemblies of the churches of which I am a member, he does not understand that God works this aspect of salvation in such a way that He (sovereignly) moves the elect sinner to repentance so that, following this repentance, He may forgive.

Here Professor Engelsma explains the *relationship* between repentance and forgiveness. There certainly is a relationship between repentance and forgiveness. Scripture often connects the two. "John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mark 1:4). "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:38). For the better part of the past year, Professor Engelsma has been working with this relationship between repentance and forgiveness. All of his incessant barking about the future tense of God's promises

is his recognition of this relationship between repentance and forgiveness.

Our difference over this relation of repentance and forgiveness seems to be the main doctrinal issue between us, or, at least, very close to the heart of the main issue.

I explain, therefore, to my mistaken brother, and beloved former student, yet once again, that our believing precedes God's justifying us and that God's remitting our sins follows our repenting, and that this order of God's saving us does not compromise the truth of salvation by grace alone. (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

And now, after Professor Engelsma has written all of that, month after month, with all the force and persuasion that he is able to bring to pen and paper, Professor Engelsma finds it absurd that I would accuse him of teaching that man's activity precedes God's activity in salvation? How absurd.

That there is a relationship between repentance and forgiveness is certain. But how one explains the relationship is all-important. In the explanation of that relationship is either the truth or the lie, either the gospel or the corruption and loss of the gospel.

With his "in order that" and "so that" statements, Professor Engelsma gives us his explanation of the relationship between repentance and forgiveness. The professor's explanation is that God's forgiving man waits upon man's repenting. God's forgiving man cannot proceed

until man has done his repenting. It makes no difference for the professor's theology that God is also the one who works man's repentance. The issue is not where the sinner's repenting comes from. The issue is whether God's work of forgiving the sinner waits upon the sinner's activity of repenting. In the professor's teaching, God must bring the sinner to repentance in order that God may forgive the sinner. In the professor's theology, God may not forgive the sinner until he has brought the sinner to repentance. Only after God has brought the sinner to repentance may God then proceed with his forgiveness of the sinner. "God works in such a way that He moves us to act in order that He may then act in the way He has determined" (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*). "God works this aspect of salvation in such a way that He (sovereignly) moves the elect sinner to repentance so that, following this repentance, He may forgive" (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*).

The proper term for Professor Engelsma's explanation of the relationship between repentance and forgiveness



is *prerequisite*. In the professor's theology, the sinner's repentance is the prerequisite for God's forgiving the sinner. The sinner must repent as the prerequisite for the sinner to be forgiven, and God himself may not proceed to forgiveness until the prerequisite of repentance has been met. The proper term is also *condition*. The sinner's repentance is the condition of God's forgiving the sinner. The sinner must repent as the condition for the sinner's being forgiven, and God himself may not proceed to forgiveness until the condition of repentance has been fulfilled.

Professor Engelsma will never use the terms *prerequisite* or *condition* to describe his theology, but he should. These terms are precise, and they accurately describe his explanation of the relationship between repentance and forgiveness. These terms would save the professor a world of trouble. Instead of having to tweak and rework and restate and reformulate his doctrine with every new publication, he could simply say, "The sinner's repentance, worked by God, is the God-ordained prerequisite for the sinner's forgiveness." That would be a simple, accurate statement of what he is trying to get across. The professor is already saying this anyway, minus the word *prerequisite*. Consider Professor Engelsma's statement as he made it, and then with the addition of the word *prerequisite*. Is there any theological difference whatsoever between the two?

God works this aspect of salvation in such a way that He (sovereignly) moves the elect sinner to repentance so that, following this repentance, He may forgive.

God works this aspect of salvation in such a way that He (sovereignly) moves the elect sinner to repentance so that, following this [prerequisite] repentance, He may forgive.

Professor Engelsma's doctrine this past year has been prerequisites all along. In his dogged insistence that an activity of man (worked by God, of course) precedes an activity of God in salvation, he has been teaching prerequisites. The prerequisites that were implicit in his *man before God* formulation are now made explicit in his *man before God in order that God may proceed* formulation.

If Professor Engelsma's explanation of the relationship between repentance and forgiveness is wrong, what is the correct explanation? This: repentance is the fruit of faith and the fruit of forgiveness, not the prerequisite to forgiveness. Repentance is the mark and evidence of forgiveness, not its condition. This explanation of repentance and forgiveness can be found earlier in this article, as well as earlier in this issue.

### *Third Development: "Repentance Is an Element of Faith"*

Professor Engelsma's third development of his error is that he makes repentance to be an aspect or an element of faith. The underlining is mine, but all other punctuation and brackets are Professor Engelsma's.

My statement was as follows: "It pleases God... to forgive in the way of the sinner's repenting... Neither is repentance the cause of forgiveness... [As an aspect of faith it is] the (God-worked) means. It is not the cause... 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." (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

An aspect of the mistake concerning repentance on the part of the editor of "S&S" (which I mention in the hope that recognition of this mistake may incline him to recant his error that repentance does not precede remission as the God-ordained and God-worked way unto the remitting of sins) is that apparently the editor does not know that the Reformed tradition follows Calvin in regarding repentance as an aspect of faith. Repentance is not a "good work" of the sinner that is a "fruit" of faith produced by the sinner, but an element of faith itself. (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

In Professor Engelsma's theology, repentance is faith, and faith is repentance. Repentance and faith are equivalent. Whatever distinction there may be between repentance and faith, repentance is an aspect of faith and an element of faith itself. For Professor Engelsma faith has certain elements. Presumably, knowledge is an element of faith. Presumably, assurance is an element of faith. But certainly, repentance is an element of faith. Faith is knowledge, assurance, and repentance.

In support of his doctrine that repentance is an element of faith, Professor Engelsma appeals to John Calvin. Professor Engelsma's appeal to Calvin is bizarre. It makes me wonder, as I have before, whether the professor knows what he is doing. Is the theology of the professor over the last year the work of a sound mind that truly believes that there is a vital aspect of salvation in which man's activity precedes God's activity? I hope not. I hope it is dementia. (And lest anyone think that that is an unkind hope, the alternative is that the professor is subverting the gospel with a sound mind.) But then I read Professor Engelsma's papers, in which he writes with tremendous learning and force. He is alternately able to condemn *Sword*

and *Shield* or play nice with *Sword and Shield* as suits his purpose. He appeals to the same theology that he taught in South Holland Protestant Reformed Church when he was in the prime of his ministry. So I guess that this is truly Professor Engelsma's theology. I don't know what he is reading in John Calvin, and I cannot explain why he thought Calvin supported his position, but I will leave the evaluation of that mystery to others.

Professor Engelsma mutilates John Calvin. The professor is trying to prove from Calvin that repentance is identical to faith, or an aspect of faith, or an element of faith itself. Professor Engelsma hacks Calvin to pieces and sews him back together thus:

cf. his *Institutes*, 3.3.1: "Both repentance and forgiveness of sins...are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith... Repentance...is also born of faith." (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

What is so bizarre about this quotation is that even this mutilated Calvin does not teach what the professor tries to make him teach. Calvin (even as Professor Engelsma quotes him) does not teach that repentance is an element of faith but that repentance is attained through faith. Calvin does not teach that repentance is an aspect of faith but that repentance is born of faith. What is attained through faith is not faith. What is born of faith is not faith. What am I missing?

Here is Calvin's actual doctrine of repentance, not as an element of faith but as a distinct gift from faith that is produced by faith and that follows from faith: "That repentance not only always follows from faith, but is produced by it, ought to be without controversy."<sup>3</sup>

Can true repentance exist without faith? By no means. But although they cannot be separated, they ought to be distinguished. As there is no faith without hope, and yet faith and hope are different, so repentance and faith, though constantly linked together, are only to be united, not confounded.<sup>4</sup>

The real evil in all of this is not the professor's misuse of John Calvin. Rather, the evil is that Professor Engelsma makes repentance to be the means of justification along with faith. For Professor Engelsma, justification is not by faith alone but by faith and repentance. And Professor Engelsma rightly claims this as the doctrine of the entire Protestant Reformed denomination. Quoting his previous document, he says,

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. (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

What does scripture say about the means of the remission of sins, which is justification? This: "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:28). And this: "That no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith" (Gal. 3:11).

What do the confessions say about the means of the remission of sins, which is justification? This: "How art thou righteous before God? Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 60, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 106). And this: "Therefore we justly say with Paul, that we are justified by faith alone, or by faith without works" (Belgic Confession 22, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 50).

What does Herman Hoeksema say about justification by repentance? This from his 1957 sermon on Lord's Day 24, "Justification without Works":

Do we not feel sometime, beloved, that when we repent, then that act of repentance ought to be an act of righteousness before God? So that we are justified also, at least in part, by that act of repentance? Do you not feel that way sometimes? I must confess I, I feel that way, if I'm not—if I don't watch out. Easy for me to do that. When I say I feel sorry for my sins, when I confess that I'm sorry for my sins, I think that confession makes me feel—if I do not look out—righteous. Is that possible? Is the act of repentance part of our righteousness before God? *No!* says the Heidelberg Catechism. Not at all. Not at all. As far as that is concerned, you may just as well not repent. That's the...Catechism. Just as well. I say, I want to emphasize that. I *must* emphasize that.

Here is Hoeksema, with regard to whether we are justified by repentance: "As far as that is concerned, you may just as well not repent!"

Professor Engelsma disagrees and the PRC with him. For Professor Engelsma and the PRC, the means of remission of sins is also repentance. In their theology justification is not by faith alone but by faith and by repentance. Let all take heed that those who believe and practice this theology are not justified but perish in their imperfect repenting.

3 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 3.3.1, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.v.iv.html>.

4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 3.3.5, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.v.iv.html>.

In this connection Professor Engelsma misrepresents my position on the means of justification. I maintain that faith alone is the means of justification and that repentance does not enter in whatsoever as a means of justification. The professor says that my position means that the sinner has forgiveness without repenting, as though there were no more reason to call the sinner to repent. Professor Engelsma italicizes my statement and quotes it thus: “*Repentance has no bearing whatsoever on [a] man’s remission of sins*” (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*). I stand behind my statement as the gospel truth that justification is by faith alone. I also stand behind my insistence that the sinner be called to repentance, without confounding that call as though it taught repentance as a prerequisite. I provide the full quotation as I wrote it and not as Professor Engelsma quoted it:

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.<sup>1</sup>

And I will let the reader judge whether the professor, in his quotation and interpretation of my words, was ignorant, lying, or merely mistaken.

### Conclusion

The development of Professor Engelsma’s theology was inevitable. He has done the church world a favor in developing that theology himself, though it means that we must now let him be accursed for subverting the gospel. The truth and the lie are not hard to discern, and Professor Engelsma’s continued developments make that lie stand out ever more starkly.

Let God’s people now discern the truth and contend for it.

—AL

## EDITORIAL RESPONSE

# THE PRC, THE TRUE

How could it have gone so wrong, so badly wrong? How could the situation in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) get to the point where a professor emeritus, a professor emeritus of theology, can write what he wrote and speak as he spoke?

We might expect such writing and speaking from the men who supported Rev. David Overway and his teachings from the beginning of the doctrinal controversy: Rev. K. Koole, Rev. C. Haak, Rev. R. Van Overloop, Rev. G. Eriks, Rev. J. Slopsema, et. al. We might expect such writing and speaking from the authors of the doctrinal statement that the consistory of Hope Protestant Reformed Church adopted as its response to the protest of Connie Meyer against sermons by Reverend Overway. We could not only expect such teachings, but we have also read and heard such teachings. For a while those men tempered their support by criticizing with sadness the pastor of Hope Protestant Reformed Church and admitting that he was confusing in his preaching.

However, when Synod 2018 gave its judgment that the pastor in his preaching had compromised the doctrines of grace and justification, the Protestant Reformed leaders reacted badly. They saw all their own preaching and teaching under attack by synod’s judgment. But more importantly, they saw their control of the most major assembly of the Protestant Reformed Churches slipping from their fingers. How they scrambled and strove to gain back that control! We might well congratulate them on their success.

How did they manage to pull it off?

First, they knew they had the hearts and minds of the majority—the majority of the influential people in the PRC, the ministers and elders who served on the denominational committees and who were regular delegates to synod. The leaders also had the majority of the Protestant Reformed members, who had a simple, unconditional trust in their leaders and who viewed any kind of controversy or trouble as immoral because of the discomfort

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Lanning, “Reply,” in *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 14 (February 15, 2022): 19.

it brought. This combination allowed the members to maintain trust in their leaders when they told the people that the troubles in the church were caused by radicals, officebearers and members who were causing trouble for trouble's sake. The members of the PRC continued to trust their leaders when they were further told that those troublemakers were really antinomians and hyper-Calvinists, who were making elect, regenerated children of God into stocks and blocks with their teachings.

There was, however, a problem. That problem was Prof. David J. Engelsma. Not only did he express himself very openly and publicly in opposition to the course that was being charted by the leadership, but his expressions of opposition could not be so easily written off as hyper-Calvinistic or antinomian or slandered as making men into puppets or robots. He continued to express himself sharply on the issues, demonstrating his vast capabilities and orthodoxy on the subjects of grace and church polity. While others of lesser stature in the denomination might be derided and deplored as antinomians, hyper-Calvinists, or radicals, respect for the professor emeritus made him exempt.

Up to a limit. A definite, fixed point.

Oh, this limit! Did the leadership in favor of Reverend Overway, in favor of good works unto salvation, and in favor of conditional theology know this limit? Did the leaders anticipate it? Did they plan for it?

We may never know.

But Satan knew.

In retrospect it is frighteningly obvious.

This fixed, definite limit is a sharply defined boundary. It is the point up to which there is life, security, and air to breathe. It is the point beyond which there is no life but only death, no security but only ruin, no air to breathe but only an empty void. In front of the point is the hand of God, but beyond it is Satan's hand.

That boundary is the fixed point of membership in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

However, the PRC do not apply that boundary to the leaders and members of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC). With respect to member denominations in NAPARC, the Protestant Reformed leaders consider the PRC to be at the sharp point of the wedge. That is, they consider the PRC to be at the forefront of the arrangement of true churches into degrees of faithfulness. The member denominations in NAPARC are only behind the PRC, according to this thinking. These denominations should comfort themselves that the PRC recognize them as true churches, just not as true as the Protestant Reformed denomination. These member denominations of NAPARC can be recognized and engaged with. These denominations have some

air to breathe, some security to enjoy, some measure of God's grace. They should be relieved to know that the limit of church membership as described above does not apply to them.

However, the limit does apply to those who were formerly Protestant Reformed and who have now formed the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC). They have been removed into the realm of the damned. They are under God's wrath. Officebearers are no longer to be recognized as officebearers. Members can no longer be recognized as Christians. They ran afoul of the hierarchical system. They can have no air to breathe, no security to stand, no grace to enjoy. They must suffocate and fall under the heavy weight of God's eternal wrath. Outside the PRC, they must be reprobate. That is, unless they repent and apologize to the PRC, the church that disciplined them.

To be clear, this process began when these persons were still in the PRC. When it became evident that they were not going to roll over like they were supposed to, they became targeted. First they were targeted with slander and innuendo. Then they were accused by individuals, ministers, editors of the *Standard Bearer*, church visitors, and consistories. Some had these charges brought to broader assemblies, which approved the charges. When that approval was protested to Classis East and appealed to synod, Classis East declared the protests illegal, and synod made a fine show of dealing with the appeals but ignored the appellants' true concerns.

But the true force of membership in the true church that is the PRC came into play when these individuals were no longer in the PRC. Though organized into churches and even into a denomination, and even though an organized congregation was dismissed from the Protestant Reformed denomination, all of them are under condemnation. In the Reformed Protestant Churches is God's wrath in operation. Grace within the PRC, wrath without.

Such was the point of division, not only for Professor Engelsma but also for many in the PRC. Empathy, sympathy, and especially agreement could not go beyond that point.

But empathy, sympathy, and agreement could not remain in the air as lingering sentiments. The point demands far more. The point also demands further accusations and charges. Those accusations and charges can no longer be merely schism and slander. The PRC is not a morally constituted denomination. Because it is doctrinally constituted, the former schismatics and slanderers must have new labels put on them. New trials must be held. New edicts of condemnation must be issued with a doctrinal orientation. So the Reformed

Protestant Churches must be branded as antinomian and hyper-Calvinistic. These brands must also be grounded in things said and written by members of the RPC, especially by the three ministers laboring in the fledgling denomination.

As an aside, wonder of wonders, these are the very same labels that leaders in member denominations of NAPARC have affixed to the Protestant Reformed Churches. Is it only a coincidence that these same labels are applied to the troublemakers now *outside* the PRC? Can you hear the testimony of a Protestant Reformed minister to NAPARC? “Yes, I know you thought the PRC denied man’s responsibility, conditions, the call of the gospel, etc., and that we were antinomian hyper-Calvinists. But look at what our ministers are now writing and speaking. The PRC is now rid of the radicals who had been denying these truths. The PRC no longer has those hyper-Calvinistic antinomians in the denomination, so you can now remove these labels and accept us into your club.”

Back to the point: these new labels need glue for them to stick. There is a lot of glue to be found, or, to be more accurate, glue to conjure up. The Reformed Protestant denomination rejects the necessity of good works, rejects the preaching of the law, rejects commands and calls to repent of sin and believe on Jesus Christ, rejects the reward of grace, rejects faith as active and insists that faith is only passive, and rejects that in a certain sense man’s actions precede God’s.

What brought Professor Engelsma into the label-printing and sticking business with the other leaders of the PRC? What brought him into agreement with those whom he formerly opposed? With Reverend Koole, with whom Engelsma carried on a disagreement on the pages of the *Standard Bearer*? With Reverend Overway, whose preaching Engelsma protested, standing together with such individuals as Rev. Andy Lanning and Mr. and Mrs. Neil Meyer? What brought him to such an agreement with those whom he formerly opposed, not only to declare his former comrades-in-arms antinomians but also to declare that man’s activity is first, before God’s in a certain sense?

The same question must be asked without reference to former foes or former friends. Why the *doctrinal* stance that man’s work must be first in a certain sense? Why not agree with the whole of Reformed theology, the theology

with which before he stood in complete agreement, that grace is the beginning, middle, and end of all of salvation? Why find this point of disagreement with Philippians 2:13: “It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure”? Why substitute “of his good pleasure” with the activity of man’s being first in a certain sense? Why toy with the teaching of John 1:16, of “grace for grace,” exclusive of all works, to interpose man’s activity in some sense?

Why not grace and grace alone?

Because grace and grace alone is what the RPC is teaching. Because the members of the Reformed Protestant Churches are no longer in the PRC. Because the RPC, being now separated from the PRC, simply cannot be orthodox. Since the PRC is orthodox and alone

is orthodox, the RPC cannot be orthodox. It just needs to be explained how the RPC is unorthodox.

Professor Engelsma saw where the truth of salvation by sovereign grace without works led. He saw that the truth was leading outside the PRC. He blinked, and he blinked hard.

He could not follow others who did not blink.

There were those who did not blink, those who did not fear to cross the boundary of the denomination. Members and officebearers knew their obligations to stand for the truth and to follow the truth in spite of the cost. There was to be no compromise. They certainly knew the pressure, each in his own circumstances. On the line was a comfortable place in a denomination that takes care of its own. On the line were the comfortable esteem of fellow officebearers and a network of support and care. On the line was the office of minister. On the line were emeritation and a comfortable, financed retirement for the ministers and their wives. What was there not to understand?

The blinking and subsequent judgments of Professor Engelsma and others are certainly understandable. In their comfort and peace, which they have refused to leave, they must now join together in condemning those who followed the truth. In this condemnation must be found the doctrinal reason for the entire controversy. Those ejected from the PRC and those who left voluntarily must alike share in the condemnation of the whole Reformed Protestant denomination as being antinomian. The ground of the judgment must be that these antinomians reject man’s activity being first and God’s second, albeit in a certain respect.

While others of lesser of stature in the denomination might be derided and deplored as antinomians, hyper-Calvinists, or radicals, respect for the man who is a professor emeritus made him exempt.

This condemnation itself must not be sufficient. It must also be grounded in scripture. The antinomians are antinomian because they deny James 4:8. But why stop there, as if these antinomian hyper-Calvinists have denied only one verse in all of scripture? If James 4:8 is denied, then included should be all the commandments, prohibitions, and exhortations delivered by scripture to the people of God. There should be included all the points of the three forms of unity that touch on obedience, sanctification, and good works, especially the third section of the Heidelberg Catechism, on thankfulness.

Hardly daring to go so far, lest the whole argument fall to pieces on its own absurdity, the limit of a passage here or there must be observed. But there is another reason for this limit. It must become apparent to the careful observer that all this has been done before. Numerous passages like James 4:8 have been collected before and marshaled into apparently powerful arguments. James 4:8 simply does not exist by itself, as a single verse that provides a complete bulwark against this supposed antinomianism. The consistory of Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Walker, Michigan, had its collection of verses in an attempt to answer the protest of Mrs. Connie Meyer against many sermons preached from its pulpit. The Arminians had their collection in their efforts against the doctrines taught in the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism, the standards of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. The Roman Catholic Church collected its passages from the Bible against the Reformed. The unifying theme of all those efforts was the same. All of those passages were brought together to deny the teaching that salvation is by grace alone without works.

It must be granted that Professor Engelsma is certainly not willing to go as far as Professor Cammenga in hunting antinomianism. It should also be crystal clear that the professor emeritus will not stand in complete agreement with the doctrinal statement or with the proposition entertained by Hope's consistory and by Classis East, that because Mr. Neil Meyer had objections to the preaching and teaching of Reverend Overway, he must be guilty of antinomianism. But the pathway, the method, and the abuse of scripture are nonetheless identical.

However, there is another, even more basic agreement lying at the bottom of the doctrinal unity of the leadership

of the PRC. It is the agreement that the denomination is more valuable than the truth of salvation by grace alone without works.

This agreement comes from different sources. For some, this agreement is one of sheer power. The denomination must be at the command of its leaders, moving where they want it to move, going in the direction they indicate. This gratification of power has become evident at meetings of classes and synods where the entire room of delegates shifts and moves its thoughts at the mere hints of men in leadership.

But for such men as Professor Engelsma, the above is not the source of his agreement. For him it is what he has stated and stressed so many times that it has become his specialty. It is an argument he has often repeated, two irrefutable truths that form a logical syllogism, premises

leading to an irrefutable conclusion. Major premise: one must be a member of a true church for salvation. Minor premise: the PRC is the true church. Conclusion: within the PRC is salvation; outside the PRC there is no salvation.

This syllogism must be believed and followed through. So much has it gripped the mind and heart of the professor that it has become absolute. In this grip he is not alone. This grip is

reflected in the mindset that has been operating in the PRC for years, that the Holy Spirit so guides the broader assemblies of the denomination that their deliverances are the deliverances of the Holy Spirit. This mindset was brought to the foreground especially as the recent controversy engulfed the PRC. This mindset has been featured in sermon after sermon in the PRC, in article after article in the *Standard Bearer*, in speech after speech sponsored by churches, and in officebearer conferences prior to meetings of Classis West.

The mindset dominated by the above syllogism stands in an absolute way. It is unconditional. It has come to such a point that the foundation of scripture for decisions of classes and synods is entirely wanting. As long as there is a majority vote, the decisions are settled and binding and are the work of the Holy Spirit. Though the decisions at times are so confusing as to be nonsensical, still they are the product of the Holy Spirit's guiding the church into the truth.

Yes, fundamental doctrines were and are being compromised. Yes, the heritage of the unconditional covenant has been thoughtlessly tossed out in favor of man's

What brought him to such an agreement with those whom he formerly opposed, not only to declare his former comrades-in-arms antinomians but also to declare that man's activity is first, before God's in a certain sense?

responsibility, available grace, and two tracks to heaven. But the PRC must be the true church.

This mindset is also the reason those who dig down and point out a lack of foundation in the PRC must be treated the way they have been and will be treated. It is the reason leadership in the PRC must now be united in its abhorrence of the RPC and must now find so many reasons for judging the denomination heretical. It is why the pot must call the kettle black. It is why those labeled hyper-Calvinists must now accuse others of hyper-Calvinism. It is why those labeled antinomians must now charge others with antinomianism. It is why now it has become a terrible heresy to deny that good works have any role to play in obtaining salvation.

Will the Reformed Protestant Churches receive instruction from these judgments of Professor Engelsma in particular? Coming from him they have a distinct force, distinct from the condemnatory shouts and cries of so many others in the PRC. Professor Engelsma's judgments must be incorporated into the church reformation that must take place in the ongoing development of the RPC. Paying close attention to them in particular must yield much profit for the future. When judgment is sharp and severe, those fearing God must take note and humbly receive instruction from the mouth of the Almighty!

How often scripture calls us to prove and to test! "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thess. 5:21–22). Acts 17:11 commends the Berean Jews with the words, "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." Matching these exhortations is the warning of Jeremiah in Jeremiah 7:4, "Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these."

When judgment is sharp and severe, those fearing God must take note and humbly receive instruction from the mouth of the Almighty!

In this same respect, from the lesson of Professor Engelsma in particular, we must humbly learn the wisdom of Proverbs 27:2: "Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth; a stranger, and not thine own lips."

The lesson: Say not, "The temple of the Lord." Say not, "The true church of Christ." Be the temple of the Lord. Be the true church of Christ. Let true churches be true churches. Let false churches be false churches. Let true churches be so diligent and forthright in demonstrating their marks that it need not be declared at all that they are true. If we truly subscribe to article 29 of the Belgic Confession, we ought to trust and agree with its conclusion: "These two Churches are easily known and distinguished from each other" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 64). So easily known and distinguished that there is no need to exclaim, "The true church!" or "The Holy Spirit!" The word itself will speak. The Holy Spirit will bring God's people to hear the voice of Christ, their shepherd, to follow him alone.

The lesson is also that the snare is easy to fall into. It is easy to compare, to pick and choose elements of comparison. It is easy to so explain the distinction between the true and false church that one is able to find one's own denomination "at the point of the wedge."<sup>2</sup>

However, such a comparison is not only the temptation of pride, but it is also the pathway of folly that leads to certain destruction. For it is looking in the wrong direction. It means inevitably straying from the pathway of faithfulness.

There is only one standard, the word of God. There is only one place to look, holy scripture. Only when the foundation is the word of God is the church the pillar and ground of the truth. Only then is the church true. Only then do churches and congregations, officebearers and members, freely serve their Lord and one another in the joy of their salvation.

—MVW

<sup>2</sup> See Russell Dykstra, "The Marks of the True Church Applied, or, At the Point of the Wedge," *Standard Bearer* 94, no. 20 (September 1, 2018): 461–63.

## ENGELSMAS ORDER

### *Introduction*

Prof. David Engelsma has come out with a speech on antinomianism and a letter criticizing Reverend Lanning's summary of Professor Engelsma's teaching about man's being first. I will give my impressions.

I have a complaint—and this is generally for our Protestant Reformed opponents. They cite passages of scripture against us and our doctrine in support of their own statements but do not explain these passages and how they teach what our opponents say they teach. For instance, in his letter, *Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*, Professor Engelsma writes,

I urge him [the editor of *Sword and Shield*] also to open his eyes to the fundamental Christian truth that God works in such a way that our repenting precedes our receiving the gift of forgiveness, so that the necessary call of the gospel is, “repent that you may be forgiven” (cf. Mark 1:15; Mark 2:17; II Cor. 7:10; Luke 13:3, 5; Luke 15:11–32).

Professor Engelsma cites the above passages against us and our theology, but he does not do us the courtesy of explaining how the passages condemn our theology. I do not believe that a single one of those passages teaches that the call of the gospel is “repent that you may be forgiven.”

In the *Copy of the Lecture on “Antinomism” Given to my Reformed Doctrines Class on January 26, 2022* and in *Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*, he accuses us of baseless name-calling, as if in our contentions against him and his doctrine and the doctrine of his denomination we were children arguing in a ball game about whether someone is safe at first base.

Let me assure everyone that we are not engaging in mere rhetoric or name-calling. We are doing polemics and now against him, his doctrine, and the doctrine of his denomination. In polemics it is necessary to point out error, who teaches it, its essence, and where it leads.

We believe that the doctrine the professor is now promoting brings conditions into the covenant and that at its essence the doctrine is federal vision, Arminian, and Pelagian. We believe our charges, and we stand behind them. We can prove them at even greater length and depth than we already have. We believe that this theology

has destroyed and will continue to destroy the Protestant Reformed denomination. We understand full well the seriousness of the issues involved and of our accusations against him. We remind everyone that the ministers, officebearers, and members of the Reformed Protestant Churches have lost their ecclesiastical lives for their doctrine. We are not playing. The stakes could not be higher.

Professor Engelsma admits that if what we say is true, then the charges are “damning.”

His speech regarding antinomianism is inexcusable bragging and blatant hypocrisy. He does not reckon with the corruption that afflicts the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) from top to bottom and in every area of the church. Pedophiles, rapists, liars, sexual predators, homosexuals, and more, as well as those who knowingly cover for them or turn a blind eye to their sins, occupy offices in his denomination, hold influential positions, or sit comfortably in the pews of the churches secure in the knowledge that they will never be dealt with. Besides, false doctrine is routinely preached from the pulpits of his denomination.

Does he believe the false doctrines that we have pointed out? If he does not, then he tolerates doctrinal lawlessness. If he does, then he is guilty of doctrinal lawlessness.

The Lord Jesus Christ has been beating the Protestant Reformed Churches with a stick, and the only thing it has done to them is harden them in their vanity about their orthodoxy, of which Engelsma's speech is a prime example.

Every mention of antinomianism by the Protestant Reformed clergy and seminary professors is hypocrisy. They are not champions against antinomianism, but they use the charge to attack the truth that they cannot stand or of which they are suspicious that it does, in fact, make men careless and profane.

In the letter Professor Engelsma tries to appear magnanimous and conveniently passes over his own condemnations of us. Where was such magnanimity when we were being cast out of the churches and the schools? Where was his magnanimity when we were being damned in public announcements, emails, letters, speeches, articles, and sermons? He tries to be magnanimous in the name of the PRC and as though that is how the denomination has treated us.



But I have never dealt with an angrier, a more vindictive, and a pettier people: from the Reformed Free Publishing Association, to the school boards, to the consistories, to the ministers and professors, to everyday run-ins with people. They are the antithesis of magnanimous. They show themselves to be vindictive, prickly, narrow-minded, and small-souled. I have received kinder treatment from unbelievers and long-standing antagonists against my preaching and writing than from the members of the PRC. Trying to instruct them was a thankless task as a minister, and trying to warn them of impending dangers was perilous and ultimately deadly.

In Professor Engelsma's failed attempt at being magnanimous, he is also directly and publicly contrary to the decisions of his denomination and the letters and announcements that declared us to be schismatic, rebellious, and insubordinate. His denomination and the decisions of his denomination do not allow him such magnanimity. We were suspended from office. That suspension ends in excommunication and is in principle excommunication. By our suspensions the Protestant Reformed Churches cast us out of the kingdom of heaven and delivered us to Satan for the destruction of our flesh. Professor Engelsma must reckon with that. He is all about the assemblies and their decisions, but he picks and chooses which ones he personally will follow.

I said before that one must choose whether what has transpired was reformation or schism. If Professor Engelsma says *schism* officially through his church but will not say *schismatics* about us in his writings, then he shows that he lies or does not believe the decisions of his own denomination. What was his involvement in those decisions? What is his view of those decisions? Let him come out and say that his denomination was wrong, that the behavior of the consistories and church visitors was reprehensible and ungodly, or let him condemn us with the charges of his denomination. But let him not pretend to be magnanimous when his denomination has cast us out as wicked men and when the clergy and membership will not recognize us as ministers or churches and can hardly say our names without spitting.

I also criticize his method in both the speech and the letter as ecclesiastical grandstanding. He writes, as

The Lord Jesus Christ has been beating the Protestant Reformed Churches with a stick, and the only thing it has done to them is to harden them in their vanity about their orthodoxy, of which Engelsma's speech is a prime example.

it were, with a sideways glance at the broader Reformed church world, which he informs us is watching from the sidelines. He acts as though he is interested in a serious debate, but he does not even do us the courtesy of writing in our magazine. He does not even bother to write into his own denomination's magazine. He criticizes us and our magazine publicly but will not engage us. We have offered to publish him and to give him as much space as he wants. He writes from what amounts to a soapbox on a street corner, so that debate with him is impossible. He should write to a magazine, preferably *Sword and Shield* since the *Standard Bearer* does not allow controversy on its pages. Or he should take up our offer to debate. We have offered to debate the issues publicly with anyone who will do so. No one will take us up on that either.

In light of these things and others that I prefer not to say in public, I would like more than anything to ignore the letter and the speech. But I cannot ignore them. Professor Engelsma makes significant new advances in his doctrine of man's activities preceding God's activities, and his letter is being passed around and recommended as a good explanation of Reformed orthodoxy. I maintain that it is not and that,

indeed, it will harden the Protestant Reformed denomination in its doctrinal departure.

### *Angry about Misrepresentation*

Professor Engelsma is angry because we supposedly misrepresented him. If that is the case, then it is merely the pot calling the kettle black. He has engaged in almost nothing but misrepresentation since he started speaking on the issues that led to the split in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

About our supposed misrepresentation he writes,

His reference was to my assertion that in a certain aspect of God's work of salvation God works in such a way that He moves us to act in order that He may then act in the way He has determined. In that particular aspect of salvation, God works in such a way that our activity (which He accomplishes) precedes His activity. The precise reference was to His act of the forgiving of our sins. Our repenting precedes His remission of our sins. My statement was as follows: "It

pleases God...to forgive in the way of the sinner's repenting...Neither is repentance the cause of forgiveness...[As an aspect of faith it is] the (God-worked) means. It is not the cause...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. (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

I will rehearse for the reader what Professor Engelsma wrote on this issue in June 2021 (emphasis added).<sup>1</sup>

We do draw nigh to God; God calls us seriously to do so; and there is a sense, a certain, specific sense, in which our drawing nigh precedes God's drawing nigh to us. To deny this is to contradict the inspired Word of God. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum, June 14, 2021)

A member of the church, who considered himself the most orthodox member of the congregation and probably of the denomination, if not of the catholic church of all time, objected to my sermon because I did justice to the obvious truth that there is a sense—one, specific and very important sense—in which our drawing nigh to God, in the language of the text, precedes God's drawing nigh to us and in which sermon I vehemently exhorted the congregation, including the ultra-orthodox member, to draw nigh to God. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 16, 2021)

Even one who is “mentally challenged” can understand James to be teaching that it is our solemn, serious calling to draw nigh to God; that in a certain sense our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us; and that it is not Christian orthodoxy to deny our serious calling or that in a certain sense our drawing nigh to God precedes His drawing nigh to us. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 16, 2021)

What is sad is that after everything that he has written, this will be his legacy. Everyone will forget all his qualifications. They will remember, and they will teach, that Professor Engelsma's theology is that in a certain sense man's activities precede God's blessings and that God causes man to act so that God may act.

First, to repeat, there is a vitally important sense in which, in our salvation, our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us. Let even the “idiot” Christians among us take note that the text plainly says so. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 16, 2021)

Let all us “idiots” look closely at James 4:8. And let us see with the eyes of faith, not blinded by a man-made scheme of ultra-orthodoxy, eyes that understand the clear teaching of God's Word, that there is an important sense in which our

drawing nigh to God, by the effectual allure of the promise that in this way God will graciously draw nigh to us (than which experience nothing is more precious), precedes God's drawing nigh to us. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 16, 2021)

Question to AL: does he deny that God draws nigh to us in the way of His drawing us nigh to Himself, so that our drawing nigh to Him

precedes our experience of His drawing nigh to [us]? (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 17, 2021)

God is always first in salvation, but with regard to the assurance of salvation He works in the order of drawing me to Himself as the way to draw nigh to me. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 17, 2021)

Otherwise even AL will have to acknowledge to his congregation that there is a sense in which our returning to God, by the effectual power of the grace of God in the call, precedes God's returning to us, who have gone astray. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 17, 2021)

Let AL and his audience ask the question of himself and themselves in light of Malachi 3: does the

<sup>1</sup> The quotations can be found in *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 5 (August 15, 2021): 10–12, 23–24.

passage not teach that there is a sense in which Israel's returning to God, by His efficacious call, precedes Israel's enjoyment of these blessings. This does not mean that man is first. To charge this against one who rightly explains Malachi 3 is not merely a reprehensible tactic by which one thinks to win an argument, but also the twisting of Holy Scripture by which one opposes the way of God's saving work with His people. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 17, 2021)

Presenting my thought as man's preceding God is sheer falsehood. The truth is, as I also made plain, that our drawing nigh to God, by His effectual call, precedes God's drawing nigh to us in our experience. (Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 17, 2021)

The summary of Professor Engelsma's theology as teaching that there are activities of man that precede activities of God is a fair summary.

Professor Engelsma adds to all of these teachings now that God causes man to act that God may act. The professor makes qualifications because the offensive nature of the theology has been pointed out. But his qualifications are similar to saying that there are conditions in salvation and then adding that we fulfill them all by grace. That has been a refuge of those who have taught conditions throughout history and especially in the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches during 1953. I maintain that all of his qualifications amount to the same thing.

The bare statement is this: "There is a sense—one, specific and very important sense—in which our drawing nigh to God, in the language of the text, precedes God's drawing nigh to us" (emphasis added). That statement cannot be saved. That cannot be talked straight. That cannot be qualified to make it right. That is conditional. And Professor Engelsma makes it clearer in his recent letter, as if more clarity were necessary.

A *condition* is that there is some blessing or activity of God that follows some activity of man and without which activity of man that blessing or activity of God does not come.

So infamously in 1953 it was said that "our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter the kingdom." Thus the entrance into the kingdom, which is surely God's act, does not come about unless man converts. Some ministers tried to talk that straight by saying that a man converts by grace, but the fact is they were camouflaging the business. They wanted and they preached that man's

activities—God-given and God-worked—were decisive. That is conditional theology.

With this theology Professor Engelsma and the PRC will never again draw the charge of hyper-Calvinism. This is shameful, for that was their legacy. In the interest of the accolades of the broader church world, they have turned their backs on their heritage and on the reproach their fathers endured. They have stopped dwelling alone, and it will be to their destruction. What Reformed person of federal vision persuasion, what Reformed teacher of federal vision, or even Norman Shepherd himself would disagree with Professor Engelsma's statement regarding the relationship between repentance and forgiveness?

A man once told me that the first rule of holes is that if you find yourself in one, stop digging.

But Professor Engelsma keeps digging and stubbornly defends his theology.

What is sad is that after everything he has written, this will be his legacy. Everyone will forget all of his qualifications. They will remember, and they will teach, that Professor Engelsma's theology is that in a certain sense man's activities precede God's blessings and that God causes man to act so that God may act. They might not even say that. They will just say, "Man precedes God," and they will become bolder and bolder in their conditionality.

### *Engelsma and the Ecclesiastical Assemblies*

Professor Engelsma also makes clear that his teaching—man's activities preceding God's activities—was the burden of recent Protestant Reformed synodical decisions.

Despite the efforts of myself and of the assemblies of the churches of which I am a member, he does not understand that God works this aspect of salvation in such a way that He (sovereignly) moves the elect sinner to repentance so that, following this repentance, He may forgive. (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

The language used in those synodical decisions was that there are activities of man—by grace, of course—that lead to God's blessings and that there are degrees of fellowship on the basis of how many works man performs—and we would assume on the basis of how much he repents. By these decisions synod made official Protestant Reformed dogma that man in a certain sense precedes God. I am not quoting from the decisions, nor do I intend to waste my time quoting. Those interested in the decisions can find them in the *Acts of Synod*.

The point now is that Professor Engelsma says that what he is teaching about man's activities preceding God's

activities is not merely his own private opinion, but that this was the point of all the many words, gallons of ink, and reams of paper that have been used in making recent Protestant Reformed ecclesiastical decisions on these matters.

The theology of the PRC not only unofficially in the pulpit but also officially in its decisions is Professor Engelsma's doctrine about man's preceding God.

Let everyone take notice: the Protestant Reformed denomination officially, by Professor Engelsma's own admission, has adopted the dogma that scripture and the Reformed creeds teach that man's activities precede God's blessings and activities.

However, that doctrine is not Reformed at all.

I challenge anyone to prove that scripture and the Reformed creeds teach that in a certain sense man's activities precede God's activities or that God causes man to act so that God may act.

### *Repentance, as Aspect of Faith*

About his view of repentance in relationship to faith, Professor Engelsma makes some startling admissions that are worthy of comment. He writes,

Neither is repentance the cause of forgiveness... [As an aspect of faith it is] the (God-worked) means...

Apparently the editor does not know that the Reformed tradition follows Calvin in regarding repentance as an aspect of faith. Repentance is not a "good work" of the sinner that is a "fruit" of faith produced by the sinner, but an element of faith itself (cf. his *Institutes*, 3.3.1: "Both repentance and forgiveness of sins...are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith...Repentance...is also born of faith"). The editor makes repentance a "good work" of the sinner, which greatly aids him in his (practically fatal; that is, fatal to Christian practice) denial that repentance is the way to forgiveness. (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

Perhaps Professor Engelsma can point to an article in the creeds that establishes his doctrine that repentance is an aspect of faith.

Maybe the Heidelberg Catechism overlooked this part of faith in Lord's Day 7.

Professor Engelsma's making repentance an aspect of faith is a vital part of his theology of man's preceding God

in a certain sense. He hinted at it in earlier letters. He tightly joined faith and repentance and made them both means to the forgiveness of sins. But now he comes out and says that repentance is an aspect of faith.

Let everyone understand: we absolutely deny that repentance is an aspect of faith. He says that we are ignorant of the entire Reformed tradition for denying this.

Professor Engelsma does not prove his point at all from the quotation that he gives from John Calvin. At the very least, in that quotation Calvin distinguishes repentance from faith when he says that repentance is "attained... through faith."

However, Calvin states the matter clearly when he comments on Acts 20:21: "Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." Calvin writes,

There he reckons repentance and faith as two different things. What then? Can true repentance stand, apart from faith? Not at all. But even though they cannot be separated, they ought to be distinguished...So repentance and faith, although they are held together by a permanent bond, require to be joined rather than confused.<sup>2</sup>

Repentance and faith: Joined. Not confused.

Professor Engelsma charges us with dispensing with repentance because we will not confuse it with faith. Repentance is not faith, and repentance is not an aspect of faith.

Calvin agrees with us.

Regarding the Reformed tradition on the matter, Heinrich Heppé gives the consensus when he writes,

Faith is always bound up with repentance, but it is not a part of it. Faith is primarily a relation of man to Christ. Repentance on the other hand is a relation, resting on faith in Christ, of man to God and to God's will. Therefore repentance can only enter in, where faith is already present as its presupposition.<sup>3</sup>

To prove his point Heppé quotes from the Leiden Synopsis, a document written shortly after the Synod of Dordt in 1618–19 to explain its doctrine.

If the word repentance is taken strictly [that is, as our sorrow for sin]...then it is usually distinguished from faith, as are cause and its proper

2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.3.5, 1:597.

3 Heinrich Heppé, *Reformed Dogmatics: A Compendium of Reformed Theology*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: Wakeman Great Reprints, 1950), 574.

effect and fruit, and so Scripture distinguishes it in different passages.<sup>4</sup>

The Reformed tradition is on our side too.

The reason, at least in part, that faith and repentance are to be distinguished is because if you confuse them, then you have justification by faith and works. You take the eye of faith off its proper object and introduce another object. The sole object of faith is the goodness of God, and you can say in short that the sole object of faith is Christ. Where scripture says, “Faith alone,” you cannot say, “Faith and repentance,” for then you say, “Christ plus something.”

It is Christ alone who justifies through faith alone.

### *Repentance, Not Love for God*

Professor Engelsma also criticizes the idea that repentance is love of God. He writes, quoting from the Westminster Confession of Faith,

Having established that repentance is “an evangelical grace [not a ‘good work’ of the sinner—DJE],” and that it definitively consists of “grief for and hatred of sins, [not the ‘love of God,’” which is rather the source of repentance than the identity of it; cf. II Cor. 7:9–11—DJE]... (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

Along with this Professor Engelsma ridicules the idea that repentance is a work. He writes,

The editor makes repentance a “good work” of the sinner, which greatly aids him in his (practically fatal; that is, fatal to Christian practice) denial that repentance is the way to forgiveness. (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

The activity of repentance involves works. Professor Engelsma’s criticizing repentance as being a work in contrast with its being grace calls into question what he understands by works of the sinner. All the works of the sinner are God’s gifts to him and what God works in and through the sinner. My works as a believer are God’s gifts to me that he before ordained that I should walk in them.

These works are the fruits of repentance. Repentance is simply designated by its fruits.

That repentance is love for God (and work) is not the novel doctrine of Reformed Protestant radicals, as Professor Engelsma makes it out to be. Both ideas about repentance can easily be established from the tradition of the Reformation.

Luther’s well-known first of his Ninety-five Theses states, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” The just shall live by faith, and repentance is the tear in the eye of faith.

Heinrich Hepe, giving the Reformed consensus, writes, “Repentance is thus a gracious power, bestowed on the elect, by which they lay aside the life of sin and busy themselves with righteousness.”<sup>5</sup>

Hepe quotes from Reformed theologian Cocceius, who describes the two parts of repentance—the mortification of the old man and the quickening of the new man:

These parts go together. But as regards the order of nature, although newness is subsequent to oldness, yet the newness of love of God is the cause of the abolishing the oldness of enmity of God.<sup>6</sup>

The truth of God is one-sided. It proclaims the sovereignty, the absolute sovereignty of God. The truth does not ignore that man is a rational, moral creature, but the truth circumscribes man’s choices and decisions by the will of God.

Cocceius simply uses “love of God” as a summary of repentance.

In his criticism of us, Professor Engelsma is also on the dangerous ground of openly criticizing the Reformed creeds.

Lord’s Day 33 asks about the conversion of man and answers that conversion

is a sincere sorrow of heart that we have provoked God by our sins...It is a sincere joy of heart in God, through Christ, and with love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works. (A 89–90, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 121–22)

Repentance is very often designated as conversion and conversion as repentance. The creed says that conversion is “joy of heart in God,” which is surely love of God, and the Catechism mentions this love of God as

<sup>4</sup> Hepe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 574.

<sup>5</sup> Hepe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 571.

<sup>6</sup> Hepe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 572.

that which characterizes the believer's life of obedience to God's law.

The Reformed tradition and the creeds are on our side.

Repentance basically consists of two parts: the mortification of the old man and the quickening of the new man. The mortification of the old is the negative side and involves the believer's hatred of sin. The quickening of the new man is the positive side and involves the believer's love for God and delight to walk in good works. We can also make the point that the love of God is chief. I never hate sin so much as when I am in the presence of the gracious God.

### *Ungodding God*

In an often overlooked article of the Canons of Dordt, 1.11, the creed says, "As God Himself is most wise, unchangeable, omniscient, and omnipotent, so the election made by Him can neither be interrupted nor changed, recalled or annulled" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 157). The article teaches that one's doctrine of salvation must harmonize with one's doctrine of God. The application to this controversy is this: As God is sovereign and independent, so man cannot be first, and God cannot will to make man first, and God does not work to cause man to act so that God may act. Whatever freedom man has as a rational, moral creature, his actions and activities as a rational, moral creature must be strictly subscribed by and understood within the sovereignty of God.

Professor Engelsma attempts to save his doctrine of man's preceding God by an appeal to the way God works.

God saves. God is not only first in our salvation; He is exclusive in our salvation. That is, He alone saves; He saves in the entirety of salvation. Neither do we save ourselves in any respect, nor do we cooperate in our salvation, nor does salvation depend on us. God saves, and He saves in a certain, important order of this salvation, specifically in that aspect of salvation that consists of the forgiveness of sin. He is pleased to forgive in the way of moving us to repent of our sins. Therefore, He sovereignly causes us to repent. (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

It must be understood that in this paragraph the word, "He is pleased to forgive in the way of moving us to repent of our sins," are to be read as Professor Engelsma explained Malachi 3:7: there is a certain and vital sense in which man precedes God. "In the way of" means that God works in such a way that man is first and that God causes man to act so that God may act. Speaking that way while making appeals to God's decision to work in such a

way is not legitimate. It makes God ungod himself. God cannot ungod himself. God's decree is not an exercise in God's ungodding himself. Can God decree to work in such a way that Christ gives up his divine attributes? Can God work in such a way that he makes the creature first before God? That is not God. God brings to pass what he decreed.

What is really offensive about Professor Engelsma's theology is that man is now first in the matter of repentance and that man's activities are the *may* of God's activities.

Man is not even first in the matter of sin! Did God make Pharaoh first in the hardening of his heart? First, Pharaoh hardened his heart, and then God hardened Pharaoh's heart? God was first. God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Did God make Adam first in the fall? First Adam fell into sin, and then God came with forgiveness. God decreed the fall. God was first. God realizes his covenant in the way of sin and grace. God determined sin as the way to the revelation of his glorious grace! God is first. And did God cause Adam to draw near to God so that he could draw near to Adam? If that were the case, salvation would never have happened. Adam fled from God, and God drew near to Adam.

The truth of God is one-sided. It proclaims the sovereignty, the absolute sovereignty, of God. The truth does not ignore that man is a rational, moral creature, but the truth circumscribes man's choices and decisions by the will of God. God is sovereign: God is sovereign over the salvation of sinners; God is sovereign over the damnation of sinners; God is sovereign even when devils and wicked men act unjustly. God is sovereign over man's repentance. God causes man to repent, not in order that God may act in a certain way, thus binding his activity to man's activity; but in the unfolding of God's eternal decree, he causes man to repent so that the one whom God determined to save he saves; and he draws near to that one to make that salvation a reality. God is first also in drawing near to man. Man is never, not even in his sin and wickedness, first. Man is not first in apostasy. Man never precedes God, not even in his sin and wickedness, let alone in the grace of repentance. God ordained the revelation of his glorious grace in the way of sin. It is not at all wrong to say that God's covenant is realized in the way of sin. Adam fell according to God's decree. In the language of Paul, "In the wisdom of God the world by [God's] wisdom knew not God" (1 Cor. 1:21).

And Professor Engelsma wants man to be first in repentance, of all things!

Saying that God orders repentance and God causes man to be first so that God may work in a certain way is

bad theology in almost every word. God binds himself not to be God in a certain instance. That is impossible. Man first in any instance is God not being God. Man as something in the matter of salvation makes God nothing in salvation. God is first because God is God.

God causes man to repent not so that God may then act in a certain way. God causes man to repent in accordance with God's eternal will for the life of the sinner in whom he delights.

Is that not what Ezekiel says in Ezekiel 33:11? "Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" God's eternal delight in the life of the wicked, a delight in which he chose them and appointed them to salvation, is the source and power of the repentance of the wicked. There is no man's preceding God in that.

God precedes man eternally. And on account of that eternal preceding, God comes, and he turns man, as Jeremiah says. "Turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God" (Jer. 31:18). Thou art Jehovah my God. Jeremiah grounds the fact that Jehovah turns him in Jehovah's being Jeremiah's God, and Jehovah is the God of men and women from eternity. Experience or otherwise, Jehovah is first because Jehovah is God alone, and man is not god, and the true God cannot give his glory to another by making man first, any more than Jehovah can decree to give up his perfections.

### *Denying What Christ Said*

Professor Engelsma excoriates us and mocks us that we deny the plain words of scripture. It is incomprehensible, he says. It is so obvious that "idiots" can understand this. I warn him that idiots have done many terrible things with the plain words of scripture. Indeed, if you want—on the basis of the plain words of scripture, of course—you could teach that there is no God. Does not scripture say that there is no God? Even an idiot can see it.

But I have another plain word of scripture for Professor Engelsma, which will be my fortress against his theology, and that is the word of Christ: "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:44). There Christ says that all drawing near to God and coming to God is the drawing of the Father. That is what angered

the Jews. It was not merely that Christ made salvation exclusive to himself, for the Jews made salvation exclusive to those who obeyed the law. But the issue was that Christ made salvation exclusive to himself, and then he said that no one can come to him apart from the sovereign will of God; so that Christ put salvation—also its experience—in God's power and in his sovereignty. And I will state the obvious: Christ did not say that God draws near in the way of man's drawing near first. God draws man, and he comes to God. God is first.

And not denying merely what Christ said but also the truth about Christ's very coming. In the coming of Christ, God drew near to his people. He drew near to accomplish their salvation in fulfillment of his covenant promise made to Adam in the garden, to Noah, to Abraham, to David, and to all the patriarchs. The coming of Christ is the promise. He is our forgiveness, our repentance, our justification, and our sanctification,

as Paul says. "Of him [God] are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). Christ, when he comes in the incarnation and to us in our experience, is the promise in every respect. Our whole salvation is in him; and when we are united with Christ, we receive all

that salvation. Of God we are *in* Christ Jesus.

Does not the coming of Christ himself refute the idea of man first? Did the coming of Christ and forgiveness in his name result from Israel's obedience? Did the coming of Christ and forgiveness wait on Israel's repentance? Or did the promise of Christ's coming stand in Israel's love for God? Christ's coming and forgiveness stood on the basis of God's unchanging being. Was it not exactly Israel's disobedience—her monstrous, history-long disobedience and utter failure to repent—that magnified the grace of God in sending Christ? If Professor Engelsma is correct, then Christ could never come, for Israel did not repent first.

### *Outside the Declaration of Principles*

Professor Engelsma has trumpeted his denomination's document, the Declaration of Principles. His theology of man's preceding God is not in harmony with that document's viewpoint of man's activities in relationship to the promise and sovereignty of God. The Declaration of Principles says,

1. That God surely and infallibly fulfills His promise to the elect.

"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:44).

2. The sure promise of God which He realizes in us as rational and moral creatures not only makes it impossible that we should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness but also confronts us with the obligation of love, to walk in a new and holy life, and constantly to watch unto prayer. (III.B.1–2, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 426)

The promise of God is sure. It does not come about because man does something so that God may do something else. God realizes his promise and all of salvation, and repentance is included in that promise. Where is man first in all that? God's infallible fulfillment of his promise is the reason for the call to thankfulness. Man's obligations are the fruit of God's fulfillment. Man's obligations are not those activities upon which the blessings of God wait, even if those activities of man are the work of grace.

Man's activity is not the issue.

God's fulfillment of his promise is the issue.

### *Lord's Day Fifty-One*

Professor Engelsma hangs his argument now on another text. This is the fifth petition of the Lord's prayer.

This mistake is serious enough [the mistake for which Engelsma criticizes us]. It stands uncomprehending before the petition of the model prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." To say nothing about the obvious relation between our forgiving each other and God's forgiving us, the petition has the penitent sinner requesting forgiveness of God. The penitence that prompts the request for forgiveness precedes God's forgiveness of the penitent sinner...

This order of God's work of salvation is not an arcane mystery for learned theologians to puzzle over, but the daily confession and experience of every believer. It confronts every believer daily in the petition of the model prayer: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Leave out of consideration that forgiveness here follows the believer's activity of forgiving his neighbor: "as we forgive our debtors." The main thought of the petition is that the penitent sinner asks for forgiveness: forgiveness follows penitence; repentance precedes remission of sins. (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

So according to Professor Engelsma, the fifth petition of the Lord's prayer means that we do not experience God's forgiveness of us until we forgive our debtors and that we do not experience forgiveness until we ask for

forgiveness. The main thought of the petition, according to him, is that "forgiveness follows penitence." We draw nigh to God, and then and only then does God draw nigh to us. We turn to God, and then and only then does God turn to us. This is supposed to be the obvious meaning of the fifth petition.

But Professor Engelsma should know that the Reformed faith has an interpretation of the fifth petition in Lord's Day 51.

First, the Lord's Day occurs in the third section of the Catechism. The third section comes after the stirring close to the second section, in which the believer knows with absolute confidence that he is forgiven for Christ's sake alone. The believer knows that; and because he knows that, when he sins he goes to God for forgiveness.

Second, the Catechism's explanation of the fifth petition has sinners saying, "Even as we *feel this evidence of Thy grace in us*, that it is our firm resolution from the heart to forgive our neighbor" (A 126, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 139; emphasis added). The sinner *knows* his forgiveness. He knows it, and knowing it he asks for it. And having that grace, he also is resolved to forgive his neighbor.

The explanation of the sinner's experience by Professor Engelsma bears no resemblance to this explanation of the Heidelberg Catechism.

### *1953 Redivivus*

Professor Engelsma sounds like the 1953 men. I will note that he does not, in fact, answer the question of his questioner that was the occasion of his antinomianism speech. The questioner asked about conditions on the basis of some biblical texts. Professor Engelsma talks about 1953 and its rejection of conditional theology.

Fifth, the texts do not teach a conditional theology, because a conditional theology makes salvation depend upon the sinner. This was the nature of the theology that the Protestant Reformed Churches rejected in 1953. It was, and is, a theology that has God graciously promising salvation to, with a will to bestow salvation upon, every baptized person. Whether this promise and will are realized, however, is said to depend upon the baptized sinner's fulfilling the "condition" of faith and obedience. The passages referred to by my questioner do not teach such a conditional salvation. Rather, they teach the way in which it pleases God to save His elect, redeemed people, and the way in which He accomplishes their salvation. (Lecture on "Antinomism")

The question was about conditions, but he talks about conditional theology. But the Protestant Reformed



Churches in 1953 rejected conditions, period. Any and all conditions—whether one used the word *condition* or not and in whatever sense anyone tried to defend conditions—were rejected.

Professor Engelsma has conditions. This God-worked thing in man precedes this God-given blessing.

But it is more than mere temporal preceding. He writes,

His [the editor of *Sword and Shield*] reference was to my assertion that in a certain aspect of God's work of salvation God works in such a way that He moves us to act in order that He may then act in the way He has determined. (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

Engelsma writes again,

Despite the efforts of myself and of the assemblies of the churches of which I am a member, he does not understand that God works this aspect of salvation in such a way that He (sovereignly) moves the elect sinner to repentance so that, following this repentance, He may forgive. (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

He explains what the minister proclaims in the name of God:

Does he not urgently call them to repent so that they may be forgiven? Does he not call them to repent in so many words? Does he not utter the promise of the gospel that everyone who repents is (then, and in this way) forgiven? (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

Professor Engelsma says also,

I urge him also to open his eyes to the fundamental Christian truth that God works in such a way that our repenting precedes our receiving the gift of forgiveness, so that the necessary call of the gospel is, "repent that you may be forgiven." (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

God may forgive! Repent that God may forgive!

Professor Engelsma writes, "God...moves us to act in order that He may then act in the way He has determined." *May* is a verb that expresses ability, or potentiality, or the absence of prohibitive conditions. Man's activities are the actions that make the potentiality of God's counsel real. God's counsel does not become real except through man's activities. So it is not only that God makes man first—which God cannot do—but also that

the activities of man are that upon which God's activities depend and that make God's counsel real. Man's activities do not only precede God's activities; but on Professor Engelsma's presentation, man's activities are also necessary so that God acts or that God may act in a certain way. This is conditions.

Those conditions necessarily involve an offer, and here we have the offer. God wants to forgive. God may forgive. Forgiveness is available. God purposes to forgive! Forgiveness is a divine potentiality. What stand between God, the sinner, and the reality of forgiveness are the sinner's own deeds and acts. That is an offer, and that is conditional.

Here we have an example that, after all, the works that God works in us—now also repentance—are the way to the Father. Professor Engelsma says it. God graciously causes us to repent in order that God may fellowship with us. God graciously works repentance in us that he may draw near to us. God graciously works repentance in us that he may forgive us. The divine potentiality of forgiveness is realized by man's activity. That is conditional, and

that is an offer in the matter of the experience and application of salvation.

That was Rev. David Overway's exegesis of John 14:6. The works that God works in us are the way to the Father, and it is thus not Christ alone who is the

way because it is not faith alone by which we are justified.

Engelsma's letter is nothing more than Overway's exegesis of John 14:6 raising its head again. We are dealing with a Hydra in the Protestant Reformed Churches. After we chopped off one head, another head grew up. Now another head has sprouted from the stump, and the heads are getting fiercer. That is what we are seeing now.

Where is God's eternal decree? Professor Engelsma writes like the rest of the Protestant Reformed ministers. It is about man, man, man. His letter and his speech are about man. Where is election in his speech and letter? Where is election, not merely as a mantra about an elect sinner? He will say elect sinner, elect sinner, elect sinner. But where is *election* as it controls exegesis and theology in his letter? Election is nowhere to be found. And neither then is the glory of God found.

Professor Engelsma says that whoever repents may be forgiven. That is to make the promise of God and the certainty and realization and blessed enjoyment of that promise stand in man's repentance. It makes that promise stand in man's act by God's grace. Did man believe enough? Did he repent enough?

However, the certainty of the promise, its realization, and its blessed enjoyment stand in the faithfulness of the

The Reformed Protestant truth is that God is first from beginning to end in salvation.

promising God and in his eternal decree. The promise of God is not *MAY*; it is *SHALL*, and the promise includes faith, repentance, and all the rest of salvation. The promise is sure because God is sure. The promise is real in God's counsel and as it is unfolded in time.

### *Mystified*

Professor Engelsma says that he is “mystified” about where the doctrinal difference lies and that others in Reformed churches are mystified as well.

I confess to feeling foolish in belaboring this fundamental truth of the Christian faith, especially in the awareness that some of the Reformed churches are following the schism in the Protestant Reformed Churches and who are probably as mystified over the purported doctrinal difference as am I. (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

Where the difference lies is not hard at all: we deny that man's works done by grace are the way to the Father; we deny that grace is available; we deny that there are conditions for the experience of salvation; we deny that regenerated man is not totally depraved. These are all things that Protestant Reformed ministers teach and preach. Now also we deny that in a certain sense God causes man to be first so that God may act; we deny that repentance is part of faith; we deny that the call of the gospel is repent that you may be forgiven. We deny that. We deny that emphatically. It is Arminianism; it is Pelagianism; it is federal vision; and it is modernism; and no appeals to grace or to God's supposed order of working can change that assessment. I will say that until I die, and I will say that because I believe the Reformed creeds say that, and I believe scripture says that, and I believe Christ in the last judgment will say that about this theology.

Man first in any sense is false doctrine, and those who teach it must repent of it and condemn it.

And cannot Professor Engelsma see that those who follow him are going to jettison all his clever distinctions and just state baldly, “Man is first, and man acts that God may act”?

Did not the question that occasioned his antinomianism speech cause chills to run down his spine? Did the question not give him any pause? At a Protestant Reformed event, someone asked whether some *if* passages in scripture teach conditions! That issue was settled

decades ago, supposedly. But there in Professor Engelsma's class conditions came up. And he did not pause? He gave no indication that he even considered that the question regarding conditions might reflect the theological climate in the PRC. Rather, he launched into a furious attack on antinomianism.

We are opposed to that doctrine and will oppose it, God being gracious, until we breathe our last.

The Reformed Protestant truth is that God is first from beginning to end in salvation; that he is first also in the experience of salvation; that he is first in repentance, in forgiveness, and in all the benefits of salvation; that he does not work in such a way that man is first and God is second; and that he does not work in man so that God may act in a certain way. Whatever the mysterious relationship of God's decree to man's actions are, it is not that God may act in a certain way because that would be for God to deny himself.

### *Forgiveness without Repentance*

Professor Engelsma accuses us of turning biblical theology on its head for denying that man's activities precede God's activities and for denying that God causes man to act that God may act:

To deny that forgiveness follows repenting leads to the conclusion that repentance follows forgiveness, thus turning a basic biblical truth and Christian reality on its head: “be forgiven in order to repent.” In fact, the implication of the theology of the editor of “*Se&S*” is that the sinner has forgiveness without repenting. (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

He accuses us of teaching forgiveness without repenting:

Forgiveness without repenting is not the Reformed faith. Having established that repentance is “an evangelical grace [not a ‘good work’ of the sinner—DJE],” and that it definitively consists of “grief for and hatred of sins, [not the ‘love of God,’]” which is rather the source of repentance than the identity of it; cf. II Cor. 7:9–11—DJE] the reformed Westminster Confession of Faith states that repentance is “of such necessity to all sinners, [so] that none may expect pardon without it” (15.1–6). (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*)

He writes, “Forgiveness without repenting is not Christianity: ‘Forgive us [penitent believers—DJE] our

The certainty of the promise, its realization, and its blessed enjoyment stand in the faithfulness of the promising God and in his eternal decree.

debts, as we forgive our debtors' (Matthew 6:12)" (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*).

Making his point again, he writes, "In fact, the implication of the theology of the editor of 'S&S' is that the sinner has forgiveness without repenting. This, apparently, is now the gospel-message of the Reformed Protestant Church" (*Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken*).

Yes, indeed. That is what we teach. We teach that there is forgiveness without repenting. We teach that repentance follows forgiveness. We trumpet that message. That is the order of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:

18. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation;
19. To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.
20. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.
21. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

The ministry of reconciliation, which is the glorious office that God gives to every minister of the gospel, is to proclaim that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself and that this involved his not imputing their trespasses unto them. Before the ministry of reconciliation preached one syllable, God forgave his elect all their sins and did not impute those sins unto them without a single tear of repentance. They were forgiven. That is the glorious message of the gospel that goes out into the world. God in Christ reconciled his church to himself. She is beloved of God, and all her sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. Be reconciled, for you are reconciled. Be reconciled, for you are forgiven. That is a beautiful message. That is the message of the Reformed Protestant Churches, God being gracious to us.

And this was the doctrine of the apostle Paul also in Romans 4:25–5:2:

25. Who [Jesus our Lord] was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.

1. Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:
2. By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

Justified and forgiven at the cross of Calvary without any repentance.

This was the comfort of the apostle Paul to the church: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Rom. 8:1).

There is not now, there never was, and there never will be condemnation, for the church is forgiven!

This was also Peter's doctrine in 1 Peter 1:

18. Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things...
19. But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot:
20. Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.

Christ was foreordained as the lamb with his precious blood. He was eternally slain. And we were eternally justified without repentance.

And this was the doctrine of the apostle John: "All that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8).

A lamb slain before the foundation of the world means justification before the foundation of the world and therefore that there was forgiveness before repentance and without any repentance at all.

Let everyone hear, and let them agree or disagree; let them believe it or not believe it.

This is the gospel message of the Reformed Protestant Churches. The sinner has forgiveness without repenting. This is the gospel message of scripture. This is God-first theology. That is our gospel. God first. And we deny that in any sense whatsoever man precedes God.

—NJL



Reformed Believers Publishing  
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## FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL

*For if I build again the things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor.*  
—Galatians 2:18

**T**he law is an old house. It is a death trap to all who live inside. The law says to all who come under it, “You must do this to live; and if you do not, then I will kill you.” So the law is a ministration of death. The law never makes anyone holy. It did not make Israel holy. It made the Israelites terrible sinners. Where the law enters in, transgressions abound, and death comes. There is no life in the law. There is no joy, happiness, blessedness, assurance, or fellowship with God in the law. There is only death in the house of the law.

Christ fulfilled all the law. He tore down that house. He built the house of God. The house of God is a beautiful house of fellowship with God, freedom from guilt, deliverance from bondage, and joy in the Holy Ghost. It is a house of joy and gladness and of assurance and life. All who inhabit the house live unto God. To live unto God is to live God’s own life, for God lives unto God. All who live in the house of God are made holy. They seek God and his glory in everything.

Thus every minister of the gospel is charged with preaching Christ. He tears down the house of the law. Every minister is to so preach Christ that the house of the law is destroyed, so that the bondage of the law is lifted, the terror of the law is abolished, and the curse of the law is dismissed, and the joy and life of the house of God is built.

Ministers who build again what they have destroyed are fools. Such are many sermons, articles, and speeches that pass for the gospel. They are nothing more than the folly of rebuilding what they destroyed.

If you had an old and rickety house that was a death trap to you and your family who lived in it, then you would want that rickety house destroyed. But if the builder you hired to tear it down tore down the house and then rebuilt the very same sort of rickety structure, you would call him a fool. Worse, you would suspect that he was full of malice toward you.

Such are the ministers of the gospel who preach Christ *and* the law. Christ *and* the works of the sinner are the way to the Father. Christ *and* the obedience of the sinner are the way to the assurance of salvation. Christ *and* the striving and activity of the sinner are the way to salvation. When they say, “Christ,” they destroy the house of the law. When they say, “*And* the sinner’s obedience, activity, and repentance,” they rebuild what they destroyed.

And they make themselves transgressors. They say that they are interested in the church’s holiness, but they themselves are wicked. They defend their doctrine by saying they are interested in the church’s life. But where they serve no one lives, and death is the result of their preaching. They change the gospel into law and the law into gospel. Their Christ leaves sinners, sinners who must still be active to be righteous. They charge God with lying. God said, “All who believe in Christ shall be saved.” But their gospel is, “All who are active will be saved.” They were charged to be ministers of reconciliation, but they displace Christ.

They are transgressors. They are not ministers of life and joy; they are ministers of death and doom. They are transgressors if they rebuild what they destroyed; if they preach Christ *and* the sinner’s obedience, activity, and repentance as the way to the blessedness, joy, happiness, and assurance of salvation. They are unfaithful messengers. Worse, they do not build the house of God, but they build a death trap that slays all who come into it.

—NJL