



# SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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

Deuteronomy 33:29

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*And with him they crucify two thieves; the one on his right hand, and the other on his left.  
And the scripture was fulfilled, which saith, And he was numbered with the transgressors.*

—Mark 15:27–28

In Jesus the scripture was fulfilled which says, “And he was numbered with the transgressors.”

Precious promise of God for sinners.

Jesus was numbered among the transgressors that they might be numbered among the righteous. Their sins and sinfulness were imputed to him; his righteousness, holiness, and suffering were imputed to them. He was brought down to hell; they were lifted up to the height of heaven—beyond sin and death and hell and the grave and above the possibility of condemnation and damnation.

Oh, precious promise!

He was numbered with the transgressors!

We are numbered with the righteous!

The scripture was fulfilled.

The fulfillment of scripture in this case means that God determined and carried out every detail of the cross of Christ. God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself. Man was not sovereign at the cross. God was sovereign because he was carrying out his eternal purpose in love for the salvation of his people and for the glory of his name. And among those details of the cross, God determined that Jesus would be crucified between two thieves.

And God determining that, the world and the false church of Jesus’ day with their wicked hands actually crucified Jesus between two thieves. The world and the false church numbered Jesus among the transgressors.

A transgressor is a lawless person.

Jesus was condemned as a lawless person, the ultimate antinomian. Not for any work of unrighteousness that he had done, for no one convicted him of sin. He had no sin but only righteousness and spotless holiness. He was the holy and the just one. But for his doctrine, he was condemned as a lawless antinomian.

The scribes and Pharisees had assiduously watched Jesus and lurked to hear what would come out of his mouth. As they listened, they heard Jesus condemn all their laws, which they had added to the law of Moses as the way of salvation. They heard Jesus say too that he had come as Lord of the law, to fulfill the whole law in order to free his people from its condemnation and sentence of death. He taught that he alone is the way to God the Father and to eternal life with him. Jesus taught that

only those whom the Father draws come to him. Jesus taught that those whom the Father draws have Christ by faith only. He taught the perfect sovereignty of God in salvation.

Further, Jesus denied the theology that man is saved by keeping the law of Moses, that by law-keeping a man is received into God’s grace, and that through obedience a man has closer fellowship with God. Jesus called that theology the doctrine of the devil—a wicked theology that causes people to thank God that they are not sinners as other men are!

And under oath Jesus swore to the truth that he is the Christ and thus the only way of salvation.

For that doctrine the church condemned him as a lawless and wicked person who taught the people to ignore the law of Moses. Thus he was considered a danger to the church and an enemy of the state. For that doctrine the church numbered him among the lawless, the antinomians, and the transgressors.

So unbelievers always number Christ among the transgressors. They number him among the transgressors when they condemn his doctrine as lawless and antinomian.

He is still crucified in this world between two thieves when the apostate church world—doubting that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes, viewing that doctrine as lawless, and seeing that doctrine as a threat to its own power—declares that the gospel of salvation all of grace, all of Christ, and all of God is a dangerous doctrine, a lawless doctrine that will make men careless and profane. Christ is numbered among the transgressors when his truth is condemned as evil.

That Jesus was so numbered among the transgressors teaches us exactly this: our salvation is wholly of God’s grace, wholly by Christ’s cross, wholly without our works, and wholly by faith alone. His numbering among the transgressors teaches us that apart from any obedience, activity, love, or repentance on our part we are saved from guilt, sin, and death and delivered into the eternal favor of God!

Jesus was numbered among the transgressors!

Hallelujah!

Salvation is of the Lord!

Long ago, the Spirit of God testified through the prophet Isaiah that this would happen to Christ. In the Spirit Isaiah saw Christ on Golgotha and testified in Isaiah 53:12 of his vision. Isaiah saw Christ crucified between two thieves.

The men crucified with Christ were two murderers and brigands. Concerning their natures, crimes, wickedness, and sins, the Bible makes no distinction. The men were one in those respects. They had been caught, tried, and condemned to death. Then those murderers were hung, one on the left of Jesus and the other on his right.

As transgressors they were lawless men. They were lawless in the sense that they did not own any law or authority other than themselves. They did not own God's law. They did not acknowledge church law. They did not heed state law. They did as they pleased, and they lived as they pleased. They were against any law except their own law.

Belonging to their lawlessness and manifesting their lawless hearts was their rebellion. So especially on the foreground was their contempt for law and for all authority besides themselves.

The word *rebellion* expresses the godlessness of man. Man was a rebel in the beginning. Man willed to be God. Man willed to determine for himself what is good and what is evil.

Scripture tells us that robbery was the chosen way of life of the men between whom Jesus was crucified. They were freebooters, violent robbers, plunderers, brigands, rebels against the Roman state, and excommunicates from the church of God. They lived in caves and dens in the earth. They lurked in highways and byways looking for some man to slay; some soldier to assault; some government official to murder; some man to rob or woman to rape; or a helpless, enfeebled, or lonely person to beat up, assault, and rob.

In Luke 23 scripture calls the men "malefactors"—wicked evildoers. They transgressed all of God's commandments. They were doers of evil. Evil lived in their hearts, so that their hearts were evil and wicked. There was for those malefactors no law except their own lusts and their own plans and desires. Their feet were swift to shed blood; the poison of asps was under their tongues; their hearts were full of lying and deceit; and the word of falsehood was in their mouths. They were vile, beastly, godless men who owned no law and no lord except themselves. They feared no punishment by either church or state or God.

And since the history of those men occurred in Israel, we may say that they, as Barabbas, were Jews. They had been circumcised and brought into the temple by their parents. The men were familiar with the law of God,

the scriptures, the worship of God, and their calling to honor God and the king. Even in their railing on Christ, they used the language of the covenant. The men knew of God's promise, of the Messiah, of heaven, and of forgiveness. These truths they had rejected. Theirs was a bristling, knowing rebellion against all authority and a terrible apostasy.

And as such they were worthy of death. They were worthy to be cast out of the church by excommunication, to be executed by the state and put out of society, and to be cast into the lake of fire, from which there is no exit. As one of the malefactors said, "We, indeed, are justly condemned."

Luke 23:32 says that two *other* criminals were led out with Jesus.

And Jesus was crucified in the midst of them.

Other criminals!

There was the criminal, Jesus of Nazareth. Besides him, there were two *other* criminals. In other words, it was not that the Jews crucified Jesus and that alongside him and unrelated to him they crucified two criminals. It was not as though the people thought that Jesus was innocent and that the two men crucified with him were guilty.

But the Jews condemned Jesus likewise as a lawless, rebellious apostate and antinomian. And when Jesus was hung in the middle of those two criminals and crucified with those malefactors, the people declared Jesus to be the chief of the thieves, robbers, wicked evildoers, and criminals—as it were, their ringleader and the greatest of their type.

And, crucifying him, the Jews declared Jesus accursed of God and unworthy to exist in society, in the church, and in the world.

Oh, it is true that the Roman state reserved crucifixion for her worst enemies. So Rome, as the representative of the world, declared Jesus Christ to be her worst enemy and unfit to live in society and worthy to be punished for his crimes.

But what does the law say? The law says that whoever is hung on wood is accursed of God. They crucified Jesus on the cross and cursed him there.

And when they crucified him with thieves, they numbered Jesus with the transgressors.

To number is to reckon. To reckon in the case of Jesus was to constitute him by legal declaration a transgressor. Once the judge declared Jesus guilty, he was legally numbered among criminals. Although Pilate first declared Jesus innocent, afterward Pilate legally declared Jesus a criminal. Pilate declared Jesus to be worthy of death as an enemy of the Roman state. Pilate did that in response to the church, which had declared Jesus worthy of death for blasphemy because he made himself the Son of God.

Jesus' condemnation was not because he was an actual

transgressor. He had walked all over Judea and Galilee and even to the lands beyond, and he had done good there. He had taught good and worked good, and he was good among the people there. All the proceedings of his trial, both before the Sanhedrin and before Pontius Pilate, showed that Jesus was innocent. The Sanhedrin could not get two witnesses to agree to anything. Pontius Pilate expressed four times that he found no fault with Jesus.

They numbered him with the transgressors because they saw in him the perfectly innocent one, the perfect man, God in the flesh; and they hated him. More than in the crucifixion of the malefactors, whom all men would agree were despicable; in that act of the apostate church and the wicked world to number Jesus with the transgressors, man is laid bare in all his lawlessness, iniquity, and hatred of God and of all that is good. Not only did the church and the world condemn Jesus; but also, by crucifying him between two thieves, they declared him to be the absolutely worst thing that had ever happened to the earth.

That is what man always does with Christ. Man does not open his heart to Christ. Man crucifies Christ. The church and the world did that with Christ then, and man does that with Christ now. When Christ comes in the gospel and by the gospel declares that God justifies the ungodly, that righteousness is a gift freely imputed to believers, and that salvation is all of grace and all of God and all on the basis of Christ's atoning death; then man declares that gospel positively iniquitous, a careless and profane doctrine that makes whole churches and all those who believe it worldly, lawless, and evil. Thus man puts Christ among the lawless yet today!

And through that numbering of Christ with the transgressors, the scriptures were fulfilled! God decreed so. God judged Jesus so. God judged Jesus the worst sinner who ever walked on the earth. God judged Jesus to be worthy of death, worthy to be crucified and cursed.

Blessed scripture: numbered with the transgressors.

God numbered Jesus among the transgressors because he bore the sin of many. God says in Isaiah 53:12 that he will divide Christ a portion with the great and give him spoil with the strong. God will highly exalt Christ and give him a name that is above every name. Why? "Because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."

The sin of many.

Not the sin of all.

That was clear at the cross. Those two malefactors represented all men. All men as they are evil by nature, full of iniquity, and full of transgression. Men worthy of death and worthy of hell. And Jesus was crucified in the midst of them. Jesus divided between those two men. Jesus did. Jesus, as he was numbered among the transgressors, did not merely stand between those two men, exist between them, and hang between them; but he also divided between them. Jesus—Christ crucified—as he hung there at that moment and as the word of his cross comes throughout all of history to all kinds of people divides between people and people. That word finds all men alike. All men are the same by nature. They are murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, murderers of brothers and sisters, thieves and robbers,

adulterers and whoremongers, blasphemers and false swearers, and evildoers of every kind. And Jesus divides between them. He divides between them every time the gospel is preached and he is crucified among its hearers.

He divides between them because he bears the sin of many. Not the sin of all.

If he bore the sin of all, then he would not make division between men, and he would not

be the cause of division between men. If he died for all, then all men would have an equal chance to be saved, and then men themselves would make division among men.

But Jesus divides.

And Jesus divides because God divided. God made an eternal distinction between men. God appointed some to eternal damnation, and God appointed some to eternal salvation. God made a distinction between men by the election of grace and by a just reprobation.

And to carry out that decree, God sent Christ to bear the sin of many.

And God imputed to Christ the transgressions of many. Having imputed those transgressions to Christ, God numbered Christ among the transgressors. Indeed, God made Christ sin, who knew no sin. God made Christ a curse for his people, to deliver his people from the curse that they deserved. God counted Christ the worst criminal and sinner ever to live, so that his people might be accounted the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus.

And Christ willingly did the will of God.

Is that not plain from the prophecy of Isaiah, the scripture that was fulfilled? It was not merely that Christ was numbered among the transgressors. But Christ did

So unbelievers always number Christ among the transgressors. They number him among the transgressors when they condemn his doctrine as lawless and antinomian.

not defend himself, and he made intercession for those transgressors. Being found among the transgressors, he made intercession for them.

Is that not clear from the cross? Is that not clear from Jesus' very first word from the cross? "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Jesus interceded for his people. He found himself among them as transgressors, and he did not disown them and refuse to recognize them, but he had pity on them, and in his pity he prayed for them. "Forgive them, Lord, and blot me out!"

And God heard Christ. God listened to Christ. God poured out all of his wrath, his justice, and the holiness of his offended majesty upon Jesus Christ for all the sins of all God's people, which sins God imputed to Christ.

The fulfillment of scripture!

Scripture is the revelation of God's promise of salvation in Jesus Christ. The fulfillment of that scripture is thus the coming to pass of the word of God, the fulfillment of the promise of God that the salvation of all of God's people is accomplished in every respect by Jesus Christ, and the carrying out of what God decreed for their salvation from all eternity.

Because Christ was numbered among the transgressors, his people are numbered among the righteous, the law-keepers, the obedient, the blessed, and the holy. This is the gospel.

You may not count this gospel as antinomian and so number Christ among the lawless, as the church of his day did.

God does not number his people among the law-keepers, the obedient, the righteous, the blessed, and the holy because they keep the law themselves. They are by nature malefactors and ungodly. But they are numbered among the law-keepers, the obedient, the righteous, the blessed, and the holy because of Christ's work, which they receive by faith.

So this is the truth of the text: God numbered Christ among the antinomians, the lawless, the wicked, the iniquitous, and the evildoers because God imputed our sins to Jesus Christ. And God numbers us among the righteous, the holy, the obedient, the blessed, and the law-keepers because he imputes Christ's righteousness to us.

Do you believe that?

Then you are among the righteous!

You were numbered by God among the righteous eternally.

You are numbered by God among the righteous now.

You will be numbered by God among the righteous in the judgment.

By faith alone.

Not by your obedience.

—NJL

## FROM THE EDITOR

This issue of *Sword and Shield* treats the 1953 Formula of Subscription examination of Rev. Hubert De Wolf. In the early 1950s he was one of the three pastors of First Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, along with Rev. Herman Hoeksema and Rev. Cornelius Hanko. In those years a controversy was raging in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) over the doctrine of the covenant. Herman Hoeksema, Cornelius Hanko, George Ophoff, and others stood for the truth of God's unconditional covenant of grace. Hubert De Wolf, Andrew Petter, Edward Knott, and other ministers in the PRC stood for a conditional covenant, as taught by Dr. Klaas Schilder and the Liberated churches in the Netherlands.

In the midst of the controversy, Hubert De Wolf

preached a sermon during the evening worship service of April 15, 1951, on Luke 16:19–31, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In the course of his sermon, De Wolf proclaimed, "God promises every one of you that, if you believe, you shall be saved." Members of First Protestant Reformed Church protested the sermon, but the consistory was evenly divided and could come to no decisions on the protests.

Over a year later De Wolf preached a preparatory sermon on Matthew 18:3 during the evening worship service of September 14, 1952. In the course of his sermon, he preached, "Our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter into the kingdom."<sup>1</sup> Again protests came from the congregation to the consistory.

1 For the history of these sermons and their role in the PRC controversy of 1953, see Gertrude Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden: A Brief History of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1992), 176–83; Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 300–304; David J. Engelsma, *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant: The Declaration of Principles* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2013), 103–14.

This time the consistory of First Protestant Reformed Church required De Wolf to submit to an examination of his doctrine. Such an examination is called for in the Formula of Subscription and is therefore often known as a Formula of Subscription exam. The relevant passage is the last paragraph of the Formula of Subscription:

And further, if at any time the consistory, classis, or synod, upon sufficient grounds of suspicion and to preserve the uniformity and purity of doctrine, may deem it proper to require of us a further explanation of our sentiments respecting any particular article of the Confession of Faith, the Catechism, or the explanation of the national synod, we do hereby promise to be always willing and ready to comply with such requisition, under the penalty above mentioned, reserving for ourselves, however, the right of an appeal, whenever we shall believe ourselves aggrieved by the sentence of the consistory, the classis, or the synod, and until a decision is made upon such an appeal, we will acquiesce in the determination and judgment already passed. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 326)

The consistory of First Protestant Reformed Church conducted Reverend De Wolf's examination in February of 1953, with Rev. C. Hanko chairing. The consistory had drawn up a list of questions for Reverend De Wolf to answer. The questions all referred to the two statements in his sermons and asked De Wolf to explain these statements in light of the Reformed confessions. During the examination Chairman Hanko read the questions, and De Wolf was given opportunities to answer them. At the time a majority of the consistory of First Protestant Reformed Church supported De Wolf. The result of the examination was that the consistory approved De Wolf's examination, and he was cleared of all charges.

Appeals against this decision were brought to the May meeting of Classis East. At that meeting two reports were prepared to answer the appeals. The first report—the majority report—upheld De Wolf's statements and explained them as being orthodox. The second report—the minority report—condemned De Wolf's statements as being literally heretical. Although the majority report had the support of many at classis, the Lord led the classis to adopt the minority report and

to condemn the two statements of De Wolf. This led to further wrangling in First Protestant Reformed Church, with the final result that De Wolf and his supporters left the PRC.

The majority report, the minority report, and the history of the events of 1953 have been published and are widely available. See, for example, *For Thy Truth's Sake*, which includes the two reports as appendices.<sup>2</sup> But to my knowledge, Hubert De Wolf's examination in February of 1953 has not previously been published and is not widely available. The record of the examination still exists. Tape recordings of the examination were made, and a transcript of the examination was prepared. Although the transcript has surfaced from time to time, it was largely forgotten and its significance overlooked.

That all changed in 2021 when the Lord took home to glory Mr. Rich Van Baren, a member of First Reformed Protestant Church. As family members went through Mr. Van Baren's boxes of documents, they discovered a copy of the transcript of De Wolf's 1953 examination. As they read through it, they recognized its importance for the contemporary controversy between the PRC and the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC), and they began to share it with members of the RPC. De Wolf's 1953 examination has now been passed around and studied by many. The Berean Reformed Protestant Fellowship in Singapore masterfully analyzed this examination and showed its significance for today.<sup>3</sup>

The editors of *Sword and Shield* believe that it would be profitable to have the transcript of De Wolf's 1953 examination available to the reading public, especially to readers of *Sword and Shield*. In this way it can also be preserved for posterity and consulted for years to come. The examination is published in its entirety in this issue. The transcript was retyped by our indefatigable copy editors. Some changes were made to bring the punctuation of the transcript into the correct style, and spelling mistakes were corrected. However, the words themselves were retyped exactly as Rev. C. Hanko and Rev. H. De Wolf spoke them and then checked and rechecked for accuracy.

In this issue each editor has added his own analysis and comment on De Wolf's 1953 examination, which we pray will be profitable for the readership.

May the Lord speed the truths written herein to your hearts and the next issue into your hands.

—AL

2 "Report of the Committee of Pre-advice in Re Protests of the Revs. H. Hoeksema and G. M. Ophoff against the Consistory of First Church," majority report, in Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake*, 481–501; "Report of the Committee of Pre-advice in Re Protests of the Revs. H. Hoeksema and G. M. Ophoff against the Consistory of First Church," minority report, in Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake*, 502–3.

3 This analysis, "The PRCA's Controversy: The Return of 1953," can be found at Berean's YouTube page: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LbU8zEZCpg>.

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## *De Wolf's Examination*

### **Questions drawn up by the consistory of First Protestant Reformed Church for Rev. Hubert De Wolf's Formula of Subscription examination**

- I. In regard to your statement: "God promises every one of you that, if you believe, you shall be saved."
  1. Regarding this statement we ask you:
    - a. Do you still maintain it as it stands there?
    - b. On which article or articles of the confessions do you base this?
    - c. Is not this a general conditional promise (every one of you...if)?
    - d. Do you not see the difference between this and Heidelberg Catechism question 84: "Thus: when according to the command of Christ, it is declared and publicly testified to all and every believer, that, whenever they receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith," etc. Canons 2.5: "Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life." According to your statement, "God promises to every one of you"; according to the confessions, it is only to the believer, and to the consciousness of the believer, i.e., to the elect, that God addresses the promise.
    - e. Will not every Arminian subscribe to your statement, and is it not your calling, according to the Formula of Subscription, "to refute and contradict these errors"?
    - f. Is, according to your conviction, the promise conditional?
  2. Regarding the promise:
    - a. Heidelberg Catechism question 22 speaks of the promise as including the whole of our salvation, including the gift of the Holy Spirit and of faith. Is that promise conditional? County (*sic*) you say, "God promises to every one of you faith and the Holy Spirit?"
    - b. Heidelberg Catechism questions 65–7 speak of the promise:
      - 1) Question 65. Is faith here a condition or a means whereby we are made partakers of salvation?
      - 2) Question 65. The Holy Ghost works faith in our hearts. Is the gift of the Holy Spirit conditional?
- 3) Question 66. The promise of the gospel is that God "freely grants us the remission of sins and life eternal." This promise he seals unto us. What does it mean that God seals, and who are the "us"? How then can you maintain that "God promises (in the gospel and in the sacraments) that he will save every one of you, if (conditional) you believe?"
- 4) Question 67. Is the assurance by the Holy Ghost conditional?
- 5) Question 69. This question is very personal. Who is the "I"? Is it "every one of you"? To this person God addresses the promise forgiveness of sins. General? Conditional?
- 6) Question 70 adds to the promise "renewal by the Holy Ghost." Is that promise conditional?
- 7) Question 70 also adds to the promise sanctification, death unto sin, and the leading of holy lives. Is this condition or fruit?
- c. Question 74 speaks of the promise in infant baptism. The promise is redemption from sin and the Holy Ghost as the author of faith. Is this promise conditional? Is it to "every one of you if you believe"? Or is it unconditional and for the elect only?
- d. To whom do the personal pronouns refer in Netherlands Confession articles 34–35? To "every one of you" or to the believers, i.e., the elect?

3. As to unconditional election:
  - a. Canons 1A.6: If faith proceeds from God's decree, how can it be a condition?
  - b. In Canons 1A.8 will you explain the term "according as"? How can the application of election be conditional if election itself is unconditional?
  - c. Canons 1A.9: If faith, obedience of faith, holiness, etc. are no prerequisites in God's counsel, how can they be in its realization?
  - d. Canons 1B.5: If God in his eternal election did not foresee "faith, the obedience of faith, holiness, godliness, and perseverance" as conditions required beforehand, how can he see them as such in time? And if he does not see them as such, how can they be conditions at all?



Again, how can these be conditions and fruits at the same time?

4. As to faith:

- a. In Lord's Day 7 is faith presented as a condition or as a God-given means whereby he ingrafts us into Christ?
  - b. Likewise in question 53.
  - c. Likewise in Netherlands Confession article 22.
  - d. Canons 3–4.14: Is it (*sic*), perhaps, so that God bestows the power of faith, and that our act of believing is a condition unto salvation, or does he work both: the power and the act?
  - e. Heidelberg Catechism question 64. Is our walking in good works a condition unto the salvation, or are our good works the inevitable fruit of faith?
- Once more, in the light of all the above: Is it Reformed to preach that God promises every one of you, if you believe, that you shall be saved?

II. In regard to your doctrine that our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter into the kingdom of God:

1. In regard to this teaching of yours we ask:
  - a. Do you still maintain this doctrine as your (*sic*) preached it?
  - b. On what article of the confession do you base this teaching?
2. What, according to our confessions, is the meaning of prerequisite? Canons 1A.9; 1B.5.
3. Do you maintain that our act of conversion is *before* we enter into the kingdom of God? (Prerequisite.)
4. Are we not in the power of darkness before we enter into the kingdom of God? Heidelberg Catechism question 8, Netherlands Confession article 14, Canons 3–4.1–4, 10.
5. Are not our regeneration and conversion the entering into the kingdom? How, then, can conversion be *before* entering into the kingdom? Canons 3–4.10–12.
6. Is conversion, first of all, a work of God or an act of man? Canons 3–4.10–12.
7. Do we enter the kingdom, first of all, by our act of conversion or by God's work of translating us? Canons 3–4.10.
8. Are we, then, in the kingdom before we do or can convert ourselves? Canons 3–4.10–12. How, then, can our act of conversion be a prerequisite to enter into the kingdom?
9. Is not our act of conversion the fruit of our entering into the kingdom of God? Canons 3–4.12, 16.
10. Is our daily or continued conversion (or entering into the kingdom) first of all the work of God or the act of man? Canons 5.3, 6, 8.

11. Is our act of conversion a prerequisite consciously to enter into the kingdom, is our consciousness of being in the kingdom antecedent to our act of conversion, or are they simultaneous? Canons 5.7, 9, 11.
12. How, then, in the light of this clear teaching of our confessions, can you maintain that our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter?

**Transcript of Reverend De Wolf's Formula of Subscription exam, given by Rev. C. Hanko**

CHAIRMAN HANKO: "In regard to your statement"—I am reading now from the questions as drawn up before—"God promises every one of you that, if you believe, you shall be saved." Regarding this statement, we ask you: A. Do you still maintain it as it stands there?"

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, I maintain that that statement permits of a correct interpretation, although I have never maintained it is a concise expression of the truth. My interpretation of that statement is recorded in a letter of August 27, 1951, and in a letter to the consistory of September 5, 1951, which I read in the last meeting.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) "On which article or articles of the confessions do you base this?"

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, I would say that it isn't up to me to say on what article this statement is based, but it is up to the consistory to say which articles of the confessions this statement is supposed to contradict. That is according to the Formula of Subscription. I don't believe that a minister must be able to point to some particular article as a basis for every statement he makes. The confessions, I think we all hold, are a minimum and not a maximum of the truth.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) "Is not this a general conditional promise (every one of you...if)?"

REV. DE WOLF: As I explained before, by "God promises," I meant the same as God declares to you, or God assures you that if you believe, you shall be saved. That was really my meaning.

However, even if the idea of promise in the strict sense of the word be maintained, it refers only to that which follows upon believing. It does not, therefore, include the gift of the Holy Spirit and regeneration and faith. It simply certifies that this "shall be saved" will follow upon the believing. This promise of being saved, is, therefore, not general but is limited by the "if you believe."

Moreover, the faith through which one believes is the gift of God, which he unconditionally bestows upon the

elect. What is general is not what God promises to do but the proclamation of what God promises to do for everyone who believes.

And, as I said, Mr. Chairman, it was not my intention to in any way bring in the idea of conditions. I had no intention of doing that, but since I am being held responsible for that statement, and since it seems that the consistory is not satisfied with what I mean—although it at one time did accept my meaning and interpretation and then retracted and demanded that I take back the statement, as such. I feel that now I am held responsible for something which I really didn't mean to say in the beginning when I made the statement. But I am still of the opinion that you can defend this statement, and I shall attempt to do that, Mr. Chairman.

And I would like to quote some authorities for that. I would like to read a little bit, if I may, from a pamphlet entitled *Calvin, Berkhoff (sic) and H. J. Kuiper, A Comparison*, page 32, and on 35 and 56.

He affirms here [that is, Calvin] what we have always taught, as we have written often in the past, that inasfar as the message is general and comes to all, it is conditional. The offer is eternal life. The condition limiting this offer is "turn from your wicked ways." This condition makes the contents of the general message particular. Just as we have emphasized in the past, a contention our opponents have tried to laugh to scorn, there is a general proclamation of a conditional and particular gospel. He promises to all that believe, peace and eternal life. Thus is the plain exposition of Calvin on this passage. He teaches all that hear a conditional doctrine. If ye turn, ye shall live, and because it is conditional, it is also particular.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to say that I would not go along with that statement myself. I don't believe I would say it that way. If I was to speak of particular and conditional, I would turn that around, and I would say that because it is particular, it is conditional, and not because it is conditional, it is particular, but the statement reads here,

And because it is conditional, it is also particular, and God, in reality promises eternal life only to the elect, for it is quite certain, according to Calvin, that men do not turn from their wicked ways on their own accord, nor by any instinct of nature. It is equally certain that none turn from their wickedness but the elect, therefore, the contents of this externally general message is particular, and applies only to the elect of God.

I believe, Mr. Chairman, that the Rev. Hoeksema, who is the protestant in this case, used the word "promise" in the same sense in which I meant to use it in this statement, when he wrote in another pamphlet. By the way, there is more in this book that I wanted to read. I want to read on page 35, (reading):

And Calvin explains that the two members of the text (this is out of Ezekiel) must not be separated; that God in the text, as taken as a whole, promises life only to them that turn from their wicked way, and that, therefore, the contents of this gospel is conditional and particular. That moreover, the condition can never be fulfilled by the natural man, but only by those to whom God gives grace of repentance, and that God gives this grace of repentance only to the elect, so that, according to Calvin there is in these words nothing that is in conflict with the doctrine of eternal predestination.

We find then on page 56,

Secondly, the passage is in plain denial of the view that the gospel is a message of peace to all without distinction. It is a power of salvation to them that believe only. Though the outward calling is general, the preaching is conditional and particular nevertheless.

As I was saying, the Rev. Hoeksema has used that idea of promise in that same—I would say the loose sense—in which I meant to use it when he wrote in his sermons on Romans on page 296 of that book,

Does not the Word of God clearly promise: "Ask and it shall be given you. Seek and ye shall find. Knock and it shall be opened unto you. For everyone that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened." And when the Lord says, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give unto you rest," does not then the fulfillment of this promise of rest depend upon our coming to him, and is it not, besides, the experience of every sinner that is saved, that he found God only in the way of seeking him; or is there ever a sinner that finds God without having sought him; has found peace in the everlasting arms without having inquired after him? To be sure, only he that asketh receiveth. Never he that asks not. Only he that seeketh, findeth. Never he that seeks not. Only to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Never to him that knocks not. Only to them that

come unto him is the promise of rest, not to them that refuse to come. Therefore, only in the way of seeking God and inquiring after him can we ever find him.

I have one more quotation, Mr. Chairman, which reads as follows, from page 227 of this same book.

The sole requirement unto salvation is that you believe on him, and call upon his name, and there is no but. If you put your confidence for righteousness upon the Christ, and upon him only, you shall be saved. In this gospel there is no appendix. There is nothing to be added. It must stand alone, absolutely alone.

That, Mr. Chairman, is the answer to that question.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) “Do you not see the difference between this and Heidelberg Catechism question 84: ‘Thus: When according to the command of Christ it is declared and publicly testified to all and every believer, that, whenever they receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith,’ etc. Canons 2.5: ‘Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life.’ According to your statement, ‘God promises to every one of you.’ According to the confessions, it is only to the believer, and to the consciousness of the believer, i.e., to the elect, that God addresses the promise.”

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, there is a problem here, I feel, and it would not, perhaps, be right for me to say that I don’t see any difference here. Yet I believe that I may say that essentially, essentially as far as the truth itself is concerned, there really isn’t any essential difference. The difference is mainly due to the fact that—at least I feel that the difference to a great extent is due to the fact that my statement is in the form of direct discourse, while those that are quoted are in the form of indirect discourse. So that actually there is no discrepancy here.

According to my statement, God addresses the promise of salvation to the believer, to the consciousness of every hearer. I would like to have that plain, Mr. Chairman. God addresses the promise of salvation to the believer, to the consciousness of every hearer. The promise itself is always to the believer, and never to everyone, irrespective of whether or not he believes. Therefore, if one believes, he has the promise. If he does not believe, he does not have the promise. And since God gives the grace to believe only to the elect, it must follow that the promise is only for the elect. Really, the thing I meant to convey in that particular sermon, and in that expression, was that God confronts

everyone in my audience with the fact, “If you believe, you will be saved.” That fact, I called that a promise.

I have explained before that by promise I really meant there the assurance in the sense that the word of God is a promise; that you may take God at his word. If you believe, you will be saved, and I think you can say that to anyone, Mr. Chairman. That does not predicate any ability at all as to whether or not he is able. It says nothing about that. It simply states this fact, that the believer is surely saved. And when you say that in direct discourse, then you say, if you believe, you will be saved. That is my answer, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) “Will not every Arminian subscribe to your statement, and is it not your calling, according to the Formula of Subscription, ‘to refute and contradict these errors?’”

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, this question implies really what it ought to prove, namely, that anything with which an Arminian agrees is erroneous. I am sure that any Arminian will subscribe to the doctrine of the Trinity and of the virgin birth. And I would ask, are they, therefore, false doctrines that are to be refuted because the Arminian also agrees to them? The fact that an Arminian agrees with a statement of a Reformed man does not condemn that statement. It is a question of interpretation. This is always true, and that’s true also of many texts of scripture, as I have written to the consistory before in one of my letters. That is true with such a text as John 3:16. And I think that in the context of my sermon, Mr. Chairman, I did not leave any room for an Arminian interpretation, and I certainly refuted it when I made very plain that it was only by the grace of God which he sovereignly bestows upon his elect that we are able to do this. And I said that, Mr. Chairman, in so many words, and I don’t think that any Arminian is going to agree with that. That is my answer, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) “F. Is, according to your conviction, the promise conditional?”

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, here, you see, once again you have—this puts me on the spot. I have never gone out of my way to preach conditional promise. I have never done that, but now I am being driven to the very extreme because of this one statement I made. It has got to be exploited to the very end. And, of course, I will try to defend that. If that’s a conditional promise, I will try to defend it because I made that statement. Although, I say once again, it was not my intention, as I said to the consistory more than once. And I still believe that the interpretation I gave of promise is a very usual one which we use very often

and which has been used in the past. Perhaps it was a little bit dumb of me that I didn't realize that I shouldn't have used the word "promise" there because of the implications which it might have, but which I do not believe it necessarily has to have.

I would answer that question, Mr. Chairman, by saying that it depends on you mean (*sic*), in the first place, by "promise," and in the second place, by "conditional." If by "promise" you mean all that belongs to our salvation, including the Holy Spirit, regeneration, and faith, it is never conditional, never; and if you mean by "conditional" that God is dependent in the realization of salvation on what man of himself must do, that promise is never conditional.

However, I believe that you can find in scripture the promise of salvation in an eschatological sense of the word, and that that is often presented in a conditional form. I think that you have that in many instances. I could quote from scripture, Mr. Chairman, such texts as Revelation 3—well, very many texts in Revelation 3, if you will allow me just a moment's time to look it up—not only in 3 but in these churches to which the Lord writes. I had a reference here to 3:21—just a moment—I know there are others here. I didn't take the pains of looking up a lot of references on this.

"To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne." You have it also in Revelation 3:10 and 12: "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon earth." 11: "Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown." "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God," etc.

I believe that there are also many instances in scripture in which God assures us that he will do something if we will do something. At least, I say, that that's the form which it comes to us in scripture. You have that, for example, in Malachi. Malachi 3:7, in the last part of verse 7: "Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts." I say that that is the form, that comes to us in this form, that if we do something, God will do something. You have in verse 10, where the Lord says, "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

I find the same thing, Mr. Chairman, in James 4:8 and 10: "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you." In some sense, Mr. Chairman, there is an action of God that

follows upon our action. Verse 10: "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up."

You have in the Old Testament—I don't have to read it, in 1 Kings 11:38, the conditional promise to Jeroboam: "You keep my statutes; walk in my way, and I will establish your house."

The Lord even says to Cain, "If thou doest good, shall it not be well with thee?"

And, of course, Psalm 81, the verses 8 to the end, I think, expresses the very same thing:

8. Hear, O my people, and I will testify unto thee: O Israel, if thou wilt hearken unto me;
9. There shall no strange god be in thee; neither shalt thou worship any strange god.
10. I am the LORD thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt: open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it.
11. But my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me.
12. So I gave them up unto their own hearts' lust: and they walked in their own counsels.
13. Oh that my people had hearkened unto me, and Israel had walked in my ways!
14. I should soon have subdued their enemies, and turned my hand against their adversaries." Etc.

That, Mr. Chairman, is the answer to that question.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: That brings us to 2. "Regarding the promise. A. Heidelberg Catechism question 22 speaks of the promise as including the whole of our salvation, including the gift of the Holy Spirit and of faith. Is that promise conditional? Could you say, 'God promises to every one of you faith and the Holy Spirit?'"

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, I feel a little bit piqued about this, if I may say that—with no malice. I preached on the Heidelberg Catechism for eight years. I can't understand that the consistory comes and questions me on that after hearing me all the time. I don't believe there is even any suggestion in anything that I preached of what these questions imply. I would say that simply in general. I have preached for eight years on the Catechism, and the elders have always given me the hand on it; and I have never had any objection to the things I have said when I explained the Catechism. Now, of course, I am being quizzed on it, and it is my duty to submit, Mr. Chairman. I humbly do so.

Question 22. Would the elders please take their Psalter out if you do not have them. I would like to have you look at those things. In the first place, Mr. Chairman, in question 22, you have a question of exegesis. You have the problem there. What is meant by the promise? Now, if you follow

the idea of the promise from here on in the Catechism, you will find that the Catechism is speaking of the promise from a very particular point of view, which, I believe, is also mentioned later on. Namely, the point of view of what you have in question 66—the answer there, the promise of the gospel that God freely grants us the remission of sins and eternal life.

Now, I do realize, Mr. Chairman, that the promise referred to here in question 22 may very well, and I believe it does, I think I would be ready to say that, and I haven't looked up my sermons that I preached on this particular question; but I think the usual interpretation is that this promise includes all that God has promised in his word, in the comprehensive sense of the word, from the very beginning, including the cross of Christ and his resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and all that God has promised; and that including also the gift of the Holy Spirit and faith.

Now, of course, Mr. Chairman, I have never contended that that would be conditional. Never. I wouldn't say that now. I simply don't believe that. That would be Arminianism. That would mean that the Holy Spirit and faith depends upon something that man does. It would, in fact, be a contradiction in terms, unless it would have to imply, necessarily, that faith was man's own work, and then it couldn't be a gift of God, and he couldn't receive it either from God, so, certainly that is not conditional. But a promise made to a conscious believer, Mr. Chairman, cannot include faith and the Holy Spirit because he already possesses them. I mean when the gospel comes to me as a believer, I confess that that faith whereby I believe has been given me of God. I certainly confess that, but I do not appropriate faith by means of faith, and that's why the promise as it comes to the believer—and that is really the promise of which the Catechism is speaking in the rest of these questions that follow—that promise does not include the gift of the Holy Spirit and faith, because he is a believer. He already has the Holy Spirit and faith, but it refers to what you have in 66 there, as I have mentioned before.

Of course, no Reformed man will ever say that God promises to every one of you faith and the Holy Spirit, and I didn't say that, Mr. Chairman. It certainly would have been ridiculous for me to say that. To say that God promises every one of you that if you believe, he will give you faith and the Holy Spirit, how in the world would that be possible? But I don't believe that it is ridiculous to say that if you believe, you will be saved. Then that salvation must mean salvation as conscious reality. And I believe that in that conscious sense, as we experience salvation, that that salvation is contingent on our believing and that that

believing of ours is, of course, again, the fruit of the grace of God which he bestows sovereignly upon his people. I think that—well, I don't have to—I was going to say I am in good company there too. I was going to give you a quote. Maybe I can pass it up. That's all right. I will let it go at that, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) “Heidelberg Catechism questions 65–71 speak of the promise. Question 65 reads,

Since then we are made partakers of Christ and all his benefits by faith only, whence doth this faith proceed?

Answer: From the Holy Ghost, who works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and confirms it by the use of the sacraments.

Is faith here a condition or a means whereby we are made partakers of salvation?”

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, the Catechism presents it here as a means, but I fail to find that the Catechism mentions faith as included in the promise here. The promise here is clearly defined as: “that he grants us freely the remission of sin, and life eternal, for the sake of” the suffering of Christ, I believe, etc., you will find in answer 66. That is my answer, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) 2 on the same question. “The Holy Ghost works faith in our hearts. Is the gift of the Holy Spirit conditional?”

REV. DE WOLF: Again, Mr. Chairman, I fail to find that the Catechism says anything about the gift of the Holy Spirit here, and that it is included in the promise, that is, in this particular promise here that the Catechism is speaking of. I hope you understand what I mean. It doesn't even mention anything about the gift of the Holy Spirit. Now, the question is, “The Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts. Is the gift of the Holy Spirit conditional?”

Mr. Chairman, that all depends on what specific aspect of the gift of the Holy Spirit is meant. If you mean in the initial sense, never conditional. Or, if you mean that the Holy Spirit can only do something if we do something, never conditional. God is never dependent on man.

I have never preached that. I don't believe that. I would never preach that. God is never dependent on man.

But, Mr. Chairman, you do find in the Catechism that those who pray receive the Holy Spirit; that God gives his Holy Spirit only to those who sincerely desire that Holy Spirit; and that for that purpose prayer is necessary. And so I would say, from that point of view, you could possibly say in the sphere, on the plane of our experience, as we

experience these blessings of salvation as rational, moral creatures; and because God has instituted means with which he has connected his grace and Spirit, that, therefore, yes, you could say, in a sense, that the gift of the Holy Spirit is conditional upon the use of those means. I think you may say that, but in the sense that the Catechism means it here, my answer is no.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) Question 66 reads:

What are the sacraments?

Answer: The sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals, appointed of God for this end, that by the use thereof he may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel, viz., that he grants us freely the remission of sin and life eternal, for the sake of that one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross.

(Chairman continuing reading from prepared questions) “The promise of the gospel is that God ‘freely grants us the remission of sins and life eternal.’ This promise he seals unto us. What does it mean that God seals, and who are the ‘us’?”

REV. DE WOLF: Do you want me to answer that first?

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Probably better, yes.

REV. DE WOLF: Of course, here you have the very particular aspect of the promise mentioned and defined, to which I have already referred. I would answer that question, Mr. Chairman, by saying that God seals, that righteousness is by faith; and, therefore, every believer receives this assurance. God seals that fact. That means he makes that fact sure to every believer. And if you ask who are “us” then, of course, it is very evident here that the “us” are the believers.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: The last part of this question reads: (Reading) “How then can you maintain that ‘God promises (in the gospel and in the sacraments) that he will save every one of you, if (conditional) you believe?’”

REV. DE WOLF: Because, Mr. Chairman, “If you believe” means that you are a believer to whom God seals the promise of which the Catechism speaks here, namely, the forgiveness of sin and life eternal. If you weren’t a believer, you couldn’t believe. That is my answer, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: “Question 67.” Question 67 reads:

Are both word and sacraments, then, ordained and appointed for this end, that they may direct our faith to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?

Answer. Yes, indeed: for the Holy Ghost teaches us in the gospel, and assures us by the sacraments, that the whole of our salvation depends upon that one sacrifice of Christ which he offered for us on the cross.

The question is, “Is the assurance by the Holy Ghost conditional?”

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, that question is very ambiguous. I have three answers for that because there are three possibilities there. Perhaps I could ask the committee which one they had in mind. But if you want me to read what I have here, Mr. Chairman, I will give my three answers—my three possibilities, I mean.

If you will pardon me while I look it up. I am dealing mostly with the answer here, of course.

Now, I would say if you mean the assurance of which this question and answer speaks, the answer is no. The Holy Spirit never assures us of anything else. There is no condition upon which the Holy Spirit would ever assure us that our salvation is not all in Christ, and that is the assurance of which this particular Lord’s Day speaks, Mr. Chairman. That’s why I asked that question.

Notice, if I may explain it to you, thus. What is that, 67? Yes. (Reading) “For the Holy Ghost teaches us in the gospel, and assures us by the sacraments, that the whole of our salvation depends upon that one sacrifice of Christ which he offered for us on the cross.”

Now, upon no condition would the Holy Spirit assure us of anything else than that, Mr. Chairman. That is the only thing that the Holy Spirit ever assures us of—that our salvation is entirely in Christ.

I feel, however, that evidently is not the meaning here.

If it means, on the other hand, that in the initial sense, the Holy Spirit cannot assure us unless we first do something—if that’s the meaning of this question—is the assurance of the Holy Spirit that we are—that our salvation is wholly in Christ—if that assurance depends on something in you and me, then it is not conditional. Couldn’t be. That would simply be Pelagian.

However, if you mean by assurance of the Holy Spirit the conscious personal assurance of our personal participation in that salvation, if that’s what you mean—but that’s really not what the Catechism is speaking of here. If that’s what you mean, then my answer is yes. It’s conditional. It is from the subjective point of view of our experience.

And for proof, Mr. Chairman, I quote question and answer 86 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Question 86 reads:

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?

Answer: Because Christ, having redeemed and delivered us by his blood, also renews us by his Holy Spirit after his own image; that so we may testify by the whole of our conduct our gratitude to God for his blessings, and that he may be praised by us; also, that every one may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof; and that by our godly conversation others may be gained to Christ.

I do not have that in mind.

Canons 5, article 5 reads:

By such enormous sins, however, they very highly offend God, incur a deadly guilt, grieve the Holy Spirit, interrupt the exercise of faith, very grievously wound their consciences, and sometimes lose the sense of God's favor for a time, until, on their returning into the right way of serious repentance, the light of God's fatherly countenance again shines upon them.

You cannot have—I mean the Catechism makes very plain—you cannot have the assurance of your personal enjoyment of that salvation when you live in sin. You have that only in the way of sanctification. Article 11 of this same head. Article 11 reads:

The scripture moreover testifies that believers in this life have to struggle with various carnal doubts, and that under grievous temptations they are not always sensible of this full assurance of faith and certainty of persevering. But God, who is the Father of all consolation, does not suffer them to be tempted above that they are able, but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that they may be able to bear it (1 Cor. 10:13), and by the Holy Spirit again inspires them with the comfortable assurance of persevering.

And, finally, in this same head, article 13. Article 13 reads:

Neither does renewed confidence of persevering produce licentiousness or a disregard to piety in those who are recovering from backsliding; but it renders them much more careful and solicitous to continue in the ways of the Lord, which he hath ordained, that they who walk therein may maintain an assurance of persevering; lest, by abusing his fatherly kindness, God should turn away his gracious countenance from them, to behold which is to the godly dearer than life, the withdrawing whereof is more bitter than death, and they in consequence hereof should fall into more grievous torments of conscience.

Now, I believe that those articles show, Mr. Chairman, that the assurance of the Holy Spirit, that is, the assurance which the Holy Spirit works concerning our personal participation in that salvation, is conditional, from the point of view of our experience, upon many things— upon sanctification, I would say, as long as we remember—as long as we remember, Mr. Chairman, that persevering is always the fruit of preservation. That's my answer.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) Question 69 reads:

How art thou admonished and assured by holy baptism that the one sacrifice of Christ upon the cross is of real advantage to thee?

Answer. Thus: that Christ appointed this external washing with water, adding thereto this promise, that I am as certainly washed by his blood and Spirit from all the pollution of my soul, that is, from all my sins, as I am washed externally with water, by which the filthiness of the body is commonly washed away.

This question is very personal. Who is the "I"? Is it "every one of you"? To this person God addresses the promised forgiveness of sins. General? Conditional?

REV. DE WOLF: What question is that, Mr. Chairman?

CHAIRMAN HANKO: 5 under B.

REV. DE WOLF: My answer to the first part, Mr. Chairman, is, the believer who consciously appropriates the promise that is added to the sacrament.

The second part—well, I would like to say that I believe that I limited the "every one" by saying, "If you believe." I certainly limited the "every one" to the believers.

As far as the really receiving the promise is concerned, the promise is given to the believers. Only he who is a believer can appropriate that promise, even though it was proclaimed to everyone in the audience.

Nevertheless, although God addresses this promise to the believer, let me read what I have here. (Reading) "This promise is proclaimed to the whole church every time the sacrament is administered. Nevertheless, only the believer receives it because it cannot be appropriated except by faith. Whether or not we consciously appropriate that promise, therefore, depends on the conscious activity of faith. You must believe in order to appropriate that promise.

Therefore, the act of faith may be said to be the condition for appropriating the promise. The act of faith may be said to be the condition for the appropriating of the promise, and faith is the gift of God to his elect, enabling them—(End of recording tape).

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Did you finish your answer to 5?

REV. DE WOLF: Yes, I will let it go at that, Mr. Chairman. I think that's sufficient.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Question 70 reads:

What is it to be washed with the blood and Spirit of Christ?

Answer. It is to receive of God the remission of sins freely, for the sake of Christ's blood, which he shed for us by his sacrifice upon the cross; and also to be renewed by the Holy Ghost, and sanctified to be members of Christ, that so we may more and more die unto sin and lead holy and unblamable lives.

(Reading from prepared questions) "Question 70 adds to the promise 'renewal by the Holy Ghost.' Is that promise conditional?"

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, it is not true that this is added to the promise. That is not correct. The Catechism does not say that. In question 69 it says that Christ adds to the external sign of baptism "the promise that, etc." as you find it there.

But in question 70 the Catechism does not speak of what is added to the promise. It speaks of something entirely different—not what we are promised, but what we have in the essence of spiritual baptism. That's what the Catechism is speaking of here—not what Christ promises us, but what he gives us in the essence of spiritual baptism. It refers to what God does for us, and in us, as believers. That's my answer, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) "Question 70 also adds to the promise sanctification, death unto sin, and the leading of holy lives. Is this condition or fruit?"

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, this is neither fruit nor condition, but it is the contents of spiritual baptism. He who is truly baptized receives these things. You cannot possibly receive true baptism without receiving these things. This is what you have in true baptism. It is neither one.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading from Catechism all of question 74) Question 74 reads:

Are infants also to be baptized?

Answer. Yes; for since they, as well as the adult, are included in the covenant and church of God; and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them no less than to the adult; they must therefore by baptism, as a sign of

the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian church, and be distinguished from the children of unbelievers as was done in the old covenant or testament by circumcision, instead of which baptism is instituted in the new covenant.

This question (reading from prepared questions) "speaks of the promise in infant baptism. The promise is redemption from sin and the Holy Ghost as the author of faith. Is this promise conditional? Is it to 'Every one of you if you believe,' or is it unconditional and for the elect only?"

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, if I may make a remark, this is very remote from anything, of course, that I said in that statement. But my answer is no. An infant cannot receive this promise by a conscious faith. This is an abstract promise to the elect, that is, to the elect church, and is consciously appropriated by the believer. That's my answer.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Netherlands Confession, articles 34 and 35. It won't be necessary, I don't think, to read the whole articles. (Reading from prepared questions) "To whom do the personal pronouns refer in Netherlands Confession, articles 34, 35. To 'every one of you' or to the believers, i.e., the elect?"

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, in my own defense, once again, I did not simply say, "Every one of you." In the second place, to the believer, of course. It is the believer here who makes confession of faith. That's my answer.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) "3. As to unconditional election, Canons 1A.6 reads:

That some receive the gift of faith from God and others do not receive it proceeds from God's eternal decree, "For known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18). "Who worketh all things after the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11). According to which decree he graciously softens the hearts of the elect, however obstinate, and inclines them to believe, while he leaves the non-elect in his just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy. And herein is especially displayed the profound, the merciful, and at the same time the righteous discrimination between men equally involved in ruin; or that decree of election and reprobation, revealed in the word of God, which, though men of perverse, impure, and unstable minds wrest to their own destruction, yet to holy and pious souls affords unspeakable consolation.

(Reading from prepared questions) "If faith proceeds from God's decree, how can it be a condition?"



REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, would you give me your judgment of number 3—the whole of number 3? Is it correct that the consistory also suspects me of believing in conditional election? Is that correct? The consistory accepted these questions, but is that true that I am suspected of believing in conditional election? I wasn't aware of that fact, and yet I am being questioned. I can answer these questions if you want me to, but it seems to me that it certainly isn't apropos. I wasn't aware of the fact that I was being suspected of that. Of course, the consistory hasn't anything in the minutes whereof I am suspected.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Will you, nevertheless, answer the question?

REV. DE WOLF: All right, Mr. Chairman, 3A. Because God has decreed faith as a means unto salvation, and therefore it often occurs in the function of a condition—notice, I say in the function of a condition—in such instances as, for example, “Believe and thou shalt be saved. Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it.”—which certainly means faith—and God, when he realizes his salvation in the elect as rational, moral creatures, has the right in the preaching of the gospel to demand of every one who hears that gospel, that he will believe, even though he has sovereignly determined to give that faith only to the elect, in order that they may be able to comply with that demand. God may demand faith of every one, and God may also sovereignly give his grace, as he does only to his elect who comply with that demand. And, therefore, faith could—faith could appear in the function of a condition, from that point of view. That is my answer.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: “In Canons 1A.8,” I will read the article. Article 8 reads:

There are not various decrees of election, but one and the same decree respecting all those who shall be saved, both under the Old and New Testament; since the scripture declares the good pleasure, purpose, and counsel of the divine will to be one, according to which he hath chosen us from eternity, both to grace and glory, to salvation and the way of salvation, which he hath ordained that we should walk therein.

(Reading from prepared questions) “Will you explain the term ‘according as’? How can the application of election be conditional if election itself is unconditional?”

REV. DE WOLF: Is that the question?

CHAIRMAN HANKO: That is right.

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, of course, there is no “according as” in that article. I imagine that was supposed to be “according to.”

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Correct.

REV. DE WOLF: My explanation is, if the meaning of the question is that the application of God's election is conditional in the sense that it depends on something which man himself must do in order that God's salvation of the elect may be realized in him, then it is certainly unconditional. But that does not mean that God cannot work out what he has decreed by confronting his people with pedagogical conditions. God is never conditioned by anything that man does. Never. And I think that's what this article is speaking of. That's my answer.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) Article 9 reads:

This election was not founded upon foreseen faith, and the obedience of faith, holiness, or any other good quality or disposition in man, as the prerequisite, cause, or condition on which it depended; but men are chosen to faith and to the obedience of faith, holiness, etc. Therefore election is the fountain of every saving good, from which proceed faith, holiness, and the other gifts of salvation, and finally eternal life itself, as its fruits and effects, according to that of the apostle: “He hath chosen us (not because we were, but) that we should be holy, and without blame before him in love” (Eph. 1:4).

(Chairman reading from prepared questions) “If faith, obedience of faith, holiness, etc. are no prerequisites in God's counsel, how can they be in its realization?”

REV. DE WOLF: Well, Mr. Chairman, once again, when you speak here of conditions or prerequisites, I would like to have it clear that any condition which man fulfills, he fulfills only by the grace of God; and any prerequisite which he fulfills, he fulfills by the grace of God. I would like to have that clear and that, therefore, that condition and prerequisite can only pertain to the subjective realization of any decrees or salvation which God grants. And my answer to that question then, in that light, would be that they are decreed in God's counsel to appear in time as requirements but not as prerequisites upon which the counsel of God's election depended.

And that's the doctrine of the Arminian. He makes this the work of man. And God saw it beforehand, and so that's the reason he is elected. He meets the condition—of himself he meets the condition—and God saw that, and that's why God elected him. And that is Arminianism. That is my answer, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Now, turning to Canons 1B.5. Article 5, Canons reads:

Who teach that the incomplete and non-decisive election of particular persons to salvation occurred because of a foreseen faith, conversion, holiness, godliness, which either began or continued for some time; but that the complete and decisive election occurred because of foreseen perseverance unto the end in faith, conversion, holiness and godliness; and that this is the gracious and evangelical worthiness for the sake of which he who is chosen is more worthy than he who is not chosen; and that therefore faith, the obedience of faith, holiness, godliness, and perseverance are not fruits of the unchangeable election unto glory, but are conditions which, being required beforehand, were foreseen as being met by those who will be fully elected, and are causes without which the unchangeable election to glory does not occur.

This is repugnant to the entire scripture, which constantly inculcates this and similar declarations: Election is not out of works, but of him that calleth (Rom. 9:11). "And as many as were ordained to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy" (Eph. 1:4). "Ye did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). "But if it be of grace, it is no more of works" (Rom. 11:6). "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son" (1 John 4:10).

(Reading prepared question) "If God in his eternal election did not foresee 'faith, the obedience of faith, holiness, godliness, and perseverance' as conditions required beforehand, how can he see them as such in time? And if he does not see them as such, how can they be conditions at all?"

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, in the main, my answer to that question is the same as the one above, the one that was answered, that you asked me before. I would like to add this, that election and the consciousness of our election are two different things. We can make our calling and election sure, the scripture calls us to do that. But that does not mean that we decide our election for God. Man is not elected because he believes, and God didn't choose him because he was going to believe or persevere to the end, as that article also states, because it refutes the Arminian doctrine there. But man believes because he is elected. That's what I believe. That is my answer.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading question) "Again, how can these be conditions and fruits at the same time?"

REV. DE WOLF: Because, Mr. Chairman, fruit and condition are not mutually exclusive. Something can be a fruit and at the same time can assume the function of a condition. Therefore, scripture often admonishes us to bring forth fruits; threatens us when we do not bring forth fruit; and pronounces us the more blessed in the measure that we do bring forth fruit. I think that is taught in our confessions, and I could show that if necessary, but I will let that go.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: 4 deals with the subject of faith (Lord's Day 7). (Reading) "In Lord's Day 7, 1. Is faith presented as a condition or as a God-given means whereby he engrafts us into Christ?" based on question 20. Question 20 reads:

Are all men then, as they perished in Adam, saved by Christ?

Answer. No, only those who are ingrafted into him, and receive all his benefits, by a true faith.

REV. DE WOLF: The answer is, Mr. Chairman, as a means, as an active means.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: You mean a God-given active means?

REV. DE WOLF: That is correct.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Question 53. Question 53 reads:

What dost thou believe concerning the Holy Ghost?

Answer. First, that he is true and co-eternal God with the Father and the Son; secondly, that he is also given me, to make me, by a true faith, partaker of Christ and all his benefits, that he may comfort me and abide with me forever.

(Reading from prepared questions) "Is faith presented here as a condition or as a God-given means whereby he engrafts us into Christ?"

REV. DE WOLF: Did you read the right one there, Mr. Chairman?

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Question 53.

REV. DE WOLF: Question 53.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Particularly this part: "secondly, that he is also given me, to make me, by a true faith, partaker of Christ and all his benefits."

REV. DE WOLF: Yes, that is correct. That's correct, Mr. Chairman. The Holy Spirit is, of course, the agent and means. And—what is the question there?

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Is faith presented as a condition or as a God-given means?

REV. DE WOLF: A means which the Holy Spirit works.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Netherlands Confession, article 22. Article 22 reads:

We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Ghost kindleth in our hearts an upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all his merits, appropriates him, and seeks nothing more besides him. For it must needs follow, either that all things which are requisite to our salvation are not in Jesus Christ, or, if all things are in him, that then those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in him. Therefore, for any to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that something more is required besides him, would be too gross a blasphemy; for hence it would follow that Christ was but half a Savior.

Therefore, we justly say with Paul, that we are justified by faith alone, or by faith without works. However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all his merits and so many holy works which he has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness. And faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with him in all his benefits, which, when become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.

Again, the question is whether faith is presented as a condition or as a God-given means?

REV. DE WOLF: I can answer that question in a lot less time than what it took you to ask it, Mr. Chairman. It is the same as the others. It is a means. It is, of course, a means that, whereby we embrace, as the article also states, enabling us to embrace, etc.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Canons 3–4.14. Article 14 reads:

Faith is therefore to be considered as the gift of God, not on account of its being offered by God to man, to be accepted or rejected at his pleasure, but because it is in reality conferred, breathed, and infused into him; or even because God bestows the power or ability to believe, and then expects

that man should by the exercise of his own free will consent to the terms of salvation and actually believe in Christ, but because he who works in man both to will and to do, and indeed all things in all, produces both the will to believe and the act of believing also.

(Reading from prepared questions) “Is it, perhaps, so that God bestows the power of faith, and that our act of believing is a condition unto salvation, or does he work both: the power and the act?”

REV. DE WOLF: Either the consistory suspects me of not believing the Canons, or otherwise this is, with no malice, Mr. Chairman, an insult to my intelligence. It says there that it is both. You read it.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: And you agree with that?

REV. DE WOLF: Of course.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Heidelberg, question 64. Question 64 reads:

But doth not this doctrine make men careless and profane?

Answer: By no means; for it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.

(Reading from prepared questions) “Is our walking in good works a condition unto the salvation, or are our good works the inevitable fruit of faith?”

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, I have never contended that there are conditions unto salvation in that comprehensive sense of the word. I believe, however, that there are conditions to the enjoyment of our salvation, and I think that that can be shown upon the basis of scripture. And I say once again, Mr. Chairman, conditions which we fulfill by the grace of God, not that we do anything of ourselves, not at all.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) “Once more, in the light of all the above, is it Reformed to preach that God promises every one of you, if you believe, that you shall be saved?”

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, if you interpret that as I do, and make plain as I did also in my sermon, that the faith to believe is the sovereign gift of God to his elect, that statement can stand. That's my answer.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Now we turn to the matter of the second sermon with regard to conversion. (Reading from prepared questions) “3. In regard to your doctrine that our

act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter into the kingdom of God: 1. In regard to this teaching of yours, we ask: A. Do you still maintain this doctrine as you preached it?"

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, that's no special doctrine of mine. My answer is yes.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) "B. On what article of the confession do you base this teaching?"

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, my answer to that question is the very same as the answer to that similar question you asked me before at the beginning. I don't believe I have to read that again. I can save you time by simply telling you that. I will read it, if you want me to.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Will you read it?

REV. DE WOLF: Yes, Mr. Chairman. (Reading) "It is not for me to say on what article this statement is based. It is up to the consistory to say which article of the confessions this statement is supposed to contradict. That is according to the Formula of Subscription. I do not believe that a minister must be able to point to some particular article as a basis for every statement he makes. The confessions are a minimum and not a maximum of the truth." That's my answer.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Now, turning to Canons 1A.9, article 9 reads:

This election was not founded upon foreseen faith, and the obedience of faith, holiness, or any other good quality or disposition in man, as the prerequisite, cause, or condition on which it depended; but men are chosen to faith and to the obedience of faith, holiness, etc. Therefore election is the fountain of every saving good, from which proceed faith, holiness, and the other gifts of salvation, and finally eternal life itself, as its fruits and effects, according to that of the apostle: "He hath chosen us (not because we were, but) that we should be holy and without blame before him in love" (Eph. 1:4).

(Reading from prepared questions) "What, according to our confessions, is the meaning of prerequisite?"

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, this article, of course, is again refuting the Arminian error. But I am sorry to say that I did not find a definition for the term of *prerequisite* in the article. And for all of the articles, however, that question reads: These articles condemn the idea of anything being a prerequisite unto our election. That is what this article is speaking of, not a prerequisite in general but of prerequisites with a view to our election. There are none.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: 1B.5. I read that article before. Particularly this last part, I think: "And that therefore faith, the obedience of faith, holiness, godliness, and perseverance are not fruits of the unchangeable election unto glory, but are conditions which, being required beforehand, were foreseen as being met by those who will be fully elected, and are causes without which the unchangeable election to glory does not occur." What is the meaning of *prerequisite*, in this case, condition?

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, I have the same answer in respect to that. It does not define it except with a view to election. There are no such things.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: But in that connection, it refers to it as something which is required beforehand?

REV. DE WOLF: That's correct. That is the idea of the Arminian—with a view to election—not, Mr. Chairman, not simply something that God requires beforehand. This prerequisite is in the idea of this article with a view to election. You cannot say when you use a word with a view to some special particular thing that that is a general meaning of the word throughout.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: But in article 9 it does speak of prerequisite as cause, does it not?

REV. DE WOLF: Our Canons refute that, don't they?

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Uh-huh. "Do you maintain that our act of conversion is before we enter into the kingdom of God?" That is, prerequisite?

REV. DE WOLF: In the sense of our consciousness of entering in and being in the kingdom, it is. I would say that you may say that it belongs to our act of entering into the kingdom.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) "4. Are we not in the power of darkness before we enter into the kingdom of God? Heidelberg Catechism, question 8; Netherlands Confession, article 14; Canons 3–4.1–4 and 10." Is it necessary to quote all these references?

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, I have virtually quoted them, I believe, although not—Well, yes, I can tell you the gist of them. Do you want me to do that?

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Will you?

REV. DE WOLF: Question 4. Perhaps you ought to read the question.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Question 8 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Question 8 reads:

Are we then so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all wickedness?

Answer. Indeed we are, except we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.

REV. DE WOLF: Yes. Heidelberg Catechism 8 says nothing about the kingdom of God or of our entering into that kingdom of God. Of course, that is not the idea either. The idea of this question, as I take it, is to show in question 8 of the Heidelberg Catechism and of article 14 of the Netherlands Confessions to prove the doctrine of total depravity. That is what you have taught there. Man is totally depraved and by nature incapable of any good, inclined to all evil. Now you come to the Canons.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Netherlands Confession, article 14.

REV. DE WOLF: I mentioned that also, Mr. Chairman. That is also to prove that man is totally depraved. That is what that article is about. If you want to read it, you can read it. I assure you that is what it is.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Canons 3–4.1–4 and 10.

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, I would like to say about this question, I will come to that reference. That question is not an easy question. The question concerning our entering into the kingdom, the manner of our entering into the kingdom, that which takes place in the sinner who enters into the kingdom of God, and the chronological order of events, with the view to his entering into the kingdom.

I have been trying to make a little study of that, Mr. Chairman, as you find these various references in scripture, and I am not prepared to give you a full explanation of these things because it is rather an involved problem, and it is not to be oversimplified by making a line and saying that man is first on one side, and then on the other. I assure you, and the Canons, of course, also do not do that. It is rather difficult to immediately establish these things here that are in question.

“Are we not in the power of darkness before we enter into the kingdom of God?”

Well, Mr. Chairman, you can say a lot of things about that. Certainly, it is true that the natural man is in the power of darkness, and it is also true that when one is in the kingdom of God, he is in the light. I think we may say that.

Now, I would like to call your attention to article 10, particularly, to show you that this problem is not so simple. You read in article 10, “But that others who are called by the gospel, obey the call, and are converted.” And, Mr. Chairman, the reason I call special attention to article 10

is because it mentions the kingdom. The other articles do not, if my memory serves me correctly.

“Is not to be ascribed to the proper exercise of free will, whereby one distinguishes himself above others, equally furnished with grace sufficient for faith and conversions, as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains; but it must be wholly ascribed to God, who as he has chosen his own from eternity in Christ.”

And now, Mr. Chairman, may I call your particular attention to the order in which we have these things here in this article. “As he has chosen his own from eternity in Christ, so he confers upon them faith and repentance, rescues them from the power of darkness, and translates them into the kingdom of his own Son.”

Now, Mr. Chairman, there must be some reason why our fathers used this order. They speak of that “translation into the kingdom of his own Son” as following upon being “rescued out of the power of darkness, as following upon the conferring of faith and repentance upon them, which faith and repentance are certainly active conscious realities. Repentance cannot be anything else but conscious; must be. And faith, I believe, according to our confessions, usually also has the idea of the conscious act of faith. I think that if you look up the idea of faith in our confessions, you will find, Mr. Chairman, that that is the aspect of faith that stands upon the foreground—not the potential, not the potential of faith, but the act of faith. And I find it very significant, Mr. Chairman, that the fathers put it in this order.

Now, I know I am not trying to draw a necessary doctrine from this; but I maintain, Mr. Chairman, that no one else has any right to change this order, unless he can show very plainly that that is the way it should be and that our fathers are not right in having this order.

That is the problem, Mr. Chairman. I am simply trying to present the problem. You can’t just draw a line and say it’s that way on one side. First you are there. Now you are on the other side of the line, and that settles the matter. That is not so easy to do.

Now, the question here is, what does this translation consist in, and how does it take place?

You have got to face that question. If it refers to regeneration alone, if entering into the kingdom refers to regeneration alone, then it must take place before God confers faith and repentance because faith and repentance are the fruits of regeneration. But notice that this article says first that God confers faith and repentance and that then he translates them. You have the very opposite order there. The translation, I would say, may refer rather to the act of God that takes place after he has conferred faith and repentance, and which is realized in man’s act of turning,

so that it is conversion from the point of view of a man's act in that conversion as the fruit of the work of God that is referred to here. So that then you would have this idea: while the elect are in the power of darkness, God confers faith and repentance upon them, by which they come to the knowledge of their depravity and bondage in darkness and by faith trust in Christ, turn from their sins—there you get that conversion—turn from their sins and so are rescued out of that power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of his Son.

And then, Mr. Chairman, conversion is prerequisite to entering into the kingdom.

Besides, Mr. Chairman, you have the problem here of entering. And entering is active. That does not mean being dragged in, pushed in, rolled in, or anything else. It means entering—consciously entering in. There is an activity there that you cannot ignore. And if you are going to say that if regeneration alone is the prerequisite to enter into the kingdom of heaven, as it has been said here, you simply ignore all these things.

I have no objection to saying that regeneration is prerequisite to entering the kingdom. But I deny, Mr. Chairman, that regeneration ever stands alone. God's work is complete. With regeneration always comes conversion, always. It's the very counter-side of regeneration. It is the result of regeneration. And if you say that regeneration is prerequisite to entering into the kingdom of heaven, you must also say that conversion is prerequisite to entering into the kingdom of heaven. You can't possibly avoid that because those two things belong together.

And now for proof of the fact that you may speak—and, Mr. Chairman, I'm not pleading for this thing, for I will frankly admit that I said more on the pulpit than what I now realize I said. But I will not admit that I preached a false doctrine. I am more convinced now that I didn't. I am more convinced of that now. I didn't realize all the implications. And I'll frankly admit, and I suppose almost any minister will, we sometimes talk about things that we don't understand so very well, until we are put on the spot, and we have to start investigating them, and then we find things that we haven't found before.

Now, Mr. Chairman, if the elders will please turn to question 83 of the Heidelberg Catechism. And the point I am trying to make here, Mr. Chairman, by all of this is this, that you cannot very easily accuse a man of heresy when he says that conversion is prerequisite to entering into the kingdom of heaven. You have to be very careful with that, I assure you. That isn't so easy to say that all of a sudden. I say simply the only point I am trying to make, and that is why I am trying to develop this a little bit.

Notice, Catechism question 83:

What are the keys of the kingdom of heaven?

Answer: The preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline, or excommunication out of the Christian church; by these two—notice—the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers, and shut against unbelievers.

That means, Mr. Chairman, that every time the gospel is preached, the kingdom is opened to believers over and over again. Why? So that they enter in.

And, Mr. Chairman, I was speaking of the daily, conscious entering into the kingdom of God when I preached that sermon. I was not speaking of conversion in the initial sense. I wasn't concerned about it, but I was speaking exactly of that fact.

Now the question—well, I will come back to that, perhaps, later. I want you to notice here that it is opened so that believers may and do enter consciously, consciously, because it is the preaching that does that. It is the preaching that opens that door and that closes that door every time the gospel is preached. And every time it is preached, God's people turn from their wicked ways. They convert themselves, if you want to use that—perfectly all right with me. I believe that. They turn, through the grace of God, they turn all over again, and they enter into that kingdom.

Now, Mr. Chairman, I could go on and talk about the kingdom of God because I would like to say this, too, that the kingdom of God is spiritual and that the horizontal line is the line of this world and this earth on which we live, and that the horizontal line of this earth and this life is intercepted by the vertical line of the kingdom of God that touches our life over and over again. That is why you cannot make the kingdom of God a field with a fence around it. That isn't what it is. The kingdom of God in our daily life and entering into it is a very, very narrow way, very narrow, so that we are constantly called to turn away and to walk in that narrow way, that we may enter in day by day and finally enter in hereafter. I will leave it with that for the time being, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Question 5. (Reading) "Are not our regeneration and conversion the entering into the kingdom?" Do you want to answer that first, or shall I add the second?

REV. DE WOLF: I am a little confused with my notes I have here, Mr. Chairman. Will you give me time to orient myself, please? I am looking for those questions. What is that question?

CHAIRMAN HANKO: “Are not our regeneration and conversion the entering into the kingdom? How then can conversion be *before* entering into the kingdom?”

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, you understand that really these problems that follow, and also this is related to that whole problem that I have presented here. And I have no objection to saying that regeneration and conversion are the “entering in.” I really have no objection to that. I think in a sense, certainly they are the entering in. I would say they are, but that does not mean—that does not mean that you cannot use them in a sense of before.

Just because they are the entering in, that does not mean that you cannot speak of conversion also from the point of view of being a prerequisite. That is the point I am trying to make. The one does not exclude the other. I have written here in relation to that second question, because that’s the vital question here, that again from the point of view of our consciousness, we are constantly entering into the kingdom.

And as I said before, always that conversion is the fruit, result of regeneration. It’s only possible because of regeneration.

And as I have said before, if you may say that regeneration is prerequisite, which has been said, and I think which you may say, you may also say that conversion is prerequisite from that very same point of view. It is one work, essentially one work, Mr. Chairman. I don’t say the same work; it is essentially the one work of God. That’s my answer.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: 6. All these questions are based on these articles: 10, 11, and 12. I don’t know if it is necessary to read them. (Reading from prepared questions) “Is conversion, first of all, a work of God or an act of man?”

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, conversion is always, first of all, a work of God, always. You can’t have conversion if God doesn’t work conversion.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) “7. Do we enter the kingdom, first of all, by our act of conversion or by God’s work of translating us? Canons 3–4.10.”

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, there again you have something that relates to that same problem. “Do we enter the kingdom, first of all, by our act of conversion or by God’s work of translating us?” Now, you see that God’s work of translating us stands opposed to our act of conversion, and that’s a big question. I question that, Mr. Chairman. I question whether God’s translating us, whether our conversion is not a part and a process of God’s translating us. I believe it is. And I don’t think that you can oppose

these two. That’s the only way I can answer that question at present.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) “8. Are we, then, in the kingdom before we do or can convert ourselves? Canons 3–4.10–12. How, then, can our act of conversion be a prerequisite to enter into the kingdom?”

REV. DE WOLF: What is that, 9?

CHAIRMAN HANKO: That’s 8.

REV. DE WOLF: That’s 8. Oh, excuse me. Well, there you have got that same thing again, Mr. Chairman. “Are we, then, in the kingdom before we do or can convert ourselves?” If you mean are we natural people, lost, totally incapable of any good and inclined to all evil without having the Spirit of God working in us, are we simply purely natural men? Well, of course, then, we are not in the kingdom. We are not in the kingdom then; of course, we aren’t.

But the question is, just where does that entering into the kingdom commence, and in how many senses may you speak of entering into the kingdom? There you really have that same question there again. “How, then, can our act of conversion be a prerequisite to entering the kingdom?” The implication of this thing is, Mr. Chairman, that the natural man does it.

Now, I have never taught anything like that, never. I didn’t teach that in that sermon. I didn’t teach that a man by nature, a man totally depraved, is faced with the fact he must convert himself and that he can do it. I wasn’t even speaking of natural people. I was speaking of the people of God who are already in the kingdom. That’s what I was speaking about.

But you cannot so easily compose a question like this because there are problems involved.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Article 16 is the one that is added here. We have article 12 and 16 on question 9. I will read article 16, since that is introduced here. Article 16 reads:

But as man by the fall did not cease to be a creature endowed with understanding and will, nor did sin which pervaded the whole race of mankind deprive him of the human nature, but brought upon him depravity and spiritual death; so also this grace of regeneration does not treat men as senseless stocks and blocks, nor takes away their will and its properties, neither does violence thereto; but spiritually quickens, heals, corrects, and at the same time sweetly and powerfully bends it; that

where carnal rebellion and resistance formerly prevailed, a ready and sincere spiritual obedience begins to reign, in which the true and spiritual restoration and freedom of our will consist. Wherefore, unless the admirable author of every good work wrought in us, man could have no hope of recovering from his fall by his own free will, by the abuse of which, in a state of innocence, he plunged himself into ruin.

The question reads: “Is not our act of conversion the fruit of our entering into the kingdom of God?”

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, in respect to that question, I have read those articles, and the articles do not teach that. The articles teach that conversion is the fruit of the work of God. That’s what those articles teach. They are the fruit of the work of God.

Now, I would rather say in the light of the problem that we have here—because I am fully persuaded that we do have a problem here—I would rather be on the safe side and say that our conversion is a part of the whole process of God’s translating us into his kingdom. We constantly walk in conversion as those who know ourselves to be in the kingdom, as a fruit of the work of God’s grace. I will say that. That is, the conscious believer, and that’s what I had in mind. From that point of view, he is in the kingdom. I wasn’t, as I say again, I wasn’t speaking of conversion in the initial sense of the word, the calling out of darkness into light. That’s about the best I can do for that, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Canons 5.3, 6, 8. Article 3 reads:

By reason of these remains of indwelling sin, and the temptations of sin and of the world, those who are converted could not persevere in a state of grace if left to their own strength. But God is faithful, who, having conferred grace, mercifully confirms and powerfully preserves them therein, even to the end.

Article 6 reads:

But God, who is rich in mercy, according to his unchangeable purpose of election, does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from his own people, even in their melancholy falls; nor suffers them to proceed so far as to lose the grace of adoption and forfeit the state of justification, or to commit the sin unto death; nor does he permit them to be totally deserted, and to plunge themselves into everlasting destruction.

Article 8 reads:

Thus, it is not in consequence of their own merits or strength, but of God’s free mercy, that they do not totally fall from faith and grace, nor continue and perish finally in their backslidings; which with respect to themselves is not only possible, but would undoubtedly happen; but with respect to God, it is utterly impossible, since his counsel cannot be changed, nor his promise fail, neither can the call according to his purpose be revoked, nor the merit, intercession, and preservation of Christ be rendered ineffectual, nor the sealing of the Holy Spirit be frustrated or obliterated.

“Is our daily or continued conversion (or entering into the kingdom), first of all, the work of God or the act of man?”

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, my answer is that the act of man is always the fruit of the work of God, also when man fulfills conditions and prerequisites.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: (Reading) “11. Is our act of conversion a prerequisite consciously to enter into the kingdom, is our consciousness of being in the kingdom antecedent to our act of conversion, or are they simultaneous? Canons 5.7, 9, 11.”

REV. DE WOLF: In the first place, Mr. Chairman, what is that first question there?

CHAIRMAN HANKO: “Is our act of conversion a prerequisite consciously to enter into the kingdom?”

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, not in the initial sense; it couldn’t be. You know what I mean by—I think the elders understand what I mean by the initial sense. The Christian can never convert himself apart from any operation of the Holy Spirit and of faith. Conversion is always the fruit of the Holy Spirit and faith. Nevertheless, I would like to add this: it is certainly true that no unconverted man can claim a place in the kingdom of God. We certainly must understand that.

And in the second place, in respect to the other question there, “Is our consciousness of being in the kingdom antecedent to our act of conversion, or are they simultaneous?”

Well, Mr. Chairman, there again you have a difficult question. That is related to this whole question of entering in and of being in the kingdom. I hardly know how to answer some of those questions exactly for that reason. If you want to take a purely objective view, and you



say that either a man is in the kingdom or he is in total depravity, then this question is very simple to answer—if you take that view. Then, of course, his being in the kingdom is antecedent to his conversion. It would have to be. It would have to be. If you can make a line between light and darkness, a sharp line between light and darkness, and you say, “Well, here he is a natural man; here he becomes a spiritual man,” he certainly must become a spiritual man before he can convert himself. He certainly must be regenerated.

But you again have that question of what is the relation between regeneration and conversion and the act of entering into the kingdom. I think you can say that they are simultaneous too. I think you can say that. Our act of conversion is also at the same time our entrance into the kingdom. I think you may say that. I believe that scripture, therefore, also admonishes us to convert ourselves as progressive activity of entering into the kingdom.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: You were finished with question 11, weren't you?

REV. DE WOLF: Yes, I was.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: That leaves 12. (Reading) “How, then, in the light of this clear teaching of our confessions, can you maintain that our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter?”

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, I would like to add to question 11 what you read in question 84 of the Heidelberg Catechism and question 85. I won't go into that now. I simply would like to have that on the record in connection with what I said.

That question 12, my answer is this, Mr. Chairman, as I have explained before, namely, from the point of view of our consciousness—as the Lord plainly teaches us in the text of Matthew 18:1–4—the turning and humbling is necessary for the entrance into the kingdom, over and over and over again. And I believe that to deny this is to contradict the plain words of Christ: “Except,” etcetera.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Do you have any more on 12?

REV. DE WOLF: No, I haven't. Nothing to add.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: That brings us to the conclusion of the examination.

REV. DE WOLF: Mr. Chairman, I would like to make one remark, if I may. I have done a lot of off-the-cuff speaking here, and is the idea now that I am held responsible for every word that I have said and every statement that I have made; that it is going to be that I am going to be prosecuted because of that? Now, I hope that that's not the idea because there is the possibility that after I, if I should read what I have said here, that I would say, “Well, I wouldn't say it that way.” I would like to have that—

CHAIRMAN HANKO: You certainly will be given that opportunity to correct any error you may have made.

REV. DE WOLF: All right, thank you.

(Discussion relative to having meeting recording typed up, etc.)

REV. DE WOLF: There is just one thing I would like to call to your attention. You are going to take my remarks, many of them which I made at random, and you are going to study them. Will I be given time also to study some of the questions that may come back on my remarks, or will I be, will I have to simply answer them right off the cuff again?

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Well, I don't see why you wouldn't be given time, if you need it. Maybe you won't need it.

REV. DE WOLF: Well, perhaps not. I am perfectly willing to attempt to answer any questions impromptu. But in case I should feel that there is a problem, or that there is a problem there, I wouldn't like to express myself. I would like to have that right.

(Further discussion relative to having recording typed, motions, etc., and meeting adjourned.)

# DE WOLF'S THEOLOGY

## *An Important Theology*

In his 1953 examination Hubert De Wolf explained his theology to the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). Hubert De Wolf's theology is exceedingly important. De Wolf took the conditional theology of Klaas Schilder and the Liberated churches and developed it for the Protestant Reformed Churches. Although two statements of Hubert De Wolf were subsequently condemned by the PRC, De Wolf's theology as a whole has never been condemned by the PRC. In all of the great battles in the PRC against Klaas Schilder and the Liberated and in all of the PRC's great documents, including the Declaration of Principles and the minority report written at the May 1953 meeting of Classis East, the PRC have not explicitly repudiated Hubert De Wolf's theology. Not only that, but De Wolf's theology is taught in the Protestant Reformed Churches today, minus only a word or two. De Wolf's theology has very specific features that made it palatable to Protestant Reformed members in his own day and that make it palatable to Protestant Reformed members today. If we want to understand what Protestant Reformed theology is today, we must understand Hubert De Wolf's theology in 1953.

Listening to the Protestant Reformed Churches, one would never know how important De Wolf's theology actually is. The Protestant Reformed Churches are ignorant of De Wolf's theology. That is, the Protestant Reformed Churches teach and believe De Wolf's theology, but they are ignorant that it is De Wolf's theology. They think that it is Engelsma's theology. They think that it is Koole's theology or Cammenga's theology. But it is De Wolf's theology. The only thing that some members might know of De Wolf's theology is two sentences from two sermons that were protested to Classis East and that were condemned by Classis East. Those sentences are probably still taught in the Protestant Reformed seminary, maybe they are taught by an occasional minister to his catechism classes, and perhaps an exceptionally industrious member of the PRC has read a book that mentioned those sentences. But no one knows De Wolf's actual theology.

This makes the recovery and publication of De Wolf's 1953 examination even more important for the church today. The questions that were put to De Wolf were clear and sound and drew out of him a clear testimony

of his theology. Understanding De Wolf's theology as he expressed it in his 1953 examination, at the height of the controversy over conditions, sheds light on the current theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

## *A Mostly Candid Examination*

In his 1953 examination Hubert De Wolf was mostly candid and open about his doctrine. It is true that he was also aware of the high stakes of his examination, and he knew that his theology was suspect among many of the elders of First Protestant Reformed Church. Therefore, he qualified and limited his statements whenever possible. For example, when asked whether the promise of the gospel was conditional, he complained, "This puts me on the spot." When asked several other questions about the relationship between the promise and the call of the gospel, he said, "There is a [theological] problem here," and "That question is not an easy question." When asked to demonstrate upon which articles of the confessions he based his doctrine, he dodged and maintained that the burden was on his accusers to demonstrate which articles of the confessions he had violated. At the end of his examination, he announced to everyone, "I have done a lot of off-the-cuff speaking here," with the plea that he not be held responsible for every word that he had said.

Nevertheless, throughout the examination De Wolf was candid that his theology was a conditional theology. He wanted to limit the specific respect in which his theology was conditional, but he frankly acknowledged that he had no problem with conditions, as long as they were properly qualified. This is remarkable, because by the time De Wolf was examined, the word *condition* was a lightning rod in the Protestant Reformed Churches. The Declaration of Principles, which had been adopted by the Protestant Reformed synod in 1951, condemned the idea that faith is a condition.

[The Protestant Reformed Churches] teach on the basis of the same confessions...that faith is not a prerequisite or condition unto salvation, but a gift of God, and a God-given instrument whereby we appropriate the salvation in Christ. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 416, 423)

By the time De Wolf was examined in February of 1953, the Declaration of Principles was well-known and

hotly debated within the PRC. Everyone knew that protests against the Declaration were coming to synod that year. In that climate of tremendous conflict over both the word *condition* and the theology of conditions, De Wolf openly acknowledged that there was a certain sense in which the salvation of God's people was conditional.

Reading De Wolf's examination is refreshing. Not because of his abysmal conditional theology but because of his candor in acknowledging that his theology was conditional in a specific respect. There are a host of Protestant Reformed ministers today who teach conditional theology, as has been demonstrated on these pages again and again. But whereas the Protestant Reformed De Wolf was candid that he taught conditions, the Protestant Reformed ministers today are deceitful in saying that they do not teach conditions. They studiously avoid the term *condition* (most of the time, but not all of the time). They studiously avoid the term *prerequisite* (and instead prate on forever about man's activity "preceding" God's activity). They chant as their mantra, "In the way of, in the way of" (when they might just as well chant, "Because of, because of"). All the while they teach a conditional theology: If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do. But they will not admit that their theology is conditional. Hubert De Wolf was a more ethical and honest theologian than the Protestant Reformed theologians today. From that point of view, it is refreshing to read De Wolf. When his theology looked like a conditional duck, waddled like a conditional duck, and quacked like a conditional duck, he called it a conditional duck. When the theology of the men of the PRC today looks like a conditional duck, waddles like a conditional duck, and quacks like a conditional duck, they call it the unconditional quail of heaven.

The turkeys.

### *De Wolf's Theology*

De Wolf's conditional theology was emphatically a theology of man's *experience*. De Wolf took great pains throughout his examination to distinguish between God's salvation of man from sin and death, on the one hand, and man's conscious enjoyment of that salvation, on the other hand. Regarding God's salvation of man,

De Wolf insisted that salvation is absolutely and entirely unconditional. However, regarding man's enjoyment of that salvation and conscious experience of that salvation, De Wolf insisted that it is conditional, with the condition being man's activity of believing and turning.

Near the beginning of the examination, Chairman Rev. C. Hanko asked this key question: "Is, according to your conviction, the promise conditional?" In reply, De Wolf introduced his distinction between salvation in two senses. Although he did not yet make clear what he meant by salvation in these two senses, he was already making the distinction in order to teach that in one sense salvation is unconditional, and in the other sense salvation is conditional.

I would answer that question, Mr. Chairman, by saying that it depends on you mean (*sic*), in the first place, by "promise," and in the second place, by "conditional." If by "promise" you mean all that belongs to our salvation, including the Holy Spirit, regeneration, and faith, it is never conditional, never; and if you mean by "conditional" that God is dependent in the realization of salvation on what man of himself must do, that promise is never conditional.

However, I believe that you can find in scripture the promise of salvation in an eschatological sense of the word, and that that is often presented in a conditional form. I think that you have that in many instances.

Throughout his examination De Wolf would maintain and pursue this distinction between two senses of salvation. As the examination unfolded, it became evident that De Wolf was making a distinction between salvation, on the one hand, and the conscious experience of salvation, on the other hand. Regarding this distinction, he taught that salvation was unconditional, but the experience of salvation and enjoyment of salvation and conscious appropriation of salvation were conditional. In response to a question about Heidelberg Catechism question and answer 22, De Wolf answered,

Of course, no Reformed man will ever say that God promises to every one of you faith and the

De Wolf's theology is taught in the Protestant Reformed Churches today, minus only a word or two. De Wolf's theology has very specific features that made it palatable to Protestant Reformed members in his own day and that make it palatable to Protestant Reformed members today.

Holy Spirit, and I didn't say that, Mr. Chairman. It certainly would have been ridiculous for me to say that. To say that God promises every one of you that if you believe, he will give you faith and the Holy Spirit, how in the world would that be possible? But I don't believe that it is ridiculous to say that if you believe, you will be saved. Then that salvation must mean salvation as conscious reality. And I believe that in that conscious sense, as we experience salvation, that that salvation is contingent on our believing and that that believing of ours is, of course, again, the fruit of the grace of God which he bestows sovereignly upon his people.

In answer to the question whether the gift of the Holy Spirit is conditional, De Wolf said,

Mr. Chairman, that all depends on what specific aspect of the gift of the Holy Spirit is meant. If you mean in the initial sense, never conditional. Or, if you mean that the Holy Spirit can only do something if we do something, never conditional. God is never dependent on man.

I have never preached that. I don't believe that. I would never preach that. God is never dependent on man.

But, Mr. Chairman, you do find in the Catechism that those who pray receive the Holy Spirit; that God gives his Holy Spirit only to those who sincerely desire that Holy Spirit; and that for that purpose prayer is necessary. And so I would say, from that point of view, you could possibly say in the sphere, on the plane of our experience, as we experience these blessings of salvation as rational, moral creatures; and because God has instituted means with which he has connected his grace and Spirit, that, therefore, yes, you could say, in a sense, that the gift of the Holy Spirit is conditional upon the use of those means.

In answer to the question whether assurance by the Holy Ghost is conditional, De Wolf said,

If it means, on the other hand, that in the initial sense, the Holy Spirit cannot assure us unless we first do something—if that's the meaning of this question—is the assurance of the Holy Spirit that we are—that our salvation is wholly in Christ—if that assurance depends on something in you and me, then it is not conditional. Couldn't be. That would simply be Pelagian.

However, if you mean by assurance of the Holy Spirit the conscious personal assurance of our

personal participation in that salvation, if that's what you mean—but that's really not what the Catechism is speaking of here. If that's what you mean, then my answer is yes. It's conditional. It is from the subjective point of view of our experience.

After quoting several passages from the confessions, De Wolf continued his answer:

Now, I believe that those articles show, Mr. Chairman, that the assurance of the Holy Spirit, that is, the assurance which the Holy Spirit works concerning our personal participation in that salvation, is conditional, from the point of view of our experience, upon many things—upon sanctification, I would say, as long as we remember—as long as we remember, Mr. Chairman, that persevering is always the fruit of preservation. That's my answer.

In response to a question about good works, De Wolf answered,

Mr. Chairman, I have never contended that there are conditions unto salvation in that comprehensive sense of the word. I believe, however, that there are conditions to the enjoyment of our salvation, and I think that that can be shown upon the basis of scripture. And I say once again, Mr. Chairman, conditions which we fulfill by the grace of God, not that we do anything of ourselves, not at all.

Throughout his examination De Wolf openly maintained that salvation is unconditional but that man's conscious enjoyment of salvation is conditional, with the condition being man's activity of believing. As the examination moved to De Wolf's statement regarding prerequisites, De Wolf maintained this same distinction. By *prerequisite* he meant the same thing as *condition*, with the prerequisite being the believer's activity of conversion. To the question, "Do you maintain that our act of conversion is before we enter into the kingdom of God?" That is, prerequisite?" De Wolf answered, "In the sense of our consciousness of entering in and being in the kingdom, it is. I would say that you may say that it belongs to our act of entering into the kingdom."

Later, maintaining the same distinction, De Wolf said,

That means, Mr. Chairman, that every time the gospel is preached, the kingdom is opened to believers over and over again. Why? So that they enter in.

And, Mr. Chairman, I was speaking of the daily, conscious entering into the kingdom of

God when I preached that sermon. I was not speaking of conversion in the initial sense. I wasn't concerned about it, but I was speaking exactly of that fact.

As his answer to the twelfth and final question of the examination, and as his concluding word on the matter, De Wolf maintained the same distinction.

That question 12, my answer is this, Mr. Chairman, as I have explained before, namely, from the point of view of our consciousness—as the Lord plainly teaches us in the text of Matthew 18:1–4—the turning and humbling is necessary for the entrance into the kingdom, over and over and over again. And I believe that to deny this is to contradict the plain words of Christ: “Except,” etcetera.

Always for De Wolf, salvation was unconditional, while the conscious enjoyment and appropriation of salvation was conditional, with the condition being man's activity of believing and turning. This is the hallmark of De Wolf's theology. It is its identifying characteristic: conditional enjoyment of salvation.

### *Other Characteristics*

The essence of De Wolf's theology was the conditional experience of salvation. De Wolf's theology had some other notable characteristics as well.

First, De Wolf maintained that salvation, the promise of salvation, and the experience of salvation were limited to the elect believer. De Wolf denied that salvation, the promise of salvation, and the experience of salvation were given universally to all men.

Well, I would like to say that I believe that I limited the “every one” by saying, “If you believe.” I certainly limited the “every one” to the believers.

As far as the really receiving the promise is concerned, the promise is given to the believers. Only he who is a believer can appropriate that promise, even though it was proclaimed to everyone in the audience.

Nevertheless, although God addresses this promise to the believer, let me read what I have here. (Reading) “This promise is proclaimed to the whole church every time the sacrament is administered. Nevertheless, only the believer receives it because it cannot be appropriated except by faith. Whether or not we consciously appropriate that promise, therefore, depends on the conscious activity of faith. You must believe in order to appropriate that promise.

Therefore, the act of faith may be said to be the condition for appropriating the promise. The act of faith may be said to be the condition for the appropriating of the promise, and faith is the gift of God to his elect.

The implication of this thing is, Mr. Chairman, that the natural man does it.

Now, I have never taught anything like that, never. I didn't teach that in that sermon. I didn't teach that a man by nature, a man totally depraved, is faced with the fact he must convert himself and that he can do it. I wasn't even speaking of natural people. I was speaking of the people of God who are already in the kingdom.

De Wolf returned to this argument several times throughout his examination. For De Wolf the question of conditions was strictly limited to the realm of the elect believer. The question was not whether there were conditions for an unregenerate man or a reprobate man to enter into the kingdom. Rather, the question was whether there were conditions for an elect, regenerated man to enjoy the kingdom and to experience his salvation. De Wolf's answer to that question was that there were conditions for the elect, regenerated believer to experience his salvation, and these conditions were the man's believing and the man's turning.

Second, De Wolf maintained that the conditions and prerequisites for the enjoyment of salvation were given to man by God. Believing and converting were real conditions unto the enjoyment of salvation, but they were gifts of God to his elect people:

Faith is the gift of God to his elect.

Mr. Chairman, conversion is always, first of all, a work of God, always. You can't have conversion if God doesn't work conversion.

Mr. Chairman, my answer is that the act of man is always the fruit of the work of God, also when man fulfills conditions and prerequisites.

For De Wolf the question was not whether man must believe and turn to God of his own free will or by his own power. De Wolf maintained that God alone gave man faith, and God alone gave man conversion. Man's activity of believing and turning was the fruit of God's work of giving him faith and conversion. The condition for man's enjoying salvation was fulfilled by man, but God enabled man to fulfill it by giving him faith and conversion.

De Wolf's theology, then, was that the elect believer's experience and enjoyment of his salvation were conditioned upon his faith and conversion, which faith and conversion were given to him as gifts of God.

## *A Development of Conditional Theology*

De Wolf's theology marked a development of conditional theology. De Wolf's theology was essentially the theology of Klaas Schilder but developed specifically along Protestant Reformed lines.

The theology that infiltrated the Protestant Reformed Churches in the late 1940s and early 1950s was the conditional covenant doctrine of Dr. Klaas Schilder of the *Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt)* (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, Liberated). Contact between the PRC and the Liberated had been established in 1939, when Schilder visited the United States and was invited to preach in Protestant Reformed pulpits. The Liberated and the PRC had great sympathy for each other due to their shared rejection of the theory of common grace and their shared Dutch heritage. Herman Hoeksema and Klaas Schilder had both been deposed from their respective denominations for their stand for the truth of the gospel. When a great tide of Dutch emigrants from the Liberated churches in the Netherlands arrived in the United States and Canada after World War II, they sought out the Protestant Reformed Churches. When Klaas Schilder visited the United States again in the 1940s, he was again invited to preach in many Protestant Reformed pulpits. It appeared that the Protestant Reformed Churches might be a home for the thousands of Liberated immigrants flooding into the United States and Canada.

However, it soon became evident that Schilder and the Liberated held to a doctrine of the covenant that was at odds with Hoeksema and others in the PRC. Schilder taught a conditional covenant. According to Schilder, God made a promise in baptism to every single infant, head for head, that God would be the God of that child on the condition that the child would believe in God and obey him when the child came to years of discretion. Schilder's doctrine found widespread support in the Protestant Reformed Churches. Hoeksema, Ophoff, and those who would remain Protestant Reformed rejected Schilder's doctrine as the conditional theology of the Christian Reformed theologian William Heyns applied to the covenant.

When the Declaration of Principles was drawn up in 1950 for use in Protestant Reformed mission work

with Liberated immigrants, the battle lines were clearly drawn. The Declaration repudiated the teaching "that the promise of the covenant is conditional and for all that are baptized" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 424). The Declaration was adopted by Synod 1951, and the doctrine of the unconditional covenant ultimately prevailed in the Protestant Reformed Churches over against Schilder's conditional covenant.

In the midst of all of this, Hubert De Wolf took the essence of Klaas Schilder's conditional covenant and developed it in the Protestant Reformed Churches. The essence of Schilder's conditional covenant doctrine was the conditional promise. Schilder taught that God made a covenant promise to every infant at baptism, which promise

was conditioned upon the infant's later taking hold of that promise by faith. De Wolf's development was to take Schilder's conditional promise to infants and apply that conditional promise in the realm of man's conscious experience and enjoyment of salvation. For De Wolf, God's promise that man would enjoy his salvation was conditioned upon man's believing God and turning to God.

The questions that were put to De Wolf at his examination brought out that De Wolf was really dealing with a conditional promise, which was the essence of Schilder's theology. "Is not this a general conditional promise (every one of you...if)?" And: "Is, according to your conviction, the promise conditional?" De Wolf's answers revealed that he was indeed dealing with a conditional promise, but as that conditional promise applied to man's experience of salvation.

I don't believe that it is ridiculous to say that if you believe, you will be saved. Then that salvation must mean salvation as conscious reality. And I believe that in that conscious sense, as we experience salvation, that that salvation is contingent on our believing and that that believing of ours is, of course, again, the fruit of the grace of God which he bestows sovereignly upon his people.

Along the way, De Wolf cleaned up in Schilder's theology certain matters that would be objectionable to a Protestant Reformed congregation. Whereas Schilder's conditional promise was universal to all baptized infants,

De Wolf's conditional theology was emphatically a theology of man's *experience*. De Wolf took great pains throughout his examination to distinguish between God's salvation of man from sin and death, on the one hand, and man's conscious enjoyment of that salvation, on the other hand.

elect and reprobate alike, De Wolf's conditional promise (as he explained it) was particular to elect believers. In addition, De Wolf made sure to emphasize that the believer's believing and turning, by which he fulfilled God's conditions and prerequisites, were the gifts of God to him.

De Wolf's development of Schilder's theology is devastating for the child of God. De Wolf's theology sends the child of God to his own believing and to his own turning from sin unto God for his comfort and peace. Whether the believer can enjoy salvation and experience salvation and be sure of salvation now depend upon whether the believer has performed enough active believing and whether he has done enough active turning.

But the believer never believes well enough. The Lord's rebuke of his disciples always rings in the believer's ears: "O ye of little faith" (Matt. 8:26). The believer always says with tears to his Lord, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24). The believer always comes to the Lord's supper confessing, "We have not perfect faith" (Form for the Administration of the Lord's Supper, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 269). And the believer never turns far enough. From the height of Peter's confession of Christ as the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16), Peter becomes Satan, who savors not the things that be of God but those that be of men (v. 23). If the believer must fulfill the condition of believing and turning—even if God gives him his believing and turning and even if the person is an elect, regenerated believer—the believer can never have the comfort and joyful experience of his salvation. His believing is never done well enough, and his turning never goes far enough.

The only theology that can bring peace to the believer is the gospel. It is the theology that the believer's salvation and the believer's enjoyment of his salvation are Jesus Christ. The believer rejoices in the Lord, not in himself (Phil. 4:4). The believer's peace with God is through the Lord Jesus Christ, not through himself (Rom. 5:1). And the faith by which the believer is justified does not refer to man and what man is doing and what man is believing, but it refers to Jesus Christ, the object of faith, in whom all of the believer's righteousness is found.

## *Never Officially Condemned*

De Wolf's development of Schilder's theology made conditional theology palatable for the Protestant Reformed Churches in De Wolf's day. He had many able defenders in the PRC, some of whom repudiated Schilder's theology but were willing to defend De Wolf's theology. A learned document known as the majority report was drawn up for the May 1953 meeting of Classis East, defending and explaining and excusing De Wolf's theology.<sup>1</sup> The document had many ardent supporters at classis and by all accounts could have carried the day at classis. It is probably not too much to say that the only earthly reason this document in defense of De Wolf was ultimately defeated is because De Wolf himself spoke up to dismiss the document.<sup>2</sup> The Protestant Reformed Churches barely, barely condemned De Wolf in 1953.

In the end the Protestant Reformed Churches only officially condemned two statements of De Wolf. The May 1953 meeting of Classis East adopted the minority report, which called De Wolf's two infamous statements from his sermons "literally heretical" and "Arminian." By this the minority report implicitly repudiated all of De Wolf's theology. But even the minority report did not explicitly repudiate De Wolf's theology as he had maintained it in his 1953 examination. In fact, the minority report rejoiced in De Wolf's examination and strictly limited its condemnation to the two sentences from De Wolf's sermons that had been protested.

In our opinion both the statements which the protestants condemn are literally heretical regardless of what the Rev. DeWolf meant by them, regardless of how he explains them and regardless of however much we may rejoice that his examination shows that he does not believe the heresy implied in them.<sup>3</sup>

Neither does the Declaration of Principles explicitly condemn De Wolf's theology. This is not the fault of the Declaration, since it was written with an eye on Schilder and the Liberated doctrine of a conditional covenant. As such, the Declaration very clearly condemns the Liberated view of conditions. "We repudiate...The teaching that the promise of the covenant is conditional and for all that are baptized" (*Confessions and Church Order*,

1 See "Report of the Committee of Pre-advice in Re Protests of the Revs. H. Hoeksema and G. M. Ophoff against the Consistory of First Church," majority report, in Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 481–501; see also Nathan J. Langerak, "The Majority Report," *Sword and Shield* 1, no. 13 (March 2021): 12–18.

2 See Gertrude Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden: A Brief History of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1992), 181.

3 "Report of the Committee of Pre-advice in Re Protests of the Revs. H. Hoeksema and G. M. Ophoff against the Consistory of First Church," minority report, in Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake*, 502.

424). But the Declaration never enters into De Wolf's particular development of Schilder in the realm of man's experience.

### *Flourishing Today*

De Wolf's theology of conditional experience flourishes in the Protestant Reformed Churches today. On these pages it has been demonstrated that the theology of the PRC is that of conditional covenant experience.<sup>4</sup> The new point to make here is that the denomination's present-day doctrine of conditional covenant experience is De Wolf's theology. The only difference between the Protestant Reformed De Wolf and the Protestant Reformed theologians of today is that De Wolf honestly spoke of conditions and prerequisites. While the Protestant Reformed theologians teach *conditions* and *prerequisites*, they will not use those terms.

There is no discernible theological difference between what De Wolf said in his examination—right down to the texts to which he appealed—and what the PRC are saying today. For example, in a stunning passage in De Wolf's examination, he said almost word for word what Prof. David Engelsma is writing today. De Wolf was asked whether the promise is conditional. In his answer De Wolf said that although he did not originally intend to teach a conditional promise, he was willing to defend that idea. As his defense of God's conditional promise, De Wolf said,

I believe that there are also many instances in scripture in which God assures us that he will do something if we will do something. At least, I say, that that's the form which it comes to us in scripture. You have that, for example, in Malachi. Malachi 3:7, in the last part of verse 7: "Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts." I say that that is the form, that comes to us in this form, that if we do something, God will do something. You have in verse 10, where the Lord says, "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

The theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches today is not that of Herman Hoeksema but that of Hubert De Wolf.

I find the same thing, Mr. Chairman, in James 4:8 and 10: "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you." In some sense, Mr. Chairman, there is an action of God that follows upon our action. Verse 10: "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up."

Compare that with Professor Engelsma in 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.<sup>5</sup>

In another stunning passage from De Wolf's 1953 examination, he spoke at length about the theological problem that he was trying to solve of "the chronological order of events, with a view to [the sinner's] entering into the kingdom." De Wolf carried on at length about "the order" of salvation and what things "follow upon" others; about what is "first" and what is "before" and what happens "then." And De Wolf made man's faith and repentance precede God's translation of man into the kingdom. "Notice that this article [Canons 3–4.10] says first that God confers faith and repentance and that then he translates them." The whole passage irresistibly reminds one of Professor Engelsma's latest discourses on man's activity preceding God's activity and God's activity following man's activity. But De Wolf had the honesty, as Professor Engelsma does not, to call man's preceding God what it is: a prerequisite. "And then, Mr. Chairman, conversion is prerequisite to entering into the kingdom."

### *A Glorious Label*

The theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches today is not that of Herman Hoeksema but that of Hubert De Wolf. Though the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches boast of an unconditional covenant, their covenant doctrine is that of conditional covenant experience.

<sup>4</sup> See Andrew Lanning, "I Don't See It," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 4 (August 1, 2021): 6–13.

<sup>5</sup> "Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 16, 2021," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 5 (August 15, 2021): 11; emphasis added.



In this they show themselves to be the theological children of Hubert De Wolf.

This is significant for the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC). The PRC are crying as loudly as they can to anyone who will listen that the theology of the RPC is antinomian, hyper-Calvinist, and stock-and-block theology, and that the denomination in her repudiation of Arminianism has fallen into the ditch of antinomianism on the other side of the road.

But who is making the charge? It is Hubert De Wolf! It is Hubert De Wolf's theological heirs. The PRC have to make this charge against the RPC because conditional theology must always accuse unconditional theology of being antinomian. The Pharisees accused Jesus of it. The Judaizers accused Paul of it. And the PRC accuse the RPC of it. When the Professor Engelsmas and all the rest make the charge, "Antinomian!" against the RPC, let the members of the RPC not be troubled by it but realize that they are merely hearing the howl of De Wolf.

In fact, when one's theology is labeled as "antinomian" by one who teaches conditions, that false charge

is a powerful commendation of one's theology. The truth always draws such a charge from the lie. I hope that the RPC never stop drawing that charge until Christ returns. And if the RPC ever stop drawing that charge, then let the RPC examine whether the denomination has lost the gospel of grace and has adopted the false gospel of man and his doing.

The label "antinomian" when it is falsely applied is glorious. It is not a label to try to avoid. It is not a charge that should cause one to adjust his theology so as to escape the charge. Let the charge come. And let the church wear that false charge without shame. I'm tempted to say, "Print it on a t-shirt." If I had a boat, I would be tempted to name my boat with the charge.

*The Hyper-Salmonist.*

*The Ancho-Nomian.*

*The Ditch on the Other Tide.*

Let the church not recoil when she is charged with these things. For her accuser is De Wolf, and De Wolf teaches conditional theology.

—AL

## UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

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

# ENGELSMA AND 1953

## *The PRC of 2022 and the PRC of 1953*

Before I analyze the "privately published paper" of Professor Engelsma<sup>1</sup> in light of the events and writings regarding the schism of 1953 in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), I note that I have a syllabus that was compiled by a supporter of Rev. Hubert De Wolf and the other ministers who agreed with his theology. The compiler's purpose in creating the syllabus was to make known "the truth from the other side" and to show that De Wolf and the men who agreed with his theology were, in fact, good, "solid Reformed men" who should not have been condemned.<sup>2</sup> The syllabus is composed of articles from the *Reformed Guardian*, which was a magazine first published on July 21, 1953, after the suspension and deposition of

De Wolf. In the *Reformed Guardian* De Wolf and ministers who supported him defended their theology regarding conditions and prerequisites and made known what they considered to be "the vicious condemnation of Rev. De Wolf" on "flimsy grounds" and by "gross injustice."<sup>3</sup>

What is startling is that the articles and defenses of those men would have a comfortable place in the Protestant Reformed Churches today. Clean up a reference to a condition here and a mention of a prerequisite there, and the articles could be written by any one of the ministers in the PRC today. If a minister or member of the PRC and any other interested reader want to know where the PRC are actually at doctrinally, they should read some articles in the *Reformed Guardian*. All the same scriptural

1 David J. Engelsma, "Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 16 (March 15, 2022): 12–14.

2 *The Reformed Guardian: The 1953 PRC Controversy "The Other Side."*

3 H. De Wolf and A. Cammenga, "Schism in the Church," *Reformed Guardian* 1, no. 1 (July 21, 1953): 7.

passages being used today to defend the doctrine of the PRC were used in 1953; all the same arguments being made today were made then; all the same warnings against making men stocks and blocks and about doing justice to the plain language of scripture as are issued today were issued then. It really is shocking and eye-opening.

I will give an opening sample from Rev. John Blankespoor:

How does that Word come to us as rational, moral creatures? This to me is the big question. The answer is that God uses many different forms, also conditional speech and requirements.

Does this mean then that man must do something? This question I have heard so often of late arising out of a suspicious heart it seems. Man do something? Why, it's absurd! God does everything, man does nothing.

That attempt at giving God all the glory in this statement I again do appreciate. But it doesn't explain everything. True, man does nothing as far as earning salvation is concerned. Never do we merit anything. The cross of Christ is the only ground of the salvation of the elect. However, *after* we are saved we surely do something, and are called upon to do something. No, not of self, but by the Spirit within us, for man never works anything which God does not first work in him. Doesn't the Bible say that we must even work out our own salvation? Isn't that doing something? Isn't the performing of good works doing something? Isn't the new obedience unto which we are called in the baptism form...an action on the part of the redeemed saint? That we may and can do this is surely by the grace of God, but it is doing something nevertheless. Therefore, it is better to say that God does everything and we, in connection with sanctification, do nothing *of ourselves*.<sup>4</sup>

It must be remembered that Blankespoor was defending the theology of Rev. H. De Wolf regarding prerequisites.

That God causes man to perform something on which God's act depends, or that God causes man to act so that God may act, is for God to give himself a condition. There are no conditions for God; he brings to pass.

I am sure that every Protestant Reformed minister today would admit that there are no prerequisites in salvation. It might take a year and a half and several protests, but when hard pressed the elders and ministers would finally admit that if a minister taught that there are conditions for communion with God, this is "the error of the heresy of conditional covenant theology."<sup>5</sup> If a man would use the word *condition*, it could not have been intentional, of course, because no Protestant Reformed minister could possibly believe in conditions, let alone preach them and actually mean it.

Prof. R. Dykstra told everyone that so it is in the Protestant Reformed Churches:

The other point of this history ["a wrenching controversy over the covenant of grace [in 1953]... whether the covenant can be conditional"] is that

*the Protestant Reformed Churches are well grounded on the doctrines of sovereign grace and the unconditional covenant. Coming to synod [2018] were not two groups of elder and minister delegates with opposing theologies...All the delegates of synod, representing the churches well from a theological point of view, were and are committed*

to the theology of justification by faith alone and an unconditional covenant.<sup>6</sup>

Today, then, Protestant Reformed ministers would not be too quick to use the word *condition* or *prerequisite*.

But examine how Reverend Blankespoor framed the matter of conditions: it was about man's activity and doing justice to the biblical language of requirements. Man does do something.

That is also how this same kind of conditional theology is being defended today in the PRC. Who in the denomination today would not laud Blankespoor's writing as the very picture of balance? Men who write like Blankespoor would have no problem with man's being first in order that God may act, with man's being first in a certain sense, with the teaching that there is that which man must do for salvation, and with the preaching that the grace of God is available. Men like Reverend

4 J. Blankespoor, "Conditions and Requirements in the Covenant of Grace," *Reformed Guardian* 1, no. 5 (September 22, 1953): 4; emphasis is Blankespoor's.

5 Minutes of Classis East 1/13/2021, article 41, 33–34.

6 Russell Dykstra, "Synod 2018: Obedience and Covenant Fellowship," *Standard Bearer* 94, no. 18 (July 2018): 414; emphasis added.

Blankespoor in 1953 would defend that false theology the same way as men do today—they would quickly add that God causes man to act, that God decreed to work in a certain order—and they would react in horror at the suggestion that man acts by himself. “It is only by grace, beloved!” they would exclaim.

The theology that man is first in a certain sense and that there is that which man must do to be saved was the theology of 1953. And the syllabus on the schism of 1953 put together by a supporter of De Wolf and his followers establishes that fact.

As I said, you could publish any one of the doctrinal articles in this syllabus in the *Standard Bearer* today with only a little massaging and some basic editing, and the writer would be praised. It would be a really good joke to send one of these articles in to the *Standard Bearer* for publication. It would be published.

It is clear after reading this syllabus whose children the PRC of today are.

### *Hoeksema’s Overlooked Phrase*

The theology that is being promoted in the PRC today, the theology that Professor Engelsma is defending and that is pouring out in sermons and articles, is conditional. I am thankful that Engelsma is so willing to state boldly and clearly what others are apparently incapable of doing or are unwilling to articulate.

I will review briefly what he has taught. Recently, he wrote the following:

The precise reference [of an editor of *Sword and Shield*] 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.”<sup>7</sup>

He wrote the following in his explanation of Malachi 3:7:

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.<sup>8</sup>

He recently added the following to that explanation of the order in which God works:

Despite the efforts of myself and of the assemblies of the churches of which I am a member, he [the editor of *Sword and Shield*] 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.<sup>9</sup>

And he wrote,

Does he [a minister] not urgently call them [members of the congregation] 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,” 13)

And he wrote similarly,

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.” (“Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken,” 14)

Man’s being first in the matter of the experience of salvation, man’s repenting so that God may forgive him, and the promise of the gospel described as “repent that you may be forgiven” are conditional.

My burden now is not to establish this again. I have already done that.<sup>10</sup> My point now is that the nature of the conditions faced today is similar to the nature of the conditions the PRC faced in 1953.

The PRC of 1953 had conditions for regenerated and sanctified people, and the PRC of today have conditions for regenerated and sanctified people. Rev. R. Van Overloop really said it best:

If any man will hear my voice....he is talking about not the condition to establish a union but

7 David J. Engelsma, “‘Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc?’ Non!, or, ‘Don’t Kill the Rooster!’” as quoted in Engelsma, “Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken,” *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 16 (March 15, 2022): 12.

8 “Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum, June 14, 2021,” *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 5 (August 15, 2021): 10; emphasis added.

9 David J. Engelsma, “Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken,” 13. Page numbers in *Sword and Shield* for subsequent quotations from Engelsma’s “privately published paper” are given in text.

10 See Nathan J. Langerak, “Engelsma’s Order,” *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 16 (March 15, 2022): 32–43; “Chanticleer,” *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 8 (October 15, 2021): 11–19; “The Majority Report,” *Sword and Shield* 1, no. 13 (March 2021): 12–18.

*he is establishing a condition that deals with communion.* Not union, that's grace, it's all grace, only grace, but communion, fellowship.<sup>11</sup>

There are no conditions to enter the covenant, but there are conditions for fellowship in the covenant. Van Overloop's elders at Grace Protestant Reformed Church said it even better: "We do agree...that any condition that man needs to fulfill, *without the grace of God*, is wrong."<sup>12</sup> They do not believe in any condition that is not fulfilled by grace.

This is the same theology stated nakedly as is being taught through the use of the language of *in the way of*, faith and repentance being means to forgiveness, active faith, and a faith that is man's activity and not God's act. That theology is being taught by the language that repentance is the activity of man that God does not perform. The same theology is being taught when the preacher or writer says that faith is God's gift, but man has to exercise his faith for this, that, or the other blessing of God. That theology is being taught when it is said that in a certain sense man is first or that God causes man to act in order that God *may* act in the way he determined.

In some cases the men of 1953 expressed their conditional theology in almost the exact same words as we are hearing today in the PRC. So, for instance, Reverend De Wolf in his Formula of Subscription examination defended his theology of conditions by an appeal to Malachi 3:7. He said,

I believe that there are also many instances in scripture in which God assures us that he will do something if we will do something. At least, I say, that that's the form which it comes to us in scripture. You have that, for example, in Malachi. Malachi 3:7, in the last part of verse 7: "Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts." I say that that is the form, that comes to us in this form, that if we do something, God will do something.

And now listen to how Reverend De Wolf exegeted that conditional "form" of Malachi 3:7: "In some sense, Mr. Chairman, there is an action of God that follows upon our action."

Professor Engelsma cannot have been ignorant of that part of De Wolf's exam.

And there is more of that kind of language in the exam. When De Wolf, for instance, was explaining conditions,

he said that he was only talking about how God works out his decree consciously in man.

De Wolf was asked during his exam the following perceptive question: "If faith, obedience of faith, holiness, etc. are no prerequisites in God's counsel, how can they be in its realization?"

De Wolf responded,

I would like to have it clear that any condition which man fulfills, he fulfills only by the grace of God; and any prerequisite which he fulfills, he fulfills by the grace of God. I would like to have that clear, and that, therefore, that condition and prerequisite can only pertain to the subjective realization of any decrees or salvation which God grants. And my answer to that question then, in that light, would be that they are decreed in God's counsel to appear in time as requirements but not as prerequisites upon which the counsel of God's election depended.

What was he saying? He was saying that what he called a "prerequisite" was in God's decree what was required first before God did something else for the realization of his decree in man's experience. God decreed to work in this certain way that man would be first.

Professor Engelsma wrote, "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."<sup>13</sup> In the matter of the assurance of salvation, or in the subjective realization of salvation, God decided to work in a certain order so that man must do something—by grace, of course—before God does something.

Professor Engelsma also wrote,

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," 12)

If this does not mean that God decreed to work in such a way that man is first and following man's activity (by grace or not makes no difference) God acts in a certain way, then I do not know what it means. God in the subjective realization of his decree decided to save in such a way that man must do something before God does something, or God decreed to work in such a way that man acts so that God may act.

11 Rev. R. Van Overloop, as quoted in article 21 of the Minutes of Classis East 1/13/2021, 6; emphasis added.

12 Grace Protestant Reformed consistory, as quoted in the Minutes of Classis East 1/13/2021, 7; emphasis added.

13 "Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 17, 2021," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 5 (August 15, 2021): 23; emphasis added.

How is this any different from De Wolf's language that in the subjective realization of God's decree the activities of man appear in God's counsel as requirements or things that man must do before God does something?

Certainly, De Wolf and his followers in 1953 appealed in defense of their theology to the same passages as today (Mal. 3:7; James 4:8; the fifth petition of the Lord's prayer; and others). I would like to say to all the ministers who quote Bible passages and creedal articles to us that you are using the same passages and articles that ministers such as De Wolf, Blankespoor, Petter, Cammenga, and others used against Reverend Hoeksema.

In an overlooked phrase in Hoeksema's letter to the Protestant Reformed Classis East of May 1953, which was deciding the question of De Wolf's orthodoxy, Hoeksema wrote, "No matter, how anyone may attempt to explain these statements, whether they be applied to the regenerated or unregenerated, the statement remains corrupt."<sup>14</sup> He was commenting on De Wolf's statement, "Our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter into the kingdom of God." Hoeksema was also referring to the defense of that statement by an appeal to man's regeneration.

Rev. De Wolf maintained that by "our act of conversion" he did not refer to the unregenerated but only to the regenerated. He spoke only about the regenerated man's responsibility and activity.

But Hoeksema pointed out that whether the statement is applied to the regenerated or to the unregenerated makes no difference. "The statement remains corrupt." And you can add that whether the act is fulfilled by grace or not fulfilled by grace also makes no difference. "The statement remains corrupt."

Hoeksema hit on something in his statement. I do not know, and I cannot say for sure, that his insight was not dropped at classis. But I would make the argument that Classis East dropped it and that the focus in the 1953 controversy became conditions in what we might call their raw form, which is what De Wolf and his followers were teaching in principle.

I believe that the statement of Hoeksema bears reexam-

The PRC of 1953 had conditions for regenerated and sanctified people, and the PRC of today have conditions for regenerated and sanctified people.

ination. What his statement means is that a condition is a condition. You can put lipstick on a pig, but it is still a pig. I would add that it makes no difference whether or not one uses the word *condition* or *prerequisite*. The theology is not about a word. It is about an idea. A condition is a condition. Whether one talks about regenerated or unregenerated people, a condition is a condition. Whether one says, "By grace" or "In man's own power," a condition is a condition. Whether or not one says that God decreed to work in such a way, a condition is a condition.

The final decision of Classis East in May 1953 was that both of De Wolf's statements were "literally heretical regardless of what the Rev. De Wolf meant by them, regardless of how he explains them."<sup>15</sup>

My contention is that classis' condemnation was incomplete. It allowed the defense of conditions by De Wolf and others to fester in the PRC. It is this theology—the theology of De Wolf's defense of conditions; the theology of the majority report of Classis East that sought to exonerate De Wolf<sup>16</sup>; the theology of the 1953 men generally, as represented in their writings—that is at present being developed in the PRC. I maintain that it is this theology

that we are confronting today.

I wonder if Professor Engelsma made it his business in his ministry to balance Hoeksema and De Wolf's defense. Would Engelsma not join Hoeksema in being one-sided? Engelsma is De Wolfian in his language and in the defense of his language. He should know this more than anyone.

The members and officebearers in the PRC today maintain that just because they do not use the word *condition*, they do not teach conditions. I maintain that because they say that God causes man to act so that God may act, they have conditions. I maintain that because they say that there are activities of man upon which follow blessings of God, they have conditions. It is said that because *God* causes man to be first, there are no conditions. It is said that because they are talking about regenerated people in whom God works, there are no conditions. It is said that because they are talking about assurance and experience,

14 Herman Hoeksema, "Rev. Hoeksema's Document," as quoted in A. Petter, "Two Revealing Documents," *Reformed Guardian* 1, no. 4 (September 10, 1953): 22.

15 "Report of the Committee of Pre-advice in Re Protests of the Revs. H. Hoeksema and G. M. Ophoff against the Consistory of First Church," minority report, in Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 502.

16 See "Report of the Committee of Pre-advice in Re Protests of the Revs. H. Hoeksema and G. M. Ophoff against the Consistory of First Church," majority report, in Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake*, 481–501.

this language is not conditional. But whether or not these statements are applied to regenerated or unregenerated, the ideas we are facing today are conditional.

### *Conditions Then and Now*

The shocking similarity between the theology of De Wolf and his followers in 1953 and the theology we are hearing today in the PRC will come out when I examine how the 1953 men defined *conditions* and how they defended conditions.

Rev. G. M. Ophoff, in his dealings with Rev. A. Petter and Petter's defense of conditions, insisted on this idea regarding the word *condition*:

Condition:...A requisite; something the non-concurrence [*sic*] or non-fulfilment of which would prevent a result from taking place; a prerequisite...

Hence—A restricting or limiting circumstance; a restriction or limitation.<sup>17</sup>

A restricting or limiting circumstance is a prerequisite. What is required before something else can take place is a prerequisite. God does not have prerequisites because he is God, so the term can only be applied to man and what man must do. Prerequisites are what man must do before something else happens. Again, whether by grace or not is not the issue.

Hoeksema gave a definition of *prerequisite* in his appeal to Classis East:

This sermon [of De Wolf] emphasized very strongly [that] our act of conversion is a condition or prerequisite to enter into the kingdom of God. This, whether it is applied to our first entering into the kingdom or to our repeated conversion, is pure Arminianism. The question is: what is a prerequisite? The answer is: a prerequisite is something required beforehand, i.e. as a preliminary to any proposed end or effect.<sup>18</sup>

Note that to teach that something is required beforehand, that is, that something is a preliminary to any proposed end or effect, whether it is applied to the initial entrance into the kingdom or to daily entering the kingdom—whether it is applied to salvation or to the experience of salvation—is a prerequisite, that is, a condition, according to Hoeksema. If man and man's activity are first before God and his blessing, then that is conditional.

De Wolf's explanation of a *prerequisite* was as follows:

In the first place, it must be proved that "prerequisite" places one outside of the kingdom. This can be proved only when it can be shown that "prerequisite" means something which a man must do of himself, as a natural man, before God does something.<sup>19</sup>

Thus De Wolf was willing to grant that a prerequisite is what a man must do before God does something, but that idea only became Arminian and therefore unacceptable to him if man had to fulfill the prerequisite in his own strength.

Blankespoor explained *conditions* this way:

Speaking about conditions and requirements in this Covenant [of grace], I have reference only to God's people, as chosen and regenerated, etc...

After God regenerates His people He calls them, gives them faith, through faith justification and with justification sanctification. In sanctification He preserves them and therefore they persevere, and finally He glorifies them. All this is of God! Now it is in connection with the increase of this faith and sanctification that Reformed theology has spoken and does speak of conditions and requirements.<sup>20</sup>

Note that Blankespoor simply used the word *conditions* as a synonym for *requirements*. All he was talking about was requirements. A condition is what is required of man in the increase of his faith and sanctification. The realm is man's experience.

Then Blankespoor asked,

What then are conditions in this very limited sense of the word?...In connection with our use of the word we consider it to be something demanded or required as a prerequisite for granting something else. Also, that a condition is something that must exist or be present if something else is to take place. In short and plain language, I consider a condition something which is required for something else to take place.<sup>21</sup>

For Blankespoor a condition was something that is required for something else to take place. Something that man must do—whether by grace or not, whether regenerated or not, makes no difference—before something else takes place.

17 G. M. Ophoff, "Petter Replies," *Standard Bearer* 25, no. 17 (June 1, 1949): 401.

18 Herman Hoeksema, as quoted in H. De Wolf, "Those 'Heretical' Statements," *Reformed Guardian* 1, no. 3 (August 29, 1953): 6–7.

19 H. De Wolf, "Those 'Heretical' Statements," 12.

20 J. Blankespoor, "Conditions and Requirements in the Covenant of Grace," 3–4.

21 J. Blankespoor, "Conditions and Requirements in the Covenant of Grace," 6.

He defined *condition* again in his explanation of 1 John 1:9:

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness!”...Does this forgiveness of the text mean that it is dependent upon our confession? All of Scripture surely contradicts this... But how then explain the text? No doubt John is speaking of the possession, experience, conscious enjoyment of the forgiveness of sins. This we receive only when we confess our sins. Hence, the confession in some limited sense is a condition unto the enjoyment of the forgiveness. The one is required for the other.<sup>22</sup>

He also explained *condition* in connection with 2 Chronicles 15:2:

“The Lord is with you while ye be with him; and if ye seek him, he will be found of you; but if ye forsake him, he will forsake you.”...This can mean only one thing: when and if Israel and Judah seek the Lord, they will be *conscious* of the Lord’s blessing and nearness, and if and when they don’t they will not experience this. Hence, the seeking of God is required to be found of Him.<sup>23</sup>

There is something man must do that is required for something God will do. Again, the realm is experience. For us to experience being found of God, we must seek him. For us to experience the forgiveness of sins, we must confess them. There is something man must do, upon which doing some blessing of God follows.

Petter explained *condition* by pointing out that faith is active and that the believer is active in his faith. And the following is what he meant by *condition*:

It will be evident that under this form of promise [a calling given to a believer with an act of God following] in the administration of salvation the faith is always presented as an act of man, a conscious, hoping, trusting, relying on God, and as such it is in the Bible freely presented as a condition.<sup>24</sup>

What he meant was that man has faith as a gift of God; and what man has to do for this, that, and the other promised blessings of God is to exercise his faith.

De Wolf and his followers were very keen on the idea of exercising one’s faith. Constantly, they juxtaposed these two things: faith and the benefits of faith. Faith is the gift of God, but do not think that the benefits of faith appear automatically. Man must exercise his faith. Something man must do for the blessing of God. Indeed, that is the way that all of God’s promises are yes and amen to believers: they have to exercise their faith!

All of the above point out in their own words what De Wolf and his followers meant by *conditions*. That is how they spoke and exegeted passages. That was their thinking.

And that is nothing different from Protestant Reformed exegesis and explanation today, except that the ministers do not very often use the word *condition* or *prerequisite*.

A *condition* simply means that one thing by man is required before the next thing from God happens. What is required is man’s activity or man’s doing. Ministers deftly deflect criticism of this Arminian thinking by appealing to God’s grace. What follows man’s activity is God’s blessing, God’s fellowship, the assurance of salvation, more grace, and whatever else is good

and blessed. God gives to man so that man can do, in order that God may act in a certain way. The promises of God are always held away from man until man does his part. This is conditional.

That is how ministers preach this too. Man must do this and that. He does this all by grace. They preach whole sermons that are nothing but what man must do, and at the end the third point is entitled “The Possibility.” I want to say today to anyone who is still a Berean that if you hear a third point that is entitled “The Possibility,” you are more than likely hearing conditional preaching. I sat under a lot of it. It is as De Wolf said about the sermon in which he preached that “Our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter into the kingdom of God”:

We are always entering into the kingdom, day by day, in all our life, and because sin still lives in

22 J. Blankespoor, “Conditions and Requirements in the Covenant of Grace,” 7.

23 J. Blankespoor, “Conditions and Requirements in the Covenant of Grace,” 6; emphasis is Blankespoor’s.

24 Andrew Petter, “Current Controversial Issues,” *Reformed Guardian* 1, no. 2 (August 8, 1953): 10.

us and works in us we are always being called to turn away from it and humble ourselves...So it is from the point of view of our conscious entering. From that point of view, and from that point of view only, conversion is a prerequisite for our entering into the kingdom of God, and never as something that man must do himself. Also this was very plain in my sermon. For, having shown what was necessary to enter into the kingdom we stressed the fact that it is impossible for us, that we cannot change our nature which is evil and proud, that we, therefore, experience that we of ourselves cannot do what we must, and therefore, have but one hope, namely, the cross of Christ and his grace.<sup>25</sup>

Ah yes, I have heard more preaching like that than I care to remember. Explain what man must do to experience the favor of God, have assurance, or experience this or that blessing of salvation. Tell man that he cannot do it by himself. Tell him that he can only do it in Christ. Christ is a mere possibility. He is the help that man needs to do what man must do. And if, and only if, man does it, does he then receive the promised blessing. The whole sermon amounts to a moral lesson about what man must do, and Christ and God are the possibilities. That is today's Protestant Reformed preaching. That is conditional.

### *Contingency*

What is a condition? A condition means 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. The entrance into the kingdom, which is surely God's act, does not come about unless man converts. Some ministers tried to make that statement orthodox 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.

When they were called Arminians, they protested and said they most certainly did not believe Arminianism and that their theology was not Arminian.

The Protestant Reformed men have conditions. They have conditions as the men of 1953 defined them.

But it was Arminian, and Hoeksema called it that. He said it was "pure Arminianism" and "worse than Arminianism."<sup>26</sup> The more I read the heretical ministers of 1953, the more I am impressed by Hoeksema. He was on to them. He rose to the challenge. He fought for the truth, even though he was weak from strokes and worn out from the care of the churches. He was able to discern the ministers' deceptiveness, and they were deceptive. They make today's ministers look like amateurs by comparison. The 1953 ministers were theologians. Hoeksema did not merely fight against a caricature of their theology; he did not set up straw men in order to knock them down. He dealt with those heretical ministers as they were actually preaching their corruption of the Reformed faith. Hoeksema said in many articles and in many speeches that their conditionality came down to this: they were making man's activities, whether by grace or not, decisive in salvation.

The same issue faces us today. The matter is whether in the realm of experience, assurance, joy, peace, and happiness in God man is first or God is first. That matter is whether God decrees man to be first and causes man to be first so that God may work in a certain way; or whether God sovereignly gives to man the experience of his salvation, so that from the beginning to the end—from election through the cross, to the application of salvation and the experience of salvation, on into eternity—God is first.

The Protestant Reformed men have conditions. They have conditions as the men of 1953 defined them. There is hardly a thing that those men wrote that would not be praised to the heights today in the PRC as the very essence of Reformed orthodoxy and as a necessary balance in teaching about salvation by grace alone in the interest of preaching a full-orbed gospel and doing full justice to the commands of scripture, to the fact that man is a rational and moral creature, and to the activities of regenerated man.

It is about contingency. It is not about the bare word *condition* or *prerequisite*. It is about the idea of them, and that idea is *contingency*. The 1953 men conceded this point too. They were not sticklers for the word, but they wanted the idea of condition and prerequisite. That idea was contingency.

By the measure of today's theology in the PRC, the schism of 1953 should never have happened. The

25 H. De Wolf, "Those 'Heretical' Statements," 11.

26 Herman Hoeksema, as quoted in H. De Wolf, "Those 'Heretical' Statements," 7; Herman Hoeksema, "Rev. Hoeksema's Document," as quoted in A. Petter, "Two Revealing Documents," 29.



ministers of the PRC should make a wholesale rewrite of the history. They believe the same thing; they write the same way; they appeal to the same scriptures and the same creeds; they make the same justifications and pleas. They are the ministers of 1953 come back from the dead.

Engelsma rejects conditional theology. But he does not reject the idea, the concept, of conditions and ends up with a conditional theology. There is something man must do before something God does. The acts and blessings of God are contingent on man's acts, acts that God causes man to perform.

But that God causes man to perform something on which God's act depends, or that God causes man to act so that God may act, is for God to give himself a condition. There are no conditions for God; he brings

to pass. That is the Reformed faith: a sovereign God who brings to pass in salvation what he decreed to give to his people, and he does not work in such a way—whatever that means—that man is first so that God may then act. I do not recognize that language as Reformed. That is the language of conditions. That is the language of contingency.

The Protestant Reformed Churches have succumbed at last to the theology of 1953, to the theology of De Wolf, Petter, Blankespoor, Cammenga, and the rest. And the fate of the PRC will be the same as the fate of the 1953 men. Look how far the PRC have traveled in a little more than a year. It is mysterious and sobering. But then, the mystery of iniquity is always with us as the sovereign God carries out his will for salvation and damnation.

—NJL

## FAITH AND LIFE

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

# A TALE OF TWO EXAMINATIONS

## *A Comparison*

No, not as Dickens' classic novel begins: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

Rather, this tale must begin: It was the best of times. It became the worst of times.

What made it the best of times? What makes it the worst of times?

A comparison.

A comparison that must be made between two examinations that, to my knowledge, were the only two examinations undertaken in the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) for the purpose of examining an ordained minister's profession of doctrine. These two examinations had to do with the requirement of the Formula of Subscription. In one respect a minister commits himself to such an examination when he signs the Formula. He agrees in advance to submit himself to such an

examination of his views should it be deemed necessary by an ecclesiastical assembly. In another respect the Formula itself requires such an examination of an ordained officebearer who is suspected of teaching or maintaining doctrines that are contrary to the three forms of unity: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordt.

It should be noted that the Formula of Subscription has to do with the doctrines of the three forms of unity, not with the decisions of deliberative assemblies. An examination is not undertaken to see whether or not an individual officebearer's teachings are in harmony with the decisions of ecclesiastical assemblies. But an examination is undertaken to determine whether the officebearer in question upholds and maintains the Reformed creeds.

How do these two examinations, the 2018 examination of Rev. David Overway and the 1953 examination

of Rev. Hubert De Wolf—the only two examinations of their kind undertaken in the Protestant Reformed Churches—compare to each other?

The examinations were similar regarding their cause. Both examinations were deemed necessary because in each case the officebearer’s teaching and preaching were suspected to be not in accordance with the doctrine of the unconditional covenant as maintained by the three forms of unity. With the case involving Rev. David Overway, there were additional concerns about his compromise of the doctrines of justification by faith alone and the sufficiency of God’s grace.

How fearful that the similarity ends with the cause of the examinations.

Great, serious, and fearful differences comprise the bulk of this tale.

One difference is so significant that this tale might never have been told at all. The second examination was never meant to be part of Protestant Reformed history, a history that could be told and examined. The tale was not meant to be told. In fact, one’s telling the tale of the exam conducted by Synod 2018 may have been a ground for charges of schism and slander and for deposition on the same charges according to articles 79 and 80 of the Church Order. That ground and action would surely have been invoked, were it not that the teller of this tale is no longer under the authority of a church in the denomination which this tale concerns.

Had the authors of the 2018 examination determined that the reporting and publishing of the examination would be grounds for charges of schism and slander? Hard to say. There is no record. In sharp contrast to the examination of Rev. Hubert De Wolf, no questions were published. No answers were recorded, let alone published.

At the very least, the subtlety of the seminary professors must be noted. No record means no specified grounds for the decision taken, in the 2018 case the exoneration of a minister whose “uniformity and purity of doctrine” were suspect.<sup>1</sup> No specified, published grounds means that it was impossible to protest the decision regarding the outcome of the examination. It was impossible to determine whether synod’s decision to exonerate Reverend Overway was in conflict with scripture and/or the Church Order. It became

impossible to argue that Reverend Overway had failed his examination. What examination? What questions? What answers?

With no examination recorded or published, how could the tale of two examinations be told?

Is the tale of only one examination, that of De Wolf, valid to tell?

However, the tale must be told of two examinations. Let it be told by one who was present for the second examination and heard the questions and answers with his own ears.

What a difference there is between the contents of these two examinations!

The questions in the examination of Rev. Hubert De Wolf were sharp and to the point. The questions worked with exactly what De Wolf had taught and preached. They worked with what he had taught and preached in the light of the development of the entire controversy

taking place in the PRC over conditions. In the most direct manner, the questions brought the three forms of unity to bear as a standard on his teachings.

There are two outstanding features about the questions used in De Wolf’s examination. The first is that the questions were woven tightly together to ensure that either De Wolf had to acknowl-

edge that his teaching and preaching were indeed contrary to the three forms of unity, or he had to be evasive in his answers. (As is evident from his answers, he chose the latter.) The second feature was that the questions controlled the examination. At no point did the questioner, Rev. Cornelius Hanko, try to chase down De Wolf with a string of questions. At no point did Reverend Hanko ask friendly, helping questions, trying to exonerate De Wolf.

So very different were the questions addressed to Reverend Overway.

The questions drawn up by the seminary professors, who were given control of the examination, had an entirely different purpose. The purpose of the questions was not to find orthodoxy or heterodoxy in Reverend Overway. Instead, their purpose was to exonerate him. The questions did not include quotations from the creeds or implications of their teachings in order to determine whether the minister could explain his specific teaching in their light, as was so often done in the examination of Reverend De Wolf. Reverend Overway was asked simply to explain what he believed to be the truth of justification,

It became impossible to argue that Reverend Overway had failed his examination. What examination? What questions? What answers?

<sup>1</sup> *Acts of Synod 2018*, 84.

sanctification, good works, and obedience in the light of the doctrine of salvation by grace. He was asked merely if he felt that any of his preaching and teaching was out of harmony with scripture or the creeds. He was gently guided by the questioner into certain pathways. Where Reverend Overway was reluctant to go, he was not required to go.

The questions asked of Reverend Overway made it clear that the professors, who had been given the right to “conduct the examination,”<sup>2</sup> were at fundamental odds with the decisions of Synod 2018 regarding the protested sermons. Were matters as serious as Synod 2018 had decided? Was it true that the minister’s preaching and teaching had compromised the sufficiency of Christ’s merits? Was it true that his preaching and teaching had compromised the doctrine of justification by faith alone without works? Was it true that his preaching and teaching had compromised the doctrine of the unconditional covenant? The questions themselves said no. The questions led the way to clearing the minister.

The tale of two examinations must also set out the difference between the answers of each man who was at the center of his respective, similar doctrinal controversy.

De Wolf’s answers demonstrated a thorough, careful preparation. To the evident chagrin of Synod 2018—the questioner and some of the delegates—Reverend Overway’s answers did not demonstrate careful preparation. De Wolf had his material at his command, ably answering the questions addressed to him. Though terribly evasive in his answers, he understood his doctrinal position and was highly capable of explaining it. Reverend Overway did not understand and was incapable of explaining his doctrinal position. His answers demonstrated confusion that sometimes could be characterized as deliberate ambiguity. He also committed some unorthodox blunders in his answers. Those blunders were painful for me to hear and were certainly grounds for deposition for heresy (spoken in front of an entire synod), but the blunders were spoken against the backdrop of woeful confusion. One example was when Reverend Overway based the necessity of good works for the Christian upon the commandment of the law, and he entirely left out of view the wonder of gracious sanctification. Another blunder was when the minister could not bring himself to agree that anything he had taught or preached in the protested sermons was contrary to the Reformed creeds. Yet another was one that would result in more controversy and confusion not only with Reverend Overway but also with other ministers. Reverend Overway answered one question with the agreement that, yes, our

good works are indeed fruit, but they must be more than fruit. The reason good works had to be more than fruit was because believers really do them.

A great difference between these two examinations was their outcomes.

One outcome of De Wolf’s examination was the understanding that the views represented and maintained by him were to be rejected by the Protestant Reformed Churches as contrary to scripture and the three forms of unity. De Wolf had been guilty of violating his subscription to the three forms of unity. Another outcome was that the Protestant Reformed Churches maintained the truth of salvation by sovereign grace alone and drove out as heretical the doctrine of the conditional covenant.

The outcome of Overway’s examination was that the Protestant Reformed Churches maintained his views. Though Reverend Overway requested and was granted resignation from the ministry, his doctrines were maintained and defended by subsequent assemblies in a number of ways. Strangely, those who were vigorously opposed to his preaching and teaching and his defense by the assemblies of the churches were divided. Some turned from opposition to support. Others, remaining faithful to the truth, were branded as schismatic and slanderous and often charged with the doctrine of antinomianism. They were driven out of the denomination in different ways, but the force of authority was clear: the unity of the denomination was to be preserved at all costs, even the cost of the truth.

Another point of difference must be identified. The examination of Rev. H. De Wolf was clearly under the control of the consistory of First Protestant Reformed Church, the examining deliberative assembly. Rev. C. Hanko, as the questioner, demonstrated in behalf of the assembly a thorough control of the examination. He asked the questions on the prepared list. After De Wolf had finished answering a question, Reverend Hanko moved along with the next question. The questions were sharp and incisive, requiring De Wolf to give answers that related to them and making it very evident when he did not. When the examination was finished, there could be no question whether De Wolf was orthodox or heretical according to the Reformed standards of doctrine. (Which, by the way, makes the recent matching doctrinal declarations of Professor Engelsma all the more reprehensible and shameful.)

The above was most evidently not the case during the examination of Rev. David Overway, which was conducted by a Protestant Reformed seminary professor. A year after Overway’s examination, in a meeting with

<sup>2</sup> *Acts of Synod 2018*, 85.

the editors of the *Standard Bearer*, two of whom were seminary professors, I spoke to them about the examination. I spoke to them about their lack of leadership in the controversy as editors of the unofficial denominational periodical. I told them, concerning the examination of Reverend Overway, that Professor Cammenga was not in control of the examination. I told them that neither the seminary faculty nor the synod was in control. I told them that only one man was in control of the proceedings: the man who was being examined. I testified to them that Overway knew their purpose was to exonerate him and that he went out of his way to make his exoneration as difficult as possible. In the end he made it perfectly clear that synod passed him on his examination not because of his answers but because the synod and the professors were already strongly committed to the course of exonerating Reverend Overway of all error.

How committed?

Committed to making it the worst of times. Committed to a pathway of emphasizing man's responsibility; what grace can make of a man; if a man would be saved, there is that which he must do; making a good use of available grace; obedience and walking in the way of good works for obtaining promised, conditional spiritual benefits. Committed to a certain sense in which man's actions precede God's. Committed to confusion in which the error becomes powerful to drive out the truth of salvation by grace alone. Committed to taking the joy and peace of assurance by faith alone out of the hearts of believers and making that joy and peace dependent instead upon their pursuit of good works.

### *Doubling Down*

There are two lessons to be learned from this tale of two examinations.

The first lesson is the truth about doubling down. The term *doubling down* is best understood in the context of wokeism and cancel culture. The leaders in a society formulate a narrative, or story, by which they control society. This narrative is intended to take the place of what truly happened because the truth of what happened is viewed as harmful to the carefully controlled society. The leaders speak the narrative. Those indiscriminately submissive to these leaders take up the narrative as their own. However, from time to time either God's truth itself threatens to destroy the narrative, or those testifying of God's truth threaten the narrative. Doubling down is the attempt to drive out the force of the truth and to establish more firmly the lie in its place. In the context of cancel culture

and wokeism, the attempt continues to enjoy success, often to the astonishment of those who know and love the truth.

One example of doubling down was the attempt of the United States' presidential administration to claim that the withdrawal of American troops and citizens and their Afghan assistants from Afghanistan was a tremendous success, when it was truly a dismal failure. Against the clear testimony of raw footage and eyewitness testimony, the administration published irrelevant statistics and past reports to bolster its opinion.

Another example was the attempt of the Canadian prime minister's office to portray the "Freedom Convoy," a grassroots movement of truckers protesting COVID vaccine mandates, as "a fringe minority" holding "unacceptable views," funded by money flowing from outside the country.<sup>3</sup> The movement was also deemed a threat to national security, requiring the invocation of a national emergency granting special powers to the government. Again, though actual footage and testimony declared the truth about the movement, the prime minister's office and the media maintained their narrative that the movement was a powerful threat to Canada's well-being.

Doubling down, in the present context of narrative and wokeism, is not just the effort to maintain the lie against the truth. Doubling down is also God's judgment upon rebellion against the truth that is always God's, his special revelation or his general revelation. God judges the lie with men's doubling down, in which they move further and further into absurdity and irrelevance. Similar is the term found in the Bible, *the hardening of the heart*.

What is the doubling down in the case of this tale of two examinations?

Doubling down is the way that the leadership of the PRC has worked itself into a self-contradiction. The leadership of the PRC has been confronted with so much testimony to the truth of God's word—the truth of God's word that the denomination had maintained in its history for so many years. The material of the doctrinal examination of Reverend De Wolf was a small part of that testimony to the truth. The labor of Hope Protestant Reformed Church's consistory, Classis East, and the special committee appointed to help Hope was all toward creating, nurturing, and sustaining the narrative that Reverend Overway was indeed preaching the truth of God's word and that all criticism sprang out of antinomian, that is, heretical, sources. When Synod 2018 broke

3 See "Freedom Convoy' Descends on Ottawa, Throwing City Streets into Chaos," [https://www.antihate.ca/freedom\\_convoy\\_ottawa](https://www.antihate.ca/freedom_convoy_ottawa).

that narrative with its decisions, the denominational leadership responded by doubling down. The Protestant Reformed synods of 2019 through 2021 continued the work of doubling down.

But this doubling down has now led to this consequence: by launching an organized assault on the testimony coming from *Sword and Shield* and its editors, a stalwart professor of theology in the Protestant Reformed Churches has come out in agreement with statements made by Rev. Hubert De Wolf in his defense of conditional covenant theology.

This tale of two examinations is a lesson!

It cannot be mere analysis. It cannot be mere criticism. It cannot be merely the basis or reason for calling God's faithful people out of a denomination that can only double down on its narrative, sliding further and further from the truth.

See what is underneath. See the pride of men who want to be lords, who suppose that their voices cannot but be the voices of the truth. See the pride of despotic, tyrannical leaders who must be right and are so fearful of being wrong that correction becomes impossible. How hard it is to let go of a position when one has staked a claim on it. How hard it is to listen when "little people" criticize, confront, or even protest. How hard it is to be simply a servant of the Lord, to listen to his voice whenever he speaks, even through the lips of those who are considered lesser but who are bringing the truth of God's word. How easy it is to deplore them, find flaws in them, and outright reject the truth they bring.

That pride lives in the heart of every officebearer. So easily it mounts up in the minds of leaders. It is the enemy against which the believer must fight his whole life long. It is one of the reasons the church must be the church of Christ, every member part of the body. It is one of the reasons article 31 of the Church Order is formulated the way it is. Yes, officebearers and deliberative assemblies can be wrong. They can be grievously wrong. The delegates can be hard of heart. They can double down. They can do so at any time and under any circumstances. They need the office of every believer for their correction. They need to pay particular heed to

that office and be servants to the Lord and his truth, as well as servants to the Lord's people in that same truth.

### *Nothing without the Truth*

The second lesson to be learned from this tale of two examinations is that a denomination is nothing if it does not have the truth. This tale of two examinations is so sad because it so clearly demonstrates that the Protestant Reformed denomination has abandoned her doctrinal heritage. In truth, that heritage was not only the doctrine of the covenant of grace as entirely and wholly unconditional. But that heritage was also the truth of complete salvation by grace alone without works. That heritage of the unconditional covenant and salvation by grace alone

without works was maintained and consistently held in the PRC with great care and even at great cost. The examination of De Wolf and its result bear powerful testimony to that cost.

Yes, the Protestant Reformed Churches have abandoned their doctrinal heritage.

Let there be no doubling down! Let there be no distractions from the issue in the controversy—not about antinomianism, not about schism and slander. Let there be no grand remonstrations about doing justice to the Bible, to man's responsibility, or to what grace can indeed do for a man.

Let there be no appeal to these

or those statements as professions of orthodoxy. It has all been compromised. Let the tale of two examinations speak for itself.

How did this sad state come about?

What must be seen within this second lesson if it is to be understood as well as applied?

What is so critical about this lesson is that between these two examinations there was a slow erosion and corrosion of the truth *within* the Protestant Reformed Churches. There was no attack from without. The walls were maintained very high. We were assured over and over that the high walls would keep the denomination safe in her orthodoxy. On the other side of those walls, the PRC could spot all kinds of heresies. Those heresies could be identified in their beginnings, their infiltrations, and their fruits of destruction in other churches and denominations. But we were assured that all was healthy and well in the Protestant Reformed Churches. The Lord

By launching an organized assault on the testimony coming from *Sword and Shield* and its editors, a stalwart professor of theology in the Protestant Reformed Churches has come out in agreement with statements made by Rev. Hubert De Wolf in his defense of conditional covenant theology.

would surely see to it that the walls would keep us safe and secure from all enemies. Within those walls we had the truth. That truth made us strong in our homes and families, in our good Christian schools, and in our Christian businesses and societies.

We kept looking at the walls and no longer considered the foundation, where the damage was taking place. Emphasis on doctrine and truth changed to emphasis on appearances. Good homes, good marriages, good children, good Christian schools, good businesses, good societies, good ministers, good consistories, and good magazines were signs of God's blessings upon his elect people, believers and their seed. The solid foundation of the truth of the gospel of salvation by grace alone in the cross of Jesus Christ became merely a given. That box was always checked. Christian living, behavior, and conduct became the material of the pulpit. The clamor, aroused and gratified by the leaders in the churches, was for practical preaching. Members needed to know how to live and walk as Christians. So behavior—not regeneration—came to make Christians. Walking and conduct—not Christ—was to make God's people. No wonder conditional covenant theology came to dominate.

So the tale of two examinations.

The change occurred slowly and steadily, but greatly nevertheless. Depth fell out of favor, and superficiality won the day. Truth came to be replaced with action, doctrine with conduct. Grace came to be replaced with works. The orthodoxy of the PRC in its beginning that resulted in De Wolf's examination with its particular questions became the antinomianism and hyper-Calvinism rejected by the present leadership of the PRC in favor of conditional theology. De Wolf's answers have now become the orthodoxy of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

But this same lesson must be broader, much broader.

Its breadth is that the truth may not be exclusively identified with any denomination. Had it been true in this particular case—that all the truth was in the PRC, that there was no truth outside the PRC, and that the PRC were the sole stewards and guardians of the truth—the earth this day would be bereft of the truth at all. Part of the reason for maintaining the denominational walls in their height and thickness was that all outside was only darkness and corruption, no truth whatever.

(Never mind what abuses were being carried on under the carefully maintained veneer in the PRC.) For some of us, being under unjust decisions of deposition and discipline was the hard-taught lesson we needed to learn that the truth was truly free, that it could not be bound up with a particular denomination or found only in submission to certain decisions of assemblies. It was the only way we could learn that truth was first with God alone, and then it was his gift to the hearts of his people by his word and Spirit, and that we were free to join ourselves to the church we could adjudge to be most faithful to our God, without regard to fear of men or respect of persons.

This lesson must be engraved deeply on the hearts and minds of God's people. That church is useless which does not constantly lay open its foundation in its preaching and teaching for God's people to rest upon by a true and living faith. That church is a liability that covers over that foundation with a sense of shame, finding the doctrines of grace offensive to man's pride. Even worse is the church that pretends in some respect to stand for grace alone, yet insists on the necessity of the believer's good works for further, as yet unreceived, spiritual and material blessings and benefits. How can the believer rest upon his Lord when he must be busy working

for additional wages (all by grace, of course)?

What is the lesson? History does not matter. Denominational identity does not matter. Meetings of consistories, classes, and synods do not matter. Men with suits and ties do not matter. Theological degrees from accredited institutions do not matter. Church polity does not matter, albeit based on God's word. They are all subject to abuse. They can all be distorted to serve the lie instead of the truth, works instead of grace. The believer must walk by faith, seeking the truth. He must not be distracted by all the claims of men he hears. He must listen for one thing: the voice of his shepherd calling him by name. It is that voice that he must hear and that he must continue to hear. If that voice falls silent in his church, he must depart. His obligation is not to apostasy, compromise, or confusion but only to the truth. So must faithful officebearers follow their master Jesus Christ and his voice. The officebearers must not feel obligated by a misguided loyalty to promote and stand for a denomination characterized by apostasy, compromise, or confusion. They might

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feel compelled to stand for the truth, but then they must stand for the truth. Their loyalty must not lead them to be silent when they ought to speak in behalf of the truth when it is attacked. The virtue of loyalty may not become the vice of compromise.

Most broadly, this second lesson is a stunning reminder of the freedom of God with his truth. He is indeed sovereign, sovereign in judgment as well as in grace. Sober indeed is the truth that in sovereign judgment God can and does righteously remove his truth from a denomination of churches. The PRC can be no exception. The members of the Reformed Protestant Churches must never think that the denomination must forever be exempt from divine judgment. How long can abuse of God's truth go on before he acts?

But God delights in grace. So he graciously preserves a remnant according to his gracious election. He may even see fit to begin churches and denominations that are faithful to his word. He may also work repentance in denominations and churches, in officebearers and members. He may also bring about development, so that churches grow

in faithfulness rather than decline into apostasy. The Lord is always at work. How necessary are his gracious gifts of eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand!

This freedom of God and his truth is a powerful force in this lesson. One of the most striking aspects of this force is its liberation for faithful members and officebearers who have long borne with darkness in a languishing denomination, especially one that has been based on appearances. One simply does not need to bear the burden of turmoil; oppression; criticism based on false narratives; the misuse of church polity for the sake of garnering power; the doctrinal confusion that creates ignorance, which in turn shuts out the truth. He can leave it all behind and keep the truth in order to serve the truth alone.

So the tale must continue. It cannot end with it having become "the worst of times." There can be and ought to be true reformation. But the best is yet to come: God's truth wholly vindicated with the perfect redemption of all his own, all by grace, not at all by works!

—MVW



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## FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL

*Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him. — Psalm 2:12*

**K**iss the Son!

What striking language. What a vivid picture. There upon the holy hill of Zion sits the Son of God, the mighty King of kings. The Father has given unto the Son all the nations and peoples of the earth to serve him. The nations hate the Son. The people revile the Son. But they serve the Son all the same, in spite of themselves. In the hand of the Son is a rod of iron, instrument of vengeance and destruction. With his rod of iron, the Son smashes the heathen nations of the earth into pieces like a potter's vessel. Stretching out before the Son is a great line of the mighty ones of the earth. Kings of their nations. Rulers of their communities. Lords of their churches. Tyrants of their homes. And now the everlasting Father will speak to all these mighty ones as they stand before his Son.

Kiss the Son!

What does it mean, this call to kiss the Son? It means this: Repent! It means this: Turn! It means this: Bow your proud neck and your stiff knee before the Son. Show him the sign of honor, respect, fealty, service, loyalty, and subjection. Before the kings of the earth, a kiss. Before the King of all kings, a broken heart.

Kiss the Son!

The wickedness of your rebellion is monstrous. You raged against God and his truth. In his gospel you found only God and never man, and it galled you. In his salvation you found only God's work and never man's work, and you hated him for it. Imagining a vain thing, you took counsel against Jehovah and his anointed. You plotted ways to break their bands asunder and cast away their cords from you. You cast away Jehovah's gospel. You introduced the things of man into the things of God and spoke perverse things to lead away disciples from the Lord unto yourself. Monstrous rebellion!

Kiss the Son!

Let your proud mouth that took counsel against Jehovah and against his anointed now kiss the Son in humility. Let your foolish lips that spoke of casting away Jehovah's bands and cords now kiss the Son in willing submission to him. Let your hard heart that raged against God and his truth and that imagined the vain things of man now bring you to kiss the Son in grateful worship of him. All of you who strut and preen as though you alone of all people of the earth know how to call to repentance, now hear this call to your own repentance.

Kiss the Son!

The calling is urgent! The time is today! He that sits in the heavens already laughs and already has the wicked in derision. Repent now, lest the Son be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little.

Kiss the Son!

And blessed are all they that put their trust in him. These are the beloved of the Father, who belong unto the Son. These are they whose rebellions have pierced the hands and feet of the Son and for whom he shed his blood. These are they who have been given to the Son by the Father, and no man shall pluck them out of his hand. These are they who have been drawn unto the Son by the Father himself, being called according to his purpose. And they truly are blessed!