



SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Letters Edition

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

Deuteronomy 33:29

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Welcome to another exciting Letters Edition of *Sword and Shield*.

These Letters Editions are proving to be some of the more anticipated issues of the magazine. The questions and comments of our correspondents indicate a keen interest in the magazine, and more importantly, a keen interest in the issues that the magazine addresses. As editors, we are in complete agreement with our correspondents that these issues are worthy of the time

and effort that they have invested in writing to *Sword and Shield*.

The letters also indicate that the magazine is being read far and wide by a diverse audience. We thank God for speeding the magazine to so many.

And now without further ado, it is time to find out what your fellow readers are thinking. Read on. And write on. And may God speed the truths written herein to your heart, and the next issue into your hands. —AL

LETTER: ASSURANCE

Dear Editor,

Thank you for your response to my letter in the January 15, 2021, Letters Edition of *Sword and Shield*. I have a few follow-up questions, but for the sake of brevity and clarity, I thought it best to bring them in two separate letters. In the first place, in answer to the question of how assurance can rightly be understood to spring from godliness, I appreciated the following points you made:

- 1) That godliness must be viewed through faith as the work of the Holy Spirit in me. And, only when I see God's work in me (though polluted through and through by my sinful nature, so that I could hardly call them good works) as part of His gift of salvation in Christ, am I assured by it.
- 2) That godliness must *not* be viewed as an activity of man (by God's grace) which results in a subsequent assurance, because then this assurance would be conditional and would inevitably waver and fail.
- 3) That godliness is not *motivated* by the prospect of receiving assurance when we walk in godliness, but rather godliness is to be understood as a source of assurance in a more organic sense. When godliness is looked at organically from the big picture perspective, it has this in common with the other two elements in Canons 5.10, namely; that God's gift of faith in His promises (1st element), God's gift of the Holy Spirit, who bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God (2nd element), and God's gift of a serious desire to preserve a good conscience and to perform good works (3rd element) are all gifts of salvation which God gives to His people in

Christ, so that, as the recipients of those gifts, we can be sure that He who has regenerated, called, justified, and sanctified us will certainly preserve us to the end and glorify us. Using the organic picture of a living tree, we who are engrafted into Christ by faith and therefore bear fruit shall not in the end be hewn down and cast into the everlasting fires of hell, but we shall forever be united to Christ, who is our life, and shall be taken to live with Him where He dwells at the right hand of God in heaven.

- 4) All this is what the *Word of God* reveals to us concerning our salvation: It consists of God taking us to Himself in Christ, revealing Himself to us as our God and Father (which He does by giving us faith in His promises and testifying in our hearts by His Spirit), living within us by His Word and Spirit so that by faith we desire to preserve a good conscience and to perform good works, and, finally, bringing us both in body and soul to be with Him in heavenly glory to all eternity. Again, this is God's Word and *His* doing and therefore is absolutely sure to be fulfilled, and we can be certain that it will come to pass. Truly, God alone is true, sure and steadfast so that He alone is the source of all our certainty and assurance.

However, while I understand that the Canons in Head 5 article 10 present all three elements as sources of assurance, the real question I have is whether they are all sources in the same way. I believe you begin to answer this question when you indicate that there are "great differences in each of the elements in their operations," but I am wondering if you could expound upon that a

little more. How does the way in which godliness operates to assure us differ from the way in which faith in God's promises and the testimony of His Spirit operate to assure us? I struggle to answer this question because Canons 5.10 doesn't really seem to indicate any differences between the three elements; yet, in light of the rest of the confessions, it seems like they must operate differently.

Perhaps the following will help you understand my question a little better:

As you state earlier in paragraph 4, "Assurance is the gracious application by the Holy Spirit of the testimony of the gospel to the believer's heart. This work of the Holy Spirit is the gift of assurance in the consciousness of the believer." In other words, the first two elements (God's gift of faith in His promises and God's gift of the Spirit who bears witness with my spirit that I am a child of God) are essentially the gift of assurance. However, I do not believe the same can be said of the third element. God's gift of godliness is not the gift of assurance but is really the realization of that of which I am assured. I am assured that I am a child of God, and God's gift of godliness is His gift of actually making me to be His child who is made more and more conformable to His image. I believe this is Hoeksema's point in the quotation you provided—those whom the Spirit assures, He also sanctifies. The question then is, "How exactly does God's gift of godliness assure us, and can it be understood as a source of assurance in the same way that faith in God's promises and the witness of the Holy Spirit are sources of our assurance?"

I particularly struggled to answer this question when I considered the connection between Canons 5 article 9 and Canons 5 article 10. Since the time I wrote my letter in September, I have had quite a bit of time to study this, and it seems to me that the point of article 10 is that the faith according to which I am assured (in art. 9) is a faith that is not *founded* in some mystical revelation or in

some philosophy of man, but is a faith that is *founded* in the promises of God Himself, which faith is sealed by the testimony of His own Spirit of promise. This is why my faith is an assured confidence that is absolutely certain of my eternal salvation. It is a faith *in* the promises of God as revealed in *His Word* after all! However, it would contradict BC art. 24 to say that my faith is also *founded* in my desire to preserve a good conscience and to perform good works. This third element must, therefore, function as a source of assurance in a much different way.

Although Canons 5.9 and 5.10 do not clearly spell out this difference, in light of HC QA 86, BC art. 22–24, and Canons 5.RE5, I understand the difference to be that, while God's promises and the witness of the Holy Spirit with my spirit that I am a child of God are the *foundation* of my assurance of perseverance, my desire to preserve a good conscience and to perform good works in a *confirming* way assures me that I will be preserved to the end. His promise and testimony, which is sure and steadfast, is *confirmed* as it is carried out, or realized. Although I am already certain of His faithfulness, His faithfulness is *confirmed* as I see His faithfulness in action. This is more or less where I am at in understanding this article, but is this the proper way to understand Canons 5.10, or am I missing the point being made in this particular article? Please don't hesitate to explain to me if I am wrong or missing some important connection between assurance and godliness.

Perhaps part of my struggle is also understanding why God's gift of godliness is necessary *as a source of assurance* when I am already fully assured that I am and forever shall remain a child of God by faith in God's promises and the testimony of the Holy Spirit in my heart. Perhaps you could clarify this for me as well.

Sincerely in Christ,
Sara Doezema

REPLY

Dear Sara,

Thank you for your persistence with your questions along this important line of discussion. That you look for a more thorough answer than what I've given indicates that there are likely other readers who desire the same.

With all three sources of assurance, their real power is the power of faith. Or, to speak more properly, it is the power of faith according to faith's only proper object, Jesus Christ. Since Jesus Christ is the only savior, every part and aspect of salvation is in him alone, including every part and aspect of assurance of salvation. Therefore, faith must include the full assurance of perseverance in that salvation.

More to the point of your question, for these three sources to be truly those out of which assurance of perseverance springs, it is necessary to see how these sources are completely related to Jesus Christ, the proper, sole object of faith.

The First and Third Sources of Assurance in Canons 5.10

First, since all the promises of God are yes and amen in Christ Jesus to the glory of God, faith in the promises of God is faith in Christ. This is an integral part of covenant doctrine and one of the chief reasons the covenant must

be unconditional: Christ is the glorious head of that covenant. He is the promised seed of Abraham and Isaac. Christ is the true heir of the world, in whom Abraham and Isaac, as well as all their spiritual seed—all the elect—have their blessed, saving fellowship with the living God (Rom. 4:13; Gal. 3:16).

From the standpoint of faith in these promises of God, faith receives the substance of these promises because it receives Christ Jesus, in whom the promises have their ground. He is the one to whom God first made these promises in eternity, foreknowing the elect in Christ, predestinating them in him to be conformed to his image, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren (Rom. 8:29). He is the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament as the servant of Jehovah, who would work the works of Jehovah and whose works would be in behalf of the covenant people to save them out of their misery. He would accomplish those works as their vicarious substitute. “By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities” (Isa. 53:11). Our Lord’s death on the cross as a vicarious, substitutionary atonement is the complete ground of all the promises of the word of God. Those promises include the substance of the promises, in this particular respect assurance. But those promises also include all the *administration* of the substance of those promises, in this particular respect the *giving* of this assurance through the work of the Holy Spirit by his eternally appointed, blood-bought gift of faith (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:25–28).

The one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, is the reason faith in God’s promises is identified in such a comprehensive way as bringing about assurance. It is not merely faith in certain promises of assurance. It is not merely faith in certain promises of the knowledge of assurance. It must be faith in all the promises of God. It must be faith in all the promises of God because they all have the same Lord Jesus Christ as their ground—Christ who is fully the believer’s through faith alone.

From a more practical viewpoint, this is why struggles of faith involve struggles of assurance. This is also why in these struggles, such as those identified in Canons 1.16, struggling saints are directed to the promises of God. To keep us from heresy at this point, it is crucial to emphasize that *in* the promises themselves is assurance. The source of assurance is not *believing*, but the source is *the promises* that are received through faith.

Here it is helpful to bring up the third source of assurance mentioned in Canons 5.10: “a serious and holy desire...to perform good works” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 175).

The Synod of Dordt described this desire as “serious and holy.” It is “holy” because it is a consecrated, Spirit-worked desire. It is “serious” because it is the fruit of the

heart’s regeneration. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart, where he works the desire of the new man in Christ, which new man of the heart is perfectly consecrated to God. Therefore, what proceeds out of this holy desire are the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23), and those fruits over against “the works of the flesh” (v. 19).

There are, then, two different relationships operating between this “sincere and holy desire...to perform good works” and “faith in God’s promises.”

First, we ought to say that in both of these relationships there is a relationship of complete dependency. There can be no such sincere and holy desire to preserve a good conscience and to perform good works without faith in the promises of God’s word. Faith in God’s promises must be first, and then the fruit of that faith is the sincere and holy desire. Put another way, good works can only be the fruit of faith and must be that fruit of faith *consciously*.

The first point of relationship is the word of Jesus Christ in John 15:5: “Without me ye can do nothing.” There is only one cause for the bearing of all the fruit of good works in the believer’s life, and that is Jesus Christ. Such is the spiritual underpinning of faith, the faith that rests in the promises of God, as those promises are sealed in the blood of the cross of Jesus Christ.

The second point of relationship is both the strength and the essential condition of all good works: gratitude. Such is the point made powerfully and practically in Romans 12:1–2, which calls believers to offer themselves up as living, spiritual sacrifices to God, proving *by the mercies of Christ* what is that good and acceptable and holy will of God. This is the reason for the glorious banner, “Of Thankfulness,” that heads the third section of the Heidelberg Catechism.

So, to speak very specifically to the question, the third source of the assurance of perseverance is rooted and grounded in the first source. The promises of the word of God, being the source to which faith goes for its blessed assurance, provide also the powerful desire by faith to do good works.

This relationship establishes a proper safeguard against a horrible abuse of this third spring of assurance.

Here a phrase must be addressed that has seen a great deal of abuse over the past few years in the Protestant Reformed Churches: *in the way of*. As the denominational synod indicated in 2018, there is a heretical use of the phrase *in the way of* and an orthodox use of the phrase. “Springs from” in Canons 5:10 represents the orthodox use of *in the way of*. The manner is organic. Another way to speak of “springs from” is *spontaneously*. Assurance springs up *spontaneously* out of the “sincere and holy desire to preserve a good conscience and to perform good works.”

The frequent biblical picture of a fruit-bearing tree is most helpful here. Psalm 1 is a powerful example: the inspired celebration of the blessedness of the man who is far from the wicked and who meditates in the law of his God. This man is compared to a fruitful tree planted by the rivers of water. That tree brings forth his fruit in his season.

What makes this man so blessed? Is it what he is doing? Is the cause of his blessedness that he keeps himself from the wicked, that he meditates in the law of his God day and night, delighting in it? Is the cause of his blessedness that he prospers in whatever he does? Not at all! His blessedness is *in* all those things. His blessedness is *in* all those things because they are all the works of Jehovah his God. Such is the fundamental truth of verse 6: “The LORD knoweth the way of the righteous.” This knowing is *the way* of Jehovah’s sovereign grace, the way of God’s knowledge of Abraham (Gen. 18:19) and God’s knowledge of his people saved by his grace alone (Eph. 2:10). *For* Jehovah knows the way of the righteous.

So it is also helpful to consider the heretical use of the phrase *in the way of*. This use rejects the “springs from” of Canons 5.10. This use rejects the organic, spontaneous relationship between assurance and good works. This use also divides what belongs together, separating good works from assurance. There are several ways in which this can be done.

Sometimes good works are separated from assurance with respect to time. If you do good works—worship, devotions, loving God and the neighbor, resisting sin and temptation—then you will get assurance or you will obtain more assurance. If you do these things, then you will prosper spiritually. Thus man’s blessedness *in* good works becomes man’s blessedness *after* good works. Sometimes this separation is worked backwards. The believer is invited to reflect on what he has done. Looking back on a life of good works, he can be assured that indeed he is a child of God.

Or the separation can be merely abstract or hypothetical. This is teaching concerning reason or motivation. Why does the believer need to do good works? Because he is saved (or experiences assurance) only in the way of good works. Here the question so controls the answer that the question creates the division that spoils assurance. In the believer’s consciousness is put the necessity to bend every effort to do good works in order to obtain assurance by doing them.

The worst form of separation between good works and assurance is the intimation that the believer’s need to do good works stands between him and God’s gift of assurance to him. This separation makes *a way* to that assurance. Along *that way* the believer must make progress. When he makes progress along *that way* by his good works, he receives assurance. The more progress he makes

on the way by doing more and more good works, the more assurance he receives. God’s gifts wait upon man’s actions. The grace of assurance by faith alone is destroyed. This is another reason that the phrase *in the way of* is not helpful at all. The phrase is no measure of orthodoxy by itself.

This is why speaking organically of producing fruit, fruit springing forth, or bearing fruit is the proper teaching. This is why the word *spontaneous* is helpful. In and with the sincere and holy desire, there is also assurance. Assurance is in and with the good works in the way of doing them. *Spontaneous* means that there is no movement from the cause of good works to their effect of assurance. Just as much as good works are all wrought by God in his elect, so that they do them, so also is his gift of assurance given to his children.

Another way to see the same distinction between good works and assurance is to look at the definition of good works in Lord’s Day 33 of the Heidelberg Catechism. There are two useful points in that definition. First, the works are good because they “proceed from a true faith.” Second, the works are good because they are done to the glory of God (*Confessions and Church Order*, 122).

The first point, that these good works “proceed from a true faith,” is in harmony with the relationship between the first and third sources out of which the believer’s assurance of perseverance springs. Faith is first, as the spring is before the water that flows out of it and as the living tree is before the fruit that grows from its branches.

But what needs the emphasis here is that true faith looks to Christ. True faith looks to Christ for all the blessings and benefits of salvation. As faith looks always and only to Christ, it cannot look to self to find any goodness of good works. Faith is no self-reliance, let alone good-works reliance. Faith dwells not on the gifts but always seeks their divine giver.

The same thing is true of the holy direction of good works. Good works are those only that are done to the glory of God. They are not done for self. They are not done for the benefit of self. Good works cannot have competing motives: some benefit for the believer and some benefit for God. As faith receives from God in Christ through the operation of the Holy Spirit, so faith must give all glory to God alone. “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

Here is where the point you make about “confirming” assurance is important. Assurance is confirmed with good works because it is spontaneous with them. Here is the sharp difference between the first and the third sources of assurance. The first, the promises of God, are given to look at, to study, to meditate on, and that in the most direct manner. They ought to fill all of the believer’s vision. To

do the same with good works, or even with the desire for them as “serious and holy,” would destroy all assurance.

Perhaps the analogy of the sacraments is helpful. Lord’s Day 25 uses similar language to describe the working of the Holy Spirit with respect to the sacraments in distinction from the preaching. While the Spirit “works faith” by the preaching of the gospel, he “confirms it” through the use of the sacraments (*Confessions and Church Order*, 108). That division can apply in the same respect to the first and the third sources of assurance. With respect to the sacraments, there is a warning given in both forms, a warning that reflects the instruction of Lord’s Days 27 and 29 of the Catechism. The warning with respect to baptism is that it may not be administered out of custom or superstition. The warning with respect to the Lord’s supper is not to eat without discerning the body of Christ. The warning is not to look at the sacrament but to look through it to see the proper object of faith, the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Just as it ruins the sacrament to look on the bread and wine instead of on Christ, so it must ruin the goodness of good works to make them anything more than confirmation.

The Second Source of Assurance in Canons 5.10

In a similar respect does the second source of assurance have its strength: spontaneously.

How precious is the language of scripture that is reflected in this second source! “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God” (Rom. 8:16). How do we enter into these inner recesses of our hearts? What can we say about our own experience of these things? Can we sense in ourselves this operation of the “Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father” (v. 15)? Can we feel in ourselves our own spirits bearing witness with the strength of the Spirit of adoption? Can we say here or there? At this time or that time? Any affirmative answer to these questions must immediately take us from the solid rock of God’s word and throw us into the quicksand of sickly mysticism.

What is the point of Romans 8:16 and its use by the Canons in 5.10? Taken in the context of Romans 8, the believer’s triumph is to know that as he contemplates all his place as a child of God and all the treasures, riches, and gifts of his Father’s kingdom, the believer’s privilege is to know the blessed source of all that knowledge as the spontaneous production of the Spirit of Christ in him as the Spirit of adoption, bearing witness with his spirit that he is a child of God. It is exactly this blessed assurance because it is of God his Father and not of himself.

As with good works, it is possible to destroy also this second fountain of assurance. That possibility is along the

same lines as with good works. To pry apart this witness and testimony of the Spirit with the spirit of the believer must be immediately to destroy this witness. One cannot speak of a before and after or of a here and there.

A powerful reminder of this necessary limit of self-knowledge is expressed in Canons 3–4.13:

The manner of this operation cannot be fully comprehended by believers in this life. Notwithstanding which, they rest satisfied with knowing and experiencing that by this grace of God they are enabled to believe with the heart, and love their Savior. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 169)

It is instructive that article 14 follows article 13 with a sharp denial of the division made by the Remonstrants, who disregarded this limitation. They did not rest satisfied but insisted on taking apart what God had joined together. They had to give man room in the work of his salvation. They rationalized that they alone could do justice to the rational, moral nature of man, that they alone could rescue man’s integrity from the determinism that would make of man a mere stock and block. Their rescue plan is clearly laid out in article 14. God did need to work his necessary grace. He must give man the offer of faith. Or he must bestow the power or ability to believe. Yes, faith must be by grace. But man must have his part, to be man. So man must have the ability to accept the offer of faith. Or he must have the responsibility to use his free will to bring into actuality the faith that God graciously gave in only power or ability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a division can be noted among the operations of these three sources of assurance in the places they occupy in the believer’s life. First, faith in God’s promises has the believer before the scriptures as the word of truth. Whether reading the promises directly in God’s word, or meditating on them, or hearing them proclaimed in the preaching of the gospel, attending on them with a true faith brings assurance. In this regard this first source of assurance demonstrates its true power as being first. God’s promises are applied by the Spirit through his gift of faith to the consciousness of the believer.

Second, the witness of the Holy Spirit has a very different place. His operation for this witness is in the secret recesses of the believer’s heart. The result of this operation is only known by the believer in his consciousness and that in a very indirect manner. Though its operation takes place within the believer, the truth of its operation must be told to us in the revelation of scripture, the Spirit’s book. In the child of God, assurance is a glorious conviction he joyfully possesses by faith. From scripture he learns the powerful source of that conviction.

Third, the sincere and holy desire to preserve a good conscience and to perform good works is integral to the whole life of the believer. It is the desire that flows out of the heart's believing reception of Christ as the complete savior, blessing the believer with the peace and joy of believing. It is the desire that reflects itself in the course of his life. It is a desire to carry out the precepts of God's law as the believer meets with the circumstances of his life as God providentially arranges them. This desire, wrought by the Spirit, excites the believer to a performance of all

good works. The Spirit so strengthens the believer to fight the battle of faith. He knows the fountain to drink from for his nourishment. He knows that rest he needs in his God to strengthen himself for the daily battle.

These three sources together demonstrate the glorious way we have been created: to be redeemed and to be blessed in the assurance of our redemption running through our whole nature, to the praise of the glory of God's grace in his beloved Son (Eph. 1:6).

—MVW

LETTER: FAITH AND REPENTANCE

Dear Editor,

Again, thank you for your response to my letter in the January 15, 2021 Letters Edition of *Sword and Shield*. In this second letter, I would like to ask a few follow-up questions concerning the relationship between faith and repentance in the context of Psalm 32. As you point out, conditional theology has two different aspects to it and can be identified in one of two ways:

1. Conditional theology turns God's work into man's work (whether man's work by God's grace, regenerated man's work of his own accord, or man's work of his own free will makes no difference). Because God alone is the unchangeable, all-powerful, faithful and true I AM, while man is fickle, powerless, wholly corrupt, and deceitful beyond measure, when any aspect of salvation is turned from being wholly the work of God to being even one ounce of man's work, all certainty and assurance is destroyed. Thus nothing can ever be both conditional and certain.
2. Conditional theology establishes a time relationship between good works and salvation, or the experience of salvation, such that good works are necessary before one will receive or experience some aspect of his/her salvation. Thus, conditional theology reverses the logical, orderly way God works in us as rational moral creatures, so that the good works of the child of God are turned into conditions necessary before one receives this or that rather than the organic fruits of thankfulness for all that one has been graciously given. In this way conditional theology always makes God's dealings with His people contractual rather than organic.

I know I have wrestled with this concept myself, so I just want to be clear. The organic nature of the covenant does not deny the fact that there are consequences

for sin. God is all-wise and He instructs us in the way of wisdom, which way is truly good for us. When we stray from His perfect way, we reap the consequences of our sin. Even unregenerate man has the glimmerings of natural light whereby he can discern good and evil and discerns that there are unwanted consequences to various actions. If he doesn't follow the traffic laws, he will end up in an accident. If he lies to everyone, nobody will trust him with anything. If he does not treat his fellow-citizens well, he will not be respected and will not receive their business if he is a business owner. If he commits adultery, his family will be broken up and destroyed. Outwardly he may live a life that looks much like that of his Christian neighbor. Yet, it is a life of avoiding consequences and doing this to get that desired result or joy rather than a life of thankfulness that is rooted in the true joy of one's gracious salvation in Christ. This is the essential difference between the unbeliever, including the one who supposes he is a member of a conditional covenant and supposes he has a contractual relationship with God, and the believer, who is a member of the unconditional covenant and has an organic relationship with God, being one organism with Christ so that His life flows through him. While all our actions have consequences, the believer's actions are not governed by consequences, but rather proceed from faith, which is the work of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ and thus bending and governing our wills by applying the Word of God to our hearts, with the fruit that that Word truly lives within us and guides us in all our ways. Thus it is our spiritual condition (faith, which God graciously gives us) that influences our actions, rather than our actions that determine our spiritual condition. While there are consequences for our sins, spiritual blessings are never the consequences of our good works. There is no "doing this and then receiving that spiritual blessing" in

God's unconditional covenant of grace, but there is only receiving all spiritual blessings from Christ our Head and Mediator by faith.

Getting back to the two points you make in your response, that the covenant is unconditional means, first, that all of salvation is *God's* work and, second, that there are no conditions at all. Not just that God fulfills all the conditions, so that there are no conditions *we* must fulfill, but that there are *no conditions at all*, which is to say that there is no time relationship between good works and spiritual blessings such that the latter is the consequence of the former. While you clearly emphasize these points, I would appreciate it if you could clarify the following: In explaining how the third exegesis of Psalm 32 (pg. 20 of September 15 S&S) is Reformed you state, "Although the third exegesis directly identifies a time relationship to support the use of the phrase 'in the way of,' it denies a relationship of dependence or conditionality, affirming instead, 'It was all of grace by faith'" (bottom pg. 11 of January 15 S&S). I guess my question is, does it really matter in the end whether repentance is considered man's work by God's grace or God's work, if a time relationship, such that repentance is performed before forgiveness is experienced, is maintained? Further, is it possible to maintain a time relationship such that repentance is *prior* to the experience of forgiveness on the one hand, while denying that one's experience of forgiveness is *conditioned* on one's repentance on the other hand, without contradicting oneself? In light of the above explanation of conditional theology, as long as you deny one aspect of conditional theology, does that mean you are now Reformed? Rome and the Arminians both insisted that man's doing and the fulfilling of the "prerequisite" was all by God's grace too, so could you further explain why a conditional covenant theologian would agree with the first exegesis of Psalm 32, but not the third?

I realize this all relates to the following decision of Synod 2020:

- b. Rev. Overway did not militate against Synod 2018 when he preached "in the way of repentance we have the mercy of God." Explanation:...

- c. Rev. Overway did not militate against Synod 2018 when he preached that there is an activity of the believer that is *prior* to the *experience* of a particular blessing from God. Mr. Doezema's objection to this reveals a misunderstanding and a misrepresentation of the decision of Synod 2018. 1) What Synod 2018 clearly rejected was any notion that characterizes what the regenerated believer does as a prerequisite or condition or instrument that earns, gains, or obtains a blessing from God. The fact that an activity of the believer may occur temporally *prior* to the *experience* of a blessing from God does not automatically make such activity a condition or prerequisite for earning, gaining, or meriting the blessing from God. Explanation:...

- d. Rev. Overway's preaching that we repent and in the way of repentance experience the mercy of God is the teaching of Scripture and the confessions. (*Acts of Synod 2020*, 80–82, Art. 51 C.2.b.–d.)

I appreciate the point you make that, "For the sake of true repentance, faith must *first* apprehend the mercy of God in Jesus Christ as a *reason* for coming to God in sorrow or shame" (bottom pg. 12). Certainly this must be true. The only other alternatives would be to make man himself capable of true repentance or to make man a stock and block in whom God simply works true repentance, with really no *reason* for repenting. As you state, God must first give one the experience of His mercy by faith in Christ before God works even the first good work of true repentance in one's heart. However, I do not see how the explanation you give is compatible with the above decision of Synod 2020 of the PRC. If you would be willing to explain how they are compatible, I would appreciate it.

Again, thank you for your time and energy in addressing these important truths in distinction from the lie. We as God's sheep are hungry for the meat of His Word, whereby we grow. May God continue to provide such spiritual nourishment through your labors.

Sincerely in Christ,
Sara Doezema

REPLY

Dear Sara,

I heartily appreciate this second letter, because I am convinced that it leads straight to the heart of the entire controversy over the good actions we undertake and the blessings of God upon those good actions.

Good Works, Grace, and Blessings of God

When I say "good actions," I refer to every good in which the believer engages—everything from repentance and faith, to all the good works of obedience done by the believer, to his perseverance through all hardships

and persecutions until he enters into the fullness of God's kingdom at Christ's return. For those good actions to be truly good, several things must be true about them. They must be the fruit of the believer's regeneration and of his gracious election. They must be worked by the Holy Spirit in the believer. They must be according to the will of God revealed in his word. And they must all be done to the glory of God, without respect to receiving anything from God in return for them, exclusive of all merit and reward. That is, their goodness is that they are done to the glory of God alone. All this is the truth of Ephesians 2:10 living in the hearts of God's redeemed and renewed people. Their great delight is to be thoroughly and completely the workmanship of their God.

The fundamental truth of these good activities is that they are the working of the Holy Spirit of God, according to the will of God, and their complete ground is in the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. That is all their goodness, and therefore all the regard that God has to them. There is only one who is forever good: that is God.

In this light the shortest answer to your question is that *there is no temporal order, no before and no after*. This denial of a temporal order can best be stated with the phrase that has become so controversial: "In the way of obedience is God's blessing." All the emphasis of this phrase belongs not on the word "obedience" but on the phrase "in the way of." To speak more to the point, obedience is but one blessing of God "in the way of," and obedience certainly is not the most fundamental. The most fundamental blessing is to be in Christ, who is himself "the way" (John 14:6; Acts 9:2; 19:9). What makes all the difference is how obedience is understood. Understood as *our* obedience, the controversial statement is indeed heretical. If this obedience is what *we* do, and blessings are made contingent upon what *we* do, then we are immediately in a system of *merit*. However, if obedience is understood as the gracious gift of God in Christ, then the blessing is immediately attached to the gift. This explains the absence of a temporal order.

Your question, then, is immediately valid. It is contrary to the doctrine of salvation by grace alone to state that a temporal relationship applies this way: when and how we obey, then afterward we receive blessings from God. Further, it is contrary to the doctrine of salvation by grace alone to state that there is any kind of separation between us and God's grace, so that God waits upon our obedience to effect something in him, namely, for him to bless us. To possess God's grace through faith *is* to be blessed.

That false notion of separation is the distinction between the doctrine of the unconditional covenant and that of the conditional covenant. A conditional covenant theology demands that man (elect, regenerated, justified,

adopted) still remains a party over against God. Thus there is a contractual obligation on the part of man to do something independently of God, something for man to do that in some respect is of himself. There is a condition of some kind to perform. It makes no difference that man fulfills that condition by God's grace. Man is still a party over against God. In the conditional covenant, man's actions, whatever they are, must be of *him* in order for them to have their proper significance as conditions. For the conditional covenant, then, a temporal relationship is absolutely necessary.

On the other hand, the relationship of friendship and fellowship that is the truth of the unconditional covenant means that God, as the covenant God, the friend-sovereign of his people, blesses them with all their salvation from beginning to end. Man is not blessed because he obeys or provides anything. He is blessed because God gives him all the blessings, including all his obedience.

Exactly here it is so important to understand the true nature of the obedience of the child of God and why that obedience is a blessing in itself. It is the obedience of Christ in the child of God and of him in Christ. That obedience is the fruit borne by the branch because the branch is in the true vine, Jesus Christ. That obedience is the life lived in the flesh by the child of God by Christ, who lives in him, to use the language of Galatians 2:20. His obedience is the blessedness of salvation.

However, scripture also teaches the importance of time and temporal relationships. Their importance is that they are the means that God is pleased to use to show the wonder of his grace in the salvation of his holy people.

There is a temporal relationship between these good actions and the good that follows them. But that temporal relationship—as before and after, as preceding and antecedent—is in no way under our control. That relationship is all of God and of his grace in Jesus Christ, the head of the covenant.

Two passages from the Bible make clear that grace—and grace alone—is responsible for this temporal order.

The first, most direct, passage is John 1:16–17: "Of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace. For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."

The second passage is Romans 11:6. To be perfectly clear, the truth of this text is the same truth of John 1:16–17, but I quote from Romans 11 for the sake of closing the case. "If by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work."

I include the Romans passage because it makes clear that grace and works must always be exclusive of each other. I also include this verse because it clearly shows

that grace excludes works. The word “works” in Romans 11:6 is simple. There are no qualifications attached to it. “Works” are the same as the willing and the running of Romans 9:16. It is not that these works are presented in a system of merit. It is not that these good works are performed as of *law*, that is, to fulfill some imposed *requirement* conditioned on those works before *obtaining* what is promised. To be sure, this is the teaching of conditional theology and exactly that with which we must reckon. But the argument must still stand: Romans 11:6 simply addresses works—anything and everything that is done *by* the believer as his work.

Going back to the Spirit’s instruction in John 1:16, there are two points that answer your question.

The first point is “grace for grace.” The Greek of this verse can be translated more roughly as “grace upon grace.” The King James Version captures the proper nuance of the preposition. The Greek certainly allows the translation of the word “for.” In addition, what follows in verse 17 helps direct this translation choice. The contrast between grace and the law as carrying the principle of man’s works for benefits from God brings about the proper translation of “for” in verse 16. Would that we would agree heartily to the same—to the exclusion of all our works! But we must also be able to appreciate the flowing and overwhelming sense of grace proposed by the rougher translation “grace upon grace.” Indeed, grace alone without works is the mighty stream that carries us from the cross of Christ to eternal glory!

In these words of John 1:16, grace is magnified. Grace is upon grace. Grace is upon grace as we receive it. This is the teaching of article 24 of the Belgic Confession about the reward of grace. “We do not deny that God rewards our good gifts, but it is through His grace that He crowns His gifts” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 54). This is the truth in which the child of God humbly rejoices. Good works are not *man’s* works that God crowns. But those works are the gracious gifts of God that he graciously crowns.

To be in the midst of this outpouring of grace, of grace for grace and grace upon grace, is the blessing of the child of God.

This is, in effect, the significance of the article of the Canons of Dort that addresses the eminence of God’s grace in the believer’s life. When the believer repents and trusts in God, the grace of God becomes eminent in the believer. When he walks in true conversion, putting off the old man of sin and putting on the new man in Christ, the grace of God becomes eminent in the believer. This is his motivation in his arduous fight against sin and in his pursuit of holiness. His aim is not to receive some kind of blessing or benefit. His aim is to make eminent the grace of God. This was the same objective of the apostle

Paul when he sought to preach the gospel. This is also an incentive to good works on the part of the believer. Again, it is not so that he might obtain some blessing or benefit, but the incentive is that God’s grace might become eminent, not only in the good works but in the grace that follows after them. The believer desires to see God’s grace for grace. He has such a zeal for God’s glory that he rejoices to pursue the good, knowing that the grace of God alone crowns the divine gifts worked in him.

The second point in John 1:16–17 is Jesus Christ—Jesus Christ as the author and provider of all grace, who also stands over against Moses, the lawgiver. This second element is the real point of the Holy Spirit in this passage. The controlling contrast is between Jesus Christ and Moses. Truly, the temple has more glory than its builder! The entire point is the Son of God, not the man Moses. “Grace for grace” must be “grace for grace” because Christ is forever the fountain of that grace. This is a point, given in the introduction to the gospel of John, that the Spirit brings up over and over in the following chapters. When later the Spirit identifies Jesus Christ as the water of life; the bread of God from heaven; the door; the good shepherd; the resurrection and the life; and the way, the truth, and the life, all these identifications point back to John 1:16 and its “grace for grace.”

The driving force of another truth consistently presented by the Spirit in this gospel account brings this second point to bear on your question. That truth is presented clearly in John 3:16: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life”; in John 20:31: “These are written, that ye might believe... and that believing ye might have life through his name”; and in John 15:5: “Without me ye can do nothing.” That truth is this: to believe on Jesus Christ is to possess him who is the way, the truth, and the life. To have Christ is to have life—that life in its beginning, in its end, and in every step and part of the way.

So there are, in this respect, two answers to your question.

The first answer is governing and controlling: to possess Christ by a true faith is to possess earth, heaven, and all things in them. It is to possess salvation in every part and aspect, including repentance and faith, including justification and sanctification, including obedience in all good works and all perseverance, and including heaven as home. In Christ are all the good works that the Christian will ever do. In Christ are all the rewards of those good works that the Christian will ever receive. To answer your question: *in Christ there is no before or after; in Christ there is nothing dependent on the believer’s willing or running or acting or doing.*

It must also be noted, contrary to the error refuted in Lord's Day 24, that the gospel of "grace for grace" will make no true believer careless or profane. It will make no child of God indolent or lazy. Just the opposite: knowing the glory of Christ as his complete savior by faith alone will make the believer zealous of true conversion because it magnifies the glorious grace of his Lord, who loved him and gave himself for him (Gal. 2:20). There is no need to hold in abeyance certain blessings or rewards because too much certainty (that is, too much grace) will either make God's children lazy or turn them into robots or puppets.

The second answer lies under and depends on the first. "Grace for grace" treats also the practical application of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. There is an order. But we must remember that this order does not exist for the sake of giving the believer's works value and significance. That is why the second answer is second, not first. This order exists to give *grace* its value and significance. Temporal order magnifies the truth of "grace for grace."

What makes the reward of grace the reward of *grace*?

It is not because grace somehow substitutes for merit. In other words, that the reward of grace must be the reward of grace because it is not of merit but of grace.

Why grace? Because, strictly speaking, it is impossible for God to reward *the works* of his believing children. Their best works are polluted with sin. God's children are sinful. They are depraved. The lust of their flesh touches and pollutes all of their good works. Their good works are the product of mixed motives, aims, goals, and reasons. We dare not set our good works before the holy and righteous God. We must ask forgiveness for every one of them. How much less dare we say, "Look at what we have done, and deal with us accordingly!"

Whose works are rewarded? The works of our gracious Lord Jesus Christ. Those are the works that God rewards. The works of the Spirit of the Son in us, sanctifying us and making us holy. Those are the works that God rewards. It is the grace that God bestows upon grace. Grace alone through Christ alone.

Thus the second answer lies along these lines: *Yes, a temporal relationship and order, to be sure. But that temporal relationship and order does not deal with our works as our works. Rather, that temporal relationship deals with God's works in Christ.*

Practical Considerations

There are also practical considerations that support the truth of a temporal relationship between grace and grace.

The first practical consideration is the promise of God and his faithfulness to perform what he has promised. So abundant and manifold are these promises of God that they fully embrace every aspect of our salvation. Because

the promises are God's, it is his glory to fulfill them all by himself, without the aid or help of his people. While much of the controversy swirling around in the Protestant Reformed Churches is about the promises of blessing and *good works*, there is a completely different category of these promises that involves *rewards* promised for the trials and persecutions of God's people. In particular, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake are promised a great reward in heaven. These promises identify and need a very clear temporal distinction. Those who are persecuted suffer now, but then they shall be glorified. Even though there is this clear temporal distinction in this promise, the ground is not their suffering (of which they are passive by definition) but the righteousness of God for which sake they suffer. At present, that righteousness is the reason for their suffering, but the fulfillment of the promise of future glorification is God's holy vindication of that suffering for the sake of his righteousness.

What is especially powerful in the above is that the suffering of God's people in persecution is fundamental to their position in the world. God's people serve their Lord in a world that is hateful toward God. As they testify of the righteousness of God in Christ and demonstrate its power in their antithetical walk and life of good works, they bring down upon them the enmity of the world. That enmity manifests itself in persecution. In the persecutions God's people endure, they do not consider themselves rewarded in this life. They do not prosper. The persecution of the world means their suffering and deprivation. They are outcasts from their homes and families. They are cast out of their society and economy. They are the objects of shame and reproach. Nevertheless, they have the promise of God. Their persecution shall be rewarded. They shall be great in the kingdom of heaven. That promise is for their comfort and peace *presently* in their sorrowful and desolate circumstances. They are called blessed by their savior. He commands them to rejoice and be glad, for great is their reward in heaven.

This leads to the second practical consideration. This consideration is the gifts of faith, hope, and patience, which are given by the Spirit. These gifts require the temporal distinction between promise made and promise fulfilled, all by the grace of God. Faith apprehends the promise of God's word and rests in it. Hope looks specifically to those promises that are yet to be fulfilled and apprehends their certainty, though not seeing them yet fulfilled. Patience is the application of that hope to present circumstances, waiting upon God's time, enduring all hardships for the sake of what God is certain to work because he has promised.

Also here, the consideration must not be human. Faith, hope, and patience are not mere human traits. Though

their counterfeits might exist as psychological conditions in mankind, the difference is sovereign particular grace, grace obtained by the merits of Christ's sacrifice and obedience alone. These gifts of the Spirit have their ground in the cross, are dispensed according to God's eternal decree of election, and are thoroughly gifts wrought in the children of God by the Holy Spirit by himself. We must also note that every expression of these gifts in the children of God—as they interact with all the circumstances of their lives in which they exercise these particular gifts—is also the work of the Spirit in them. They *manifest* these works of God in their lives.

Exactly because these are the gracious gifts of God to his covenant people, they must be vindicated. Faith must become sight. Hope must be seen. Patience must be rewarded. These gifts must be brought to their proper end according to the time that God has established for them. He will fulfill by himself the promises he has given his children to believe and for which to hope and patiently wait. Their works and their suffering will be graciously rewarded because he is faithful who has promised. The time of that reward he has determined for the sake of his glory, so that not one of his gifts will miss its end, and so that not one of his works will be unfulfilled. All must be brought to its proper end, his everlasting glory alone.

The above is the significance of the prayer of Psalm 90.

As the psalmist begins his prayer with praise of the eternal God, who is before the mountains were brought forth or ever the earth and the world were formed, so the psalmist ends the prayer with an acknowledgment that the works of the Lord are for his glory alone. His works, for his eternal glory, are the subject of the closing words of the psalm. "And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it" (v. 17). His glory is to beautify all his works, even those works that he works in us in and through his Son and Spirit, which works include all the good that we will and do (Phil. 2:13).

Your question thus touches on the heart of the controversy over the good works done by God's people. If we foolishly pretend that what we do in time and history is significant because these works are done by us—even by us as elect, regenerated, believing persons—we must be powerfully rebuked by our own insignificance. So much more should we vainly suppose that the enormous, incomprehensible matter called time that the eternal God created should be for our significance, rather than for his alone. He is Lord of time. He is our Lord. Faithfully serving our redeemer, redeeming the time because the days are evil, let us wait upon him to glorify his grace in us to his eternal praise and glory alone.

—MVW

LETTERS: BIBLICAL COUNSELING

Dear Editors,

As a result of reading the articles regarding IRBC in the Dec.1, 2020, and Jan.15, 2021, *Sword and Shield* issues, as a psych (related to mental health) nurse, I reflected on treatment of mental illness in general. Christian counseling is very important for depressed and anxious patients that are functioning well enough to process thoughts, or those seeking to deal with life circumstances in a Godly way, following the only Truth, the Bible. Hopefully, counselees would not be further discouraged by incorrectly being told they are not feeling better because they are not doing enough or aren't spiritual enough. In more complex cases, Christian counselors, especially those that are lay people trained briefly, may not have the depth of training needed. I feel so strongly the Bible has the answers to life but that certain aspects of psychiatry can be very helpful in some cases. I realize carefulness is needed in that, and if necessary a pastor or elders may have oversight.

As an example, I have seen, where a particularly gifted, non-Christian therapist saved a marriage when spiritual counseling, well-meaning as it was, did harm. This therapist, with a keen and unusual understanding of early childhood development and how that impacted the current relationship, worked expertly and diligently within the framework of the couple's beliefs regarding divorce and remarriage. That excellent outcome is not saying I don't understand the importance of Christian counseling, but there are exceptions. Mental illness and its treatment can be incredibly complex.

Another non-Christian therapist, in passing told me, "You are seeing that in a codependent way and it is affecting your ability to see accurately." These were words that were helpful then and have been ever since in various situations. If I were to see a Christian counselor, I would hope for this level and type of insight.

Ideally, we would have Christian therapists available that

are trained with a strong background in God's science of psychology (which the world has distorted), and who also have had past experience working on a psych unit. It is incredibly helpful to work with and know different types and levels of depression, bipolar illness, OCD, mania, psychosis, PTSD, anorexia, schizophrenia, multiple personalities, and more. Also, it helps to learn to recognize and how to work with personality disorders. The area of special concern though is the world's twist on psychology in social and behavior studies. This should be worked through carefully and with Christian support depending on the specific class.

Just after leaving med-surg to work psych, I asked our director, a Christian psychiatrist, Dr. Mulder, if most of our patients were there because in some way they had a sin problem. A man of few words, he looked at me, paused at length, looking like it suddenly was becoming a very long day and said, "That is greatly oversimplifying it," and turned back to his charts. How right he was, but it was something I'd have to see for myself over time.

I am curious how it works for spiritual counselors when patients may not really be ready for any counseling until they have had medication to clear distorted, fixed, incredibly anxious thinking, or have lost the ability to stay on track mentally. Psych meds are not "happy pills" or a cop out. There is a class of meds called "benzos" (Valium, Xanax, and Ativan) that help anxiety. These are typically used until the meds that actually help restore the brain biochemistry start to work. Because these meds can be addictive with long term use, prescriptions are watched closely. There sometimes is a lot of trial and error in med management and it can be a very frustrating and long process.

The psych meds that actually help the altered brain chemistry usually have side effects and it is not patients' first preference to be on them. They often go off these meds when they shouldn't, sometimes with much regression. And meds should usually be tapered when going off of them. It was particularly frustrating when ministers would come in and tell patients they aren't better because they do not trust God alone to heal them, and that they shouldn't take psych meds.

As an aside there are many possible causes of depression like stroke and coronary bypass surgery; and depression can be a precursory sign to things like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. It's also possible there are not external

causes to the brain's pathology in depression; in the same way not all with hypertension are overweight, smoke, don't exercise, or watch their diet.

In regard to spousal abuse, a related subject, some Christian counseling denies it exists or shouldn't be called such because it should be called and dealt with as sin. It is sin...murder. The wife, who is usually the abused one, can be confused and unable to even put the pieces together of her situation, while her husband in private does things like repeated undermining, gas lighting, crazy making, and / or physical abuse. She often carries the fear for years of not being really sure people understand or believe what she went through. After a marital session, retribution can come to the wife in a variety of ways. The abuser wants control at any cost. It's important to see the couple separately. It should not ultimately be marital therapy but therapy for the abused first of all, and abuser secondly. Most severe abusers are either narcissists or sociopaths. In the psych field, severe abusers are considered so cunning they often dupe the therapist, so it is recommended the therapist work under a supervising therapist.

I haven't understood, sadly, until recent years, how, as a last resort, separation may need to happen. First of all, to bring strength of mind and body back to the abused person and to the children if there are any. This can take months, and children, often silent sufferers, also are incredibly destroyed by abusive marital relationships. Secondly, separating can bring stark reality to the abuser. In a later case, bringing reality by separation caused a complete turnaround in the abuse, and then reconciliation. This would not have happened without that last extreme step. In regard to abuse, two very helpful books that all counselors and consistories should be well versed on are, *Why Does He Do That* by Lundy Bancroft and *The Unholy Charade* by Jeff Crippen and Rebecca Davis. The latter is in regard to churches.

In closing, there is not always one easy answer in treating mental illness. As I've struggled for years with exactly where to land in the spiritual counseling alone view—versus also the use of psychotherapists and psychiatrists (who prescribe meds)—I'm open to more thoughts on this subject.

Sincerely,
Glenda Koops



In his response to Brendan Looyenga's letter defending the views of IRBS against Samuel Vasquez's criticisms of the Biblical Counseling movement, Vasquez rightly attributes to me and other defenders of common grace what he considers to be the erroneous conviction that, as he

describes our view, "truth can be found in unregenerate, profane authors; this truth is given by the Holy Spirit to unbelievers, and if we despise this truth wherever it can be found, we despise the Spirit of God." Again, that certainly is an accurate account of the view I hold.

But Vasquez’s characterization of the view is also a close paraphrase of something that John Calvin affirms in *Institutes*, II, 2, 15, where the Reformer observes about ancient pagan authors that the “admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it where it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God.”

I do not mean here to rehearse my serious disagreements with Protestant Reformed authors regarding common grace. But I do believe you should make it clear to your readers why you reject what Calvin says in this comment that Vasquez paraphrases, lest they happen to read the *Institutes* and be unwittingly led by what he affirms into what you see as a clear and dangerous departure from Reformed orthodoxy.

Richard J. Mouw, PhD
President Emeritus
Fuller Theological Seminary

REPLY

Introduction

I appreciate Dr. Mouw’s desire not to enter into a debate regarding the doctrine of common grace over against particular grace or over against providence. The question, for the sake of the argument, concerns truth: Is truth found among unregenerate persons, either as individual persons or as they form worldly institutions?

However, let me take the opportunity to state my preference. Although the idea is erroneous, I prefer Mouw’s judgment, expressed elsewhere, that common grace is the outstanding explanation for psychology and psychiatry. To have psychology and psychiatry be the results of common grace would be an improvement, though only from worse to bad, over the more recent novelty of so-called Christian psychology.

Indeed, the Protestant Reformed Churches ought to understand that Christian psychology is not Christian. The introduction of Christian psychology into Protestant Reformed churches is evident. It is evident in sermons, in the teachings of various articles, and in counseling done in the denomination by ministers and lay persons. Such is the reason behind Samuel Vasquez’ article, “The Sufficiency of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” in the December 1, 2020, issue of *Sword and Shield*. This article occasioned the missive from Dr. Mouw. A proper understanding of this psychology, branded as Christian, reveals the attempt to introduce practically into the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) the doctrine of common grace through the Trojan horse of Christian psychology.

If the interested reader is willing to do the research, he will find that Dr. Mouw’s contention about common grace is indeed correct. There is abundant testimony from a multitude of purveyors of Christian psychology that *common grace* is their basis for applying the results of secular psychology to Christianity. Dr. Mouw’s labor is but

the tip of an iceberg. Then the question must be asked, is the doctrine of common grace stealthily worming its way into the PRC via Christian counseling?

The above is indeed the deep, heartfelt concern expressed by Samuel Vasquez. The question raised by his article is indeed urgent. Are we selling our precious birthright of sovereign, particular grace alone for the potage of Christian psychology? His sense of alarm easily explains, then, the length he is willing to go by writing the statement to which Dr. Mouw calls attention.

What about Truth?

The main matter of importance that Dr. Mouw brings to the reader’s attention gets to the heart of the debate. What about truth? Specifically, what about the truth that is found on the lips and from the pens of unregenerated individuals? What about the truth that is found from the studies of men that are performed in obvious independence from the only light—God’s word?

In addition to the quotation presented by Dr. Mouw from Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, we find two additional comments in the immediate context of the same section.

To this gratitude we have a sufficient call from the Creator himself, when, in the case of idiots, he shows what the endowments of the soul would be were it not pervaded with his light. Though natural to all, it is so in such a sense that it ought to be regarded as a gratuitous gift of his beneficence to each. (II.2.14)

Shall we say that those who, by the cultivation of the medical art, expended their industry in our behalf, were only raving? (II.2.15)

What is striking about this second quotation is that Calvin includes his observation concerning “the medical

art” among others, namely “lawgivers,” “philosophers,” rhetoricians, and the “mathematical sciences.” I bring up this quotation because it shows a ready application to the realm of psychiatry (not so much psychology) as a subdivision of medicine.

At the same time—and I trust Dr. Mouw will readily agree with him—Calvin had the following to say:

Lest any one, however, should imagine a man to be very happy merely because, with reference to the elements of this world, he has been endued with great talents for the investigation of truth, we ought to add, that the whole power of intellect thus bestowed is, in the sight of God, fleeting and vain whenever it is not based on a solid foundation of truth. Augustine...to whom, as we have observed, the Master of Sentences...and the Schoolmen are forced to subscribe, says most correctly, that as the gratuitous gifts bestowed on man were withdrawn, so the natural gifts which remained were corrupted after the fall. Not that they can be polluted in themselves in so far as they proceed from God, but that they have ceased to be pure to polluted man, lest he should by their means obtain any praise. (II.2.16)

What is this “truth” found here and there, “whenever it is not based on a solid foundation of truth”? Is this “truth” or is it even common grace, when, as stated by Calvin, “the gratuitous gifts bestowed on man were withdrawn”?

The alarm raised by Vasquez is therefore entirely justified. We can certainly understand that he is free to disagree with Calvin on the distinct point. There are certainly clear, urgent reasons for rejecting anything in the above as “truth,” and especially as “the truth given by the Holy Spirit to unbelievers.”

One reason for Vasquez’s alarm is the clear danger demonstrated by so many examples. The truth identified by Calvin in this section of his *Institutes* is abused to such an extent as to overwhelm and drive out the truth of God’s word, notably the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. One such example is found in Vasquez’s point that the superficial comfort and peace offered by psychological methodology are preferred to the true, antithetical comfort and peace from the cross of Jesus Christ set forth in the gospel. The Pelagian self-improvement of self-teaching and self-motivation replaces the sinner’s faith in Jesus Christ to be all his salvation. The behavior-changing techniques of psychological therapy contend against gratitude for Christ’s salvation as the godly motivation for a life of good works.

Another reason for alarm is the failure to understand and apply the antithesis between the truth and the lie.

Indeed, while it is to be admitted, as Calvin asserted, that the truth is not to be despised when God providentially gives that gift to lawmakers, philosophers, and doctors; yet it remains that unregenerated, fallen men in Adam hold this truth under in unrighteousness and use it in the service of the lie. The lie is that *without God* this truth can be known and discovered, explained and applied for the true benefit of man. While men crow and preen themselves on the knowledge that they have attained in perverse defiance of the very God who has shown to them what they know, they give every evidence of their wickedness. As article 14 of the Belgic Confession asserts regarding these unregenerated, fallen men who have this knowledge, they retain

only a few remains thereof, which, however, are sufficient to leave man without excuse; for all the light which is in us is changed into darkness, as the Scriptures teach us, saying: The light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not, where St. John calleth men darkness.

The same confession is made later in the same article: “Who can speak of his knowledge, since *the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God?*” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 39). After declaring that the natural man “is incapable of using it [“the light of nature”] aright even in things natural and civil,” the Canons of Dordt go further in stating the work of the natural man upon that light. “Nay further, this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God” (*Canons 3–4.4*, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 167).

The failure to understand and apply the antithesis between truth and lie becomes clear when applied to Christian psychology. How does secular, atheistic psychology come to have these inroads into Christian churches to the subversion of the gospel of salvation, in which is found all true comfort and peace through faith alone in Christ alone?

There is a catastrophic failure to see the “truth,” to which Calvin calls attention in II.2.15, in the light of scripture. Sadly, this failure is not in seeing what the Canons call “the glimmerings of natural light.” But the abject, devastating failure is to apply the scriptures that testify what the natural man does with these glimmerings. Christians, eager to import the fleshly and devilish wisdom of the world, forget that the world is under the judgment of God. Specifically, under the judgment of God, the ungodly world formulates many ways and means to maintain its comfort and peace and denies the wrath of God on the wicked. Refusing the true comfort and peace presented in the gospel of the cross of Jesus Christ, the

ungodly world insists on the sufficiency of its earthly psychology. In their great evil, what is the material difference between the sufficiency of earthly psychology or the sufficiency of drug abuse? Must not any sufficiency opposed to the sufficiency of the gospel of Jesus Christ be wholly abhorrent to the child of God? Must he not see it as a deadly rival to the comfort that he possesses only as the gift of his dear savior to him? Must he not take any other sufficiency than the gospel and reject out of hand that sufficiency as a wicked lie of Satan to draw him away from the full peace he has from the blood of his crucified Lord?

The matter of “the glimmerings of natural light” stands over against the darkness of the natural man, the darkness that always renders that light wholly polluted and holds it in unrighteousness. While Dr. Mouw, following the teaching of Calvin, may rightly deem such glimmerings as

“truth,” the alarm sounded by Vasquez about the abuse of that “truth” in the service of the lie that would subvert the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ is easily understood. Let the alarm continue to sound, whether against Christian psychology or against common grace psychology!

We might well seek more of the likes of Laocoön, Cassandra, and Helen, who gave every effort to warn the hapless Trojans of the perilous horse brought into their midst. What will happen when their warnings are ignored, and the population goes to blissful sleep at night and awakens the next morning to see the city’s gates opened wide to the enemy’s attack and the destruction of their beloved city? Who in the wake of such destruction would dare quibble about Cassandra’s spurning of Apollos as a reason for ignoring her true warning?

—MVW

LETTER: WITSIUS

Dear Dr. Nathan Lanning and the Editors of *Sword and Shield*,

I wanted to thank you for the critique and analysis of Herman Witsius in the May issue of the magazine. This article was a necessary counterpoint to the articles in the *Standard Bearer* encouraging the PRC and Reformed community to seek doctrinal guidance from Herman Witsius regarding the covenant. Especially as those articles were instructing us in the utility of good works in the possession of the believer’s salvation.

When those articles in the *Standard Bearer* initially came out, I looked into who Witsius was. From what I was able to find it appears that he was a follower of the “further reformation” movement in the Reformed church world. This means that Witsius would be in the tradition of the Puritans and Netherlands Reformed Church. This is important because the “further reformation” tradition has a distinctively unReformed view of faith and the experience of one’s salvation. As pointed out in your article, Witsius held to this same erroneous view of faith and assurance in contradiction to Lord’s Day 7. This “further reformation” theology puts the believer on a quest so that by his striving and endeavoring and working he might finally come to have the “possession” or experience of his salvation.

It is incredible that a Protestant Reformed minister would send us to a “further reformation” theologian in order to show us the proper utility of one’s good works

in regards to the experience of their salvation. We must beware whom we seek direction from. If the heart of their theology regarding faith and the experience of the believer is built upon false doctrine, then all of their theology regarding faith and the experience of the believer is subject to that same error. In this regard, it is good to remember the parable of Jesus in Luke 6:39: “Can the blind lead the blind? shall they not both fall into the ditch?”

Rather than following Witsius who has shown himself to be blind with regards to faith and the believer’s experience, let us seek leaders whose eyes have been opened regarding this subject. Prof. Engelsma speaks to this experience of one’s salvation in his pamphlet *The Gift of Assurance*. “Puritan theologians and their followers speak anxiously of the ‘quest’ for assurance. Reformed orthodoxy thankfully rejoices in the ‘gift’ of assurance. The *Spirit* works assurance, not the believer himself” (44). “The Spirit assures elect believers of their salvation in the same way in which the Spirit saves them, namely, by faith in Jesus Christ, as He is preached in the gospel of the Scripture. Assurance is a gift of God in Christ to the elect child of God. It is a purely gracious gift...Assurance is not earned, or obtained, by works” (43).

Engelsma later goes on to explain that one’s assurance is only experienced within the sphere of holiness in the believer. However, unlike a “further reformation” theologian, who makes that holiness the way one comes into possession of their salvation, the truth is that because

the *Holy Spirit* is holy those within whom He dwells He also makes holy. Further, when the Holy Spirit gives the gifts of salvation to the believer, He gives those gifts simultaneously. The believer is made partaker of Christ and *all* his benefits. Just as assurance is a gift, so too is our holiness and good works. These benefits are not doled out piecemeal and according to our works, but are generously and bountifully given freely to the believer all at the same time as his inheritance.

One other important point from your article that I found interesting was the teaching of Witsius “that the covenant is a mutual agreement between God and man.” A covenant that is a mutual agreement between God and man is a covenant that has two consenting parties. A covenant that has two consenting parties is a bilateral covenant. I understand that Witsius held to a unilateral covenant in its origin and establishment, but in its administration and application to a rational moral creature, he turned the covenant into a bilateral one. And a bilateral covenant is by necessity a conditional covenant.

This teaching of a bilateral covenant becomes even more troubling when you look at the April 5, 2021, Reformed Free Publishing Association blog post. Here a quote of Herman Bavinck was included without qualification and for the reader’s enjoyment. In this quote Herman Bavinck teaches that the elect in the covenant of grace “consciously and voluntarily consent to this covenant.” And that “in its administration by Christ, the covenant of grace does assume this demanding conditional form.” The believer most assuredly *assents* to the covenant that it is good and that he consciously and voluntarily will strive to do his part in the covenant as is his duty. But if man can and must *consent* to the covenant, this would make man a party alongside God. If the *consent* of the believer has any weight in the covenant then the covenant is no longer unilaterally established and maintained only by God, but it becomes bilateral and is maintained by God and man. Such a covenant would truly become a covenant of grace that assumes a conditional form.

Bavinck goes on to acknowledge that “the covenant of grace, accordingly, is indeed unilateral.” However, it would seem this unilateral nature of the covenant only goes so far. Bavinck continues in the very next sentence to say, “But [the covenant] is destined to become bilateral, to be consciously and voluntarily accepted and kept by humans in the power of God.” According to Bavinck then, the covenant in its administration, or maintenance, or in the believer’s conscious experience is bilateral. A bilateral covenant is a covenant between two consenting parties that are equals. A bilateral covenant is by definition then a conditional covenant.

That this quote was initially given without any qualifi-

cations and for the reader’s enjoyment on a RFPA blog post is astounding. In 1953, the forefathers of the PRC fought for a unilateral covenant especially as it pertained to the experience of the believer. I believe this quote of Bavinck was printed because it speaks to the believer’s duty and how God deals with His people as rational moral creatures and additionally because Bavinck speaks highly of the new life that the believer has whereby he can and does obey God. These issues are hot topics within the PRC at this time and it is good to discuss them. However, to promote these issues as Bavinck did by asserting a bilateral covenant is to bring heresy into the church for the sake of promoting holiness of life. It was one thing for Bavinck to do this at his time in church history as the doctrine of the covenant had not yet been so fully developed as it is now, but for the publishing house of the PRC to favorably print this quote for the readers enjoyment without warning or comment is an entirely different matter.

To the RFPA’s credit on May 5, 2021, the RFPA published another post “as a commentary to a previous blog post published in April 5, 2021, titled *Herman Bavinck on God’s Covenant of Grace*.” This was an excerpt from the book *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition* by Prof. Engelsma. In this excerpt Engelsma interprets what Bavinck is meaning to teach when he speaks of a bilateral covenant as the mutuality of the covenant, that is, man in the covenant has his part to do. Though Engelsma’s evaluation of Bavinck’s teaching may be correct, as we have learned in recent history, the orthodox statements do not explain away the unorthodox ones, but rather the unorthodox statements compromise the orthodox ones. Bavinck was wrong to speak of our *consenting* to the covenant. He was wrong to speak of the covenant in its administration as assuming this demanding *conditional* form. And he was wrong to speak of the covenant as being *bilateral*. No matter what Bavinck meant to teach when he wrote these things, these ideas have been rejected as heresy by the PRC. As such, it was wrong of the RFPA to initially post this quote from Bavinck for the readers’ enjoyment without commentary or qualification, as if he had something the PRC needed to hear and learn.

In light of these articles in the *Standard Bearer* on the relevancy of Witsius in the current debate within the PRC and this April 5 blog post by the RFPA, I am concerned that the RFPA and the PRC do not know and love their own history and doctrinal heritage as they should. Those who do not know their own history are in danger of repeating it. Also those who leave their first love are in danger of no longer being a true church of Jesus Christ (Rev. 2:4–5). It is also concerning that leaders in the PRC are using quotes and teachings of

men that have been condemned in the PRC's history in order to bolster their position regarding the place of good works in salvation. Once again it is good to hear the words of Christ on this matter, "Let them alone: they be blind

leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch" (Matt. 15:14).

A brother in Christ,
Matthew Overway

LETTER: OUR PRESENT CONTROVERSY

Dear Readers & Editors,

I am thankful to God for His mercy in rebuking me through the mouths of his prophets over the last months. Whether in the preaching or in the *Sword & Shield*, I have been confronted with this rebuke from the LORD: "What have you done and what are you doing with my truth? Why do you yet strengthen the hands of evildoers, minimizing the false doctrine they have taught? Why is there ever a mind of compromise within you that seeks to find common ground with the lie, seeks to excuse and explain it away as a mere difference in emphasis or vantage point, and seeks to ignore your differences in order to avoid the battle that ever belongs to true faith? How is it that your love for me and my truth has grown so cold?"

And, I have found this rebuke to be convicting. Initially, I was frustrated and disgusted with the weakness of the decision of Synod 2018 regarding Connie Meyer's appeal. After hearing many praise it and give thanks for it, I began to think it maybe wasn't so bad. Yet, my conscience could not but protest this decision to the Synod of 2019. As many whom I highly respected, including the editors of the *Sword & Shield*, continued to consistently hold forth the decision of Synod 2018 as a strong defense of the truth, I began to conclude that perhaps the decision itself was good and strong, and the problem was only with those who were continually twisting it.

But, in the face of these rebukes, I have been compelled to again face this question: You uphold the decision of Synod 2018. You take it for your confession of the truth and your rejection of the lie. But what kind of confession of the truth is this that you have made? Is it truly a confession of the truth that leaves no room for the lie? Is it a confession of the truth that does nothing but reject the lie in strongest terms? Is it a confession that holds up the truth in all of its purity and clarity, dispelling the darkness and confusion which belongs to the lie?

Truly, the truth is holy. It is pure light. It is a burning and consuming fire before which not even one word of the lie can stand. Christ is the Truth, and the devil is the lie, and there can be no concord between Christ and Be-

lial. And so it is, throughout scripture and throughout the Reformed Confessions, that the truth is declared to the utter destruction and rejection of every lie, even every slight wind of false doctrine.

So, the question I have again been called to ponder and to meditate on in light of the rebukes that have been brought is, "Is the decision of Synod 2018 to which you hold such a confession of the truth that fiercely, fully, and jealously rejects the lie as an all-consuming fire burns away every spec of dross?" Is it truly a rejection of the lie that one's experience of this blessing or that blessing in the covenant is contingent on how one lives in the covenant? Or, is it also to be judged as a minimization of that lie? A minimization that leaves just a little room for the lie, entertaining the possibility that the lie could be understood as truth and could be interpreted rightly? Since the decision of Synod 2018 was made, the error has been minimized in many ways. But did our minimization of this gross error begin already with our adoption of Synod 2018's decision? May each of us who have taken this decision as our own confession of the truth lay this question to heart, shine the light of scripture upon it, and answer it with the conviction of the Spirit of Christ.

In answering this question, I began by looking at what a scriptural rejection of the lie looks like.

Scripture

Acts 15:5, 10-11, 24: "But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses. Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they. Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment."

I Timothy 1:3-7, 18-20: "As I besought thee to abide

still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine, neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith: so do. Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned: from which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling; desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm. This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them mightest war a good warfare; holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.”

II Peter 2:1–3, 12–22: “But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not. But these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things that they understand not; and shall utterly perish in their own corruption; and shall receive the reward of unrighteousness, as they that count it pleasure to riot in the day time. Spots they are and blemishes, sporting themselves with their own deceivings while they feast with you; having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls: an heart they have exercised with covetous practices; cursed children: which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; but was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man’s voice forbad the madness of the prophet. These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever. For when they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage. For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for

them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.”

Matthew 15:6–9; 16:6 “Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition. Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.”

Colossians 2:8, 16–23: “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ. Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God. Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (touch not; taste not; handle not; which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body: not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.”

Galatians 1:6–9; 2:3–5; 5:6–9: “I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, if any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: and that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: to whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you. For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing,

nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love. Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth? This persuasion cometh not of him that calleth you. A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.”

Titus 1:10–14: “For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre’s sake. One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, the Cretians are alway liars, evil beasts, slow bellies. This witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith; not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth.”

Similarly, the Reformed confessions are characterized by the same uncompromising rejection of the lie.

Heidelberg Catechism

LD 11: “They do not; for though they boast of Him in words, yet in deeds they deny Jesus the only deliverer and Savior...”

LD 30: “So that the mass, at bottom, is nothing else than a denial of the one sacrifice and sufferings of Jesus Christ, and an accursed idolatry.”

Belgic Confession

Art. 7: “Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever doth not agree with this infallible rule, which the apostles have taught us, saying, Try the spirits whether they are of God. Likewise, if there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house.”

Art. 9: “This doctrine of the Holy Trinity hath always been defended and maintained by the true Church, since the times of the apostles to this very day, against the Jews, Mohammedans, and some false Christians and heretics, as Marcion, Manes, Praxeas, Sabellius, Samosatenus, Arius, and such like, who have been justly condemned by the orthodox fathers.”

Art. 12: “Therefore we reject and abhor the error of the Sadducees...and also that of the Manichees...”

Art. 13: “And therefore we reject that damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God regards nothing, but leaves all things to chance.”

Art. 14: “Therefore we reject all that is taught repugnant to this concerning the free will of man...In short, who dare suggest any thought...”

Art. 15: “Wherefore we reject the error of the Pelagians, who assert that sin proceeds only from imitation.”

Art. 18: “Therefore we confess (in opposition to the heresy of the Anabaptists, who deny that Christ assumed human flesh of His mother)...”

Art. 22: “Therefore, for any to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that something is required besides Him,

would be too gross a blasphemy; for hence it would follow that Christ was but half a Savior.”

Art. 34: “Therefore we detest the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with the one only baptism they have once received...”

Art. 35: “Therefore we reject all mixtures and damnable inventions which men have added unto and blended with the sacraments, as profanations of them...”

Art. 36: “Wherefore we detest the Anabaptists and other seditious people, and in general all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates and would subvert justice, introduce community of goods, and confound that decency and good order which God hath established among men.”

Canons of Dordt

1.RE1: “For these deceive the simple and plainly contradict the Scriptures...”

1.RE2: “For this is a fancy of men’s minds, invented regardless of the Scriptures, whereby the doctrine of election is corrupted...”

1.RE3: “For by this injurious error the pleasure of God and the merits of Christ are made of none effect...and this declaration of the apostle is charged as untrue...”

1.RE4: “For this savors of the teaching of Pelagius, and is opposed to the doctrine of the apostle, when he writes...”

1.RE5: “This is repugnant to the entire Scripture...”

1.RE6: “By which gross error they make God to be changeable, and destroy the comfort which the godly obtain out of the firmness of their election, and contradict the Holy Scripture...”

2.RE1: “For this doctrine tends to the despising of the wisdom of the Father and of the merits of Jesus Christ, and is contrary to Scripture.”

2.RE3: “For these adjudge to contemptuously of the death of Christ...and bring again out of hell the Pelagian error.”

2.RE6: “For these, while they feign that they present this distinction in a sound sense, seek to instill into the people the destructive poison of the Pelagian errors.”

3–4.RE3: “This is an innovation and an error, and tends to elevate the powers of the free will, contrary to the declaration of the prophet...”

3–4.RE4: “For these are contrary to the express testimony of Scripture.”

3–4.RE7: “But this is altogether Pelagian and contrary to the whole Scripture...”

3–4.RE8: “For this is nothing less than the denial of all the efficiency of God’s grace in our conversion...”

3–4.RE9: “For the ancient church has long ago condemned this doctrine of the Pelagians...”

5.RE2: “For this idea contains an outspoken Pelagianism,

and, while it would make men free, it makes them robbers of God's honor..."

5.RE3: "For this conception makes powerless the grace, justification, regeneration, and continued keeping by Christ, contrary to the express words of the apostle Paul..."

5.RE5: "For by this doctrine the sure comfort of the true believers is taken away in this life, and the doubts of the papist are again introduced into the church..."

5.RE6: "For these show that they do not know the power of divine grace and the working of the indwelling Holy Spirit. And they contradict the apostle John..."

5.RE8: "For these deny by this doctrine the incorruptibility of the seed of God, whereby we are born again..."

5.RE9: "For they contradict Christ Himself, who says..."

And, now, let us compare the decision of Synod 2018 to the rejections made in the scriptures and the confessions (underlining added—SD).

In Articles 62 & 67 of the 2018 Acts of Synod we read:

p. 61 B.1.: "Classis failed to deal with doctrinal error contained in sermons Mrs. Meyer protested to Hope's Consistory. The doctrinal error is that the believer's good works are given a place and function that is out of harmony with the Reformed confessions."

p. 63–64: a), b), c), d): "L.D. 32 does not teach that the necessity of good works is..."

p. 66 a): "Good works of 'obedience' and 'godliness' are forced into L.D. 45. It is not true that 'when the Catechism mentions requisites or requirements, it's talking about obedience,' or 'godliness.' L.D. 45 is not teaching the requisites of God's law (L.D.s 34–44), but the requisites of prayer."

p. 66 b): "It is erroneous to teach...Nowhere do the creeds, including L.D. 45, which is the text for the sermon, teach that...Giving to our obedience the place that these statements do strongly suggests that our obedience is a condition for covenant fellowship."

p. 66 c): "Nowhere does L.D. 45 teach or even suggest..."

p. 68–69 a): "But, L.D. 23 says nothing about our good works...It is detrimental to the congregation that anywhere in a sermon on forensic justification, a preacher would teach that Scripture speaks highly of works."

p. 69 b): "James 2 teaches that Abraham demonstrated his faith by his works, but it does not teach that Abraham looked at his works to become aware of and more conscious of God's justification of him in the courtroom of his heart."

p. 69 4) a): "The orthodox statements in the broad context of these sermons cannot be used to justify these erroneous statements, but rather the orthodox statements are compromised by the erroneous statements."

p. 70 b): "The doctrinal error of the sermons then compromises the gospel of Jesus Christ, for when our good works are given a place and function they do not have, the perfect work of Christ is displaced. Necessarily then, the doctrines of the unconditional covenant (fellowship with God) and justification by faith alone are compromised by this error."

p. 70 c): "Additionally, even the truth of the strict demands of God's law is compromised."

p. 70–71 b.: "Hope's Consistory erred in its defense of Rev. Overway's sermons...With this defense, Hope's Consistory reveals that it has a misunderstanding of the 'necessary way of the covenant' and the proper use of the phrase 'in the way of.'"

p. 73 (b): "To say, either 'Obedience is necessary for the experience of covenant fellowship' or 'obedience is a requirement *in order to* experience covenant fellowship' is ambiguous and could suggest that obedience is part of the way unto the experience of covenant fellowship, that is, a requirement to be met in order to have covenant fellowship. It is better to say: obedience is necessary *in* the experience of covenant fellowship."

p. 74–75 2): "Hope's Consistory was mistaken when it maintained regarding the challenged sermons, 'In Rev. Overway's sermons he teaches the necessary way of the covenant' (Mar. 22, 2017 Letter)...a) Contrary to the contention of Hope, the following statements are *not* expressions of the 'necessary way of the covenant.'"

p. 75 a) (2): "In these statements good works are no longer fruits and are no longer the way of grateful conduct in the experience of fellowship with God, but good works are performed to obtain something, or good works function as an instrument/means for the reception of something, or good works become part of the way unto the experience of covenant fellowship."

p. 75 3): "Furthermore, Hope's Consistory erred by reformulating the 'necessary way of the covenant' in an ambiguous manner so that the believer's obedience seems to be given an instrumental role, in which case obedience is no longer a fruit."

p. 76 c): "Whether we are convinced as Mrs. Meyer is that Hope made obedience an *instrument unto* rather than a *fruit in* the covenant relationship, the phrase 'in the way of' should not be used as Hope's Consistory used it."

p. 76 c.: "Classis East...errs in the pronouncements it makes regarding Mrs. Meyer. 1) Ground 1—Classis East states (Art. 41, I, A), 'Mrs. Meyer does not prove her accusation "that the teaching of Hope Consistory is the teaching of a conditional covenant and justification by faith and works." Rather, Mrs. Meyer assumes what she must prove.' This statement is accurate but not to the point."

p. 79–80 B.2.: “Classis erred in advising ‘Hope Consistory to rescind its November 21, 2017 decision to adopt ‘The Doctrinal Statement: Re Experiencing Fellowship with the Father.’” Classis should have advised Hope to reject the Doctrinal Statement because it contains ambiguous statements and the similar doctrinal error of giving to our good works a place and function out of harmony with the Reformed confessions.”

p. 80–81 a., b., c.: “The Statement teaches... This statement is ambiguous and not distinctively Reformed.”

p. 80 a. 2): “However, to continue in the very next line and teach that the gift of sanctification is part of what *brings* the elect *into* the enjoyment of fellowship with God, strongly suggests that good works bring us into the enjoyment of fellowship and have been assigned a role the confessions give only to faith in Christ.”

p. 80 b. 1) “By teaching... the statement could be interpreted to teach that a holy life of obedience is a prerequisite of, or condition of, or instrument unto the enjoyment of the Father’s fellowship.”

p. 80–81 b. 2) “It would be better to teach... so that our obedience is never mistaken to be *the way of approach unto* the enjoyment of covenant fellowship.”

p. 81 c. 1): “To say... could be interpreted to mean that obedience is a condition of... It would be better to teach...”

p. 81 c. 2): “The statement, ‘It is only by a living, sanctifying faith which exercises itself in obedience that we can experience and enjoy God’s fellowship’ could be read to teach that the believer’s good works of obedience are the instrument by which he experiences fellowship with God.”

p. 81 c. 3) “This statement fails to use the phrase ‘in the way of’ to state the relationship between obedience and the experience of covenant fellowship. It is better to say, we experience the Father’s fellowship on the basis of Christ’s perfect work, through a justifying faith in Christ, and *in the way of* a holy life of obedience.”

p. 81 d.: “The Statement errs when it concludes... 1)... It is not in harmony with the creeds to teach that we have fellowship with God through a sanctifying faith. Our good works are never an instrument by which we obtain fellowship with God.”

p. 86 2.: “That synod declare that whether or not Mrs. Meyer’s extreme characterizations of Hope’s teaching (listed by Classis East in Art. 44) were necessary is a matter for her conscience.” (The extreme characterizations referred to are: rank heresy, gross false doctrine, Federal Vision and Romish doctrine, and teaching justification by faith and works and a conditional covenant—SD).

These 2018 decisions were maintained by Synod 2019:

p. 63 a.: “One of the perceived inconsistencies Miss Doezema points to is explained by the fact that Synod 2018 distinguished between statements that Rev. Overway made repeatedly and persistently in his sermons, and the same statements stated abstractly in another context.”

p. 64 b. 2) “Synod 2018 was not willing to say that this *one* statement made by Hope [in their defense of Rev. Overway’s sermons—SD] definitely taught the error, while it was willing to say that Rev. Overway’s *repeated and persistent* statements definitely did.”

According to Synod 2020, these 2018 decisions leave room for the following teaching:

p. 81 c.: “Rev. Overway did not militate against Synod 2018 when he preached that there is an activity of the believer that is *prior* to the *experience* of a particular blessing from God.”

p. 82 d. “Rev. Overway’s preaching that we repent and in the way of repentance experience the mercy of God is the teaching of Scripture and the confessions.”

We have seen what a true rejection of the lie looks like. We have held the decision of Synod 2018 up to that pure light and brought it before that all-consuming fire. Does it stand the test? May God’s holy Truth live within us, that we may answer with conviction and repent of all minimizing of the lie that we have been a part of throughout this controversy, to the end that the lie might be all the more fiercely consumed whenever it arises in our midst. Furthermore, may God’s Truth live within us, that we might go forward into battle as the church militant, surrounded on every side and especially from within by the mightiest of foes. God be thanked that we might go forward with the confidence that the battle is won, the victory is ours, and He will keep our feet from falling in the heat of battle!

God’s word shall surely stand;
His Name through every land
Shall be adored;
Lord, who shall lead our host?
Thy aid we covet most,
In Thee is all our boast,
Strong in the Lord. (Psalter 298)

All glory to God, who is our Sword and Shield!
With thanksgiving for God’s gift of Himself and
His Truth,
Sara Doezema



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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works: of whom be thou ware also; for he hath greatly withstood our words. —2 Timothy 4:14–15

Beware of Alexander the coppersmith.

Alexander the coppersmith, resident of Ephesus, where the apostle Paul had labored for three years on his second missionary journey and where the young preacher Timothy was now laboring.

Alexander the coppersmith, who worked in copper and the indispensable bronze alloy of copper and tin.

Alexander the coppersmith, integral and valued member of Ephesian society. Bronze was used in everything from spears to spoons, breastplates to balances, vases to vessels, and all the mirrors, farm implements, and idols in between. The prosperous and teeming city of Ephesus gleamed with bronze, fashioned for her by Alexander the coppersmith.

Beware of Alexander the coppersmith.

For Alexander the coppersmith was an enemy of the gospel of Jesus Christ who greatly withstood Paul's words. Paul's words were the words of Jesus Christ, who had called Paul to be his apostle. During his three years in Ephesus, Paul spoke many words. Alexander the coppersmith greatly withstood Paul's words.

When Paul testified repentance toward God, Alexander the coppersmith greatly withstood Paul's words. The call to repentance was an outrageous personal affront to Alexander the coppersmith, as it always is to proud men who will not suffer the preacher's word to rebuke their sins.

When Paul testified faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, Alexander the coppersmith greatly withstood Paul's words. The preaching of the cross was foolishness to Alexander the coppersmith, as it always is to boasting men who find themselves sufficient unto their own salvation and enjoyment of salvation.

When Paul shunned not to declare unto the Ephesians all the counsel of God, Alexander the coppersmith greatly withstood Paul's words. All the counsel of God was too heavenly and too spiritual for Alexander the coppersmith, as it always is to carnal men who savor not the things that be of God but those that be of men.

Alexander the coppersmith greatly withstood Paul's words. And so, Timothy, beware of Alexander the coppersmith. And so, faithful preacher of the gospel, beware of Alexander the coppersmith. And so, seminary student, beware of Alexander the coppersmith. Every time you preach repentance toward God, you will find Alexander the coppersmiths who bristle at your rebukes and call you a Samaritan and a devil. Every time you preach faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, you will find Alexander the coppersmiths who demand that man and the works of man and the honor of man have their place alongside Christ. Beware of Alexander the coppersmith.

Alexander the coppersmith did Paul much evil. Paul does not elaborate what that evil was. He does not have to, for the faithful preacher and the faithful church know the marks that it is their privilege to bear from the hands and mouths of every Alexander the coppersmith. And Paul does not have to elaborate because the Lord knows what evil Alexander the coppersmith did, and even now the Lord rewards Alexander the coppersmith according to his works.

Beware of Alexander the coppersmith. But do not fear him. For the words that Alexander the coppersmith withstands are the everlasting words of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Alexander the coppersmith withers as grass and falls away as the flower of grass, but the word of the Lord endures forever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.

—AL