

The background features a stylized orange illustration. A sword is positioned diagonally from the top left towards the center. A shield is positioned in the lower left, overlapping the sword's blade. The shield has a circular design with several smaller circles inside. The overall style is minimalist and graphic.

SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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

Deuteronomy 33:29

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Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass. Cease from anger, and forsake wrath: fret not thyself in any wise to do evil. For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the LORD, they shall inherit the earth. — Psalm 37:7–9

Do not fret, beloved saints who are persecuted for Christ's sake. For beloved you are. Do you not hear the words of David? Do they not speak to you and comfort you? These are not the words of David, except by the Spirit who inspired David—the very Spirit of Jesus Christ who was in David and taught David these things when he was brought into similar circumstances in which you find yourself. And Christ himself! What wickedness the wicked perpetrated against the holy and just one! And through it he became heir of all. His Spirit taught David. His Spirit teaches you.

Who like David—and Christ—saw the wicked prospering in their ways and bringing their wicked devices to pass? Saul. Doeg, Saul's stool pigeon and enforcer. Shimei, cursing and kicking dust as he came. Annas and Caiaphas, the New Testament seed of those Old Testament reprobates. Wicked men who were members of the church. Indeed, they were rulers in the church but murderers of priests, oppressors of the poor and needy, relentless hounds against the righteous, opportunists for evil. They are the reprobate and powerful in the earth.

They will be cut off. You will search for them in the whole earth, and you will not find them. Jehovah will laugh at them because he sees their day coming—appointed by him—when Jehovah will break the arms of the wicked, pierce them with their own swords, and break their bows. The end of the wicked is to be cut off, rooted out, and destroyed, them and their seed, and the Lord will leave them neither root nor branch.

Not yet! You must suffer a little while at their hands. But Jehovah will not leave you in their hands. Be patient!

The wicked must fill their cup of iniquity in their vile plotting and evil persecution of the righteous.

Be patient, dear child of God. So you are addressed: rest in Jehovah, and wait patiently for him. That is the command to you because of who Jehovah made you by his grace. In calling you to rest in him, Jehovah calls you his child. He speaks to his children in the circumstances into which Jehovah himself brings us. In our earthly circumstances—cast down, cast out, cast away—we do not appear as his children. Yet does not Jehovah call us his heirs? Does he not speak of a grand inheritance laid up for us in heaven, of inheriting the whole earth, and of a new creation in which you can search from end to end for the wicked and never find them? Does he not call us to look to heaven, to that new heaven and new earth in which righteousness will

dwell and from which all who love and make a lie are cast out and in which we will dwell with God forever?

Let us more closely examine these children of God. They are God's according to his eternal decree of election. According to that decree he has adopted them as his children and heirs by faith. They are with him in the covenant of grace. They belong to him and are precious unto him. In him they rest. Like a little baby who presses himself into the arms of his mother, the believer presses himself into the arms of his Father. Joined to Jesus Christ by faith, righteous in Christ by faith alone, by faith the believer reposes in Jehovah God as the God of his salvation, rests in Jehovah, relies on him for time and for eternity—does nothing for his salvation, for salvation is of the Lord.

By faith they know Jehovah God, particularly his goodness. If Jehovah is Jehovah, then he is good. He is good in himself as the perfect and perfectly blessed God. Jehovah is good in all that he decrees, and thus he is good in all that he does. In his goodness Jehovah blesses the righteous, and he curses the wicked. If Jehovah is good, then he cannot curse the righteous. Ever. In anything. If Jehovah is good, he cannot bless the ungodly. Ever. In anything.

Whence, then, the success of the ungodly in the earth and the suffering of the righteous at the hands of the ungodly? Jehovah is good! He cannot bless the wicked...? He cannot curse the righteous...? But the wicked bring so many wicked devices to pass!

Patience, beloved! Wait on Jehovah. Wait patiently for him.

Faith is the power of the child of God's patience in this world. *Patience*, a wonderful word! Seeming contradiction! For the word means to be anxious and to twist and to writhe. Are we being anxious for nothing? Oh, yes, be anxious for nothing. Take no thought for tomorrow; sufficient for the day is the evil thereof. Rest in Jehovah; wait patiently for him. Yet are we stones that feel no pain, sorrow, or anguish? We writhe and twist in it. In the face of all the pain caused by the ungodly in one's heart, mind, soul, and spirit; in the face of the terrifying presence of the implacable wicked, who set their faces against you like a stone and who are unmoved by your pleas for mercy, let Jehovah fill all your thoughts. Wait for him, for his judgment, for his deliverance, for his coming, for the fulfillment of his promise of your salvation, and for the execution of his promise that vengeance is his and he will repay. Wait for Jehovah, trusting that according to his word he will come to set all things right—all things that seem in the earth

to be turned upside down and so out of place, so that the wicked flourish and the righteous are driven out of the land and away from their inheritance. Wait on him with ardent desire, fervent prayer, and uplifted head, and pray, "Come, O Jehovah, come; Lord Jesus, come quickly!"

Waiting on Jehovah, the believer endures. Waiting is enduring. He waits upon Jehovah, that is, he endures Jehovah! Oh, you would expect something so different. The believer endures the wicked. He endures the persecution. He endures the pain and suffering. No, he endures *Jehovah*. Such is the viewpoint of faith, and such is the anxious waiting of the believer for Jehovah. Jehovah so fills the believer's thoughts, and the truth of Jehovah's sovereignty over all evil so fills the believer's mind and is the conviction of his heart, that he receives everything as from the hand of Jehovah. Jehovah said, "Curse David." At the cross the Jews did whatsoever Jehovah God determined to be done. In your life and in my life, the wicked cannot so much as move apart from the decree and command of God. The believer endures Jehovah in this sense, that, knowing Jehovah's sovereignty and goodness, the believer also receives with patience whatever Jehovah sends to him in this life. He receives from the hand of his Father fruitful years and barren, riches and poverty, sickness and health, life and death. He receives from Jehovah's hand the wicked persecution and bewildering success of his enemies against him, the truth, and righteousness. He endures in the earth believing Jehovah is good, even while the believer is brought to nothing and the wicked flourish like a great tree in earth. The believer endures without the failure of his faith. He trusts that in all that Jehovah sends unto him, Jehovah is good to him and works all for his salvation. That Jehovah blesses the righteous and he curses the wicked is the believer's conviction! Surely and certainly, without respect to appearances, Jehovah blesses the righteous and curses the wicked. The believer is blessed in his suffering, and the wicked is cursed in his successes.

Faith endures. Faith endures because Jehovah God in his goodness is its object. Jehovah is the believer's strength in time of trouble. By faith he trusts that God is his God. He believes that God has forgiven his sins and that he is righteous before God and an heir of eternal life and of the whole world. He trusts that Jehovah will bring forth his righteousness as the light and his judgment as the noon-day. All will be made as plain as the sun in the heavens.

Surely this is what Jehovah God did in Christ. The wicked succeeded in putting Christ to death. All was in God's plan. They did only what God ordained to be done. It was for righteousness and for salvation. Through it Jesus Christ was exalted to the right hand of God. In Christ, God established his own righteousness as the righteousness of the believer and that on account of which he is saved and blessed. This righteousness, the very righteousness of God worked out in Christ, will be publicly declared to be the righteousness

of believers. Those whom God has transformed in the very depths of their beings, whose ways and steps are ordered by God, whom he has taken to be of his side in the world, and whom he caused to know and love his truth will be acknowledged in that day as his children. Those whom all men shouted down, whom they mocked and ridiculed, and whom they declared to be the offscouring of the earth will be acknowledged to belong to the Son of God, and their cause, which was declared by many judges to be heretical, sinful, schismatic, and wicked, will be acknowledged in that day to be the cause of the Son of God.

Not yet! Patience! Wait on the Lord! Rest in Jehovah! Do not fret!

To fret is to be in pain and, as a consequence of that pain, to be angry. Cease from anger. Let that go. Do not be consumed by that anger, for anger is a fire that burns, and it will burn you up and burn you down. Forsake wrath. Oh, yes, wrath is like a poison that kills the soul and one's entire existence. Give that up. Do not fret.

And what could cause the dear child of God so much pain, sorrow, and anguish of soul, mind, and life that he becomes angry, burning with rage, and poisoned by wrath?

The wicked man who prospers and increases. Who is that wicked man? Let us examine him according to the psalm. He is in the church, for he is in the land and has a place in that land. He had a part in Canaan in David's day. He takes root in that land and flourishes like a great bay tree. Saul was such a man, a Benjamite, the Lord's anointed, always ready with the name of God on his lips, always carefully grooming his own image. So the wicked is strong in the church. He sits on school boards, consistories, councils, classes, and synods. When he speaks, other men listen. All men seek his counsel and his advice. He is the big man. He has all that heart could desire from an outward point of view. He brings to pass all his desires and has success and happiness in the earth as far as you can tell.

And he hates the just. He hates their testimony. He hates their place in the land. He hates their very existence. It is not worthy that they should live.

Supposing that he reclines in the lap of God, he plots against the just. They are an offense to this godless, earthly-minded, and sensual man. He watches the righteous and seeks to slay them. Sinister! He bides his time, whispering, plotting, and planning in his secret meetings, scheming with his like-minded friends. Oh, yes, there are many, and they increase in power and riches: they validate and encourage one another in their hatred of the righteous and in their own wickedness. At the opportune time the wicked draws his sword and bends his bow to kill the righteous and to remove them from his presence. He takes the righteous in his hand and gnashes on them with his teeth. And so he brings his wicked devices to pass. By his wicked devices he himself increases in riches and in

stature with men. By his wicked devices he exults himself against God and against his people. By his wicked devices he persecutes the godly. By his wicked devices he takes the land for himself and casts the godly out of it.

Yes, surely that was David's experience, and such is the experience of the godly always.

Do not fret, beloved. Do not be filled with the fire of rage and the poison of wrath.

Rest in Jehovah. Wait patiently for him!

For Jehovah shall laugh at the wicked. The man who laughs now shall weep in that day, for Jehovah sees the day of the wicked coming! The wicked is displeasing to the Lord. The wicked is that eternally according to God's decree of reprobation. God is not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; the evil shall not dwell with him; he hates all the workers of iniquity. In his heart and in all his deeds, the wicked man is displeasing to the Lord. There is nothing in that man's life or in his thoughts that is pleasing to God. He is an enemy of Jehovah. He hates Jehovah, and he particularly hates God's truth and his church and his people.

And behold, as we observe him, he prospers in his wicked way. He brings his devices to pass. The word *wicked* is not in the original Hebrew text. The text is not so much interested in the wickedness of his devices, for the man *himself* is wicked, and so are all his works. Very often—mostly—he clothes all his wicked devices in the cunningly crafted garb of righteousness. His wicked devices he makes sure are declared before the world to be utmost righteousness. But they are devices for all that. Cruel and evil plotting and planning carried out against the just. And this wicked man brings all his devices to pass, and he prospers in his way. He tramples on truth and justice, decency and order, and crushes the poor and needy under him, and all the while he pours down contempt upon the godly. All his plans come to pass; there appears to be no frustration or setback in his life; he runs in the way of wickedness, and he prospers in his way: this wicked man, who says, "I am a Christian, I am Reformed, I love the Lord, I am righteous, I do God a favor in putting this man out of the church."

Fret not thyself because of evildoers. Urgent warning. Constant refrain. Necessary instruction.

The believer sees the evildoer who prospers in his way and brings all his plans to pass, especially as he plots against the godly and is able to bring to pass his wicked oppression of the godly, and the believer frets.

Fretting is anger, yes, but jealousy too! That wicked man is enjoying the good life! All men speak well of him, of him and of his wicked devices that are praised as most just? Perhaps...oh, perhaps...*that* is the blessed life and the good way? Like a fire and a poison in his pain, these thoughts eat away at the believer's convictions. Jehovah blesses the wicked in their wickedness...? Does Jehovah not see...? He will not judge...? The righteous are chastened and cursed...?

Will the wicked escape in their wickedness...? Is...oh, a destructive thought...is Jehovah good...? Clean hands are worthless and pure hearts are vain...? And the soul is full of fretting, the fire of rage, and the poison of anger.

Do not fret, beloved! Do not be filled with the fire of rage. Do not be overcome by the poison of anger.

Then you will be dissatisfied with your lot. The angry man is not content, and anger is a lack of contentment because anger is an expression of displeasure. He is displeased with his life, displeased with God, and displeased with his suffering.

Displeased, he loathes his life. He is angry at his lot, at the work that he is given, and at the suffering that he must endure. He loathes his job, his car, his clothes, his house, his wife, his children, his food, his body, and his whole situation. He hates it. He hates the persecution and mockery that he has to endure. Wrath brings strife. First in a man's soul and then in his whole life as that anger burns like a forest fire, and wrath poisons all his thoughts. His flesh is enraged and controlling in his whole life.

Do you know what he does? He sins. Is that any surprise? "Fret not to do evil," says the Spirit. So the fretting believer seeks to imitate the wicked man who is prospering in his way and follows his evil ways. What is the cause? The believer is fretting. Dissatisfied and angry with his lot, he supposes that the lot of the wicked is good. He lets these thoughts take hold in his mind and in his soul: God is not displeased with the wicked, and indeed they are good people, and their lives are good too.

O beloved, do not envy the evildoer, and imitate none of his ways. For the evildoer shall be cut off. What is there to envy in the life of a steer whose trough is never empty because he is being fattened for the slaughter? What is there to envy about the careful husbandry of a forest of trees that is going to be cut down and ground into sawdust? What is there to envy in the life of the man who enjoys seventy or eighty years of success in the earth and is cast into hell forever? What is to be envied in the life of the man who makes God his enemy? Evildoers shall be cut off.

Not yet! Wait on the Lord!

They must grow up like a great tree and luxuriate in the earth for a while to manifest who they really are in themselves and fill up their cup of iniquity in their persecution of the righteous. And in all that, Jehovah, the righteousness judge and executioner, has his sword drawn and is waiting only for his ordained moment to drop his sword and to cut them down and with them all workers of iniquity. But those who wait on Jehovah shall inherit the earth. Cast out now and their place made very small and even nonexistent in the world, they shall inherit all the earth. In this life the wicked act like the world belongs to them, and they thrust out the righteous from his inheritance. In the world to come, the wicked will be judged and cast out, and the righteous will inherit all the land.

Not yet! Patience! Do not fret!

—NJL

“I DON’T SEE IT”

Introduction

This editorial is intended for those readers of *Sword and Shield* who remain honestly skeptical that there has been a real doctrinal controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) and that this doctrinal controversy is what divides the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC) from the PRC. Over the last year, when *Sword and Shield* laid out the doctrinal controversy in the PRC, one common response was, “I don’t see it.” This year, when the respective Acts of Separation of First and Second Reformed Protestant churches stated that the PRC were apostatizing from the truth of unconditional theology, a popular response was also to say, “I don’t see it.” In conversations with friends and family, those who do see it have often received this response from their loved ones: “I don’t see it.”

I take those readers at their word that they don’t see the false doctrine that has been taught, tolerated, and defended by the PRC. I must admit that I am puzzled how someone still does not see it in light of the multitude of protests, appeals, sermons, articles, lectures, letters, ecclesiastical decisions, and conversations that have been at pains to point out the controversy and to lay out the doctrinal issues in the controversy. But false doctrine is deceptive. False doctrine does not advertise itself as false or call attention to itself as false. False doctrine does not want to be detected as false but wants to be received as true. So false doctrine is always camouflaged and cloaked as the truth to escape being exposed as false. False doctrine is sneaky and tricky because it is the lie and comes from the devil, who is the father of the lie. “When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it” (John 8:44). False doctrine is devilish not because it is so obvious but because it is so subtle. It whissspers like a serpent. Satan is transformed into an angel of light, and his false apostles transform themselves into the apostles of Christ. They seem to preach Jesus (though he is another Jesus). They seem to bring the gospel (though it is another gospel). Their listeners seem to receive the Spirit (though it is another spirit). This is the danger of the lie! It is beguiling and deceptive and so hard to detect, and it is meant to be. The serpent beguiled Eve through subtlety, and I fear, lest by any means of the devil’s subtlety today, that your minds would be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ (2 Cor. 11:3–4, 13–14).

Therefore, for the sake of those readers who have not yet been able to see the false doctrine in this controversy,

this editorial will point out what the error has been from the beginning and will provide several examples of how this error continues yet today within the PRC. This list is not exhaustive by any means, and examples could be multiplied. Just before this issue of *Sword and Shield* went to press, the council of what was formerly Wingham Protestant Reformed Church signed an Act of Separation and Reformation, along with a forty-page document that lays out the doctrinal controversy clearly and compellingly. The council of First Protestant Reformed Church of Edmonton also took a decision to withdraw from the PRC and provided its own account of the doctrinal issues in the controversy. I did not know that those documents were coming as I worked on this editorial, and I was greatly edified, encouraged, and convicted when those documents landed on my desk. I find them to be more comprehensive than this editorial. However, rather than scrap this editorial, which was originally intended as a stand-alone article, I now offer it to the reader as a companion to those more thorough and authoritative documents.

The Doctrinal Issue

The doctrinal issue in the controversy is God’s covenant fellowship with the believer. God’s covenant fellowship with man is a matter of a man’s experience. Man experiences and enjoys friendship and communion with God. Man consciously experiences the favor of God upon him. He knows and enjoys the gracious forgiveness of his sins, peace with God, the shining of the light of God’s countenance upon him, and the mercy of God to him. The controversy is whether the experience of covenant fellowship is conditional or unconditional. Does man obtain the experience of covenant fellowship with God by man’s good works and his keeping of the law? If so, then there are prerequisites and conditions to man’s covenant fellowship with God. Or does man obtain and receive the experience of covenant fellowship with God entirely graciously by faith alone in Christ alone? If so, then God’s covenant fellowship with man is gracious and unconditional. From the beginning of the controversy, the Protestant Reformed Churches have taught, tolerated, and defended the position that man obtains the experience of covenant fellowship with God by his obedient keeping of the law. This is the doctrine of prerequisites for covenant fellowship. It is the doctrine of conditional covenant fellowship, though the PRC have usually (but not always) been shrewd enough not to use

the word *prerequisite* or *condition*. Over against this, *Sword and Shield* and the Reformed Protestant Churches maintain unconditional covenant fellowship with God by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

The false doctrine of conditional covenant fellowship first surfaced in this controversy in 2015 with then Rev. David Overway's sermon on John 14:6 in Hope (Walker; hereafter Hope) Protestant Reformed Church, entitled "The Way to the Father." John 14:6 reads, "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." In the sermon Rev. Overway called attention to man's *conscious experience* of covenant fellowship with God: "It becomes evident that Jesus is saying, 'I am the way unto the Father that you can consciously enter into communion with the Father'... especially his focus is, 'You need to come into the Father's presence consciously... I am the way so that you can come unto the Father and know him and rejoice in his fellowship consciously and with awareness'" (*Acts of Synod 2017*, 312). Rev. Overway then introduced the obedience of man, man's holy life, and man's godly life as the way to that conscious experience of fellowship. "The way unto the Father includes obedience." "The way of a holy life matters. It is the way unto the Father." "...He is the way, your way unto Me, through the truth which He works in your hearts, through a godly life..." (*Acts of Synod 2016*, 45).

In John 14:6, Christ alone is the way to the Father. Man's coming to the Father on that way is by faith alone. But the sermon made man's obedience the way to the Father. And the sermon made obedience the way to the Father in man's conscious experience of covenant communion with the Father.

Elder Neil Meyer protested this preaching as the preaching of a conditional covenant. "The preaching of Rev. Overway is the preaching of a conditional theology, and more specifically, that of a conditional covenant... By teaching that the way unto covenant communion with God is man's obedience and holiness, the covenant is made conditional" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, 73).

In response, Hope church defended the sermon as thoroughly Reformed and as the right explanation of the relationship between Christ's work and man's obedience. Hope, along with Grandville Protestant Reformed Church, countercharged that Elder Meyer held the heresy of antinomianism because of his opposition to the sermon and deposed him from office.

Mr. Meyer appealed to Classis East in January 2016 and stated once again the issue at stake.

My judgment on these statements is that because they make the way of salvation and covenant communion with God include our obedience, and be our holy life and godly life, that we then no longer need rely on Jesus Christ and His obedience alone

as the way of salvation and communion with God and that this therefore teaches conditional covenant theology. (*Acts of Synod 2016*, 92–93)

Classis East did not sustain Mr. Meyer's appeal but defended the false doctrine of the sermon. "A fair reading of the sermon shows that the statements Mr. Meyer finds objectionable do not teach that man's obedience is necessary to merit salvation but rather they teach that man's obedience is the way to experience fellowship with the Father" (minutes of Classis East January 13, 2016, article 24). Classis' position, stated clearly, was that man's obedience is the way to experience fellowship with the Father.

Mr. Meyer appealed to Synod 2016.

At issue is the experience of our covenant communion with God. Do we come to the Father in the way of our obedience and holy, godly life, or do we come to the Father in the way of faith alone in Christ alone apart from any of our works?

To teach that our obedience is the way [to experience fellowship with the Father], I believe, is to add to the work of Christ, which addition can only be a condition to our experience of the covenant. Rather, I believe our obedience is the sure fruit, the fruit of gratitude as it comes forth from the covenant bond and fellowship that God has established and maintains in Jesus Christ alone with all His own. (*Acts of Synod 2016*, 109, 122)

Synod did not sustain Mr. Meyer's appeal but defended the sermon against the charge of conditions. "The sermon does not teach a conditional covenant" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, 48).

Several protests against synod's failure to condemn the sermon came to Synod 2017. If I may be allowed a quotation from my own protest:

I believe that this case introduces a new threat to the Protestant Reformed doctrine of the covenant. The new threat is to make man's *conscious experience* of covenant fellowship conditional upon man's obedience. The question in this case is not merely how man obtains the covenant *objectively*, but how he obtains the covenant *subjectively*. Does man obtain the *right* to covenant fellowship with God *through Christ*, but the *experience* of covenant fellowship *through works*? The truth is that, both objectively and subjectively, man obtains the covenant by Christ alone, not by man's works. I believe the sermon taught that works are the subjective way unto the Father, that works gain for man the experience of Father's fellowship. (*Agenda for Synod 2017*, 220)

The decision of Synod 2017 in response to the several protests was finally to rule against Rev. Overway's sermon on John 14:6. Synod did this by sustaining several

protests against the sermon. Nevertheless, synod's decision was weak and would prove to be insufficient to rid the churches of the conditional theology that had set in and that had been defended to that point by so many ecclesiastical assemblies, ministers, elders, and professors.

Synod's glaring weakness was that it failed to identify the doctrinal error of the sermon. Mr. Meyer had laid out the doctrinal issue with crystal clarity: "At issue is the experience of our covenant communion with God. Do we come to the Father in the way of our obedience and holy, godly life, or do we come to the Father in the way of faith alone in Christ alone apart from any of our works?" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, 109). Mr. Meyer had also expressed the truth of the experience of covenant fellowship with crystal clarity. "To teach that our obedience is the way, I believe, is to add to the work of Christ, which addition can only be a condition to our experience. Rather, I believe our obedience is the sure fruit, the fruit of gratitude as it comes forth from the covenant bond and fellowship that God has established and maintains in Jesus Christ alone with all His own" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, 122).

But synod never said whether this was really the issue. Synod never agreed with Mr. Meyer's theology of unconditional covenant experience. In fact, synod took the opportunity to condemn certain godly statements of Mr. Meyer as unbiblical and unreformed. Failing to identify the false doctrine of conditional covenant fellowship in the sermon and condemning Mr. Meyer as erroneous instead, synod and the denomination would be unable to eradicate the error. The denomination would be left helpless against that false doctrine when it would continue rolling through the PRC like an evil tide.

The point of this section has been to establish that the doctrinal issue in the whole controversy has been clear and well-defined from the beginning. The doctrinal issue has been man's experience of covenant fellowship with God. The controversy has been whether man obtains the experience of covenant fellowship by his good works or whether he obtains the experience of covenant fellowship by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone apart from his works. Is covenant fellowship conditioned on man's work as a prerequisite? Or is covenant fellowship entirely unconditional as the gift of God's grace through faith in Christ?

The Next Round

Even while Synod 2017 was taking place, the false doctrine of conditional covenant fellowship continued to be preached and defended at Hope church. For the better part of a year before Synod 2017, seventeen more sermons of Rev. Overway had been protested by a mother in Israel, Mrs. Connie Meyer.

The false doctrine was exactly the same as it had been from the beginning: conditional covenant fellowship.

Mrs. Meyer's very first letter of protest to her consistory described the issue as clearly as possible: "The main teaching of Rev. Overway that I object to is the concept that our obedience is a condition that we must perform in order to experience the fellowship of God. I consider this theology to be that of a conditional covenant" (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 103).

Here are samples of the conditional covenant theology that Mrs. Meyer protested.

Our good works are God's gift to us, Jesus' gift to us, which He works within us as part of our salvation. Not an aftereffect of salvation. Not a result of salvation. As part of our salvation. (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 118)

We must pray—must pray. It's required in order for us to enjoy God's grace, in order for us to enjoy His Spirit, His blessing. (119)

We do good works. We can look at them. We see them. They're obvious. They're evident, much more so than faith is. And we can say: I see these good works. That's proof to me that I have faith. And one only has faith who is atoned for by Jesus Christ and one only is atoned for if he is elected in eternity. I am an elect child of God. I see that by my good works. I'm assured. An important reason to do good works. (120)

We do good works so that we can have our prayers answered. (120)

We do good works so that we can receive God's grace and Holy Spirit in our consciousness. So that we can consciously and with awareness receive the grace and Holy Spirit of God...

Someone says, I don't feel the love of God? I don't experience that love of God in my heart? Feels that God is far away from me. There may be different reasons for that. But very, very wise on the basis of Scripture to begin questioning ourselves: Am I really walking in good works? Am I truly repentant? Am I truly humble? Do I really believe that all my righteousness before God is found in Jesus Christ alone? And do I live out of that faith—love for God in all good works? (121)

They would enter into that rest in the land of Canaan through activity. Through activity. They would enjoy the, the finished work of their activity. They would find peace in the land of Canaan through the activity of following God, obeying His Word, believing in Him, fighting the battles of faith that He called them to. And then He assured them that He would, through their fighting, give them the victory. But through that activity they would find their peace and rest. (121–22)

When the Catechism mentions requisites or requirements, it's talking about obedience. I must

obey. It's required of God. God requires it of me. God requires a certain obedience from me. Obedience is required here, obedience that I must perform in order to enjoy fellowship with God.

There's requisites to fellowship, as we said, for the child of God, to the one who's justified in Jesus Christ, the one for whom Jesus has died and atoned and satisfied for his sins. There are requirements for him to fellowship, to approaching unto God, coming to the Father.

Godliness, on the other hand, is the requirement according to Scripture for our prayers to be heard by God. I John 3:22: "And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him." Whatever we pray for, we receive. "Because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight." We have true fellowship with God. We truly ask and are heard, and God receives our prayer and gives us—because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.

I've elected you. And I've done everything in you so that you walk in godliness. Why? So that when you pray as a godly person walking in godliness—when you pray, God will hear and God will answer.

What do the creeds say about the relationship between obedience and fellowship? That there are requirements. That there is obedience required in order that we may have that fellowship, prayerful fellowship with God...

The Catechism says: Come to God that way, meeting those requirements, meeting those demands of God for a proper prayer, and you can be assured you will enjoy the fellowship of God. (123–24)

Yet perhaps one would say, "Well, how much, how little ought I meet these requirements? Do I need to meet these requirements perfectly before God will hear? Do I meet these requirements somewhat, or but a little, just a tiny bit and then God will hear my prayer?" The answer really is very simple. Very simple. If we but meet these requirements a little bit, by the grace of God, of course, and by God's grace working them in us—if we meet these requirements but a little, then we will enjoy a little of God's fellowship. That's the truth. If we meet these requirements a lot, then we will enjoy much of God's fellowship.

And don't come to God with a little bit of humility. If you have a little bit of humility in your heart and a little bit of the knowledge of a little bit of your sins, you'll have but a little the enjoyment [*sic*] of God's fellowship. (124)

Are we assured of the forgiveness of our sins without good works? Do good works do nothing to assure me of forgiveness, that I'm justified? Of course, they

do. Jesus says it in plain English in the passage before us. And for one to hold otherwise simply contradicts the plain words of Jesus Christ our Savior.

Forgive others. Live in that obedience. Live out of those good works. And only in that way will you be assured that you're forgiven, that you are justified by Jesus Christ your Savior. (124–25)

We must place those commandments before, not despise them, not say: Jesus Christ has accomplished all the law of God, so I can put away the law, I can ignore the law. But rather, we hold up that law as the guide for thankfulness, as that code of good conduct, and thereby the way in which we can enjoy good fellowship with our Savior. (128)

So it is between God and His bride, Christ and His bride. So it is between Jesus Christ and His people. How then can we know His love? How can we continue to see His love displayed? How can we continue to enjoy that love and be assured of that love for us? It's by keeping His commandments. That's what He says. If ye keep My commandments, you walk in obedience to Me, you walk the way that a human friend ought to walk with Me, your Savior and God. If you keep My commandments, then you will know My unbreakable love for you. (131)

But there is, of course, that other courtroom, isn't there. We talked about it earlier when we talked about the subjective side of justification. There's that courtroom that exists within our hearts, within our mind. And that's what James is speaking of. Abraham was justified, that is, in his heart. He became aware, he became more conscious of the justifying work, of God's declaring him righteous. He became more aware of it in his heart—how?

By looking at his works and giving a proper evaluation of those works...

So it is for us. We see. We look at our good works in the same way. Never of any value to make me be declared righteous before God, but always of help in finding and maintaining assurance that God has justified me through Christ and Christ alone. (143)

Almost unbelievably, the response of Rev. Overway, the consistory, and other ministers who became involved was to defend these sermons for nearly two full years against the protest. The consistory maintained that the theology of these sermons was sound Reformed doctrine.

In the meantime, a special committee of four leading ministers had been appointed by classis to assist Hope in the controversy. The four ministers—Rev. Garry Eriks, Rev. Carl Haak, Rev. James Slopsema, and Rev. Ronald Van Overloop—wrote a doctrinal statement as their proposed answer to the controversy, which statement the consistory of Hope adopted as its answer to Mrs. Meyer. The

full title of the doctrinal statement shows that the ministers and consistory understood the doctrinal issue at stake to be the experience of covenant fellowship: “Doctrinal Statement Re Experiencing Fellowship with the Father.” However, the doctrinal statement continued the same error of making man’s obedient good works the means to man’s experience of covenant fellowship, thus making the experience of covenant fellowship conditional.

It is by the exercise of faith that this covenant life of friendship and fellowship is experienced and enjoyed...

The elect believer comes to experience and enjoy covenant fellowship with the Father as he exercises his faith...

Scripture and the confessions also emphasize the necessity of the exercise of faith *in a holy life of obedience* to enjoy the intimacy of the Father’s fellowship.

...Scripture and the confessions emphasize the need for holiness to enjoy God’s fellowship...

This need for a holy life of obedience to enjoy the Father’s fellowship does not stand independent of faith but must be seen as the exercise of faith. It is only by a living, sanctifying faith which exercises itself in obedience that we can experience and enjoy God’s fellowship (Eph. 2:8; Acts 26:18)...

When the Scriptures, therefore, emphasize the need for a holy life of obedience to experience the fellowship of God, it does so to emphasize the necessity of a living, sanctifying faith for such fellowship. One can have fellowship with the holy God only through a sanctifying faith. (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 195–99)

Mrs. Meyer appealed all of this to Classis East in January 2018. Classis East rejected her appeal, thus defending the doctrine of the sermons. Even though classis also made some negative comments about certain statements in the sermons, classis did not condemn those sermons as false doctrine. The statements were merely “ambiguous” or “forced,” according to classis (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 223–24), but whatever they were, they were definitely not the false doctrine of conditions. Classis rejected Mrs. Meyer’s appeal for the explicit reason that classis did not believe the sermons contained conditional theology. “Mrs. Meyer errs in her understanding of what constitutes a condition in the covenant. This error largely explains why Mrs. Meyer impugns many statements as conditions that are in fact not conditions at all” (225). And classis instructed Hope’s consistory “to require that Mrs. Meyer retract her accusation against her consistory ‘that the teaching of Hope Consistory is the teaching of a conditional covenant and justification by faith and works’ and do so in writing both to her consistory, pastor, and congregation” (226).

Mrs. Meyer appealed to Synod 2018. Oh, how I have

trumpeted Synod 2018! Synod upheld Mrs. Meyer’s appeal. Synod 2018 said that there was doctrinal error in the sermons. Synod 2018 even condemned the doctrinal error in resounding terms.

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. (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 70)

I love those specific decisions of Synod 2018. I agree with them. Oh, how I wished—and believed!—that Synod 2018 was a victory of the truth over the lie. And it could have been, if only the denomination had embraced the rejection of the sermons and had run with that rejection! But there was dreadful weakness in the decisions of Synod 2018. As so often before, I have had to learn this from the office of believer, as God’s people bring the word of God and the confessions for my instruction (see Miss Sara Doezema’s letter in *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 2 [June 15, 2021]: 19–23). Synod 2018, for all its condemnation of the error of the sermons, faltered at the critical point of condemning the conditional covenant fellowship theology that was rampant in the sermons. Synod would not alert the churches to the wicked theology of conditional covenant fellowship that had blown up in her midst. Synod refused to call the error *false doctrine* or *heresy*. The most synod was willing to do was allow Mrs. Meyer her conscience in using those terms, but synod itself declared them to be “extreme characterizations” (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 86).

Not only was there dreadful weakness in synod’s decisions, but there was dreadful weakness in the denomination that somehow adopted the decisions of Synod 2018. Within only a few months of Synod 2018, the same false doctrine of conditional covenant fellowship was being taught and defended again, as if Synod 2018 had never happened.

The point of this section has been to establish that the false doctrine of conditional covenant fellowship was blatant and obvious by the time of Synod 2018. And yet the false doctrine had been heard, studied, tolerated, defended, and excused at all levels of the denomination by all of her leading men. Even the ecclesiastical assembly that condemned the sermons as doctrinal error failed to identify the doctrinal issue head-on, failed to condemn it as heresy, and thus failed to protect the churches from the error, which now multiplies in the PRC.

False Doctrine Continued

Since Synod 2018, the false doctrine of conditional covenant fellowship continues unchecked in the PRC. Contrary to those who maintain that the whole controversy

was settled in 2018, these examples are provided to show that the false doctrine has continued. They are given in chronological order after Synod 2018.

There is something very important here because at stake here is not just what you bring to your earthly family. Of greater importance is what you bring to the household of faith, the broader family of God, and to God your Father in heaven. There are times when God is ashamed to be called our God...

Abraham didn't have his one child yet, and his wife was too old to conceive, and he didn't own one square foot in the land of Canaan, but he believed and he had his vision set beyond that to the Christ and to the heavenly Canaan, and in godliness and in hope; and God was not ashamed to be called his God. But there are times when God's people make God ashamed to be called their God. Abraham's nephew, Lot—remember Lot? He was a troublemaker. He thought of himself...

His godliness was at a very low ebb through all of his life, and many times God was ashamed to be called his God. He did not bring honor and glory to the family of God. God forbid that be true of you or me...

Now look at Job, and this is where I'm going to finish this morning—Job...In all these things, Job sinned not with his lips, remaining faithful. "Do you see my servant Job?" God says to Satan. "Do you see him? He's a crown of glory to me. Look at him. Do you see my servant Job?" In the day of judgment, we're going to stand before Christ. Our works, our lives are all going to be exposed. What's the Lord going to say of you? "Do you see my servant? Do you see my servant?" Let's live in godliness, grow in godliness, to be a crown of honor and glory to our family but above all to the family of God and to our heavenly Father, who has saved the likes of you and me. Amen. (Rev. James Slopsema, sermon in Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church on Proverbs 17:6, "Being a Crown of Glory to Our Family" [July 22, 2018])

It is true that, when it comes to things spiritual, there is that which one is *called* to do, indeed, is *required* to do. But is it altogether improper for preachers so much as to suggest that there is that which one *can* do (is able to do)? And then, in the end, to go so far as to declare that if a man would be saved, there is that which he *must* do? Surely, that is altogether unbiblical and unreformed, it is sometimes argued.

Such, the Arminians alleged, was the logical conclusion of the "hyper-Reformed."

This allegation the Canons reject and condemn... That the writers of the Canons insisted that the

gospel preached was a necessary means of grace (cf. the opening sentence of Art. 17) means they confessed and taught that if a man with his household was to be saved and consciously enter into the kingdom, placing himself with his family under the rule of Christ as his Lord and Savior, he was called, he was required, to respond obediently to the call and command of the gospel—"Repent and believe, that thou mightiest [*sic*] be saved with thy house"...

There was something they were called *to do* [for salvation]. And they did it. (Kenneth Koole, "What Must I Do...?" *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 1 [October 1, 2018]: 7–8)

There can be no equality there. We do little. God rewards greatly and yet there is a correlation so that we understand the less of a good work, or the less good that a good work is, the less or smaller the reward. The less number of works, the less of a reward one receives. So too with regard to the more. The more that one walks in good works, the more of a reward is received. The greater the suffering for Christ's sake, for example, the greater the reward that is given according to that obedience or that good work...

Granted, we must speak very carefully about the reward of grace and we ought be very clear as we speak of the reward of grace, but we must speak of the reward of grace and without the fear of the justification template being laid over what we are speaking of. We speak not of justification, not of justification by faith alone when we speak of the reward of grace, but of the reward of grace as taught in the word of God and in the creeds...

That's an answer spoken out of faith. That's an answer spoken out of a faith that believes in justification on the basis of Jesus Christ alone and as appropriated by faith alone, and as justified, the believing one is justified or justified by faith, believing then also in the experience of the child of God on the basis of Christ, as appropriated by faith, in the way of good works and obedience, according to good works and obedience, rewarded in grace. (Rev. David Overway, sermon in Hope Protestant Reformed Church on Lord's Day 24, "The Reward of Grace" [December 23, 2018])

[After Hope's consistory defended this sermon for a full year, Classis East was willing to criticize some of the statements in this sermon. However, both classis and synod maintained that these statements had nothing to do with the previous errors that were condemned by Synod 2018.]

You make reference to a sermon by H. Hoeksema on Acts 16:30, 31 dealing with the conversion of the Philippian jailer, an incident in which the

jailer, having witnessed the great earthquake that he correctly connected to the unjust punishment and imprisonment of Paul and Silas, cries out “Sirs, what must I do?” In that sermon HH makes plain that he is convinced that this was really an improper question, the jailer with his heathen background thinking that there was something he had yet to do or could do (some good work or sacrifice to be made) to placate God and be spared wrath. To which question, according to HH, Paul should (or could) have replied, “Nothing! There is nothing you should do, nothing you can do.” Meaning, of course, that when Paul responds by saying “Believe,” he is really saying there is nothing you are called to do (or required to do), and that even faith itself is not a doing, an act of obedience, to the call of the gospel. In response to the call of the gospel, the command to repent and believe, there is nothing that one *must* (is required) to do. One must simply cling.

Although, in the interest of consistency, HH would not, really could not say, “One *must* cling.” In this sermon he wants nothing to do with the word “must,” not even “*must* believe.” Rather, faith is a clinging to, and that is all that may be said.

I was well aware of the sermon prior to writing the October 1 editorial. I have had that sermon (typed out by C. Hanko) for some time.

Simply put, there are aspects of HH’s explanation with which I do not agree. HH is mistaken when he views the question of the jailer as a wrong-headed question, claiming there was nothing that the Philippian jailer was called to do and that, when to that question Paul responds “Believe, and thou shalt be saved and thy house,” Paul was in essence saying, “There is nothing you are called to do, nothing you must do.”

Quite frankly, if it were anyone else than HH, at this point I would say, Nonsense! So all I will say is, I disagree. (Kenneth Koole, “Response,” *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 12 [March 15, 2019]: 279)

“If any man will hear my voice.” He’s not establishing, of course, a condition. There are none. But he is talking about—not the condition to establish a union—but he is establishing a condition that deals with communion. Not union. That’s grace, it’s all grace, only grace. But communion, fellowship”...

In the way of that repentance and daily constant turning conversion, that’s when we enjoy or are aware of that blessed fellowship, that consciousness that God is with us and he will never forsake us. (Rev. Ronald Van Overloop, sermon in Faith Protestant Reformed Church on Revelation

3:14–22, “The Church of Christ at Laodicea” [June 23, 2019])

[After Grace’s consistory defended this sermon for a full year and a half, classis finally made the meaningless decision that this sermon taught the error of the heresy of a conditional covenant. Whatever “error of the heresy” means, it does not mean that the sermon was heresy. And whatever “error of the heresy” means, it certainly protected Rev. Van Overloop from being identified as a heretic. Though he taught the “error of the heresy” of a conditional covenant, classis specifically noted that Rev. Van Overloop did not sin and that classis did not question his orthodoxy. (See minutes of Classis East January 13, 2021, articles 41, 45.)]

We’re asking ourselves in the third part of the Catechism, not only how can I say thanks to God for salvation, but actually, how can I walk hand in hand with God? How can I walk in a way in which I enjoy the smiling face of God upon me in my life? How can I, if I can put it that way, embrace God and hug him? And you can’t do that physically. The Heidelberg Catechism is saying you can walk in love with God, embrace him and hug him, by living a life of good works. And that’s why we can also say, beloved, that the more you live a life of conversion, the more that you walk in good works, the more you will experience God’s love and fellowship, the more you will experience the blessing of salvation. And that does not mean at all that the more you do good works, the more you *earn* or make yourself worthy of God’s love and the experience of salvation. Not at all.

Let me try to explain it this way: think of a small child who delights in loving his mother. He delights in loving his mother and enjoying her love by embracing and hugging her, and that’s a wonderful thing. And now some of the older young people in the congregation might think, “I’ve outgrown that”; but let’s all agree that that’s a beautiful thing—a little child sitting on his mother’s lap, hugging her and enjoying that. That little child doesn’t think to himself, “Now, the more that I embrace my mother and hug her, the more I’ll *earn* this fellowship with her.” But he understands it’s in hugging her that I’m enjoying fellowship with her, and he understands: the more I do this—the more I hug and embrace her—the more I will enjoy her embrace and fellowship as well. Well, so it is with the life of conversion and good works. If the life of good works is the life of living in joy and fellowship with God, then you understand, the more you do that, the more that joy and fellowship you will have. It really is something like this: the more you fellowship with God, the more you enjoy fellowship

with God. And *because* the life of turning from sin and living in obedience to God *is* the life of fellowship with him, the more you do that, the more you will enjoy the love of God your Father for Jesus' sake. (Rev. Clayton Spronk, sermon in Faith Protestant Reformed Church on Lord's Day 33, "Christian Conversion" [September 13, 2020])

In fact, the more faithful the saints are to God's law in the grace of Jesus Christ, the more they prosper in the great blessings of the covenant. They prosper in their marriages, in their family life, and in their church life. Above all, they prosper in the enjoyment of God's covenant fellowship. (James Slopsema, "Treasure in the House of the Righteous," Standard Bearer 97, no. 2 [October 15, 2020]: 28)

Beloved, the question is: Are you seeking the grace that is available? Now that may sound a bit strange from PR pulpits: seeking the grace that is available? But it is proper. I am not talking about regenerating grace. That's sovereign grace that renews a man. I'm talking about the grace of which the Heidelberg Catechism speaks: He will give his grace and Holy Spirit to those only who ask them in sincerity for them. That's the grace and Holy Spirit, beloved, to withstand temptation. And we don't have that automatically! We receive that grace, that Holy Spirit, to withstand temptation as we seek; and seeking by prayer in Christ's name, we receive. And then! we can make progress in our spiritual life in this life's pilgrimage. (Rev. Kenneth Koole, sermon in Hope Protestant Reformed Church on Exodus 16:1–31, "Manna Sent from Heaven" [November 29, 2020])

God's sovereignty, man's responsibility. God's gifts and Christ's merits does not exclude God's use of means, does not exclude God's gift of the use of the means of our obedience. One more time: God's gifts and Christ's merits does not exclude God's sovereign use of the means of our obedience. So as the inspired word in Hebrews 4:11 says, "Labour... to enter into the rest, lest [ye] fall...[in] unbelief." Labor to enter into the rest, lest ye fall in unbelief, Hebrews 4:11. And that labor is what we identified in Deuteronomy 10:12: keep his commandments.

God's sovereignty never removes responsibility because responsibility is determined by God's commandments. What doth God require of thee? Circumcise the foreskin of your heart. And that, beloved, is not something you do once and you got 'er done. A physical foreskin being cut off in circumcision: once, it's finished. The calling to

circumcise the foreskin of our hearts never stops. How many times every day?...

And yet God commanded; I performed a duty. Two rails. They go side by side. In the wisdom of God—his sovereignty, our responsibility. And it's all grace, and nothing but grace.

And that's where our gratitude grows and our desire to be obedient unto his commandments arises—the way God works. (Rev. Ronald Van Overloop, sermon in Grace Protestant Reformed Church on Joshua 13:1–6, "Calling toward the Canaanites" [November 29, 2020])

We do draw nigh to God; God calls us seriously to do so; and there is a sense, a certain, specific sense, in which our drawing nigh precedes God's drawing nigh to us. To deny this is to contradict the inspired Word of God.

Even one who is "mentally challenged" can understand James [4:8] to be teaching that it is our solemn, serious calling to draw nigh to God; that in a certain sense our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us; and that it is not Christian orthodoxy to deny our serious calling or that in a certain sense our drawing nigh to God precedes His drawing nigh to us...

First, to repeat, there is a vitally important sense in which, in our salvation, our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us. Let even the "idiot" Christians among us take note that the text plainly says so. Second, this sense has to do with our experience of salvation, which is not an unimportant aspect of our salvation. When we draw nigh to God, by faith including faith's repentance, God draws nigh to us in our experience. We have the consciousness that God is our near-by friend and that we are close to Him, in His bosom, which is Jesus, so to say.

Presenting my thought as man's preceding God is sheer falsehood. The truth is, as I also made plain, that our drawing nigh to God, by His effectual call, precedes God's drawing nigh to us in our experience. (Prof. David Engelsma, public emails to family forum and Terry Dykstra [June 14, 16–17, 2021])

The purpose of this section has been to show that the false doctrine of conditional covenant fellowship continues to be taught in the PRC to this day. The error is crafty and subtle, as the lie always intends to be, but the error has been well-defined from the beginning, so that there is no excuse for not knowing what the error is.

May the Lord use this editorial as a companion to the documents mentioned above as a help to those who continue to say, "I don't see it."

—AL

The Lord continues his wondrous work of preserving his church through reformation, including the reformation of separation and withdrawal. The council of what was formerly Wingham Protestant Reformed Church adopted an Act of Separation and Reformation on July 6, which Act was also signed by a couple of families from the congregation. The council of what is currently First Protestant Reformed Church of Edmonton took a decision to withdraw from the Protestant Reformed denomination, which decision they will submit to the congregation for its vote on August 5.

1. When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream.
2. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing; then said they among the heathen, The LORD hath done great things for them.
3. The LORD hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad. (Ps. 126:1–3)

The two councils each also adopted a respective supporting document to explain the reason for their separation

(in the case of Wingham) and their withdrawal (in the case of Edmonton). These supporting documents are tremendously helpful in identifying the doctrinal issue in the controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches. In fact, these documents overtook and surpassed the editorial this month, which also intended to demonstrate the doctrinal issue. I highly recommend these documents to the readership of *Sword and Shield*, and I happily offer the editorial this month as a subordinate companion to those documents.

In related news, we are putting the finishing touches on a special issue of *Sword and Shield* devoted entirely to the question of whether man's activity of drawing nigh to God precedes God's activity of drawing nigh to man in man's conscious experience. A recent sermon in First Reformed Protestant Church touched off a series of public emails, a lecture, and letters on this topic. The editors of *Sword and Shield* agreed that this topic is worthy of a special issue. Keep an eye out for it around August 15.

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

—AL

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

PROFESSORS' "APPEAL" TO SYNOD: QUIXOTIC

Introduction

I permit myself an observation about the 2021 Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). For a denomination that prides herself on following “the church orderly way”—that phrase has become something of an idol in the Protestant Reformed Churches—there were some highly irregular decisions taken by that synod. I suppose that the Lord who sits in heaven will not permit a denomination that perpetrates wickedness in the name of justice and tramples on order in the name of order to have an orderly life. Rather, he judges the denomination with disorder: urgent letters received after the deadline for the synodical agenda, a letter missing from the agenda, and an odd—queer—letter the synod adopted as a suggestion to Protestant Reformed consistories.

In one of those late letters, dated May 19, 2021, Prof. Herman Hanko and Prof. David Engelsma addressed an “urgent request” to the Protestant Reformed synod in light of the recent, deep, and growing division of the Reformed Protestant Churches from the Protestant Reformed Churches. Understanding that the letter was highly irregular—it did not come as an overture through the regular channels and was sent to the clerk of synod well after the deadline for materials to appear on the agenda—the professors cited the Latin dictum *periculum in mora*, meaning that there is danger in delay, a legal term used to plead with a court for immediate, even irregular, action, especially in giving orders of protection. The action that the professors called for was specific and was explicitly laid out in their letter of appeal. They asked for a special committee to be

formed to hold meetings with the newly-formed Reformed Protestant Churches. The subject of the meetings was to be reconciliation between the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Reformed Protestant Churches. The committee was to report back to the Protestant Reformed synod, even having the power to call a special meeting of synod if reconciliation were possible. (The professors' entire letter is printed following this article.)

The synod, of course, badly bungled the request, really dismissing it out of hand, all the while making it seem as though the synod was honoring the request and was really concerned for reconciliation. I take the professors at their word that they genuinely desired reconciliation, or at least desired a good-faith effort at reconciliation. The synod that treated the letter was full of men that did not. Reconciliation was the last thing on their minds. Many of these men did not want the members, ministers, and officebearers of the Reformed Protestant Churches and the truth for which they contended, and they do not want them now in the PRC. These delegates were not interested in reconciliation, and if they had been, they would have done what the professors had suggested. At the very least, such an action would have shown some sense of reality on the part of the synod regarding what reconciliation would involve and mean for the PRC. Instead, the synod adopted an evil piece of work in the form of an open letter. (I will deal with that letter in a later issue.)

Cause of the "Deep and Wide" Division

Regarding the professors' suggestion about reconciliation, I am not in favor of reconciliation with the Protestant Reformed Churches. At this point I am not even in favor of talks with the Protestant Reformed Churches over reconciliation. This is not because I am in principle opposed to reconciliation. Rather, I do not believe that the Protestant Reformed Churches have any idea what would be involved in actual reconciliation and what that would mean for the PRC. Further, such talks would distract the Reformed Protestant Churches from the important work that God has given the denomination to do in defense of the gospel, development of the truth, reformation of his church, and care for those who have been grievously injured in the Protestant Reformed Churches. Both the appeal of the professors and the queer letter adopted by the synod occasioned by the professors' request give a clear indication that the PRC might talk of reconciliation, but she has no real grasp of what that actually involves.

The cause of the breach between the two denominations is a manifest spirit of toleration for false doctrine in the Protestant Reformed Churches. As proof I cite the fact

that after a years-long struggle over an insidious teaching of conditions in fellowship with God, Rev. Ronald Van Overloop explicitly preached conditional fellowship on the pulpit of Faith Protestant Reformed Church, and everyone yawned. In this connection there is also a clearly discernible preference to protect the honor of men rather than the honor of God. The examples could be multiplied, but I choose only the shameless circus that became the defense of Reverend Van Overloop at Classis East. He himself throughout the deliberations at classis never stood up to *repudiate* his statement but allowed the circus to continue. When the circus finally concluded after the advice of the committee was recommitted multiple times, the PRC ended up with the laughable decision that he is not persistent in his error because "in the past year and a half since the sermon was preached at Faith, Rev. Van Overloop has not maintained nor defended the statement, nor has he preached any doctrine promoting a conditional covenant," and nonsensical phrases like "the error of the heresy," and the conclusion that "the error was a case of misspeaking" (minutes of Classis East January 13, 2021, article 41).

I say "laughable" not because I think the decision is laughable but because men become fools when they make it their business to protect the names of men instead of the honor of God. I sat through the deliberations and watched the defense of men's honor. The deliberations could have been over in less than five minutes, yet it took hours upon hours of deliberations and multiple recommitments. Throughout the deliberations I watched delegates twist themselves into pretzels trying to make the condemnation of the statement as soft as possible, while others made it seem as though Protestant Reformed ministers preach heresy in their sermons on a regular basis and that such things are to be expected and not raised to the level of protest and appeal. One delegate was so engrossed in the deliberations, he fell asleep and nodded unknowingly to all that his colleagues said. I am not sure how classis could make the statement that Reverend Van Overloop has not preached any doctrine promoting a conditional covenant since the sermon at Faith. Did they listen to all his sermons? Had they not heard of his "two rails" to heaven? Misspoke? A Protestant Reformed minister misspeaks the word *condition*? After setting up the conditional statement for several sentences, he misspoke? Then this: he did not maintain or defend his statement. Against whom? Who in the whole PRC rose up in defense of God's truth and against the statement? Did the elders of Faith? Did his own consistory at Grace? Did his colleagues in Classis East? It was crickets from all of them. Reverend De Wolf would never be condemned in the PRC today.

* "Two rails. They go side by side. In the wisdom of God—his sovereignty, our responsibility." (Sermon entitled "Calling toward the Canaanites" preached on November 29, 2020, in Grace Protestant Reformed Church.)

Further, there has been a complete failure to discipline false teachers in the doctrinal controversy in the PRC, a controversy over the fundamentals of the gospel. However, there has not been a failure to discipline, since the denomination has shown herself very willing, quick, and able to discipline officebearers whom she perceives as a nuisance. All of this exposes a massive corruption in the assemblies, in which the churches reveal themselves to be devoid of the sense of truth and justice. I know it is difficult to attend Protestant Reformed broader assemblies these days with their great concern for secrecy—COVID—but a righteous man sitting there will vex his soul. These assemblies that handle with kid gloves the explicit teaching of conditions ride out on a rail a minister who combatted that false doctrine.

However, the main aspect of the breach is doctrinal, and the doctrine involves nothing less than the perfect and only mediatorship of Christ, justification by faith alone, and the unconditionality of the covenant, including the experience of fellowship in the covenant. In other words, the breach is fundamental, deep, and broad, and it will continue to grow. The Protestant Reformed denomination has set herself on the track of God and man together, side by side, as parties together in the covenant. She wants two rails running to heaven: one of Christ's merits and the other of man's obedience, God's grace and man's activity cooperating together to bring man God's blessings and fellowship. It is a Protestant Reformed manifestation of federal vision theology of a man's being saved by his living, active, obedient faith—all by God's grace, of course. It is the teaching that the activity of man, bolstered by the grace of God, becomes the decisive thing in man's covenant fellowship and in salvation. All of this has been and can be demonstrated by numerous examples. All of these have been shown to the Protestant Reformed Churches, and when she showed herself immune to such instruction and furthermore hostile to those who pointed out error, the Lord Jesus Christ brought about a reformation in his church.

Over against that departure from the pure Reformed faith, the Reformed Protestant Churches stand for the truth of the absolutely unconditional character of the salvation of the elect people of God, a salvation in which God is absolutely everything and man is absolutely nothing, a salvation that includes man's fellowship consciously with his God that is likewise absolutely unconditional. If many would finally stop ever learning and never coming to the knowledge of the truth, then it is neither time-consuming nor difficult to discern the difference. One only need listen to a few sermons and read a few articles, and the difference becomes clear, stark, and compelling.

Besides, the Protestant Reformed Churches have made perfectly clear by her damnation of the magazine *Sword*

and Shield and her discipline of faithful ministers of the gospel that she wants nothing of this truth, especially the truth's absolute intolerance for the lie that has found and continues to find shelter and a platform within the denomination. This goes back to Synod 2018. Synod 2018 was a dead letter in the Protestant Reformed Churches already shortly after synod concluded, beginning with Professor Dykstra's infamous *Standard Bearer* articles and continuing with Reverend Koole's obnoxious mockery of Herman Hoeksema's exegesis of Acts 16:30–31 and Koole's gospel-denying teaching that if a man would be saved there is that which he must do. This all-out assault on the synodical decision and desperate attempt to redefine the enemy that the Protestant Reformed Churches were facing—antinomians, radicals, and hyper-Calvinists—then continued in so many *Standard Bearer* articles and sermons one could employ a small army of people to protest all the theological garbage that was, and is, being written and preached.

Mind you, the decision of Synod 2018 was the weakest that could possibly have been taken and was shot through with holes, and even that was not acceptable to many delegates to synod and members of the PRC. When the decision was taken, many delegates looked as if someone had shot their dog, and the opposition was immediate at synod itself not only in public comments and prayers but also in the advice of another committee that would have taken back with the left hand what synod had given with the right. Men who were opposed to that decision when it was taken now only support it after they have undermined it both publicly and privately for months and after they have put their own spin on it. It is a mark of the fatal weakness of the decision that it could be so spun that those who hated the truth of it could interpret it how they wished, and those who favored it could rest comfortably in a few select phrases of the decision, all the while consoling themselves that no false doctrine was decided and that a lie was condemned.

At present the synods of the PRC are busily undermining whatever shreds are left of Synod 2018 and declaring vigorously before the world the apparently very important Reformed truth that there are, in fact, things that man does before he receives God's blessing—of course, all by grace and, of course, in a Reformed sense and, of course, not at all meaning or implying that there is *merit* or *conditions*, two very bad words! The Protestant Reformed explanation of salvation is beginning to read more and more like the small-print legalese of a contract. Indeed, that is where the denomination is headed: the covenant as an arrangement in which man does his part—by grace of course—and God responds by giving his blessings. Sick!

All of this indicates that in the Protestant Reformed Churches there is a serious departure from the gospel and very little understanding of what the gospel actually is. The Protestant Reformed classes and synods have set themselves

for the defense of this departure and for creating an environment where it can flourish. This is the fruit of and God's judgment on the failure to preach the gospel for years, the failure to condemn false doctrine and false teachers, and the failure to rid themselves of those who excused, supported, or defended such false doctrine and false teachers. And this departure will continue to grow and develop. So the division between the two denominations is deep and broad indeed and will continue to grow. The Protestant Reformed Churches may speak of reconciliation, but she has no idea what that would look like for the PRC. Therefore, it is undesirable for the Reformed Protestant Churches to engage in such an obviously fruitless endeavor.

A Significant "Appeal"

The appeal, though, of the professors to the Protestant Reformed synod is significant and worthy of some comment, especially in light of the subsequent action of the synod in response to the appeal, in which synod adopted an open letter to all those who left the PRC over the doctrinal controversy.

First, of note is that the professors in their appeal recognized a newly-formed denomination of churches, the Reformed Protestant Churches. I draw attention to this because the professors must know that this puts them at odds with the official position of the Protestant Reformed consistories, classes, and synod, the vast majority of Protestant Reformed officebearers and church members, as well as the school boards run by these members that are working overtime to make it as offensive as possible—in some cases impossible—for members of the Reformed Protestant Churches to use those schools. To these all the Reformed Protestant churches are not churches; the officebearers are not officebearers called of Christ himself; and the members are not members of churches formed by Jesus Christ, but they all are a rabble, a schismatic and rebellious rabble that holds to false doctrine. They have been unchurched by the Protestant Reformed Churches and cast out of the kingdom of heaven. The Protestant Reformed Churches cannot have it both ways. It is either-or. This is not a matter of adiaphora but of decision and principle, and it involves the salvation and eternal destiny of souls. Many of the officebearers of the Reformed Protestant Churches have been cast out as wicked, impenitent violators of the law of God. The Protestant Reformed Churches do not tire of reminding anyone who will listen that the members of the Reformed Protestant Churches are following lawfully suspended and deposed ministers.

It is surprising to me, then, that for churches that pride themselves on observing the settled and binding character of the decisions of their broader assemblies, such recognition of the newly-formed denomination would be allowed among the Protestant Reformed membership, especially

among the retired professorship. One would think that the synod would have issued an official rebuke of such a view and admonished those who hold to it to abide by the settled and binding character of the synodical decisions. One would think that the elders of these two retired professors would as vigorously hound and pursue them as the elders did their members who expressed such things. But the Protestant Reformed synod and Protestant Reformed consistories are not going to do that to Professor Engelsma and Professor Hanko because there would be uproar, no matter how many delegates of synod or elders might want to do it.

Second, of note is the professors' calling the recent division "calamitous." This is not the view of the Reformed Protestant Churches. While the members of the Reformed Protestant Churches were members of the PRC, they labored night and day to show their mother church her errors. This surely will be established in the day of judgment: there was no group of people that wrote more and that more earnestly and fervently contended against the doctrinal error that was threatening the PRC. In anger their mother viciously drove them out of her house. Where are those who saw and spoke against the doctrinal error in the PRC that was a denial of justification by faith alone, a denial of the perfect mediatorship of Jesus Christ, and a denial of the unconditional covenant, and that made man in part his own mediator? They are all gone or shortly will be. The Protestant Reformed Churches' dismissal of a remnant of those who love the gospel is not "calamitous," except for the PRC. While the PRC at present is expending her energies vigorously tilting at the windmills of antinomianism, radicals, and hyper-Calvinists, she is being swallowed by the false theology of conditional fellowship with God. The calamity for the Protestant Reformed Churches is not that there is now a division where there was none before. There was a great deal of division in the PRC prior to the formation of the Reformed Protestant Churches. The division was that the members were not one doctrinally. The calamity for the PRC is that she left Christ begging, and he is judging her. Professor Engelsma and Professor Hanko perhaps can console themselves that they will soon be in glory, and so they will not see all of the effects of God's judgment; but they must know the calamity there will be for the Protestant Reformed Churches, except she repent. Instead of an urgent appeal to reconciliation, there should have been at long last recognition of the doctrinal error that is threatening the PRC, an urgent appeal to repentance, and an urgent warning *periculum in mora!*

For the members of the Reformed Protestant Churches, the division has been an astounding salvation wrought by their God. It is not calamitous for them, but the division will be for the preservation of the gospel and the salvation of the members and their children in their generations. Their urgent calling is not to decry the division to the

members of the PRC, wringing their hands and wishing that they could all still be united in the superficial way that they had been and winking all of them at evil. Their calling is not to seek a superficial and worthless external reconciliation without repentance, reconciliation merely in the name of external unity, which is no reconciliation at all. Their calling is not to make themselves look good by seeking such a worthless reconciliation. The division is of the Lord and is his work for salvation and reformation. Their urgent call to the Protestant Reformed Churches is, “Repent of your sins, which repentance would include disciplining ministers and whole consistories.” Their urgent call to the members of the PRC is, “Come out from among her and be separate.” Their urgent warning to the members of the PRC is, “By remaining in her you are partaker of her sins and of her judgments.”

Besides, the members of the Reformed Protestant Churches have been delivered from the captivity that was their existence in the PRC. The captivity involved their being subject to the mind-boggling incompetence of PRC ministers and elders charged by Christ to uphold the truth but who repeatedly and calamitously bungled easy cases of false doctrine. The captivity was their being subject to the relentless brutality of these incompetent ecclesiastical lords who enforced wicked decisions by discipline, withholding information, threats, intimidation, and maligning any opposition. The captivity was their being damned before the world for writing and speaking God’s truth in the face of that incompetence and lack of love for the truth at the assemblies. The captivity was their being subject to vicious slanders and false charges of sin from fellow church members and officebearers, who impugned motives and characters for nothing other than loving and writing the pure truth. The captivity was their hearing lies preached and taught to them that would have destroyed them and their children except the Lord made a hole in the net of their captors, and then watching unfold before their eyes a massive cover-up of the wickedness. Truly, they have been delivered from captivity, and they are like those who dream. They have absolutely no desire whatsoever to return to Babylon and its oppression in doctrine and life. The Lord delivered them, and it would be suicide to return. It would also be unthankfulness to Christ to seek to overthrow that deliverance by a calamitous return to the PRC.

Third, of note is the reality that this suggestion for reconciliation is really that: only a suggestion. The professors themselves indicated that such was their urgency for reconciliation that if the Protestant Reformed Churches dismissed the letter—which, of course, she was going to do—the professors would not pursue the matter. They themselves did not hold out much hope for reconciliation, but wrote regarding the glowing testimony to the name and reputation of the PRC in the broader church world for making

such an effort. What kind of reconciliation has the name and reputation of the PRC as part of the effort for reconciliation? It is concern for the names of men that has the PRC in the calamitous position in which she finds herself.

The letter really appears to me to be a kind of window dressing. The letter gave no indication at all of knowledge of what would, in fact, be necessary for such a reconciliation to occur and indeed gave evidence of a continuing ignorance of the depth of the doctrinal error and terrible corruption that has come into and is developing in the Protestant Reformed Churches and which doctrinal error and corruption are at total fault for the division the professors now decry. The letter ignored what the officebearers and members of the Reformed Protestant denomination have said about these things. Is what they have said not to be taken seriously, or is it to be dismissed? In the end the letter simply suggested a way for the PRC to be able to say to the world—and especially to the Reformed church world—“We made an effort, but unfortunately the Reformed Protestant Churches would not play ball. The Protestant Reformed Churches are for peace, but they are for war.”

I for one would have no interest in participating in such a worthless series of talks. The very same men who have perpetuated, developed, and defended the doctrinal error the Reformed Protestant Churches oppose would be involved in discussions of reconciliation. And if these men were not directly involved, then, as is their mode of operation, they would be hovering in the background pulling levers, and that without a lick of repentance on their part. The very same men who are responsible for the total corruption of decency and order that the members of the Reformed Protestant Churches have witnessed, let alone of truth and right, and who have lied repeatedly to the membership of the PRC would be having discussions for reconciliation—again without a shred of repentance. Such meetings would be a farce, indeed, an affront to the cause of truth and unity that the members of the Reformed Protestant Churches have stood for, for which they have suffered and for which they have labored in the PRC. Such meetings, rather than being in harmony with the gospel of reconciliation, would be an insult to the Christ whom the members of the Reformed Protestant Churches serve and the Christ who has been so brutally treated by the PRC.

Echoing the professors themselves but for opposite reasons, for these and other reasons, I am not in favor of their proposal. The PRC would have to do a massive about-face and give evidence of repentance of her sins before such meetings could take place. Apart from that our tracks will continue to diverge.

I would say the professors’ letter is quixotic.

But if the letter of the professors is quixotic, how the Protestant Reformed synod responded to the letter was an evil business. Instead of forming a committee, the synod

drafted a letter; instead of addressing the newly-formed denomination, the synod opened up a conversation with several hundred individuals; instead of confessing wrongdoing, the synod declared its righteousness. The action of the synod demonstrates its continuing impenitence and

pride in the face of the Lord's judgment on the Protestant Reformed Churches.

To that I will turn in my next article in *Understanding the Times*.

—NJL

LETTER OF PROF. H. HANKO AND PROF. D. ENGELSMA TO SYNOD 2021

May 19, 2021

2021 Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches
c/o Rev. Ronald Van Overloop, Stated Clerk
11243–8th Ave. NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49534

Dear Brothers:

This is an “appeal” (as in an urgent request for action in an important matter) to you for extraordinary action in view of the ongoing, calamitous division in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). We acknowledge that the appeal is highly irregular. We have been at the assemblies often enough in our ministries and have sufficient knowledge of the church order to be aware of this. If the synod dismisses this appeal out of hand, it will be the end of the matter as far as we are concerned. But before this is done, we ask synod to consider the grievous nature of the division that is now troubling the PRC and the great worth of doing all we can, even though the effort is irregular, to achieve reconciliation, or at the very least, to demonstrate that the PRC are desirous of reconciliation.

To the obvious response to this appeal, that the orderly way would be to bring this document to the synod of 2022 via the proper channels, our response is that there is “*periculum in mora*.” The divide between the PRC and the new denomination forming out of the PRC is already deep and wide. It is expanding continually. If there can be reconciliation in the gracious providence of God, the sooner we take the initiative to be reconciled the better.

Our appeal for extraordinary action is that synod appoint a carefully appointed committee of five men, consisting of three ministers and two elders with the mandate to address the Reformed Protestant Churches with a request for meetings that have as their purpose the reconciliation of the presently divided churches and that, if they are willing, the synodical committee of the PRC enter into discussion as to how and on what grounds this reconciliation might be effected with the blessing of God. If there is some promising result of these meetings, in the judgment of the special committee, a special meeting of

synod be called, prior to the regularly scheduled synod of 2022, to consider and decide the possibility of reconciliation, or further actions, on the basis of the information and recommendations of the special committee. If the efforts at reconciliation obviously fail, the committee is to report to the synod of 2022.

The grounds for this extraordinary proposal are the following: First, reconciliation of divided brothers and sisters is a precious reality and a solemn calling in the sphere of the body of Christ (II Cor. 5:18-21), as is the unity of the manifestation of the body of Christ (Eph. 4). Second, the members of the newly forming denomination are men and women (and children) with whom only recently the members of the PRC were one in the gospel of grace, and there is no ecclesiastical decision of the synod of the PRC charging, or confirming, any departure on their part from the truth of the gospel as confessed by the PRC. Third, the PRC have themselves acknowledged that they are not without fault in the occasion of the division, that is, in the matter of the charge of false doctrine against the minister of the Hope PRC (cf. the “Acts of Synod,” 2017 and 2018.) Fourth, the PRC spend hundreds of thousands of dollars and untold man-hours for the gathering of only a few converts, out of zeal for the gathering of the church as the one body of Christ—the same zeal should motivate us to restore the manifestation of the one body that is now divided, and dividing. Fifth, the ongoing division and strife of the PRC are the occasion of mockery of the PRC and of the disparagement of our witness by other Reformed churches. Reconciliation would be a glowing testimony to the will and effort of the PRC on behalf of the overcoming of division and on behalf of the unity of the church. Even the attempt at reconciliation, although a failure, would speak well of the PRC.

For these reasons and more, should we not make every effort to heal the breach?

Cordially in Christ,

Prof. Herman C. Hanko
Prof. David J. Engelsma

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

CONSCIENCE, *SOLA SCRIPTURA*, AND CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.—Galatians 5:1

Introduction

One of the great wonders of the redemption of God's people by the blood of Jesus Christ is a free and clear conscience. Apart from his precious blood, there is only the accusing testimony of an evil conscience, the conscience of the first father of the human race, Adam. Finding his self-wrought garment of fig leaves wholly inadequate for the covering of his nakedness before the voice of the Lord God, Adam hid himself among the trees of the garden.

Much of the subsequent history of the human race is the continued fruitless effort to hide from God. Men continue to sew their fig leaves. They band together to proclaim their goodness to one another. They pride themselves on their self-fabricated morality. In that morality they may even acknowledge some help from God along the way, making religion their crutch. They find refuge in their own laws and their own inventions, approving of themselves before one another. Or men flee the voice of the Lord God. They take refuge in pills or the bottle, in cannabis or powder. They distract themselves with building empires, chasing trends, or pursuing licentiousness. In their lust, greed, and covetousness, they sear their consciences as with a hot iron. More sophisticated men of a philosophical bent explain to themselves that their consciences are formed only by the mores of their society and culture. On the other end of the spectrum are those who demonstrate an entire lack of any conscience by their horrific crimes. We observe more and more those who speak and act without any sense of shame whatever, parading their immorality for all the world to see.

The Conscience

What is the conscience?

Generally speaking, the conscience is an integral part of man's nature as a rational, moral creature. The operation of the conscience involves ongoing comparison and judgment. The conscience first apprehends a standard, an ethical system. This standard of an ethical system may be

consistent or inconsistent. The point is that the conscience understands the standard as a system that exists outside the conduct of the individual. Then the conscience compares the conduct of the individual to that standard to determine how the individual's thoughts, words, and deeds compare to that established standard. He will find some results of conformance, which may give him personal, inward honor, exoneration, and vindication. He will find some results of nonconformance, which may cause him shame, sorrow, and change of behavior. Or as a result the individual may determine to quiet some part of his conscience. Keep in mind that, while conscience is chiefly an individual matter, conscience also often functions among groups and societies.

According to Romans 2:15, all men in general have this kind of conscience. "Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another." The Belgic Confession, in article 37, speaks of the consciences of men being opened in the day of judgment. "Then the books (that is to say, the consciences) shall be opened, and the dead judged according to what they shall have done in this world, whether it be good or evil" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 77). The consciences of the reprobate wicked will be their own damnation!

The Believer's Free Conscience

What a marvel of redemption that the consciences of the redeemed are set truly free! The redemption of the cross of Calvary is the redemption of all the consciences of the elect. With his precious blood Jesus Christ has taken away the guilt of their consciences. He has purchased the right for the consciences of the elect to be purged from the guilt of all their sins. He has purchased the right of every conscience of his redeemed to operate in freedom before God's face and to be their proper guidance by the sanctifying operation of the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit of the Son.

The pathway to the believer's free exercise of his conscience is the application of the gospel by faith through the working of the Holy Spirit. This most fundamental application is the believer's justification by faith. It must be the proper ground of all his relationship to God. According to Lord's Day 23, the knowledge of his full and free justification before God is the silencing of the accusation of his conscience that he has broken all the commandments of God and that he is still inclined to all evil. According to the Belgic Confession, article 23, it is the freedom of his conscience from all trouble.

This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities, and to give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror, and dread, without following the example of our first father, Adam, who, trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig leaves. And, verily, if we should appear before God, relying on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should, alas! be consumed. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 51–52)

According to Hebrews 10:22, this is the confidence of approach to the holy throne of God, also signified and sealed by holy baptism: "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water."

Only and always through faith, apprehending the complete righteousness of Jesus Christ as his righteousness, does the believer have a free and clear conscience. To this possession he applies himself over the course of his whole life. As he sins daily against his God, he defiles and pollutes his conscience. His conscience accuses him. He flees to the cross in repentance and faith, receives again the knowledge of his justification before God, and is renewed in the freedom of his conscience before God.

By the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, the believer delights to have the perfect law of God as the standard for his conscience. There can be no other substitute. Nor can he desire to see that law in any way that would compromise its perfection. Psalm 119 addresses the believer's spiritual delight in the law of God exactly because of its glorious perfection. The psalm is filled with expressions of the believer's ardent desire that the perfection of the law alone fill and control his conscience. Scripture, God's perfect word, and scripture alone, the child of God desires to be the controlling and regulating law of his whole being and nature. He has no other room and no other use for any other law.

The child of God, through faith in Christ laying hold on the righteousness of Jesus Christ, is free to live according to his conscience, as his conscience is informed by the

word of God. This freedom of the gospel was the strength of the Protestant Reformation. The proclamation of the gospel of justification by faith alone without works freed the people of God from the bondage of Rome and the pope. They were not to rely upon their connection with the earthly, temporal head of the Romish church for their salvation. For their salvation they did not need implicit faith in the church and its inconsistent and confusing teachings. They did not need the institution of the church to tell them all the deeds they needed to do for salvation, whether deeds for the recovery of salvation lost by their sins (penance), deeds for their further salvation (infused righteousness or drawn from the treasury of merit), or steps taken in the direction of asceticism or mysticism for assurance of salvation. All they needed was Christ and his righteousness.

The *sola* doctrines of the Protestant Reformation were all to be applied to the consciences of the people of God, giving them their true freedom in the office of every believer. Never were they to allow their consciences to be brought again under the yoke of men.

The role of the church of Jesus Christ, as a proper instrument of the head of the church, must serve this same freedom of conscience, and must do so by means of the preaching of the gospel according to its heart, the gospel of justification, that is, the forgiveness of sins through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ alone. The central calling of the church is to preach the gospel. The doctrine of justification is the article of a standing or falling church.

Sola Scriptura

For the protection of this cherished freedom of the believer's conscience before God, the Belgic Confession invokes the principle of scripture alone as a necessary boundary for all the work of the government of the church of Jesus Christ. While granting the necessity of the government of the church for various purposes, the Confession establishes an important point of care in order not to bind the consciences of believers.

In the meantime we believe, though it is useful and beneficial that those who are rulers of the church institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the church, yet they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, hath instituted. And therefore, we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever. Therefore we admit only of that which tends to nourish and

preserve concord and unity, and to keep all men in obedience to God. For this purpose, excommunication or church discipline is requisite, with the several circumstances belonging to it, according to the Word of God. (Article 32, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 66–67)

In this article are three points that touch on the freedom of the conscience and join it with the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*.

The first point is “Yet they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, hath instituted.” Christ is “our only Master.” The church is not to make itself a master in any way, which would reject Christ, “our only Master.” The Belgic Confession here makes clear the tendency of men in their government of the church exactly to “depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, hath instituted.” They must therefore not only “take care that they do not depart,” but they must also take that care “studiously.” The word *studiously* does not mean merely carefully or attentively or even diligently. It means also zealously and ardently. Deliberative assemblies must be governed by a holy delight and zeal to ensure that there is no departure whatever from what Christ has instituted in his word.

The second point is the definite rejection made by the Confession. Rejected are “all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God.” There is no room for the inventions of men. These “inventions” can be described as speculations or errors or even confusing teachings and statements. “All laws” apply to what might be presented as demanding conformance on the part of the members of the church. Introduction into the worship of God does not mean only innovations in the manner of worship. It means also the teachings that are set out in the preaching in the church which God’s people are expected to believe and follow. The important point made about these “human inventions” and “all laws which man would introduce” is their effect. That effect is “to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever.” Such is their damage, and such is the reason they must be rejected. They bind and compel the conscience.

The third point that touches on the freedom of the conscience is the two reasons given in the sentence, “Therefore we admit only of that which tends to nourish and preserve concord and unity, and to keep all men in obedience to God.” The first reason itself is striking because it clearly relates to the boundary that has been carefully defined by the article. “Therefore we admit only...” Nothing else is to be admitted, nothing of human invention or of human law. How easy it is for men to suppose that these inventions or laws are

necessary for the sake of concord and unity! The Belgic Confession only knows one kind of concord and unity: spiritual concord and unity that is from Christ, the only master of the church.

Of special importance to the freedom of the conscience is the second reason: “and to keep all men in obedience to God.” The freedom of the Christian conscience is always to be in clear, understandable, and distinguishable obedience to God.

Preservation of the Truth of Sola Scriptura

There are three ways in which the truth of *sola scriptura* can be preserved as the “rulers of the church institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the church.”

The first way is an exercise of restraint, having respect to the boundary of scripture alone distinguished in article 32. This exercise of restraint is similar to article 30 of the Church Order. That article stipulates that only ecclesiastical matters are to be treated, and that in an ecclesiastical manner. Not every matter is to be taken up by a deliberative assembly and judgment made concerning it. Deliberative assemblies can be tempted into thinking that by making decisions they can take care of every problem presenting itself in the church. A consistory can be drawn deeper and deeper into an issue, trying to deal with all the facets and persons involved. The elders can soon find themselves making all kinds of decisions to seal off different possibilities. In doing so they can forget the boundary of maintaining the rule of scripture and begin violating the conscience.

To avoid this temptation, the rulers of the church must be able clearly to ground their decisions in the word of God. No matter how tempting it may be to exercise their authority through mere decision-making, they may not make any decision that cannot be grounded in the word of God.

The second way is similar but enters more deeply into the matter of honoring the conscience of the believer in the way in which decisions are written and presented. Deliberative assemblies may have in their collective minds how scripture indicates both the necessity of a decision and the way a decision must be taken to maintain sole obedience to Jesus Christ. But mindfulness itself is not sufficient. Decisions must not merely quote scripture. They must lay out a definite, clear line from scripture to the issue being decided. Is the decision so clearly the testimony of scripture that the child of God reading the decision will understand how it is the rule of Christ? Will he find it no burden at all to submit to the decision because he clearly understands it to be the rule

of Christ expressed to him? Will he delight to conform because he knows it to be the rule of his Savior over him?

Deliberative assemblies must not be confusing in their decisions. They may not present any kind of mixture of man's authority and the authority of God's word. They may not require an implicit faith in the church's own authority. (See Belgic Confession 7.) Deliberative assemblies may not abuse Acts 15:28—"For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us"—to puff up their own authority. They may not present God's flock with decisions that do invoke various passages of scripture but then demand implicit faith for the actual application of those passages to the specific issue at hand. They may not bind the believer's conscience by requiring submission to decisions that fail to carry the word of God all the way through to their end.

The third way of preserving the truth of *sola scriptura* is ultimate. This has to do with the calling that is presented to believers to join themselves to the true church of Jesus Christ wheresoever it is found (Belgic Confession 28), as well as the calling to separate from the false church. This way is also founded on the truth of the call of Jesus Christ to believe on him alone and that church membership in a certain institution is entirely voluntary and may not be a matter of compulsion or coercion.

Can we go so far as to say that compulsion or coercion concerning church membership is the fundamental power that brings about spiritual and ecclesiastical abuse of every kind? Is it possible to go even further: where members are no longer free to withdraw their membership for reasons of conscience, is that itself ecclesiastical abuse? This is not to say that elders are not to do any kind of work in explaining to persons why they ought to reconsider their decision to withdraw membership. Nor is it to say that persons who are considering withdrawing from a congregation ought not listen to the elders when they come to speak to them. But especially in cases of conscience, elders must understand the importance that those under their care follow Christ freely, according to the conviction of their consciences. It is all too easy in such work to bind the consciences of God's people.

It is noteworthy that the Belgic Confession, in articles 28 and 29, does not make any claim to identify any specific group as the "true church" of Jesus Christ. It only

describes how the true church may be known. Only on account of that knowledge is the believer obligated to join that true church wherever it may be found. When a church or churches must specifically identify themselves as the "true church" of Jesus Christ, thus demanding membership and continuing membership in it rather than in another, there may already be consciences bound to what is not the rule of Christ in the church. Far better it is for churches by virtue of their simple, clear, open operation "according to the pure Word of God" to demonstrate their identity as true churches. *Sola scriptura* may not be just a slogan mouthed by the rulers of the church. It must control their whole manner in the church of Jesus Christ.

However, the importance of this third way does not have mainly to do with the ultimate question of church membership, where one decides conscientiously to maintain himself under the care of Christ. It rather has to do with how the matter of church membership affects the work of the rulers of the church. Does their work truly serve the flock of Jesus Christ, so that the members of the church understand very

clearly that their membership *is* simply and clearly an expression of what it means faithfully to follow their Lord and Savior? Perhaps even more simply: do the people of God have their consciences free *by virtue of* their membership to be the sheep of the sheepfold of Christ? Of course, this does not mean that the rulers of the church stop being rulers of the church. But it does mean that deliberative assemblies of the church and churches represent the rule of Christ so clearly and completely that its members *are* convinced in their consciences that they are following Christ *alone* as proper members of the church. The alternative, the rule of Christ compromised by the rules of men, binds the conscience and makes church membership a great evil and burden rather than a blessed good. Conscientious church members are then forced always to choose between Christ and the church.

May faithful churches of Jesus Christ steadfastly labor for God's word alone in the service of Christ alone! May God's people rejoice to know their places in such churches, their consciences free to worship and serve their Savior alone!

—MVW

The *sola* doctrines of the Protestant Reformation were all to be applied to the consciences of the people of God, giving them their true freedom in the office of every believer.



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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.—2 Corinthians 13:11

Greet one another with an holy kiss.—2 Corinthians 13:12

Brethren, greet one another.

Ah, blessed greeting of brethren in the Lord. It takes but a moment, but a word, but a gesture. And yet in that little moment, the whole miraculous unity of the body of Christ comes to expression. For the brethren are members of the same body who draw the same life from the same Head. Their foundation is the same truth of the holy gospel. Their sins are washed away by the same baptism of the blood of Christ. Their mouths form the same confession. They are neighbors in heaven, where their incorruptible inheritance is reserved for them. The unity of the Spirit is theirs in one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God.

But in their stations and callings in this life, as appointed them by God, they have been apart. They have had their work to do, and they have had their homes to go to, and they have had their callings to attend to. Sometimes far away. Sometimes for a long while. And often in the midst of an unfriendly and hostile world, where greetings are merely formal, and among those with whom there is no real and heavenly and eternal unity.

But then for the brethren comes a moment of meeting. In the house of the Lord, perhaps. Or by the way, perhaps. Suddenly they lay eyes on one another, recognize one another, and rejoice. With hearty affection and without dissimulation, they hail one another in a friendly greeting. In that moment of their greeting and their rejoicing in one another is seen a flash of their rejoicing in their one Head in whom they are united.

Brethren, greet one another.

And when you greet one another, let the gesture used in your greeting be holy. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

The apostle refers to the simple custom in his day of a chaste peck on the brow or cheek or lips. The apostle apparently is not commanding a kiss as the only appropriate greeting for Christians. The scriptures refer to other gestures as well: a simple word (Matt. 28:9), a handshake (Gal. 2:9), an embrace (Acts 20:1).

Rather, the apostle is commanding that whatever gesture one uses in greeting, it must be holy. A greeting that expresses lust is perverse. A greeting that is meant to dominate is monstrous. Be holy in your greeting. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Brethren, take it to heart in this evil day in which the church is called to live. Take it to heart when men greet women and women greet men and adults greet children. Let your gesture have nothing of lasciviousness or enticement or invitation in it, but let your kiss be holy. Let your gesture never impose yourself upon others so as to violate, dominate, entrap, or shame them, but let your kiss be holy.

Blessed and holy greeting of brethren in the Lord!

Greet one another with a holy kiss.