



SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Malachi 3:7 Edition

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

Deuteronomy 33:29

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CONTENTS

- 3 FROM THE EDITOR**
Rev. Andrew W. Lanning
- 4 SERMON**
GOD'S CALL TO RETURN
TO HIM
Rev. Andrew W. Lanning
- 9 CORRESPONDENCE**
Terry Dykstra
Prof. David Engelsma
Matthew Overway
- 15 LECTURE**
DOES MAN PRECEDE GOD?
Rev. Andrew W. Lanning

- 23 CORRESPONDENCE**
Prof. David Engelsma
Rev. Andrew W. Lanning
- 33 EDITORIAL RESPONSE**
MALACHI 3:7 AND GRACE ALONE
Rev. Martin VanderWal
- 36 EDITORIAL RESPONSE**
UNFINISHED BUSINESS
Rev. Nathan J. Langerak
- 44 FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!**
Rev. Andrew W. Lanning



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This special edition of *Sword and Shield* takes the field to fight in the present-day controversy over whether man's activity of drawing near to God precedes God's activity of drawing near to man in man's conscious experience of covenant fellowship with God. Is there some specific, important, vital sense in the experience of man in which man's activity precedes God's activity?

This controversy has been given fresh legs in recent weeks by Prof. David Engelsma's public and vigorous condemnation of a sermon on Malachi 3:7 preached in First Reformed Protestant Church by the undersigned. Professor Engelsma damned the sermon as teaching a new religion, which new religion is supposedly an activity-denying, hyper-Calvinist, stock-and-block theology. Over against the theology of the sermon, Professor Engelsma stated his own theology of covenant experience: "There is a vitally important sense in which, in our salvation, our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us" (Professor Engelsma to Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 16, 2021).

Such a statement, asserted repeatedly in the following pages, is astounding. It is astounding because of who makes it. Professor Engelsma is a Reformed theologian of the highest caliber. He knows better than what he is now teaching and defending. He must know better! Mustn't he? In all the hours I have spent under his instruction, under his preaching, reading his articles, and reading his books, I would never, never have characterized his theology this way: Man. Never would I have said that at some vital point in Professor Engelsma's theology, man precedes God. Always, always I would characterize his teaching this way: God. God first and middle and last. God the Alpha and Omega. God the Beginning and the Ending. Who would ever have said any differently? Any number of our readers would have either laughed at you or fought you if you had suggested that at a critical point in Professor Engelsma's covenant theology, he made man precede God. And yet here it is: "There is an important sense in which our drawing nigh to God, by the effectual allure of the promise that in this way God will graciously draw nigh to us (than which experience nothing is more precious), precedes God's drawing nigh to us" (Professor Engelsma to Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 16, 2021).

But never mind the man. Whether a theological colossus like Professor Engelsma or a theological garden gnome like myself, any of us can err. So never mind the man. What about the theology? What about the theology that says that at the vital point of man's experience

of God's drawing nigh to him in love and salvation and mercy, our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us? This theology is devastating. It is so devastating because it is the resurrection of prerequisites. When man's activity precedes God's activity, and God's activity waits upon man's activity, that is a prerequisite. Prerequisites are back. And with prerequisites comes the whole conditional covenant theology that makes so much of them.

The essence of this controversy is as ancient as can be. In every attack upon God, his Christ, his Spirit, his church, and his salvation, the point of conflict has been man. The error exalts man; the truth abases man. The lie flatters man and inflames his pride; the truth exposes man, that God alone may be glorified. In the controversy as it is carried on in these pages too, the lie would fill man with himself by making man first in the specific and vital matter of his experience of covenant fellowship with God. Always and forever the lie enthuses over man, man, man, and more man.

The essence of this controversy is also as familiar as can be to readers of *Sword and Shield*. This is the controversy that has been fought in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) for some six years, that has been carried on in the pages of this magazine since its inception, and that has resulted in the separation of the Reformed Protestant Churches from the Protestant Reformed Churches.

But the controversy has now been carried forward to another stage of development. The theologian of the Protestant Reformed Churches has weighed in and has shown by his own teaching what lies at the heart of the PRC's error of conditional covenant fellowship: man's preceding God.

The documents that follow are given in their chronological order. To this point, the controversy has been carried out in a sermon, emails that were widely distributed, a speech, and open letters. We pray that the reader profits from having these previously scattered documents gathered in one place for his study and reflection.

Finally, I would like to echo Rev. Nathan Langerak's invitation to Professor Engelsma to write. I would like to extend that invitation to others as well. The matters are vital. We will publish you. In an entire special edition if need be. Even in a jumbo edition if need be.

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

—AL

GOD'S CALL TO RETURN TO HIM

Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return? — Malachi 3:7

Introduction

Beloved congregation in our Lord Jesus Christ, the call of this word of God to Judah in the days of Malachi was, “Return, return. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts.” And that is the word of God to his people yet today. That’s his word to you. That’s his word to this church. That’s his word to this denomination: “Return. Return unto me, and I will return unto you.”

The church of the Lord Jesus Christ must constantly hear that call, “Return.” She must constantly hear that call, “Return” because she is constantly, according to herself, tempted to depart. And according to her old man, she *is* departing, so that the rebuke of Jehovah holds for the church as well: “Even from the days of your fathers, ye have departed from mine ordinances and have not kept them.” As every one of us stands before that rebuke of the word of God, we must confess, “It’s true. It’s true. From the days of our fathers, we *have* departed from God’s ordinances and have not kept them. From the days of our fathers, for a whole generation and more, we have departed from the statutes and judgments of the Lord. We have not delighted in them. We have counted them to be a small thing, an insignificant thing, in the whole scheme of our life. We did not love them and keep them as the most precious thing that there is for the church of Jesus Christ—the ordinances of Jehovah. We despised his truth, and we’re tempted to do it yet. And according to our old man, we hate that truth and have no use for that truth.” The rebuke of the word of God must be heard by the church. It must be heard by you and me.

Hear that rebuke: “Even from the days of your fathers, ye have departed from mine ordinances and have not kept them.” And hear the call of God to his church: “Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts.” And let your response and my response not be what Judah’s response was, who said, “Wherein shall we return? We have nowhere to return. Everything is fine here with us.”

Let’s hear that call of the word of God this morning under the theme, “God’s Call to Return to Him.” In the first place, a call to those who are gone away; in the

second place, a call to return; and in the third place, a call refused.

A Call to Those Who Are Gone Away

God confronts Judah with their departure from his ordinances. That’s what this text is all about: it’s the ordinances of God and Judah’s departure from those ordinances and God’s call to return to those ordinances. It’s all about the ordinances of God, verse 7: “Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them.”

The *ordinances* of God refer to all of the Old Testament rules and laws concerning the worship of Jehovah. Those were the laws concerning sacrifice, as the previous chapters in Malachi make clear, the laws regarding what sacrifice to bring and what kind of sacrifice: a lamb, and a lamb that was unblemished and unspotted and without any imperfections in it. The ordinances of God include the laws regarding the tithes and offerings that the people were to bring, as the following context makes clear, so that the very next rebuke that God will bring is a rebuke of robbing him in their tithes and offerings. These ordinances of God include the ordinances regarding the priesthood and what the role of the priesthood was. The priesthood was called to teach the people. The priesthood had the word of God in its mouth in order to instruct the people as they brought their tithes and offerings and their sacrifices. And the role of the priesthood, then, was to rebuke the people if the people brought a torn or broken sacrifice and point the people to the true sacrifice that was the Lord Jesus Christ. There were laws concerning the private worship of the people, even in their own marriages—they were to marry the daughters of Israel and not the daughters of a strange God—and laws regarding the permanency of marriage. They were not to put away the wives of their youth, the wives who loved the Lord and wives to whom they had been united in marriage, in favor of marrying some other wife. *All* of these ordinances were the ordinances of God that taught the people to worship Jehovah and instructed the people in the service of his name.

And when we consider these ordinances, we must not

see them merely as a whole set of rules, as a whole set of lines and laws to follow, but these ordinances declared something. These ordinances instructed the people because these ordinances revealed Jehovah to them. The fact that these ordinances revealed Jehovah is evident from the fact that when God says, “You have gone away from my ordinances,” he says, “When you did that you went away from *me*.” Notice how he phrases the call to return. Not this: “Return to my *ordinances*.” That was true, return to my ordinances. But he phrases it this way: “Return unto *me*.” When they departed from the ordinances, they departed from Jehovah because those ordinances revealed Jehovah. They saw Jehovah in them.

And what did those ordinances reveal of Jehovah? They revealed that he is a covenant God. They revealed that he is a God who delights in fellowship with his people. He is a God who lives with them. That was the whole temple, and that was all of its ordinances. That temple was the house of God. That temple was the place Jehovah dwelt right in the middle of his people, right in the middle of their land, thus dwelling with his people in covenant fellowship and making them citizens of his kingdom and sons and daughters in his house. Those were the ordinances. They revealed Jehovah as a covenant God. What a precious ordinance. The other nations didn’t have that. Egypt didn’t have that temple and the covenant fellowship of Jehovah. Persia didn’t have that temple and covenant fellowship with Jehovah. These were God’s ordinances *for Israel* that revealed him as a covenant God fellowshiping with them.

And those ordinances revealed to the people regarding God that the *only* way for the people to have that fellowship with God and be united to God as members of his family was through the blood of atonement. That was the only way. They were a people who had no right in themselves to this fellowship with Jehovah. Living with God, the holy God? Being members of his household? Us, in all of our corruption and all of our disobedience? The only way to that fellowship was revealed in those ordinances—the ordinances of the sacrifices, the ordinances of the shed blood of the lamb, who was perfect and without spot. Those ordinances showed the people their life with God: their covenant fellowship with God is through Jesus Christ and through Jesus Christ alone as the lamb of God, whose blood takes away the sins of his people in all the world. Those were the ordinances—very precious, special ordinances.

Those ordinances have been given to the church of the Lord Jesus Christ today. You and I have the ordinances of Jehovah. Those ordinances of Jehovah are not merely a set of rules: come to church and make sure that you have sacraments in church and make sure that you have

preaching in church. But those ordinances reveal Jehovah to us because those ordinances are the preaching of the holy gospel and the administration of the sacraments. And what is declared to you in the preaching of the gospel but the covenant fellowship of God with his people in the Lord Jesus Christ? What is declared to you in the preaching of the word but Jesus Christ and him crucified and salvation through him and through his blood alone? And that’s the ordinance of the sacraments as well. That’s what was pictured in the sprinkling of the water this morning: the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses all of his people, us and our children, from our sin, by which sprinkling of the blood of Christ we have fellowship with Jehovah and access unto him and to all of his life and to his family and his fellowship. Those are the ordinances. It’s the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. That’s what God is talking about here when he talks about “mine ordinances.”

When God talks about these ordinances, he says to the people, “You departed. You have gone away from my ordinances.” That’s an awful thing. “You have gone away from mine ordinances.” We have all kinds of words that we can use to describe that: *departure*, or we can call it *apostasy* or *apostatizing*. Those are good words, but the reality behind those words makes us tremble. You have gone away from the gospel! You’ve gone away from that truth of fellowship with me through Jesus Christ! You despised that. You counted that a little thing. You’ve gone away from mine ordinances.

The people of God did that in the Old Testament when they looked over their flock, and the economy wasn’t very good; and there were some good lambs in the flock, but they needed those for their own support and for their own way in this world, and so they took that broken lamb and brought that lamb to the temple. The ordinance of God was, “I save you through the shed blood of the Righteous One.” And the people all came with their broken lambs and said, “Jesus Christ is a broken thing, and Jesus Christ is an unrighteous thing, and he’s an imperfect thing. See, here’s the lamb.” They came to the temple with their new wife in tow, a wife who was of a strange god, while their first wife was covering the altar of God with her tears. They came with that new wife in tow, living in ongoing adultery with her, and by that declared in the house of God, the temple of God, “God is an adulterer.” That’s what they said when they came with that new wife because that ordinance of marriage was an ordinance that showed the unbreakable, lifelong bond of God’s covenant with his people. But they broke that bond and took a new wife, even though God didn’t break that bond, and brought her to the altar and by that declared, “God is an adulterer.” What an awful thing, what a departure, what a going away from the ordinances

of God. In all of their worship, they showed that they despised Jehovah God, that they would have nothing to do with his ordinances.

And that departure from the ordinances reveals what people think about God. It reveals what the church thinks about Jesus Christ. With her mouth the church is always going to say good things about God. With her mouth she's always going to say good things about Jesus Christ. But what she does with his truth shows what she thinks of God and shows what she thinks of the Lord Jesus Christ because Jehovah God shows what he thinks of himself and what he thinks of Christ by his truth. What he thinks of himself is that his is all the honor and the glory forever. What he thinks about the Lord Jesus Christ is that he is his beloved Son in whom he is well pleased. That's what Jehovah God thinks, and that's what he declares in the preaching of the gospel and in the administration of the sacraments, in these ordinances. When the church of Jesus Christ takes that truth and twists it and corrupts it, then she shows, "We don't think what you do about yourself, God. And we don't think what you do about the Lord Jesus Christ."

Can you see those people in Judah? Can you see them coming to the temple in those days of Malachi? Can you see them coming with their twisted lamb? Can you see them coming with their second wife? Can you see them coming with their meager offerings? There they come, while Jehovah through the ordinances declares, "Your only hope of salvation is through the shed blood of the perfectly Righteous One."

And they are saying, "We don't care. We don't care about those things. We care more about our income that we left there at home in all those good lambs. We care more about our own personal fulfillment, as evidenced by our remarriage to these new wives. We don't care about you and your gospel and your Christ, your lamb. We don't care about those things."

And that is what the church does when she goes away from the ordinances of God, when she corrupts his word and corrupts his gospel.

Now can you see those other Israelites who come to the temple, and they have a good lamb, a perfect lamb? And they look at their neighbor and see his twisted lamb. They bring a good lamb, but they can live with it that their neighbor brings a twisted lamb, so that no one in Israel was allowed to say, "But my lamb is good, and my confession is all right."

Jehovah God sends his prophet to the whole nation to say to them, "Ye have gone away from mine ordinances and have not kept them."

What does a church look like that understands the truth of the word of God and that gospel of the Lord

Jesus Christ? What's her response to the corruption of the ordinances? Her response is that she keeps those ordinances. It's intolerable for her that those ordinances be corrupted, that the preaching of the gospel have mixed in it filth that takes away from the glory of God, that takes away from the righteousness of Christ. She won't tolerate that. She says about those ordinances, "We must keep them. We want to keep them, guard them, preserve them pure without any mixture of that wretched lie," when the rebuke comes to Judah and to the church of Jesus Christ, "Ye have gone away from mine ordinances and have not kept them."

Beware, church of Jesus Christ, of going away from the ordinances. Every time you come here to church, every worship service, the ordinances are there. And every time we come to church, there's a threat, a huge threat to us, that we depart from the ordinances—maybe just a step, maybe just a little; maybe just a little compromise of the truth here and there because there are some toes that must not be stepped on, because we're, after all, pretty good, and so we don't need to be so harsh all the time in rebuking our sin; maybe just a little departure. Every time we come to the worship service, there is that temptation to go apart a little bit. And every time the consistory or the classis must make decisions, then there's a temptation to go apart just a little bit. Beware of going away from the ordinances. Beware of apostasy. Beware of departure.

God brings this rebuke to the church in a way that shakes her awake because the church in those days, as is true of every age of the church, the church of those days was saying, "But our fathers. Look at our fathers. We are only doing the things our fathers did. We learned which offering to bring out of our flock from our fathers. We have been doing it our whole lives. It's never been any different than this. And so now, why do you rebuke us so?"

And God's word to his church is, "I know. Even from the days of your fathers, ye have gone away from mine ordinances and have not kept them—from the days of your fathers."

What that means is the church in every age is a generation of those who have grown up going away from the ordinances of Jehovah. The church in every age thinks she has arrived. "We are the pinnacle of every church that has gone before. There has never been a church like this. Oh, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are we. Oh, the children of Abraham are we. Oh, Reformed Protestants are we." In every age the church believes she has arrived, that she is the pinnacle. It has never been better than this. And she looks around and says, "Why should we do things any different in all of this because we learned that from our fathers?"

Her question is not, "What does the Lord require?"

What are the ordinances of Jehovah?” But only this: “What are we comfortable with?”

And God says to them, “You are a *generation* who have departed. From the days of your fathers, ye have gone away from mine ordinances and have not kept them.”

When the church declares, then, that she must be reformed and always reforming, this is what she means: not we’re going to try to change everything, and that’s reforming all the time; but this: we *always* acknowledge our sin. We *always* acknowledge that we have not arrived. We *always* acknowledge that we must be rebuked. And if ever the time comes when we say, “I need no more rebuke,” then hear the word of Jehovah: “Even from the days of your fathers, ye have gone away from mine ordinances and have not kept them.”

You know what’s in your heart. I know what’s in mine. You know, as do I, how easy it is for you to tolerate the lie. It’s so easy to corrupt the preaching of the gospel. You and I know that. You and I know that this rebuke is for us and must heed that rebuke this morning. For the sake of earthly peace, earthly prosperity, the regard of men, or any other thing, we too would run away from the truth and live happily with the corruption of that truth. Even from the days of *your* fathers, ye have gone away from mine ordinances and have not kept them.

A Call to Return

And so Jehovah calls his people, “Return. Return unto me.” And he adds to that call this promise: “And I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts.” His call to his church is, “Return.” That call to return is a call to repentance. It is a call to see the departure, to acknowledge it, and to hate it. And it is a call to leave that departure forthwith, as fast as we can, and return unto the truth of Jehovah. That’s the call to return: see that departure, acknowledge it, hate it, and come back to me. It’s a call to repentance.

And that is a *necessary* call when the church is departing. The call to return must be made. It must be made forcefully and sharply and without letting up on it. “Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts.” In fact, if that call to repentance is *not* made, then everything else the church says to herself is empty and vain. Maybe the church that has corrupted the truth and has been willing to live with that corruption isn’t corrupting the truth in every single sermon and isn’t corrupting the truth in every single interaction in the life of the church, so that there are many, many things that are true and that are even being said truly—many true facts that are being proclaimed. But when the church has departed and is apostatizing from the truth, *all* of those other things become empty in the absence of this call, “Return.” When the church proclaims, “But God loves

you, you know” and when the church proclaims, “Christ died for his people, you know” and when the church proclaims, “We’re a good church, you know,” then all of that is empty in the absence of this call, “Return.” And if the church that has departed congratulates herself by leaving a sermon and saying, “Well, I didn’t hear any false doctrine in that sermon, so things must be okay,” that sermon was nevertheless empty in the absence of the call to return. You must know that as a church, and I must know that as a preacher—that when we are tempted to corrupt the gospel and when the pressures build, as they will for whatever earthly reason, for us to compromise and for us to go along with error; then you must know as the church, and I must know as the preacher, that the pulpit must cry this text, this word to us: “From the days of your fathers, ye have gone away from mine ordinances. Return unto me, and I shall return unto you, saith the LORD.”

And that call must be made because the church that is departing must be broken in her departure. She must not be allowed to continue tolerating it. She must be made to see the monstrous nature of that corruption of the truth. And she is made to see that monstrous corruption when Jehovah says to her, “Mine ordinances you corrupted! Return unto me!” That is why the church that is departing *must* hear this call to return.

But now what are you going to do with that call?

There is a question about the *meaning* of that call in this text. The question arises because of the *order* of the call and the promise. And there is no getting around that order; there is no switching up that order. The order is this: “*You* return unto me. *You* do that. *You* repent of your sins. *You* come back to me and to my ordinances. *You* do that.” That’s first. “Then *I* will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts.” What are you going to do with that order?

I confess before you my sin in ignorance of how to understand that in past sermons that I have preached years ago. The way to solve that exegetical problem I took to be this (*many* took it to be this, so that many of us are rebuked, including your minister, first of all, by this). We took the solution to be this: “Well, that order cannot be talking about our salvation; that cannot be talking about what we might call our union to Christ or our entrance into the covenant. *That* can’t be first we return, and then God will return to us. So we’re going to take that whole order, and we’re going to put it into this whole realm we call *experience*, this whole realm we call *the experience of fellowship* or *the experience of salvation*, so that we’re going to say, ‘First, you return in your experience, and then in your experience you will know Jehovah’s returning to you.’” If that’s the order, then our peace with God and our assurance of justification, which *is* justification, is by works and not by faith alone. That is grievous sin.

When Jehovah God calls, “Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts,” he is not saying, “*You do something first, and then I will act.*” But rather, Jehovah by that call, “Return,” is thundering the *law* to us. That’s the way to understand it. This is the law—the law which does not say, “Here’s *how* you can do it, and here’s *how* you will be saved”—the law which only says, “You do this. *You* do this. *Thou* shalt, and *thou* shalt not.” And that law as it thunders upon us, “Return unto me,” exposes us as being unable in ourselves. That’s the function of that call. That’s the function of that command, that law of God in the text, “Return unto me.”

You can picture it like this, that there is a huge canyon. On either side of that canyon is a sheer cliff running down to the river far, far below. And spanning that canyon is a rope bridge that has running from side to side one rope railing along that whole bridge. That one rope railing represents the ordinances. There is a man walking across that rope bridge. He’s hanging onto those ordinances, and then he looks down and he decides he is going to let go of that, and he plummets over the side. And there is Jehovah on that bridge saying to that man who is plummeting down, “Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts.” He’s “the LORD of hosts” in this text, which means behind him are all the citizens of heaven, the hosts of the angels and the hosts of all his people who have been brought to heaven. There Jehovah stands with the glories of heaven behind him, with his house behind him, Father’s house where we want to dwell, and we’re plummeting, plummeting, plummeting from that bridge into the chasm, and Jehovah above us is saying, “Return unto me, and I will return unto you.”

When the child of God hears the call that way, that call drives home to him, “I cannot. I cannot. That’s my sin. That’s my weakness. That’s my depravity. That’s my hopelessness in myself. I cannot. All I can do of my own is plummet and be destroyed.”

And that’s the confession that the church makes when that call comes to us, “Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts.” There is heaven behind him and all the Father’s many mansions, and all we can do is plummet and realize we cannot in ourselves return unto him.

A Call Refused

Judah’s response to that call was to say, “Wherein shall *we* return unto thee? We don’t have to return. Repent of departing from the ordinances? Jehovah, haven’t you seen we’ve been at church? Jehovah, haven’t you seen we’ve gone to the temple, and we’ve had our sacrifices? Haven’t you seen we bring our tithes and offerings? Haven’t you seen we come with our families?” The response of Judah

and the response of Israel was to refuse that call and to be lifted up in pride against that call and to say to Jehovah, “You’re mistaken in your call. What in the world do *we* have anything to return for?”

If you hear that in your own heart or if you hear that from this pulpit or if you hear that in the church of Jesus Christ, “What do we have to return for?” then you stand before the stinking pride of man. That’s what you stand before. You do not stand before the confession of the godly. You stand before the pride of man, the pride of man which says, “Jehovah is mistaken in his assessment of the nature of this church. Jehovah is mistaken in his assessment of what man at his *best* is and how he must be evaluated at his best. We stand. We have never gone anywhere. We need not return.” That’s the pride of man, and that’s in your heart. That’s in my heart. You and I, who are plummeting in our sin, have the audacity of pride to say, “But we are the best that there is. Go everywhere you can; we’re the best that there is. We have no need to return.”

There is only one hope for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is only one hope for those who have departed and who are called by God to return. And that one hope is not that *we* somehow arrest our fall into destruction and turn around and go to Jehovah, but that “the LORD of hosts” comes down to us and takes hold of us by the power of sovereign grace and takes hold of us in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as that gospel is proclaimed and as that gospel was pictured in the sprinkling of the water in the sacrament of baptism; that Jehovah God by that gospel gives to us Christ, gives to us his righteousness, imputes it as ours; that Jehovah saves us from hell and destruction and sin and death by his only begotten Son. That’s what he did when he sent the Lord Jesus Christ in our flesh. There we were, plummeting into destruction, and Jehovah came down, came down, sending his only begotten Son to take hold of us and to save us from all our sin. That’s the hope, the one hope of the church of Jesus Christ. And that’s the hope that Jehovah declares to this his people.

Judah had to be broken more in those days. The church of Jesus Christ always must be broken more and rebuked more by that word of God that our hope may never be in ourselves, but that our hope and trust may be in Jehovah God alone through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

And so, church that is always threatened with departing and from the days of our fathers has departed from the ordinances of the Lord and has not kept them, hear the rebuke of the Lord, “Return ye unto me,” and be broken by that rebuke and hear the gospel of salvation: “I have come to you in Jesus Christ and rescued you from all your sin.”

Amen.

—AL

Terry Dykstra to Professor Engelsma, June 13, 2021

Good afternoon Prof.,

I have questions regarding Andy Lanning last week on Malachi 3:7. Here is the link if you want to listen. <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=6621161055911>.

I have also attached a private transcription.

This matter of us returning to God and God returning to us is explained by Andy in what I consider to be a very novel manner.

My understanding of this passage has always been that as taught by Rev. R. Hanko:

Of this same faithfulness He speaks when He tells them to return to Him and promises that, in their so doing, He would also return to them. That promise, like all God's promises, is sure and was surely fulfilled in Christ. Never does God cast away His people whom He foreknew.

That He would return to them when they returned to Him does not mean that His returning depended on theirs. In that case there could be no hope of His ever returning to them. Their returning to Him, though He does not say that here, would be, when it happened, an evidence that He had already returned to them! Nevertheless, it was only in the way of their returning that they would experience again His favor and blessing. As long as they continued hardhearted and impenitent, their experience would be that He was far off as a God of mercy and love, and near only in wrath and judgment.

Of this relationship between our returning to God and our experience of His lovingkindness the Canons of Dordt speak beautifully. In explaining the sins of God's people the Canons say:

By such enormous sins, however, they very highly offend God, incur a deadly guilt, grieve the Holy Spirit, interrupt the exercise of faith, very grievously wound their own consciences, and sometimes lose the sense of God's favor for a time, until, on their returning into the right way of serious repentance, the light of God's fatherly countenance again shines upon them (V, 5).

In showing that repentance is always a work of God the Canons say that He:

...by His Word and Spirit, certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek

and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator, may again experience the favor of a reconciled God, through faith adore His mercies, and henceforward more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling (V, 7).

That is the great incentive to repentance—the knowledge that God receives and blesses those who are sorry for their sins. That He always forgives them and never turns away His face from the tears of those who weep for their sins assures us that “though we oft have sinned against him, yet his love and grace abide.” There is, however, no mercy for those who continue to say, “Wherein shall we return?”

As you can read in the transcription, Andy's interpretation is quite different. The way he explains it seems to me to be an entirely new theology and a redefining of terms.

“ordinances” = “preaching of the gospel”
 “command of the gospel (repent)” = “law”
 response of faith to the command = do nothing, else
 you are justifying yourself by works

I would appreciate your thoughts on this, if you would.
 In Christ,
 Terry Dykstra

Professor Engelsma to Terry Dykstra, June 14, 2021

Dear Terry,

The error of the sermon is that it does away with the call of God to us to return. This call is serious, permits the errant child of God or church to respond, “I cannot and need not return,” which is to do away with the call itself. When God says to us, “return!” He is serious. We must return, must actively return. And His call itself works in us the returning. In the way of our actual, and active, returning, which God effectually accomplishes by the exhortation, He then returns to us in our experience, which is a real returning on the part of God.

What Andy Lanning has forgotten is that he needs the church, as the church does not need him. The church keeps us from going off on our own, as though knowledge of the truth is our invention. “I am the theologian, and wisdom concerning the Word of God is born with me” thinks an Andy Lanning. He is going to ruin himself and destroy those who are attached to him. Everything about this—the loss of him, the loss of his flock, and their ruin—is unutterable grief.

Notice distinctly that he himself deliberately rejects the entire Reformed tradition regarding the meaning of “return to me, and I will return to you.”

Not to be overlooked is that his peculiar interpretation of the Malachi passage is the denial of spiritual activity on the part of the believer. When God says “return,” He does not mean “return,” but He means “do nothing, but keep on falling; I will catch you apart from your returning.” This is ominous for a theology. It turns the gospel of grace into a denial that God works in us to will and to do (Phil. 2). I do not recognize this message as the Reformed faith in which I have been brought up from childhood, which I have preached and taught for many years, and which I have learned in all my study. Although it presents itself as a praise of grace, in opposition to Arminian praise of the will and works of man, it is no such thing. In fact, it disparages grace. Grace is so wonderful that it not only consists of God’s catching us when we are falling, but also teaches that God works in us to return when we stray. God not only is serious when He says to us, “return,” but also effects our active returning.

When Andy denies this, in the interests, he thinks of grace, he shows himself to be advancing beyond and contrary to the Reformed creeds. He is developing a new religion. I refer to the Canons of Dordt, 3&4, Articles 11ff. God saves us in such a way that we actively bring forth the fruits of good actions (including “returning to God when we stray—DEJ), that we do actively believe (which includes repenting and returning—DJE), that we are not treated as senseless stocks and blocks, and that does not exclude or subvert the use of the gospel (which includes the admonition, “return to me—DJE).

IN addition to all the grief referred to above, there is also the verification of the charge of our foes that the theology of the PRC is at its heart the rejection of the saving work of God *in us* and of the place of exhortation in the preaching.

I mourn for the reasons referred to above and more.
Cordially in Christ,
Prof. Engelsma

Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum, June 14, 2021

Dear Family,

With Terry’s permission, I forward my recent correspondence with him about a sermon of Andy Lanning to all of you. I especially want all of you to read my response to Terry Dykstra. But you cannot make sense of my reply to him without knowledge of the sermon that Terry asked about. I have read the complete transcript of the sermon. I know therefore what I am critiquing.

I should have added in my reply to Terry, what I add to you, that in the interests of his novel interpretation of Malachi, Andy deliberately changed the figure of the text. This is both wrong and significant. He changed Judah’s spiritual condition from a straying to a falling. The text has God’s call as “return,” not as “stop falling.” This change serves the interest of Andy which was to make the call a “do not be active.” Obviously, one who is falling cannot be called to reverse the fall. He cannot stop falling, as he can be called by God to stop wandering, even by the grace of God.

But we may not change the word of God to serve our peculiar theological interests.

The text has a departing church or believer turning their back on and straying from God. The call is “return.” And by the powerful call the church or believer returns, not stop falling and begin ascending.

Be faithful to the text, also in the figure it uses!

I might have added in my response to Terry also that the novel, and erroneous, explanation of the Malachi passage brought back a memory to me. In South Holland there was a member whose theology not only had no place for the work of God within the elect and therefore no place for exhortations, but also objected to admonitions and the activity of the believer. I preached once on James 4:8: “Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.” I explained the exhortation as God’s will to draw nigh to us in our experience in the way of causing us to draw nigh to him, that is, in the way of our believing. This is the explanation that Andy rejects. At this sermon, the member I have referred to objected, with apoplexy. There is no drawing nigh to God on our part, only His drawing nigh to us. If there is a drawing nigh on our part, in no sense is our drawing nigh first. He tried to have me condemned as a heretic. He failed because the consistory viewed the text as it stands, as even an idiot can understand it. 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. One may deny it for good reasons in his own thinking. But he is denying the Word of God as really as one does who denies the truth of Genesis 1. One may exalt his unique explanation, that does away with the text, as the highest orthodoxy. But he denies the Word of God. And he gets in the way of the congregation’s obeying the command of God in the text. That is, he interferes with God’s drawing nigh to the church and its members. I dare not do this, even in the interests of “orthodoxy.”

Blessings.
Love,
Dad

**Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum
and Terry Dykstra, June 16, 2021**

Family and Terry,

In response to a question by Terry, I recently referred to an incident in my ministry in South Holland. The incident concerned my sermon on James 4:8, “draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh to you.” A member of the church, who considered himself the most orthodox member of the congregation and probably of the denomination, if not of the catholic church of all time, objected to my sermon because I did justice to the obvious truth that there is a sense—one, specific and very important sense—in which our drawing nigh to God, in the language of the text, precedes God’s drawing nigh to us and in which sermon I vehemently exhorted the congregation, including the ultra-orthodox member, to draw nigh to God. I thought then, and remain convinced, that this ultra orthodox member needed more than most of the others to hear and heed the exhortation. Proud church members need, more than any other, to draw nigh in the humility of true faith to God.

In any case a member of the new church, the Reformed Protestant Church, severely reprimanded me for the e-mail that I sent to Terry and to my family. Evidently, my e-mail gets around. She had two objections. The first and most serious was that by doing justice to the text’s having our drawing nigh to God precede God’s drawing nigh to us I was denying the gospel of salvation by grace. The second objection was to my stating that even an “idiot” can understand that in James 4:8 our drawing nigh to God precedes, in a certain, specific sense, God’s drawing nigh to us. As for my use of the word, “idiot,” consider that I distinctly was referring to the understanding of James 4:8, which was challenged in South Holland in the early 1980s. My point was that the right understanding of James 4:8, as I gave it in my sermon long ago, is clear to any believer with a modicum of mental ability. Even one who is “mentally challenged” can understand James to be teaching that it is our solemn, serious calling to draw nigh to God; that in a certain sense our drawing nigh to God precedes God’s drawing nigh to us; and that it is not Christian orthodoxy to deny our serious calling or that in a certain sense our drawing nigh to God precedes His drawing nigh to us. One may ask *how* our drawing nigh precedes God’s drawing nigh to us. But she may not wrest Scripture by denying it. A believing “idiot” can understand the clear teaching of the text. One who denies the explanation of the text as I have given it above does not deny it

There is a vitally important sense in which, in our salvation, our drawing nigh to God precedes God’s drawing nigh to us...this sense has to do with our experience of salvation.

because the text is unclear, even to one who is “mentally challenged,” but because she deliberately closes her eyes to the clear teaching. And this is serious all by itself, very serious as is all setting aside the clear and important teaching of the Bible.

Then, there was her accusation that my explanation of James 4:8 was a corruption of the gospel of grace, exactly the charge against me in South Holland by the ultra-orthodox member of the South Holland Church. I did not run scared at that charge then, and I am less inclined to do so today. The perfectly orthodox explanation of James 4:8 and of similar passages of the Bible is as follows. 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. Is this not an important aspect of our salvation—the enjoyment of it? Third, this is not departure from, or contradiction of, salvation’s being gracious, because, as I carefully explained in my sermon in South Holland, and repeat here, God’s call to us in James 4:8, “draw nigh to me,” is His efficacious call to the elect,

that effectually draws him to Himself. By the call God savingly draws us to Himself so that we can and do experience His nearness to us. The call, “draw nigh,” is an aspect of His saving work, without which His drawing nigh to us in election and in the cross would be unknown to us. God does not only will our salvation; He wills also our experience of our salvation.

My antagonistic friend in the RPC was quick to charge my doing justice to the exhortation in James 4:8 as departure from grace. When I carefully explained to her what I am setting forth here, her response was, “I believe salvation by grace,” unkindly implying that I do not. But this response, of course, is no explanation of James 4:8. In fact, this thinking sets aside all the exhortations and admonitions of Scripture as opposition to the gospel of grace. Does the first table of the law in Exodus 20 call us not to take God’s name in vain, with the warning that God does not hold him guiltless who does take His name in vain? Somehow deny the reality of the command and deny the warning, because “I believe the gospel of grace.”

Does Hebrews 10:22ff. exhort us to draw nigh to God in His church with a true heart in full assurance of faith, adding the warning that if we sin willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth there remains no more sacrifice for sins? Orthodox Reformed believers ought to deny that the exhortation and admonition come to believers seriously as the Word of God that is to be taken seriously and obeyed, because “I believe the gospel of grace.”

In fact, one who denies James 4:8 is not believing and confessing the gospel of grace. The gospel of grace includes that God works savingly *in* us, so as to draw us to Himself and that He uses the exhortations and admonitions of the Bible to do so. There is no excuse for a Reformed church member to have trouble with this aspect of salvation. The Canons of Dordt in 5.14 confesses that God uses the exhortations and threatenings of His Word to save us. Grace does not deny admonitions, but uses them. Grace does not deny the call to draw nigh to God, but gives the effectual call. It is the one who denies admonitions who denies an important aspect of grace. The minister who cannot exhort his flock, including the belligerent ultra-orthodox member, to draw nigh to God, adding the promise that in this way it pleases God to draw nigh to them, must not flatter himself that he is the outstanding herald of grace. He strips the gospel of a vitally important aspect of its wonderful work and blocks the way as far as he is able to God’s drawing nigh to His people.

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

Cordially in Christ,
Dad and Prof. Engelsma

Matthew Overway to Professor Engelsma, June 16, 2021

Dear Professor Engelsma,

I am writing to you because of your letters to Terry Dykstra and your family regarding Reverend Lanning’s sermon on Malachi 3:7. I know those letters were not addressed to me personally, and so I was not necessarily the originally intended audience. However, those letters have made the rounds in the public domain. As such, I believe they deserve a public response.

I must say I am quite surprised by your lack of charity toward Reverend Lanning. You claim that Reverend Lanning thinks the church needs him, that he is “the theolo-

gian, and wisdom concerning the Word of God is born with me.” You know Reverend Lanning, and you know that is not who he is or what he thinks of himself. You also know that every reformer of the church has been accused of that same thing. Athanasius stood against the whole church world. So did Luther. The examples could be expounded. These accusations were hurled against them as well. Shall you also now join in the chorus of the Pharisees, Pelagius, Erasmus, Rome, and all the others who have said the same thing against the Lord’s servants?

I am also surprised at how you speak of Reverend Lanning as if he were your enemy, when you have a letter before synod asking the PRC to reconcile with him and the Reformed Protestant Churches. I will remind you of James 1:8: “A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.” Anyone who is serious about reconciling does not speak this way about the one with whom he is trying to reconcile.

I am also disappointed in your pettiness. I have seen the Facebook trolls call Reverend Lanning “Andy,” but I thought better of you. He is a minister of the word of God in a church of Jesus Christ. He has been called by this church and is watched over by his elders. Whatever you call Reverend Lanning is really of no import, but it is interesting to see the fulfillment of Christ’s words in John 15:20: “Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.” At the cross of Jesus, the Pharisees argued with Pilate about Jesus’ superscription. They wanted to take away his title, “The King of the Jews,” to “He said he was the king of the Jews” in order to discredit and disparage Christ. It is not surprising then that since they tried to take away the title of our Lord, so too they will try to take away the title of his servants in order to belittle and demean their office. It is a shame that you also partook in this persecution.

The above things are just superficial and irrelevant. The real issue is what you say regarding Reverend Lanning’s teaching. You claim that Reverend Lanning’s error is that he does away with the call and command to return unto the Lord. If this claim of yours was not so serious, it would be laughable. The man who was deposed from office in part for calling his church and denomination to repentance, to return to the Lord, is actually the one who does away with the call to repent? I believe you are seriously mistaken and that you have been a false witness against your neighbor.

I cannot just make this charge against you, however. I am duty bound to follow the way of Deuteronomy 19:16–19:

If a false witness rise up against any man to testify against him that which is wrong; then both the men, between whom the controversy is, shall

stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges, which shall be in those days; and the judges shall make diligent inquisition: and, behold, if the witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely against his brother; then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his brother: so shalt thou put the evil away from among you.

I must diligently make inquisition of the sermon to see if your accusation stands. If it does not, then you are a false witness and have the calling to repent.

Throughout the sermon it was emphasized that the call to return must be issued from the pulpit repeatedly and urgently.

The church of the Lord Jesus Christ must constantly hear that call, "Return." She must constantly hear that call "Return" because she is constantly, according to herself, tempted to depart. And according to her old man, she is departing...His call to his church is "Return." That call to return is a call to repentance. It is a call to see the departure, to acknowledge it, and to hate it. It is a call to leave that departure forthwith, as fast as we can, and return unto the truth of Jehovah. That's the call to return: see that departure, acknowledge it, hate it, and come back to me. It's a call to repentance.

And that is a *necessary* call when the church is departing. The call to return must be made. It must be made forcefully and sharply and without letting up on it. "Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts."

Your charge that Reverend Lanning does away with the call to repent cannot be based on the body of the sermon itself. He issued that call seriously and fervently to the congregation in this sermon.

However, you do not base your claim on anything that was actually said but upon your own interpretation and understanding of what Reverend Lanning means to teach by his sermon. You claim that the sermon denies spiritual activity on the part of the believer, such that Reverend Lanning means to teach "do nothing, but keep on falling; I will catch you apart from your returning." I encourage you to read the sermon again. It was never said "do nothing" in response to this call. It was never said to just "keep on falling" in your sin. Your characterization of what was taught is born of your own imagination.

One way you can tell a man is a false witness is that he provides no evidence for his accusations. Another way that you can see a false witness is that he takes the words of the accused and twists them to his own devices and meaning. You see both of these things with the false witnesses at Je-

sus' trial. They had no evidence, and the evidence they did present was a wicked twisting of what Jesus actually said. The entirety of your letter presents no evidence for your claims. You cite no quotations from the sermon to substantiate your claims. You prove nothing but only assert your own thoughts. Not only do you provide no quotations, but what you do present in your letter in quotation marks are your own misunderstandings and twisting of what was said.

What was taught in the sermon was that when we as individuals or as churches depart from the Lord by departing from his ordinances, the Lord presents to us the demand to repent and return unto him. This call to repent is a serious calling that we must obey. It is a call that we must stop departing from Jehovah and return unto him. The sermon says, "And that call must be made because the church that is departing must be broken from her departure. She must not be allowed to continue tolerating it." The sermon does not teach to "do nothing." This is a call to do something. It is a call to break from our departure and not allow ourselves to continue in it.

And again the sermon instructs us, "You and I know that this rebuke is for us. We must heed that rebuke this morning." To heed a rebuke means to obey it, to do what that rebuke calls us to do. This is not a calling to "do nothing." It is a calling to obey and to do what God calls us to do.

What was said in the sermon about the believer's activity was this:

What does a church look like that understands the truth of the word of God and that gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ? What's her response to the corruption of the ordinances? Her response is that she keeps those ordinances. It's intolerable for her that those ordinances be corrupted; that the preaching of the gospel have mixed in it filth that takes away from the glory of God, that takes away from the righteousness of Christ. She won't tolerate that. She says about those ordinances, "We must keep them. We want to keep them, guard them, preserve them pure without any mixture of that wretched lie."

The believer keeps, guards, and preserves the purity of doctrine in the church. They are active in this work. This was the confession of the sermon regarding the activity of the believer.

However, the point of the sermon was not just to teach us what we must do, but also what we can do, and that in our own strength. *Can we repent and return of our own strength?* That was the question and burden of the last part of the sermon. The sermon teaches

that law as it thunders upon us, "Return unto me," exposes us as being *unable in ourselves*. That's the

function of that call; that's the function of that command, that law of God in the text, "Return unto me."...When the child of God hears the call that way, that call drives home to him, "I cannot. I cannot. That's my sin. That's my weakness; that's my depravity. That's my hopelessness *in myself*. I cannot. All I can do *of my own* is plummet and be destroyed."

And that's the confession that the church makes when that call comes to us, "Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts."...All we can do is plummet and realize we cannot *in ourselves* return unto him.

What was taught here is in perfect harmony with Belgic Confession, article 14:

Therefore we reject all that is taught repugnant to this concerning the free will of man, since man is but a slave to sin, and has nothing of himself, unless it is given from heaven. For who may presume to boast that he of himself can do any good, since Christ saith, *No man can come to Me except the Father, which hath sent Me, draw him?...* In short, who dare suggest any thought, since he knows that *we are not sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves, but that our sufficiency is of God?* And therefore what the apostle saith ought justly to be held sure and firm, that *God worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure*. For there is no will nor understanding conformable to the divine will and understanding but what Christ hath wrought in man, which He teaches us when He saith, *Without Me ye can do nothing*.

As well as Canons 5.8:

Thus, it is not in consequence of their own merits or strength, but of God's free mercy, that they do not totally fall from faith and grace, nor continue and perish finally in their backslidings; which with respect to themselves is not only possible, but would undoubtedly happen; but with respect to God, it is utterly impossible.

Because of what was taught in the sermon, you say Reverend Lanning "denies" that God by his grace works in us to return when we stray. Really? Reverend Lanning in this sermon "**denies**" that God works in us the returning when we stray? This is a baseless accusation. It is not grounded in what was actually said, nor is it an honest evaluation of the implications of what was said.

What was taught in the sermon was this:

There is only one hope for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is only one hope for those who

have departed, who are called by God to return. And that one hope is not that we somehow arrest our fall into destruction and turn around and go to Jehovah, but that "the LORD of hosts" comes down to us and takes hold of us by the power of his sovereign grace and takes hold of us in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as that gospel is proclaimed and as that gospel was pictured in the sprinkling of the water in the sacrament of baptism; that Jehovah God by that gospel gives to us Christ, gives to us his righteousness, imputes it as ours; that Jehovah saves us from hell and destruction and sin and death by his only begotten Son. That's what he did when he sent the Lord Jesus Christ in our flesh. There we were, plummeting into destruction, and Jehovah came down, came down, sending his only begotten Son to take hold of us to save us from all our sin. That's the hope, the one hope of the church of Jesus Christ. And that's the hope that Jehovah declares to this his people.

To be saved from our sin means to be justified and sanctified. This is what the gospel and specifically the sacrament of baptism teaches us. Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 26: "What is it to be washed with the blood and Spirit of Christ? It is to receive of God the remission of sins freely...and also to be renewed by the Holy Ghost, and sanctified to be members of Christ." This is what it means to be taken hold of by the power of God's sovereign grace in the gospel, as symbolized in the sacrament of baptism, and to be given Christ, such that he saves us from all our sins.

Contrary to what you say, that Reverend Lanning is "advancing beyond and contrary to the Reformed creeds" and that "he is developing a new religion," this sermon faithfully taught the calling placed before the believer to repent. It demanded that we actively and consciously turn from our sins and return unto God. It also showed us our inability to obey that command in and of ourselves. And it brought the comfort and glory of the gospel that salvation is of the Lord, so that by him and through him and to him be all the glory and praise and honor.

It is my prayer that you see the error of your accusations, that you see them as unjust and a false witness before men and before the Judge of heaven and earth. It is my prayer that the Lord work repentance in your heart for what you have done and that you repent before God and man of your sins.

Your brother and spiritual son in Christ,
Matthew Overway

DOES MAN PRECEDE GOD?

Introduction

I would like to begin tonight by noting that these are wonderful, wonderful days in which we are living. And the Lord is being very good to us, very good to his people, good to his church. And the wonder of these days is that there are so many things happening we can hardly keep up with them, so that one day one email goes out, the next day another email goes out, and the next week it happens again. There are so many things for us to study, so many things for us to learn. And that is a wonderful thing for the church. Imagine if there were nothing for us to learn now, if there were no interest whatsoever in the things of the kingdom of heaven. What a dry and barren life that would be. God is being good to us in giving us many, many things to study.

And he is being good to us in making these wonderful days in the building of his church. And that building of his church is remarkable when we consider all of the things that the church has to face. We are really standing in the middle of a hurricane, and that hurricane blows this way and that way upon us. And what are we? We are a bunch of leaves sitting in our pews or standing in our pulpits and would undoubtedly be swept away before the gale force of that hurricane. And yet, here we are, and God continues to establish us upon the truth and upon his gospel.

So these are wonderful days, and whatever trial and affliction there may be in these days and whatever opprobrium and hatred and anger that you as the church bear in these days, remember that the church is built upon Christ, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her.

I would like to speak tonight *not* about personal matters, although there are personal matters that have been raised in this week and last week. The issue before us is entirely doctrinal. I do feel compelled to state that some of the things said about me I find absolutely abhorrent, not from this point of view, that someone would say them, but abhorrent from the point of view that I might be accused of those things. For example, thinking that the church needs me or forgetting that I need the church as the church does not need me. I tell you that I abhor the idea that the church needs me. I detest that idea. I don't believe that. The Lord could take me out with a heart arrhythmia tonight and lay me in the hospital and take my life. The church of Jesus Christ would be just fine,

and there would be hardly an interruption and hardly a hiccup in the life of the church because you are founded on Christ and not on any man, even the man who stands in the pulpit.

But that being said, the issues before us are not personal issues. The issues before us are strictly doctrinal, and the doctrinal issue before us *is* covenant fellowship. That is striking because that is what the subject of our prayer meetings has been about—the doctrine of covenant fellowship. That is really at heart what the entire controversy has been about—covenant fellowship and the all-important question, is covenant fellowship conditional, or is it unconditional?

That means that the doctrinal question before us tonight is very instructive for us. And it is instructive for us along these lines.

In the first place, the doctrinal issue of covenant fellowship shows the divide that exists between the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Reformed Protestant Churches. There is a divide. The divide is not persons. The divide is doctrine, and it is this doctrine of covenant fellowship. Is it conditional, or is it unconditional?

In the second place, this doctrinal issue shows the Reformed Protestant Churches to be Reformed according to the confessions and scripture. The position that we stake out in this controversy, including the emails of this week, the position that we stake out *is* the Reformed position. And it is the biblical faith.

Then in the third place, these doctrinal issues are instructive because they show the Protestant Reformed Churches to be departing and to be apostatizing. That is something that probably everyone who is gathered in this room tonight has already seen. And perhaps those who are listening online are still wondering about that. But the doctrinal issues tonight show that the Protestant Reformed Churches are indeed departing; and, in fact, departing not only from the Reformed faith but departing from their own history and their own legacy—departing from things that Herman Hoeksema said.

And so, we welcome this controversy. We welcome emails and opportunities to speak to these matters.

The Call or Command in Malachi 3:7

The passage around which these emails center is Malachi 3:7. I would like to read that verse for us tonight, a verse that was preached a couple of weeks ago in this

congregation—Malachi 3:7. God’s word to Israel: “Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return?”

As we look at this text, we see that there is indeed a call or a command in this text. And that is what the controversy in the emails centers around. It is the call or the command of the text. That call of the text is this: “Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts.” Or that command or call can be summarized in one word: “Return.” That word “Return” means repent. That word “Return” was spoken to Israel in the midst of her departing, of her apostatizing. That word is spoken to a nation that had gone away. That is God’s accusation in verse 7: “Ye are gone away from mine ordinances.” And to the church that is going away and has gone away, God says, “Return.”

And the church had not gone away recently. She had gone away a long time ago. She had gone away in the days of her fathers. Her fathers were the first to go away, and Israel had continued in that going away: “Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them.” To that long-departing church the call, the command, of the text comes, “Return.” Therefore, that is a call to the church, “Repent.” Or it is a call to the church, “Be converted,” which means return or turn around. It is a call to the church, “In that direction you are going, you are sinning. You must turn around from that direction and return unto me.”

That is what this issue is about. It is about that call or that command of the text to return.

Whether you term that a *call* or a *command* makes no difference. It is an imperative verb, so that we can call it a *command*, “Return.” Or we could term it a *call*, “Return.” The issue is not whether we term it a *call* or a *command*.

The issue is, what does it mean when Jehovah God calls or commands his church to return in this text?

Two Kinds of Scriptural Calls

Now in order to understand that call or command of the text, “Return,” we must see that there are two kinds of calls in scripture. There are two kinds of commands in scripture. There is, on the one hand, the call of the gospel or the command of the gospel. And on the other hand, there is the call of the law or the command of the law. Two different calls or commands in scripture, so that we are dealing here with a distinction between the law and the gospel. And these two calls—the call of the gospel, on the one hand, and the call of the law, on the other hand—are as different as night and day. The call of the gospel is *not* the call of the law. And the command of the law is *not* the command of the gospel. They are not

the same thing, and they must be sharply and clearly distinguished.

The call of the gospel then is the call, “Repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” That is the call of the gospel. You will find that call, for example, in Acts 16:30–31. When the Philippian jailor—who had just seen the earthquake of the Lord’s presence and was about to kill himself and was stopped by the apostle Paul—said to Paul, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” and Paul’s answer was, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house,” that’s the call of the gospel.

Or that call of the gospel was issued by Peter at the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), when the men said to Peter after he had accused them, “You have crucified Jesus Christ. You have taken him by your wicked hands and slain him.” And they cried out to Peter, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” And Peter’s answer was the call of the gospel: “Repent, and be baptized...for the remission of sins...for the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” [vv. 37–39]. “Repent, and be baptized...for the remission of sins.” That’s the call of the gospel.

The call of the law, on the other hand, is what we might call the ten commandments or the many other commandments in scripture. The call of the law is, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy mind, and with all thy soul, and thy neighbor as thyself.” And the call of the law is, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” The call of the law is, “Thou shalt not kill.” All of that is the call of the law. It is the commandment of God.

And that call of the law is found in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, just as the call of the gospel is found in the Old Testament and the New Testament. The call of the law is also found in Luke 10:28, where Jesus said, “Do this, and thou shalt live.” Do this, and thou shalt live. That’s the call of the law or the command of the law.

There is a call of the gospel. That is one thing: “Repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” And there is a command or a call of the law, which is another thing: “Do this, and thou shalt live.”

Distinctions between the Two Calls

There are very important distinctions between those two calls.

Essence

In the first place, the distinction between the call of the gospel and the call of the law is that they have a different essence. They have a different object. The heart and meaning of the call is different between the law and

the gospel. The call of the gospel has as its essence Jesus Christ. He is the meaning of that call. When Paul said to the Philippian jailor, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved,” the essence of that call is Christ. That was the object that Paul brought the Philippian jailor’s attention to. And when Peter issued the call in Acts 2, “Repent, and be baptized...for the remission of sins,” it was Jesus Christ that was the essence of that call, as Jesus Christ is portrayed in baptism and as Jesus’ blood covers and remits our sins. The essence of the call of the gospel is Jesus Christ and him alone.

The fact that there is also an imperative verb, *believe* in the Lord Jesus Christ, does not mean that the essence of the call of the gospel is what man must do. The essence of the call of the gospel is *not* man—not man at all but Jesus Christ and him alone.

The call of the law, on the other hand, has as its essence man and what man must do. That call of the law is found in the word *thou*. *Thou* shalt not have any other gods before me. *Thou* shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. *You* do this, and you shall live. The essence of the call and command of the law is the *thou*, or man. The essence of the call, then, is man’s working and man’s doing. The essence of the call of the law, that is, is man’s working and man’s doing.

That is a sharp difference. That is an essential difference between the call of the gospel, on the one hand, and the call of the law, on the other. They have a different essence or a different object.

Activity

In the second place, the distinction between the call of the gospel and the call of the law is activity. The activity of the call of the gospel is faith: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” Or in Acts 2: “Be baptized...for the remission of sins,” which baptism was received by a believer, who believed the things of the gospel and believed in Jesus Christ. The activity of the call of the gospel is believing.

The activity of the call of the law is doing or working or obeying. Working is what the law calls for. “Thou shalt have no other gods.” That’s the work you are called to do. Do not trust in and worship some other god than me. That is your work. “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” That’s your work and the activity that you’re called to do.

The distinction between the call of the law and the call of the gospel is found in the activity. And that is a huge distinction because the activity of faith is exactly opposite of the activity of work. They are both activity. No one maintains that faith is not an activity. Faith is an activity, as obeying the law is an activity, but they are activities that are entirely distinct from each other. In fact, they are the exact opposite of each other because the meaning of “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ” is that there is

nothing for you to do for your salvation. That is what faith is. Faith is *not* a doing for one’s salvation. Faith is *not* a working for one’s salvation. But faith is a receiving and a trusting and a resting. That’s all faith is.

God designed faith to be that, to be that receiving and resting. God designed that activity to be the opposite of working. And he designed it to be that so that when a man is saved and receives all of his salvation by faith and by faith alone, then that man can never turn around and say to God, “But I may boast because I have done something after all. I have done this thing of believing after all.” The child of God is saved by faith, and God makes it that way that no man may boast (Eph. 2:8–9) and that all of the glory must go to Jehovah God.

That is a huge distinction between the call of the gospel and the call of the law. The activity of the one is faith, and the activity of the other is a diligent working in obedience to the law.

Power

The third distinction between the call of the gospel and the call of the law is that they have a different power. The call of the gospel has power, and the call of the law has power. But the power of those two is different.

The power of the call of the gospel is salvation. When the call of the gospel is made, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house,” a man is saved by that call. Romans 1:16: “I am not ashamed of the gospel of [Jesus] Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” God himself descends in that call of the gospel. God himself takes hold of a man in his own heart by that gospel, and Jehovah God by the word and Spirit of Jesus Christ saves a man by that gospel. He gives that man Jesus Christ by that gospel and gives that man all of his salvation by that gospel. The gospel is “the power of God unto salvation.” That is the power of the call of the gospel.

The power of the law is *not* salvation. The law will never save a man. It never will. The law was not meant to save a man. It never was. God did not give the law to man and the command of the law to man so that man by his keeping of that law could be saved by it. The law’s power is not salvation in any respect.

When it is time for you to do a good work, the power to do that good work does not come from the law. Not only is the law powerless to save when it comes to the forgiveness of my sins, but the law is powerless to save when it comes to my obeying the law itself. God does not command, “Thou shalt have no other gods,” and that command itself gives you power to have no other gods. That is not the power of the law.

The law has power, but in no sense is the power of the law to save.

The power of the law, rather, is the power to expose sin. The power of the law is to convict a man that he is a sinner and expose a man in his iniquity. Romans 3:20: "By the law is the knowledge of sin." That is the power of the law, and that is some power! When the law is preached to you, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, mind, soul, and strength," that law is like a mirror to you and to me. And when we look at ourselves in that mirror and we see that what is required is perfection—"Love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength"—the reflection that that law casts back to us is corruption. "Love God with all thy heart!" I didn't. "Love God with all thy mind!" I didn't. "And thy strength and thy soul!" And I didn't. That is the power of the law, and that is great power, so that when the law says to us on a Sunday morning, "Thou shalt not kill," the power of that law is to tell you, "You are a murderer." And when the law says to you, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," the power of that law is to tell you, "You are an adulterer." That is the power of the law. By the law is the knowledge of sin.

The call of the gospel saves. The call of the law does not save but exposes sin.

Another Use of the Law

There is another use of the law that does not enter into the discussion here. But just to mention that use so that no one might accuse us of overlooking that use, there is another use of the law: to be the rule and the standard and the guide of the Christian's life. That is, when it comes time for me by the power of the gospel to bring forth fruit of good works unto God, the law tells me what those good works must be. The law tells me how I am to show my gratitude to God.

The whole matter of fruit bearing for the Christian—doing good works, that is—the whole matter of fruit bearing or doing good works can be compared to a grapevine. That grapevine is planted in the ground, and it has a root. It has a vine, and it has all these branches. And these branches are to bear fruit. If that grapevine is left to itself, so that it tumbles over hill and dale, then it will put all of its energy into the expanding of those vines and will not bear good fruit. But when that grapevine is trained up along a trellis and pruned regularly, that grapevine will bear fruit. The power of fruit bearing is the root. That is Jesus Christ. That is the gospel. That fruit is borne by faith, which is the graft of each branch to the vine, so that each branch by faith in Christ bears its fruit. The trellis is the law. It is a dead trellis. That trellis does not give any life to the vine whatsoever. That trellis does not produce a single piece of fruit on the vine or on the branches, but that trellis is the rule, standard, and guide for which way the branches are to grow. That is the other use of the law.

But all of the power of that fruit bearing, and all the life of those branches, is from the root and from the vine and not from the law.

We have seen so far the distinction between the call of the law and the call of the gospel. There is the distinction in essence: one shows us Christ; one shows us us. The second distinction is the activity: one calls for faith; one calls for work. And there is a different power: one is the power of salvation; one is the power to expose sin.

How Are We Saved?

And now the issue in the law and the gospel is this: how are you saved? From which of those does your salvation come? From the law or from the gospel? Are you saved by your law keeping according to the command of the law, or are you saved by Jesus' law keeping according to the command of the gospel?

And the *obvious* answer is that we are not saved by the law. We are saved by the gospel. And that is captured in Romans 6:14: "Ye are not under the law, but under grace." Your way to heaven is not through that iron dome of the law, which constantly thunders down to you, "Do this. Do this, and thou shalt live." There is no way to heaven for you if you are under the law. But being under grace, under the gospel—which proclaims Jesus Christ and him crucified, Jesus Christ in all his perfection and all of his perfect obedience to the law, for he was under the law, made of a woman, made under the law, and he obeyed it and went right to heaven through it—that gospel that you are under, that grace that you are under, is God's work of reaching down, taking hold of you, taking you through Christ and his cross of grace right into heaven. That is the issue. Are you saved by that law, or are you saved by the grace of the gospel? "Ye are not under the law, but under grace."

This whole teaching is *not* a new religion, as has been charged. This teaching that the call of the law does not save but only exposes my sin is *not* a new religion. It is the religion of Jehovah God. It is the religion of the scriptures. This is God's teaching in Romans 8. At the beginning of the chapter, Romans 8:3: "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh." God's own word is that the law cannot save. It could not do it, and it was no fault of the law. It is your fault, and it is my fault, that the law cannot save. That law is weak through the flesh. We are fallen in Adam and are unable to keep that law. Even as regenerated Christians we are unable to keep that law perfectly so that by that law we could be saved. The law is weak through the flesh and could not save us. What the law could not do, that God did by the sending of his own Son in the flesh and for

sin—condemned sin in the flesh of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is your salvation: the Son of God, not the law.

This teaching is also confessional: explicitly, shockingly confessional, unmistakably confessional. Lord's Day 2 of the Heidelberg Catechism, question and answer 3: "Whence knowest thou thy misery? Out of the law of God." This is its power, after all. That power of the law is to make me know my misery, to make me know my sin, to make me see I cannot do what the law commands me to do. "Whence knowest thou thy misery? Out of the law of God."

Then a couple of pages later, in question and answer 19: Whence knowest thou thy salvation? Or as it is worded here: "Whence knowest thou this," that is, Jesus Christ the mediator? Whence knowest thou Jesus Christ? "From the holy gospel." From the holy gospel. That is how I know my salvation.

That law and that gospel are different. They are distinct. Then the Canons of Dordt, heads 3 and 4, articles 5 and 6:

Article 5. In the same light [the same light as man's mind and will, which cannot save him, just discussed in article 4. In the same light as man's powerless mind and will] are we to consider the law of the decalogue, delivered by God to His peculiar people, the Jews, by the hands of Moses. For though it discovers the greatness of sin [that is the power of the law: discovers the greatness of sin], and more and more convinces man thereof [that's the power of the law], yet as it neither points out a remedy [it doesn't say anything about Christ, doesn't say anything about my Savior. It only says something about me: "Thou shalt, and thou shalt not." As it neither points out a remedy] nor imparts strength to extricate him from misery [I cannot get strength to obey from the law. I need the law to show me my sin and to show me the rule of my gratitude, but I can never get strength from the law to obey. That comes from the gospel and comes from Christ. It does not impart strength to extricate him from his misery], and thus, being weak through the flesh, leaves the transgressor under the curse, man cannot by this law obtain saving grace.

Article 6. What therefore neither the light of nature nor the law could do, that God performs by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the Word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the glad tidings [the gospel] concerning the Messiah, by means whereof it hath pleased God to save such as believe, as well under the Old as under the New Testament.

That's the biblical, confessional distinction between the law and the gospel.

Exegesis of Malachi 3:7 regarding the Call

And now we face the exegetical question in Malachi 3:7: what is that call? What is it?

There is a call there. The call is "Return." Is that the call of the law or the call of the gospel?

My exegesis of that passage in the sermon a couple of weeks ago—which exegesis I maintain—my exegesis was that the call in Malachi 3:7 is the call of the law, the command of the law. That call "Return" is a bare call, a bare command, in this text. Sometimes, that call "Return," or "Repent," is indeed part of the call of the gospel. Acts 2, for example, when Peter said, "Repent, and be baptized...for the remission of sins." There is the call "Repent," or "Return."

It is possible that that call be a call of the gospel, so that it would be possible to have an orthodox, true explanation of Malachi 3:7 as the call of the gospel. But then that explanation would have to include in the word "Return" the call to faith and the call to believe, so that returning would not be repentance but repenting and believing. And then any suggestion that there is something that man does first and that God does second must be kept out of that text. It must be kept strictly out of it. If one is going to exegete Malachi 3:7 as the call of the gospel, that would be possible.

But my exegesis of Malachi 3:7 is also possible, and I believe preferable, and I believe correct. In the first place, there is no mention of the Savior in this call, "Return to me, and I will return to you, saith the LORD of hosts."

In the second place, there is no mention of faith. If one is going to find faith in Malachi 3:7, he must find it in the word "Return," where it is not automatically found. There is no explicit mention of faith.

In the third place, the text gives a bare command, "Return to me. Return." And I hear in that bare command the thundering of the law. "Thou shalt return. Thou shalt do this thing."

Then in the fourth place—and in my own judgment this was decisive for me—the ending of the verse shows what this call worked for Israel. It reveals that Israel's response to the call was hardness of heart. Israel's response was, "Wherein shall we return? You call us to return, to come back to you, God, but we never left you. Your call is nonsense. Your call is meaningless. We never left you. Wherein shall we return? What have we ever done wrong?" And I believe that that ending of the verse and the response of Israel is meant to illustrate the purpose and the point of the call, "Return," in Malachi 3:7. It is to illustrate to you, Israel, and to me, Israel, that when the call of the law comes

to us, “Return,” we will never do it. We will never do it by our own strength. We will never do it in obedience to that call by the power of that call. Our response will be a refusal like Israel by nature. When the call comes, “Return,” and we see how Israel responded, then we say, “But God, just like Israel cannot return on her own, neither can I. I cannot.” That call is meant to break me. It is meant to show me my inability and my unwillingness even to acknowledge my departure from the days of my fathers. That is the power of that call. That’s the command of the law.

And that explanation of the text is Reformed. That is not a new religion. That is Canons of Dordt, heads 3 and 4, articles 5 and 6. That is Romans 8:3. There is no threat to the Reformed faith but a faithful explanation of the Reformed faith in this call. And the importance of that call of the law is so that I see my only hope is outside of me. My only hope is in another, whom the Lord must provide. My only hope is that there is something other than “thou shalt return” that I may hear and by which I may be saved. And that something other than “thou shalt return” that I may hear is this: “Jesus Christ and him crucified.” It is this: “The messenger of the covenant, at the beginning of the chapter, whom I will send unto you and who shall come to his temple swiftly.” That is the other message, the message of the gospel. It is the message of God’s work in salvation by Jehovah God.

False Doctrine Proposed

If that were all this controversy were, that would be the end: whether we are going to exegete Malachi 3:7 as the call of the law or the call of the gospel. That would be the end of this. But that may not be the end of this because the explanation of Malachi 3:7 and like passages that has been proposed in the emails is false doctrine. It is the false doctrine of man’s salvation of himself.

And that false doctrine is evident in the insistence by the professor that there is a sense in which man’s work *precedes* God’s work.

In this whole matter of the call, mind you, and remember that the significance of the question of the call is, how are you going to be saved? Are you going to be saved by your obeying the law? Or are you going to be saved by Jesus’ gospel? That is the issue: how will you be saved? When the explanation then of the call is made, there is a sense, whatever sense that may be, in which man precedes God, that is false doctrine. That is salvation by the law.

In the emails there has been a repeated insistence on that fact. The original email that was sent out to many was a question from a member of the Protestant Reformed Churches to Professor Engelsma. The second email was the response of Professor Engelsma to that member of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

There was an additional email that was sent out after that by Professor Engelsma to a family forum. That email to the family forum, whether it was intended to be public or was not, left that family forum and has been emailed around, so that I received several copies from various members in my inbox. So I take that email to be public.

There was a third email that was sent out from Professor Engelsma to the family forum today. And in that email, which *is* intended to be public, there is a further explanation of that family email.

In those family emails, the teaching of the professor is this: “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.”

In the next email: “I did justice to the obvious truth that there is a sense—one, specific and very important sense—in which our drawing nigh to God, in the language of the text, precedes God’s drawing nigh to us.” Then again: “It is our solemn, serious calling to draw nigh to God.” Amen. We are all in agreement. It is a solemn, serious calling. This next part: “That in a certain sense our drawing nigh to God precedes God’s drawing nigh to us.” No! No! Then later in that same email:

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.

Then at the end of that email:

There is an important sense in which our drawing nigh to God, by the effectual allure of the promise that in this way God will graciously draw nigh to us (than which experience nothing is more precious), precedes God’s drawing nigh to us.

In these emails the professor is working with James 4:8: “Draw nigh to me, and I will draw nigh to you.” The professor, though he is working with that text, applies everything that he has to say about that text to Malachi 3:7. He sees them as the same thing. In Malachi 3:7, therefore, the teaching, according to the professor, is that in a certain sense our returning to God precedes his returning to us.

Now notice in which arena, or in which sense, this happens. The arena is man’s experience. The arena, or the sense, is man’s enjoyment of his salvation. It is his fellowship, his friendship, his communion with God. So

that in this controversy regarding Malachi 3:7, we are in that same arena that we have been in through most of this controversy: *covenant fellowship and man's experience of covenant fellowship and man's enjoyment of the salvation of God in that fellowship and communion with God*. That's the sense that the professor insists in which we draw nigh to God first, or return to God first, and then he returns to us. That is too far. That's too far.

It did not have to go that far. If he would have stopped with this: The call of the gospel is effectual and powerful, so that by that call of the gospel, effectual and powerful, God creates faith in the heart of the believer; and by that call of the gospel, God draws that believer to himself, so that by that faith the believer experiences all of the fellowship with God; we could all say, "Amen," and we could all go home from this controversy. But he did not stop there. He did not say, "God is first in every sense." But he said, "There is a very real and specific sense in which man is first." And that is a denial of the gospel.

The doctrine that man is first and God is second *is* conditional theology. It *is* conditional theology. Never mind how man gets to be first. Never mind whether man is first by his own innate power, as a Pelagius would have taught; or whether man is first by the grace of God that operates upon him to free him to choose by his will for God. Never mind where the power comes from. The moment man precedes God, that's conditional.

And I ask you to test that very simply. Have you ever in your life known the Reformed faith *ever* to teach man preceding God? Have you ever known it to teach man first, then God? I dare say every one of us recoils at that teaching and abhors that teaching.

And that teaching that man is first and God is second is essentially the teaching of *every* false doctrine in the realm of salvation from the beginning of the world until now. It is Pelagianism. It's Roman Catholicism. It is Arminianism. It is federal visionism. And whether one who teaches that wants to go into all of those things and be part of all of those things is not the question. We all know how vociferously the professor would deny Roman Catholicism and federal visionism, but the system he has set forth is essentially the same error as all of those. It is conditional salvation: man first, then God. And whatever arena you teach that in—whether it is the arena of receiving all of the blessings of salvation or covenant fellowship or experience or whatever it may be—when you have man preceding God, you have conditions.

This is instructive for us because it shows the divide between the Reformed Protestant Churches and our mother, the Protestant Reformed Churches. The Protestant Reformed Churches by their teaching—which by now is becoming a flood, and by the most prominent

men, whom we are bewildered to see espousing it—are teaching that in some specific, important sense man precedes God.

By God's grace the doctrine that we teach, and only by God's grace, is that God always, always, always precedes man.

The Protestant Reformed Churches have taught in a formula we could probably repeat in our sleep that God's covenant is unconditional in its establishment, in its maintenance, and in its perfection. It is *unconditional* in its establishment, in its maintenance, and in its perfection. But now the question is, what about in its experience, in its fellowship, in its enjoyment? Is it also unconditional there? And to put man before God *there* is to have conditions in the fellowship.

God Is Always First

This rejection and repudiation of that teaching does not in any way jeopardize the call of the gospel or the call of the law. The call of the gospel is serious, and the call of the law is serious. There is a *must* in the call.

This also does not jeopardize the teaching that man is active. Yes, man is active. He is a branch in the vine. How could he not be active? And man is active in the bringing forth of his good works, of his fruits. And he is active in seeing to it that those good works are brought forth according to the law that God has given him. He is active. There is no denial of that. And so all of the insistence that this, that, and the next article of the Canons has been violated is all beside the point. The point is not whether man is active. The point is not whether the call is serious. The point is this: is man before God or not? That is the point.

And what do the confessions teach about man before God or God before man? The confessions teach that it is through Christ alone, by faith alone, that we have these blessings from God. The Heidelberg Catechism, question and answer 37:

What dost thou understand by the words, "He suffered"?

That He, all the time that He lived on earth, but especially at the end of His life, sustained in body and soul the wrath of God against the sins of all mankind; that so by His passion, as the only propitiatory sacrifice, He might redeem our body and soul from everlasting damnation, and obtain for us the favor of God, righteousness and eternal life.

He obtained for us "the favor of God." And that cannot mean that he obtained for us the love of God for the first time, as if God did not love us and did not favor us, but then Christ died and God started to love

and favor us. That phrase, “obtain for us the favor of God,” must refer to experience. He obtained for us “the favor of God.” He obtained for us the knowledge and enjoyment of the favor of God in covenant fellowship with God. That is God first! That is God first all the way. That is God first through the cross of Jesus Christ, by which that favor, that experience of favor, was obtained. The confession in Lord’s Day 15 teaches this matter of God first.

Also in the Belgic Confession, article 24, which deals with our good works, we read at the end of that article:

Moreover, though we do good works, we do not found our salvation upon them; for we can do no work but what is polluted by our flesh, and also punishable; and although we could perform such works, still the remembrance of one sin is sufficient to make God reject them. Thus, then, we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences continually vexed, if they relied not on the merits of the suffering and death of our Savior.

That paragraph is obviously dealing with the experience of the child of God and his poor conscience, which would be continually vexed. When would his poor conscience be continually vexed? When would he never have the experience of his salvation and fellowship? If he founded his salvation, in any sense, if he founded his salvation upon those good works, upon his returning and upon his obeying and upon his doing all the things of the law. If the child of God says, “I must *first* do, and *then* I will have from God,” then the question that will plague him until he dies is, “Did I ever do enough? Did I ever do it?” His conscience would be continually vexed.

So also the Heidelberg Catechism, question and answer 30:

Do such then believe in Jesus the only Savior, who seek their salvation and welfare of saints, of themselves, or anywhere else?

They do not; for though they boast of Him in words, yet in deeds they deny Jesus the only deliverer and Savior; for one of these two things must be true, either that Jesus is not a complete Savior, or that they who by a true faith receive this Savior must find all things in Him necessary to their salvation.

Not only your “salvation” but your “welfare,” that is, your enjoyment and your experience, must be found by faith in Jesus Christ, the complete savior, alone, and not in

yourself and your obeying and your doing something first.

This matter of putting man first, even in the realm of experience, is fatal. And it is fatal because when we are in the realm of experience, we are in the realm of justification. Justification by faith alone is a matter for the realm of experience—justification by faith alone and the peace with God that we have by that justification.

And if a man insists that in this realm of experience then, and his peace with God, that man must be first in some obedience to the law first, then that man and all who follow that man are debtors to do the whole law without fail. That is Galatians 3:10: “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.” To teach that by the law, which we do first, God returns to us, which is second, is to put a man in debt to do the whole law, which law will curse him if he fails to obey one of its commandments.

We are dealing with justification by faith alone and the peace with God that the child of God has in that justification by faith alone.

Let me read to you the way the Protestant Reformed Churches sounded many decades ago. Herman Hoeksema:

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And that same Christ preached to him, “This you must do: Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.” That means, beloved, you must do nothing. Believe. Believe. Nothing. Do nothing but believe, believe, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.

Herman Hoeksema again:

Listen. We must believe? Oh, that’s true, but is that the gospel? Is that the gospel? *We* must believe? *We must* believe? If that were the gospel, beloved, that gospel could never be realized. I say once more: to be sure, we must believe. But there is no hope in that statement, and there is no salvation in that statement. Because if you only say that we must believe—which means, of course, that nobody has the right not to believe, and nobody has the right to be an unbeliever—then we are bound before God to believe. Yes, yes, yes. There is no hope in that. That is not the gospel.¹

That is the position that was taught in the Malachi 3:7 sermon and the position that the Reformed Protestant Churches stand for.

May God strengthen us to continue that witness, which is not to our glory but to his glory alone.

—AL

1 Herman Hoeksema, “The Calling of the Philippian Jailer,” sermon preached in Hull, Iowa, on July 5, 1953, https://oldpathsrecordings.com/wp-content/uploads/sermons/2020/09/04-The-Calling-of-the-Philippian-Jailer-7_5_53.mp3.

*Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum
and Terry Dykstra, June 17, 2021*

Dear Forum and Terry,

Someone has brought to my attention the lecture of Andy Lanning (hereafter AL) criticizing my e-mails explaining James 4 and by implication Malachi 3.

I attach this e-mail to an earlier e-mail of mine on the two biblical passages so that all who read this e-mail can easily check what I say in this e-mail against what I said along the same lines in the earlier e-mail, which AL condemns.

Before the requests come, I permit all of you to distribute this e-mail to whomever you please.

I will not stoop to retaliate the name-calling with name-calling of my own, or even to respond to the name-calling. I am determined to stick closely to the fundamental issues themselves. This is profitable. Besides, if I at this stage of my ministry, which has been public and open to all who are interested in this controversy, there are those who are open to AL's charges against me, nothing I now say could convince them otherwise. A "federal visionist"? A "Pelagian"? The very charges refute themselves.

The issue, as AL's handling of Malachi 3 and James 4 clearly shows, is whether there is a call of the gospel that effectually draws God's elect people to God—in a true and living faith—so that they experience that God draws nigh to them. The issue is not, as AL completely erroneously (whether by mistake or malice) presents it, whether man is first in any aspect of salvation, or whether God is first. As a matter of simple, plain fact, I did not write that in James 4 or in Malachi 3, "man is first." I wrote and explained that in the important matter of the experience of salvation, particularly on the part of the elect's having departed from God, God's first act, prior to giving us the assurance of His drawing nigh to us is that He draws us nigh to him. We draw nigh as the text in James 4 clearly states, by the effectual call of God (as I plainly stated in my e-mails), and in this way experience God's drawing nigh to us.

Question to AL: does he deny that God draws nigh to us in the way of His drawing us nigh to Himself, so that our drawing nigh to Him precedes our experience of His drawing nigh to Him? Does he deny what James 4 is teaching? What is his explanation of the clear doctrine of the text?

To present the faithful interpretation of James 4 as the heretical doctrine that man is first in some aspect of salvation is unworthy of a theological exegete. The truth is that God works in a certain order. In order to assure me that He is nigh me as my Savior God, which gives me the experience of His communion with me, He draws me to Himself, by the effectual call of the gospel. This drawing by God is the working in me of a true faith, that rests upon Jesus Christ. God is always first in salvation, but with regard to the assurance of salvation He works in the order of drawing me to Himself as the way to draw nigh to me.

To avoid this reality and promote his new theology, a theology that presents itself as more orthodox than that of the PRC from which AL has departed and which departure he must now justify, AL explains the call of Malachi 3, "return unto me," as merely a legal demand—the "law," intended to harden all those who come under the legal demand, not the gracious call of the gospel. Otherwise even

AL will have to acknowledge to his congregation that there is a sense in which our returning to God, by the effectual power of the grace of God in the call, precedes God's returning to us, who have gone astray. He denies that there is any grace or Christ in the call of Malachi 3. I therefore demolish AL's theology (I hope in his own understanding) when I now demonstrate that the call, "return," in Malachi 3, is not to

Presenting my thought as man's preceding God is sheer falsehood. The truth is...that our drawing nigh to God, by His effectual call, precedes God's drawing nigh to us in our experience.

the true Israel of God the law setting forth merely the duty of that Israel, with the purpose to harden, so that the response of Israel is not that they return, but that they harden themselves in their departure. Does AL claim that there is no grace or Christ in this call? The call of Malachi 3, as of James 4, is grace from beginning to end. It is drenched with the blood of the Savior. First, it reveals that it is the will of God that Israel, or Judah, return to Him. This is a gracious will, unless God has a will to save and be the God of the reprobate, who do not come to Him for salvation. God wills the return to Him of the Judah/Israel to whom He says, "return," in Malachi 3. This divine will originates in eternity in election in Jesus Christ and Him crucified. It is founded upon the cross that gives the Judah to whom God speaks in Malachi 3 the right to return. The call is made effectual by the Spirit of the Messiah promised in the OT. God makes this effectual call to Judah appealing by the promise of the blessings He will heap upon them when they return—in the way of His drawing them to Himself. Just read verses 10ff.

God will open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing. All nations will call Israel blessed. Let AL and his audience ask the question of himself and themselves in light of Malachi 3: does the passage not teach that there is a sense in which Israel's returning to God, by His efficacious call, precedes Israel's enjoyment of these blessings. This does not mean that man is first. To charge this against one who rightly explains Malachi 3 is not merely a reprehensible tactic by which one thinks to win an argument, but also the twisting of Holy Scripture by which one opposes the way of God's saving work with His people. "Return unto me, and I will return unto you," and when I do return unto you in the way of your returning unto me, I will pour out blessings upon you. Let all who sat under AL's thunderings against "man first," as though this had anything to do with the issue, read Malachi 3:7-18. Second, God accomplishes the return to Himself that He calls for in Malachi by the power of the Spirit of the coming crucified and risen Messiah. This is Christ Jesus. Christ is in the passage, dominating it, if the passage is rightly viewed as the call of the gospel. And third the alluring blessings that constitute the promises of the gospel-call are all the blessings of the Savior, Jesus the Christ (cf. vs. 10ff.). They are the forgiveness of sins; holiness; joy; peace; and more. Christ is in the passage. Every Reformed minister and believer ought to be able to see Him there.

As for Israel's natural response to the call, "return," it is rejection of the call. This is their and our natural response. So depraved, foolish, and rebellious we are. But we do not have the last word. When God issues the effectual, gracious call of the gospel to His own, not they, but He has the final word. How does the passage end? "Then shall ye return," etc. (v. 18). When God says "return" in the gospel-call to His elect Israel, we return—actively—and thus experience the blessings of salvation.

AL's explanation of Malachi 3 is wrong, dead wrong, and, by implication, his understanding of James 4 also.

This would not be so serious, although it is serious enough.

But there is reason to fear that this twisting of such a passage as Malachi is basic to his reactionary theology. Fear, whether grounded or ungrounded, of weakness in the PRC concerning an (illegitimate) role of humans in salvation causes a denial of the nature of the effectual call of the gospel as making us active (by a living faith) so that by actively believing we receive the blessings of salvation. The disguise of this fatal error not only in theology but also in regard to God's way of saving us is to rave against "man first," which is a bogeyman. What AL's error amounts to theologically is a reaction against the well-meant offer, or free will, that takes form in a sort of hyper-Calvinism.

It remains merely to call attention to statements and

charges that are false, false in the sense mostly that they are invented by AL to lead astray from the real issue and to make his (supposedly) doctrinal reformation seem sound.

Defending his rejection of the call in Malachi as a gospel-call, AL shouts that we will never "respond to the call *in our own strength!*" Who ever has said so? Is the call to return in Malachi 3 an invitation to Israel to return "in their own strength?" To try to make this the issue is pure deceit.

Similar is his harping on the axiom that "man is never first in salvation," as though this is what I said and teach. I did not say, and James 4 does not teach, that man is first in the matter of fellowship with God. I said that in James God draws nigh to us in salvation by effectually calling us to draw nigh to Him. The order is that in which God works. Theologically, the truth is that God saves us *by faith*, which faith He works in us by the effectual call and which faith is active. Does AL deny that God draws nigh to us in salvation, specifically salvation with regard to assurance and experience, in the way of calling us unto a drawing nigh to Him? Let him say so. And then let him tell us how God does draw nigh to us.

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.

And then drawing nigh to God in James 4 is not obedience to the law, but the activity of faith. God works faith in us by the call of the gospel. Does AL deny this? Is he so fearful of the activity of faith? Is he afraid to confess and teach that God saves His people by exhortations and threatenings? I warn him that this is a religion contrary to the Canons of Dordt.

Finally, when I said that Andy needs the church, whereas the church does not need Andy (or anyone of us), I was referring to Andy's need of the PRC, not his need of the RPC. He left the PRC, which might have restrained his doctrinal deviations, as the church of Christ serves as a restraint of us all, lest we go off on our own peculiar crusades.

Love,
Dad

**Reverend Lanning to Professor Engelsma,
June 19, 2021**

Dear Professor Engelsma,

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the beginning and the ending.

I write this as an open letter to you, Prof., with the intention to distribute it to others as well. Having spoken and written about each other to various audiences this week,

I take this opportunity to write directly to you, while still making this available to those who are interested. Anyone who reads this may pass it along as they wish.

The Call of the Gospel

Your latest email to the Engelsma Forum and to Terry Dykstra, dated June 17, 2021, states what you believe to be the issue between us. “The issue, as AL’s handling of Malachi 3 and James 4 clearly shows, is whether there is a call of the gospel that effectually draws God’s elect people to God—in a true and living faith—so that they experience that God draws nigh to them.”

This statement of the issue is consistent with your previous statements. “The error of the sermon is that it does away with the call of God to us to return.” “Notice distinctly that he himself deliberately rejects the entire Reformed tradition regarding the meaning of ‘return to me, and I will return to you.’” “Not to be overlooked is that his peculiar interpretation of the Malachi passage is the denial of spiritual activity on the part of the believer.” “When Andy denies this, in the interests, he thinks of grace, he shows himself to be advancing beyond and contrary to the Reformed creeds. He is developing a new religion” (Professor Engelsma to Terry Dykstra, June 14, 2021).

Your statement of the issue was helpful to me, because it explains why you have been unloading both barrels at me in your public correspondence to family and friends. You think I deny that there is a serious, urgent call and command of the gospel that calls men to repent of their sin and to believe in Jesus Christ. You think I deny that this call of the gospel is effectual, actually drawing God’s people to God in a true and living faith. You think I deny spiritual activity on the part of the believer in the believer’s actually coming to God in faith as the result of the gospel’s call. You think I deny that by this call of the gospel that draws God’s people to him in faith, they experience that God draws nigh to them.

Well, if I truly denied the effectual call of the gospel with the implications listed above, then I would deserve both barrels, and I would even hand you more slugs so that you could keep blasting away.

The reality is that I do not deny any of those things, not in my sermon or lecture or anywhere else. In case anyone has been led to think that I do deny these things, let me now confess what I actually believe regarding the call of the gospel.

I believe that the call of the gospel is, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:31). This call of the gospel includes the promise “that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life.” This promise is the essence of the call of the gospel and the power by which men are

saved. This call of the gospel includes the “command to repent and believe” (Canons 2.5). This call of the gospel is found throughout the Old Testament (Isaiah 55:1-4, for example), and the New Testament (Acts 2:38-39 and James 4:8, for example).

I believe that the call of the gospel is a serious, urgent call and command, by which God seriously calls everyone who hears to repent of his sins and to believe in Jesus Christ. The seriousness of the call does not mean that God intends or wills the salvation of all who hear the call, but it does mean that it is the duty of everyone who hears to repent and believe. Men who hear the call of the gospel but do not repent are guilty for their disobedience to the solemn call of the gospel. “But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Esaias saith, Lord, who hath believed our report?” (Rom. 10:16). “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God” (Heb. 3:12). “The wrath of God abideth upon those who believe not this gospel. But such as receive it, and embrace Jesus the Savior by a true and living faith, are by Him delivered from the wrath of God and from destruction, and have the gift of eternal life conferred upon them” (Canons 1.4).

I believe that the call of the gospel is gracious and effectual for the elect, working in their hearts a true faith in Jesus Christ by the operation of the Holy Ghost. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). “But as many as truly believe, and are delivered and saved from sin and destruction through the death of Christ, are indebted for this benefit solely to the grace of God, given them in Christ from everlasting, and not to any merit of their own” (Canons 2.7). “What therefore neither the light of nature nor the law could do, that God performs by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the Word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the glad tidings concerning the Messiah, by means whereof it hath pleased God to save such as believe, as well under the Old as under the New Testament” (Canons 3-4.6).

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

A. From the Holy Ghost, who works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and confirms it by the use of the sacraments. (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 25, Q&A 65)

I believe that the call of the gospel also has an effect on the reprobate, not to save them, but to harden them in their sin and rebellion against God. This hardening by

the gospel was God's eternal purpose with them according to his decree of reprobation. "For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth" (Rom. 9:17–18).

That some receive the gift of faith from God and others do not receive it proceeds from God's eternal decree, *For known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world* (Acts 15:18). *Who worketh all things after the counsel of his will* (Eph. 1:11). According to which decree He graciously softens the hearts of the elect, however obstinate, and inclines them to believe, while He leaves the non-elect in His just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy. And herein is especially displayed the profound, the merciful, and at the same time the righteous discrimination between men equally involved in ruin; or that decree of election and reprobation, revealed in the Word of God, which, though men of perverse, impure, and unstable minds wrest to their own destruction, yet to holy and pious souls affords unspeakable consolation. (Canons 1.6)

I believe that the faith which the Holy Ghost works by the call of the gospel in the heart of the elect is the believer's union with Christ and is the believer's holy activity of knowing God and trusting in him. The believer's activity of faith is in no sense a work, but is the opposite of working, and is the believer's receiving from God all of the blessings that Christ has purchased for him. Faith is the believer's coming to Christ, believing on Christ, and abiding in Christ, all of which coming, believing, and abiding in Christ is the gift of God to the believer, and all of which coming, believing, and abiding in Christ is produced by God in the believer (John 6:35; 15:4; Canons 3–4.14).

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

A. No, only those who are ingrafted into Him, and receive all His benefits, by a true faith.

Q. What is true faith?

A. True faith is not only a certain knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also an assured confidence, which the Holy Ghost works by the gospel in my heart; that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sin, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits. (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 20–21)

I believe that God's drawing the believer to himself by the call of the gospel is God's fellowship with the believer, also in the believer's experience. The believer hears God and believes in him, because God has already drawn nigh to the believer by his Word and Spirit. "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

For I will set mine eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them again to this land: and I will build them, and not pull them down; and I will plant them, and not pluck them up. And I will give them an heart to know me, that I am the LORD: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God: for they shall return unto me with their whole heart. (Jer. 24:6–7)

Such is my confession of the call of the gospel. I suppose that my confession will not stop the slander of some that I deny the efficacious call of the gospel according to the Reformed faith. But I do humbly entreat you, in light of my confession, that you stop teaching men that I am developing a new, hyper-Calvinist religion that does away with the call of the gospel. I also entreat you to do what you can to stop that slander on the forums where it has already been spread.

Malachi 3:7

The issue between us is not the call of the gospel. How is it, then, that one could come to think that the issue between us is disagreement over the call of the gospel? It comes from this, that in my exegesis of Malachi 3:7, I interpret God's command to Israel, "Return to me," to be the call or command of the *law*, and not the call or command of the *gospel*.

Everyone agrees that there is a command in the text. The command is, "Return to me." "Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return?"

The exegetical question regarding the command in the text is whether it is the command of the *gospel*—which would be effectual actually to cause apostatizing Israel to return to God by the power of the Holy Ghost—or whether it is the command of the *law*—which would show Israel what she must do but what she cannot do and therefore what she must rely entirely upon God to do for her.

I exegeted the call, "Return to me," as the call or command of the *law*. First, because there is no explicit call for faith. Other passages that make the call of the *gospel*, such as Acts 16:31 and James 4:8, do explicitly call for faith ("Believe" and "Draw nigh"). Other passages that make the call of the *law*, such as Luke 10:28, do not explicitly call for faith but only for obedience ("Do this"). Second,

because the emphasis in the text (it seems to me) is not on the salvation that God has accomplished by the Savior, as is characteristic of the command of the gospel, but on the requirement laid upon Israel, as is characteristic of the command of the law. Third, because Israel's response is not to turn, but to fail to return and refuse to return and even to deny that she has departed. "But ye said, Wherein shall we return?" This response emphasizes the law by highlighting what the command of the law always exposes: the sin and misery of man, including his inability to obey and his unwillingness to obey.

Incidentally, Martin Luther also exegeted the command of this text as the command of the law and not the command of the gospel, which command of the law exposes what lazy man should do but cannot do.

7. Return to Me, and I will return to you. These words seem to support the free will of man. They are, however, words of the Law, upon which the ability to obey does not immediately follow. After all, He has already said that they had never kept the Law, even if they were eager to keep it. To be sure, God is a good Lawgiver, but we are lazy doers of it. The Law tells us what we should do. He says, "Return to obey Me, and I will return to you to bless you. I will be your kind Father of mercies."

How shall we return? The prophet has to deal with holy hypocrites, who are unwilling to accept rebuke and who are unaware of any sin or turning away from God.¹

Exegeting the call of Malachi 3:7 as the call of the law, I explained that the purpose of this call is to expose our own weakness and inability to return. The law shows us what we must do, and the law shows us that we cannot do it. The purpose of the law is not to harden the elect but to expose the already existing hardness of our hearts. Exposing the elect's sin, the law shuts up the believer from himself so that his only hope for salvation, including all of his hope for returning to God, is found outside of himself in Jesus Christ. All of this is Reformed doctrine, as found in Canons 3–4.5–6.

Your original correspondent suggested to you that my exegesis of the call as the law actually denies the call of the gospel and the activity of man and that my teaching is, therefore, a new theology. "As you can read in the transcription, Andy's interpretation is quite different. The way he explains it seems to me to be an entirely new theology and a redefining of terms... 'command of the gospel (repent)' = 'law.' response of faith to the command = do nothing, else you are

justifying yourself by works" (Terry Dykstra to Professor Engelsma, June 13, 2021). You have apparently taken up your correspondent's suggestion.

Contrary to your correspondent and to your agreement with your correspondent, my exegesis of the call of Malachi 3:7 as the command of the law, not the command of the gospel, does not mean that I deny that there is such a thing as the call of the gospel. I certainly believe that there is a call of the gospel with all of its implications, as confessed above. I believe that call of the gospel to be made in many passages of scripture. For example, I believe that the other text to which you referred, James 4:8, could very well be exegeted as the call of the gospel. My exegesis of Malachi 3:7 as the law is not a denial that there is an efficacious call of the gospel. It only means that in this particular passage, I see the call of the law and not the call of the gospel.

Neither does this mean that I refuse to allow one to interpret Malachi 3:7 as the call of the gospel. There may be good reasons why a believer is led to interpret that call as the call of the gospel. You have made a good case that the call of Malachi 3:7 is in fact the call of the gospel, especially in light of Malachi 3:18 and the promise that God's people shall return. I happen to prefer Luther's exegesis to Engelsma's in this case, but that does not rule out explaining the text as the call of the gospel. But then let the man who exegetes the call of Malachi 3:7 as the gospel not accuse the man who exegetes that call as the law of having some ultra-orthodox, hyper-Calvinist, new religion.

The Issue: Does Man's Activity Precede God's Activity?

If the issue between us is not the call of the gospel, then what is it? The issue is this: whether man is first and God is second in any aspect of man's salvation. Specifically, the issue is whether man's activity precedes God's activity in man's enjoyment and experience of covenant fellowship with God. This explains why I preached what I did in Malachi 3:7 and why I said what I did in the lecture on Wednesday, June 16, 2021. I have not denied the efficacious call of the gospel, but I have denied that man's activity precedes God's activity. I have denied that God's activity of returning depends upon man's activity of returning or even waits for man's activity of returning. Man and his activity do not precede God and his activity, even in the matter of man's experience, and perhaps especially in the matter of man's experience. This is the theological issue, the only theological issue, on which you and I disagree in the matter of Malachi 3:7.

I realize that you deny this to be the issue: "The issue is not, as AL completely erroneously (whether by mistake

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Minor Prophets I: Hosea–Malachi*, eds. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 18:413.

or malice) presents it, whether man is first in any aspect of salvation, or whether God is first. As a matter of simple, plain fact, I did not write that in James 4 or in Malachi 3, ‘man is first’” (Professor Engelsma to Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 17, 2021).

Therefore, let me demonstrate (without any malice and with all the respect of a former student for his beloved professor) that this is indeed the issue between us. Regarding your condemnation of my sermon on Malachi 3:7, you compare it to a previous sermon of yours on James 4:8. About these sermons, you write the following, with my underlining:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is evidently a very important point, which you make repeatedly and forcefully. This is the point that I object to. I do not believe that “there is a certain, specific sense, in which our drawing nigh precedes God’s drawing nigh to us.” Rather, the activity of God always and in every sense and without exception precedes the activity of man. Specifically, God’s drawing nigh to man always and in every sense and without exception precedes man’s drawing nigh to God.

Jesus’ word about our coming to Jesus, which is the same as our drawing nigh to him by faith, is that God’s activity is first.

No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me. (John 6:44–45)

Jesus’ word about our coming to the Father, which is the same as our drawing nigh to him by faith, is that we come to the Father only by Jesus. “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6).

Jesus' word about our abiding in him, which is the same as our drawing nigh to him in faith, is that Jesus' activity is first. "For without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5).

God's word about our being gathered unto God is that this is entirely his work in returning to us.

For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the LORD thy Redeemer. (Isa. 54:7–8)

God's word about our turning or returning to God is that God's turning of us is first.

I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus; Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke: turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God. Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: I was ashamed, yea, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth. (Jer. 31:18–19)

The apostle's word about all of God's good work in his people is that God both begins that work and perfects it. "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

The whole Reformed faith, and in fact the true Christian faith, is that God saves man, that God's activity accounts for man's activity, and that man's activity in his salvation does not account for (or precede) God's activity.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:8–10)

In light of all of this, it is wrong to say that "there is a vitally important sense in which, in our salvation, our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us."

I recognize that you also have insisted that God is the one who first draws us to him, and that our activity of drawing nigh to God is the result of his drawing us to himself. You teach (and have always taught, as I can attest from my years under your instruction in seminary) that "God is always first in salvation." The problem is that you have now gone beyond that teaching by introducing the teaching that "there is a vitally important sense in which, in our salvation, our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us." You have added to the truth that "God is always first in salvation" a "but." "God is always first in salvation, but with regard to

the assurance of salvation He works in the order of drawing me to Himself as the way to draw nigh to me." The addition of this "but" overthrows the truth that God is always first in salvation. It introduces an aspect of our salvation where God is not first. It introduces an aspect of our salvation where man is first, for "our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us."

In explanation of your teaching that "our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us," you appeal to man's experience. It is in this sense of our experience that our activity precedes God's activity.

First, to repeat, there is a vitally important sense in which, in our salvation, our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us...Second, this sense has to do with our experience of salvation, which is not an unimportant aspect of our salvation. When we draw nigh to God, by faith including faith's repentance, God draws nigh to us in our experience. We have the consciousness that God is our near-by friend and that we are close to Him, in His bosom, which is Jesus, so to say. (Professor Engelsma to Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 16, 2021)

However, the teaching that man's activity precedes God's activity is not made right by an appeal to man's experience of salvation. Even in man's experience—especially in man's experience—God's activity precedes man's activity. The believer who draws nigh to God experiences that God has *already* drawn nigh to him. The believer's drawing nigh to God in no way precedes God's drawing nigh to him, but follows God's drawing nigh to him in the Word of the gospel. "For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God" (Heb. 7:19). The better hope of Jesus Christ and his gospel comes first in the believer's hearing and experience and heart, and *afterward* by that better hope the believer draws nigh unto God.

The believer who turns to God experiences that God has *already* come to the believer. "Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh" (Jer. 31:19). By his Word and Spirit, God turns the believer in the believer's own experience, and *afterward* the believer repents and smites upon his thigh in his grief and sorrow for his sin.

The reason for God's activity preceding man's activity even in the believer's experience is so that, even in the believer's experience, he does not boast in himself but gives all of the glory to God. Not only is he saved by grace through faith and not works, but he at every point experiences that he is saved by grace through faith and not by works, so that even in the matter of his experience he has nothing in which to boast (Eph. 2:8–9).

The fact is that the call of the gospel is God's drawing nigh to us. The call does not merely declare that God will draw nigh, but is his actual drawing nigh. By that Word itself as it is preached, God is already nigh us. "The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach" (Rom. 10:8). By the message and promise and content of that Word as it is preached, Jesus Christ is already nigh us, clearly set before our eyes. "Before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth" (Gal. 3:1). By the Spirit who carries that Word into our hearts so that we know God as our Father and cry unto him, God is already nigh us. "Ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15).

What of the fact that the wording of the call of the gospel has man's activity preceding God's activity? "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you" (James 4:8). Simply this: The order in the call is not the order of God's operation. Just because man's activity is spoken first and God's activity is spoken second, that does not mean that in the bestowal of salvation, man's activity must precede God's activity. The order of God's operation in salvation is established throughout the scriptures to be this: "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36). In that order of operation, man's activity can never precede God's.

The order in the call is given the way it is to establish that it is indeed God's serious call to man to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. The order also warns the departing hearer that there is no salvation in his departing. The order also assures the child of God that God is merciful and that he does indeed receive sinners who have gone away from him by their sin and rebellion. But the order in the call does not establish the order of God's operation.

It has been a hallmark of Reformed exegesis to interpret the order of the call as establishing man's duty, sounding a warning, and establishing God's mercy, but not as establishing the order of God's operation. In the order of God's operation, God is first. For example, John Calvin on James 4:8:

Draw nigh to God. He again reminds us that the aid of God will not be wanting to us, provided we give place to him. For when he bids us to draw nigh to God, that we may know him to be near to us, he intimates that we are destitute of his grace, because we withdraw from him. But as God stands on our side, there is no reason to fear succumbing. But if any one concludes from this passage, that the first part of the work belongs to us, and that afterwards the grace of God follows, the Apostle meant no such thing; for though we ought to do this, yet it does not

immediately follow that we can. And the Spirit of God, in exhorting us to our duty, derogates nothing from himself, or from his own power; but the very thing he bids us to do, he himself fulfils in us.²

In order to be faithful to the text, including the order of the call, there is no need to find a way for man's activity to precede God's activity in any sense, whether experience or otherwise.

In fact, teaching that there is some sense in which man's activity precedes God's activity introduces a condition into man's salvation. Every departure from the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone to the glory of God alone has made man's willing or doing precede God's willing and doing. Though you have been the sworn foe of works-righteousness and the champion of salvation by grace, as everyone can and will attest, your insistence now that "there is a vitally important sense in which, in our salvation, our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us" is a departure from the gospel of sovereign grace.

I beseech you to reconsider your position on man's activity preceding God's activity in any sense in our salvation. I also beseech you to reconsider the charges that you have blasted at my theology: Ultra-orthodox. Hyper-Calvinism. New religion. New theology. Reactionary theology. Doctrinal deviations. I wear those charges gladly, for they are the false charges that the gospel of salvation by grace alone always draws. If I must wear these charges from you, then I shall. However, I would much rather not wear these charges from you personally, for it is bewildering and grievous to me that such charges should come from you, who taught me in years past that salvation is of the Lord.

Warmly in Christ,
Rev. Andy Lanning

Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum, Terry Dykstra, and Andy Lanning, June 21, 2021

Dear family, Terry, and Andy Lanning (hereafter AL),

This is in response to the missive recently sent to us all by AL as reply to my response to his Wednesday evening attack on my and what I consider to be PR theology.

I will respond to what both he and I consider to be the main issue, in conclusion adding some remarks on other elements of his recent broadside.

The issue is the call of the gospel, particularly whether in God's issuing of that call there is an important sense in which God's drawing us to Himself consists of His causing us actively to draw nigh to Him (which is our believing and repenting) preceding His drawing nigh to us in our expe-

² John Calvin & John Owen, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 334.

rience, or consciously. Let me state this once again, more simply. In salvation as the matter of our consciousness, or experience, of God's drawing nigh to us in the assurance of His love and the sweet experience of the covenant of grace, God draws us to Himself (thus He is first in the matter of experience) in such a way that we actively draw nigh to Him by a true and living faith (which faith as a spiritual activity of knowing Him in Jesus and trusting in Him), so that in the way of this our drawing nigh to Him He may draw nigh to us in the experience of His nearness in Christ. In this specific sense, our drawing nigh to Him precedes His drawing nigh to Him. This is the plain meaning of James 4:8: "Draw nigh to me, and I will draw nigh to you." This is the plain meaning of the text as it stands in all its perfect clarity before every reader, especially before a minister of the Word. Our drawing nigh to God precedes God's drawing nigh to us. The question is not, "Does our drawing nigh to God precede in some important sense God's drawing nigh to us?" but "how," or "in what sense" does our drawing nigh to God precede His drawing nigh to us?"

I call attention to two gross errors that AL makes in his treatment of the text. First, inexcusably, and beyond any shadow of a doubt deliberately, he charges me with teaching that our activity in some aspect of salvation precedes God's activity. This is misrepresentation, if not slander. I merely call attention to the fact that to represent the issue thus, that I hold that men respond to the call "in their own strength," or "on their own," whereas AL confesses that men respond to the call by the grace of God, is false. I made clear throughout the document from which he quotes that God is first in the aspect of the experience of salvation but in such a manner of working that He causes us to draw nigh to Him in order that in this way He may draw nigh to us. He is first, but in such a way that our drawing nigh to Him consciously precedes His drawing nigh to us in our experience. This does justice to the text in James 4: Draw nigh to me, and I will draw nigh to you. Denying that there is any sense at all in which our drawing nigh to God precedes His drawing nigh to us in James 4, AL is compelled to corrupt the Word of God in James 4. Rather than to do justice to the obvious truth of the text that God's drawing nigh to us follows in any way whatever our drawing nigh to Him, AL is compelled to explain that the meaning of the text is that when we draw nigh we learn that God has already drawn nigh to us in the past. He overlooks the fact that even his explanation has our drawing nigh precede God's drawing nigh in the sense that only when we draw nigh are we assured of God's having drawn nigh to us in the past, or of God's drawing nigh to us at the present time. This explanation too can be charged by an unkind critic as making our assurance of God's having drawn nigh in the past, or of

God's drawing nigh to us at the present time, conditional upon our drawing nigh to God. An obvious indication that AL is forcing James 4 into the mold of his aberrant theology concerning the call of the gospel is his inability to do justice to the future tense in James 4:8. James 4 reads, "and God will draw nigh to you," that is, when we draw nigh to Him." The future tense compels every reader to acknowledge that in some sense our drawing nigh precedes God's drawing nigh, and that God's drawing nigh follows our drawing nigh. What does AL do in response to this obvious truth? He changes the tense of the verb. Now it becomes, "Draw nigh to God and He does draw nigh to you," or, "He has drawn nigh to you." His theology forbids him to recognize the future tense of the verb. I remind him that inspiration includes also the tense of the verb in James 4:8.

AL, explain the future tense of the verb! "Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you." "He will." In every language, except that of those who are afraid to issue the call of the gospel with its promise of experiential salvation following believing, a future tense following a present tense exhortation means that a certain benefit will follow the activity of the exhortation. Or, to say it differently, the action of the exhortation precedes the promise that follows.

Here I note that Jeremiah 31:18, 19 does not at all support AL's doctrine of the call of the gospel. The passage teaches that when God turns one to Himself He does so in such a way that the man actively repents, smiting upon his thigh in genuine grief. And when he repents he is forgiven, which forgiveness takes place in the man's experience in the way of his repenting. And this is the issue: not that the activity of repenting is God's work, which it is, but that His turning of us takes place in such a way that the elect actively repents and that this is the way of forgiveness and the experience of God's favor.

Further, as regards Calvin on James 4:8, Calvin contends with the explanation that makes man's drawing nigh to God a condition of God's drawing nigh to us. But Calvin acknowledges from the very outset of his explanation that there is a sense—an *important* sense—in which our drawing nigh precedes God's drawing nigh to us. Nor is he afraid of this truth as is AL. I quote: "He (James) again reminds us that the aid of God will not be wanting to us, provided we give place to him." "Provided we give place to him"! According to Calvin, giving place to God precedes the granting of God's aid to us.

Let me appeal to the Christian experience in everyday earthly life, which is based on the reality of spiritual life. When covenant parents have a wayward child, they call the child to repent, to turn, and to draw nigh again to them in the fellowship of the Christian family. The child repents

by the grace of God, and in this repentance draws nigh to his parents. When this takes place, and in this way, the parents draw nigh to the child. His drawing nigh precedes the parents' drawing nigh to him in forgiveness and family fellowship. To illustrate the order of the activity of repentance and faith more personally still, AL has from time to time, if he is at all like me, wandered away from God in sin. Indeed, daily. God has called him back. By virtue of this call, Andy has drawn nigh to God in a lively faith. How has he experienced God's drawing nigh to him? Did God only say to him, "I have drawn nigh to you in election and in regeneration?" Or does God make AL to experience His favor once again, upon his drawing nigh to God, saying, "now, I forgive you, and receive you back into my favor and fellowship experientially?" Does not this drawing nigh to God in repentance and faith precede God's drawing nigh to AL in "some, important sense"? Does this order of the experience of salvation identify AL as a closet Pelagian, Arminian, and Federal Visionist?

Because AL makes such a (mistaken) point of this, as though I make God dependent upon man in the matter, I am bold to ask him: "Is there such a reality in his life as forgiveness and the experience of the favor once again of God that follows his repenting, confessing sin, and trusting in God's mercy, that is, drawing nigh to God?" Does this drawing nigh to God on the part of AL precede his experience of God's once again drawing nigh to him? Do not now evade the issue by talking to me of election, the cross, and regeneration, or even of this drawing nigh to God being the effectual work of the Spirit within you, which it is. Is there a sense in your Christian life in which your drawing nigh in the sense of James 4 precedes God's drawing nigh to you? If so, why so vehement an assault upon my teaching? To the detriment of your flock?

What AL does to the call of the gospel in James 4, he must do throughout the Bible. With disastrous consequences for the gospel and the experiential life of those who are taught by AL! For example, Jesus' call, "Come unto me all ye that labor,...and I will give thee rest" is not, according to AL, a gracious call to the spiritually laboring, but law, insisting on the duty of the called. It merely convinces all that they cannot come. And, if AL rejects these charges, one charge cannot be gainsaid: the promise of rest in the text does not, according to AL, refer to a rest that follows the call, as though the coming in any sense precedes the experience of rest, for this would imply conditional salvation. Because of his fear of the serious call of the gospel, AL reads the text this way: "I give you rest, and then you come unto me." Away with the future tense of the verb to be! Yes, and away with the call of the gospel!

The issue, I remind us all, is not that God is first in election, in redemption, and regeneration. It is not even the issue of the order of daily conversion, or of sanctification. For AL to describe this controversy as the matter of his confessing that God is first in all of salvation, whereas I deny this is another falsehood. Apart from all else, these misrepresentations by AL are evidence that his doctrinal case is weak. God is first and sovereign in all of salvation. But the issue is how God works in bringing to repentance and in holiness of life. He is first in the matter of drawing, as I affirmed earlier. But He draws us to Himself by causing us actively and consciously to come to Him so that in this way He can come experientially to us.

AL is afraid of the call of the gospel, as the exhortation of us to be active in faith and repentance. This is evident also in his description of faith only as a bond of fellowship with God. But faith also becomes spiritual activity: a knowing, a trusting, a returning, a drawing nigh. And this is what faith is when it is exhorted and admonished. When God calls us to draw nigh, He is not exhorting us to create fellowship with God. He is exhorting the activity of living in this fellowship.

As for Malachi 3:7, I have already proved that "return" in the text is not law, although it is a command. It is the call of the gospel to the true Israel of God, whom God, according to the text itself, willed to return to in all the blessings of salvation as the following verses make plain. And the last verse of the chapter shows that the call is efficacious. Israel will return. It is the call of a jealous husband to His adulterous wife whom He yet loves. It is the call of a loving Father to His disobedient child, whom He desires in the fellowship of the family. And in both earthly figures, the returning of the wife and of the child precedes the drawing nigh and the returning of the husband and father.

This is fundamental earthly reality and basic Christianity.

To deny this is not orthodoxy. It is a rejection of the call of the gospel: "Come, and I will then and in this way give you rest."

Nervousness of Arminianism and of the federal vision may not vitiate this important aspect of the Christian religion.

I for one will not allow the Reformed faith to run scared before the false charge of Arminianism, run scared by denying the call of the gospel. Long before AL appeared on the scene I wrote a book against that error known as "hyper-Calvinism," that always threatens the Reformed faith. Arminianism is not the only threat to truth of the call of the gospel. I do heartily urge AL to re-read the book, and the members of his congregation to read it.

Cordially in Christ,
Dad and Prof. Engelsma

MALACHI 3:7 AND GRACE ALONE

The question is whether or not Rev. Andy Lanning's exegesis of Malachi 3:7 is within the boundary of the analogy of faith as represented by the Reformed faith. The sermon as he preached it and as the consistory of First Reformed Protestant Church approved it answers the question in the affirmative. Prof. David Engelsma's position is that the exegesis is not within the boundary of the analogy of faith. This difference is at the heart of the controversy.

There is, however, a secondary question that arises out of the first. The secondary question is, what is this analogy of faith? If the exegesis of the sermon is said by one to be within the boundaries of the analogy of faith and therefore appropriately preached in a Reformed church, but another says it is not within the boundaries of the analogy of faith, there is disagreement over what the analogy of faith is.

The particular exegesis in question is that of Malachi 3:7. To be more specific, it is the particular exegesis that the command spoken by the Lord's prophet to the returned captivity of Israel, a command to turn to the Lord, is a command of law as law, and that it is not the command of the gospel. To explore the controverted exegesis a bit further, it was presented as a command that revealed the hardness of heart and the incapability of those to whom it was preached to perform what was commanded them, namely to turn to the Lord.

Turning from the exegesis presented in the sermon to the analogy of faith, in the light of which the exegesis is to be judged as valid or invalid, it is first necessary to establish the relationship of this particular exegesis of Malachi 3:7 to the analogy of faith. Does the analogy of faith prohibit this particular exegesis? In such a case the presented exegesis of Malachi 3:7 is heretical. If the analogy of faith does not prohibit this exegesis, it still does not mean the exegesis is correct. There would be other rules regarding the interpretation of scripture to be applied to determine whether the exegesis is correct. It might be a mistaken, wrong exegesis, but it could not be characterized as doctrinal or theological error.

There are two examples we can use to demonstrate this. Whether Jephthah offered up his daughter as a burnt

offering to God or whether he consecrated her to a lifetime of full service to the Lord is a matter of exegesis. Whether or not one exegesis is correct over against the other does not involve any violation of the analogy of faith. Another illustration would be the exegesis of Romans 7:7–25. To exegete the passage as Paul's statement of his condition prior to his conversion reveals Pelagian tendencies. The Reformed exegesis of the passage is that it is Paul's self-description as a regenerated, believing child of God. That is, the latter exegesis of Romans 7 is within the boundary of the analogy of faith, whereas the former is not.

What is the analogy of faith? What makes it so strong as to be such a standard against which the exegesis of scripture on the part of ministers and professors can be judged as heretical or as orthodox?

The basis of the analogy of faith is twofold. The first basis is the unity of scripture. Scripture is one. It is one in its fundamental message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Its unity is that it is the one revelation of the Son of God as the savior from sin through the blood of the cross of Calvary. It is also one

because it consistently teaches the truth of God, which is always a complete unity. How many different things scripture teaches! Yet all its teachings are one. There is no contradiction in the Bible. All its teachings are completely in harmony with each other.

The second basis is the God-conferred, Spirit-given ability of faith to receive the above basis and to believe and confess this truth of God's word. It is the ability to understand what scripture teaches in its unity and to believe, think, and speak accordingly. By this faith the believer can know and confess the truth of scripture. By this faith the believing church can preach and teach the scriptures. By this faith believers and the church are meant to exercise discernment and judgment, testing the spirits according to the exhortation of 1 John 4:1.

Reformed churches have their analogy of faith in their common doctrinal heritage, the three forms of unity. The Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordt are not only the doctrinal standards of Reformed churches as the basis for judgment in all doctrinal controversies that must be decided by the deliberative

There is no contradiction in the Bible. All its teachings are completely in harmony with each other.

assemblies, but also these creeds must be subscribed to by all officebearers in Reformed churches. In signing the Formula of Subscription, ministers, elders, and deacons promise both to abide by these creedal doctrines in their preaching and teaching and to defend and maintain them against all errors contrary to them.

Thus we must expect that whatever exegesis is presented in a sermon on Malachi 3:7 in a Reformed church, it is required to conform with the doctrines of the three forms of unity. Certainly, the exegesis may not contradict those doctrines. Does, then, the particular exegesis of Malachi 3:7—the repentance demanded by the law, which demonstrates the incapability of man to repent of his sin of falling away from the Lord—conform to the doctrines of the three forms of unity? Additionally, does this particular exegesis apply in any way to the people of God, so that its application also is in conformity with the doctrine of the three forms of unity?

It does indeed. There are two distinct places in the three forms of unity that show conformity. The first is in the Canons of Dort 3–4.5.

In the same light are we to consider the law of the decalogue, delivered by God to His peculiar people, the Jews, by the hands of Moses. For though it discovers the greatness of sin, and more and more convinces man thereof, yet as it neither points out a remedy nor imparts strength to extricate him from misery, and thus, being weak through the flesh, leaves the transgressor under the curse, man cannot by this law obtain saving grace. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 167)

This article concerns the law, and that in distinction from the gospel treated in the following article. It also speaks of the target of the law: it was “delivered by God to His peculiar people, the Jews.” The article then declares the work of the law: “it discovers the greatness of sin, and more and more convinces man thereof.”

Is it possible, in light of the above expression of the three forms of unity, to exegete Malachi 3:7 and to apply it in such a way that the command of God’s law to repent from sin demonstrates inability to repent according to the truth of total depravity? Is such an exegesis with its application within the framework of the three forms of unity? Does this expression of the law in some respect or another apply to the people of God?

The second place in the three forms of unity that shows conformance is the first section of the Heidelberg Catechism, “Of the Misery of Man.” In light of the form of the Heidelberg Catechism as a teaching document for instruction of Reformed believers and their seed in the churches and schools, this first section teaches them their

misery, from which they need deliverance by the grace of God in Christ.

Considering this first section, the following points are outstanding concerning the controverted exegesis of Malachi 3:7.

First, question and answer 3 teach concerning the source of the misery of man that we know that misery “out of the law of God” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 84). The law is set before believers and their seed as the standard of God’s word to show to man his misery.

Second, that standard is then applied to believers and their seed with respect to their ability to “keep all these things perfectly.” They are taught, “I am prone by nature to hate God and my neighbor” (Q&A 5, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 85). The important, qualifying words must be noted in answer 5: “by nature.”

Third, this same qualification is expressed in answer 8 regarding the present condition of believers and their seed, but from the positive viewpoint of grace. They are taught to answer in the affirmative the question concerning themselves, “Are we then so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all wickedness?” But there is the same exception taught: “except we are regenerated by the Spirit of God” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 86). By nature, of themselves, yes, believers and their seed are prone to hate God and the neighbor. By nature, of themselves, yes, they are wholly incapable of doing any good and inclined to all wickedness.

Fourth, this first section of the Heidelberg Catechism, as much as the third section, is true of believers and their seed. The Heidelberg Catechism, representing the analogy of faith, is a doctrinal unity. There is no conflict between the first and the third sections. Nor is the truth somewhere between the two. There is no balance required between them. It is impossible to so emphasize the first section as to deny the third. It is impossible to so emphasize the third as to deny the first. Much less may one play off the one against the other as if practically there is a conflict between them. The distinction between the two is simple. The misery of man is by nature. The misery of Reformed believers and their seed is by nature. The ability and exercise of the elect, regenerated children of God beginning to keep not only some but all the commandments of God is by grace alone. Their true repentance as a matter of true conversion is by grace alone.

There is only one conclusion to draw based on the above: the exegesis of Malachi 3:7, meeting with such scorn and despite, does indeed conform to the doctrines of the three forms of unity, the standard of the faith in Reformed churches. That having been stated, it is beyond the scope of this article to treat whether this exegesis is correct.

However, the fact that this exegesis of Malachi 3:7 has met with such scorn and despite is cause for deep concern and reflection. Why? Why is it expressed so powerfully that this exegesis is clearly outside the boundary of what is Protestant Reformed? Why should the preaching of Malachi 3:7 in this manner be held up as an example of what must necessarily happen when one departs from the denomination of the Protestant Reformed Churches? If the sermon does indeed conform to the Reformed standards of doctrine, why is it declared to be so far outside the boundary of Protestant Reformed preaching and teaching?

One reason may be purely psychological in nature, simply reactionary. If the Protestant Reformed Churches are entirely orthodox and Reformed in their character, and that character is entirely doctrinal, it must follow that if one truly departs from that denomination, that departure must be doctrinal in nature. Similarly, doctrinal deviation must certainly result as a reaction against the denomination, a simple consequence of departure. Departure must result in some kind of doctrinal deviation. So such a sermon on Malachi 3:7 can handily be found and declared out of the boundary of orthodoxy.

Another reason may be tactical. There may be deep concern over members of the Protestant Reformed Churches departing for the newly formed Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC). There may be deep concern over sympathy and empathy among the membership of the Protestant Reformed Churches for the fledgling denomination. A way to cut off that flow and sympathy and empathy is to present grounds for the RPC to be heretical in her preaching and teaching. As one must hate the lie, so one must hate the RPC for teaching and promoting the lie.

This reason seems to be more likely, given that the new denomination is popularly scorned along the lines of doctrinal deviation. The ministers, officebearers, and members are widely regarded as hyper-Calvinistic and antinomian and those who deny the necessity of good works, regeneration, conversion, sanctification, and the reward of grace. Into such a mix it is easy to inject a particular sermon with its particular exegesis.

These reasons are somewhat superficial. As merely psychological, reactionary, or tactical, they will likely fade over time and allow for the gradual restoration of

objectivity. Perhaps the conclusion could gradually take hold that maybe such an exegesis of Malachi 3:7 is a possibility in a Reformed church.

But there is another reason that is of far deeper concern. This reason is that this controverted exegesis of Malachi 3:7, while within the boundary of the doctrines of the three forms of unity, is nevertheless outside the boundaries of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Is it thought impossible in the Protestant Reformed Churches that the law can be so applied to God's people to demonstrate to them their present inability by nature to do anything that God has commanded? Is it thought impossible that the law can show that by nature God's people are incapable of doing any good and inclined to all evil? Specifically, can the law show God's people that they are in this life unable of themselves to repent of their sins and turn from their evil ways of departing from the Lord, back to him?

The validity of this reason is demonstrated in the controversy that has developed in the Protestant Reformed Churches. Those who have stood in the controversy for the truth of salvation by grace alone without good works were charged with the error of antinomianism. They were charged with denying the possibility and necessity of good works. Even when the

stand of these individuals was maintained by the synod and the synod rejected the charge of antinomianism, the controversy continued. Other doctrines and teachings began to be skewed according to the controversy. Charges of antinomianism continued. Good works continued to be maintained as they had originally been preached: done for the reason of obtaining blessings of assurance of salvation. Faith was declared to be an act done in order to obtain assurance of salvation. Other doctrines were affected. Elect, regenerated believers can no longer be said to be totally depraved in any respect. Grace does enable and grace does equip, but believers so enabled and equipped must nevertheless do their part in order to bring grace to its completion in actual good works and obedience.

In light of this development in the controversy, the energetic rejection of the preaching of the law according to Malachi 3:7 is not difficult to understand. Malachi 3:7 powerfully deprives man of all ability by nature to repent of his sin, to turn from it to God. It has nothing good to say of man of himself, by nature. It has nothing good to say

If the sermon does indeed conform to the Reformed standards of doctrine, why is it declared to be so far outside the boundary of Protestant Reformed preaching and teaching?

of the elect, regenerated child of God by nature. It emphatically demonstrates to the elect, regenerated child of God that all his repentance, from beginning to end, is always and only by grace, not by anything in himself. Should grace leave anything undone, even for something so fundamental as repentance, there can only be impenitence, the stubborn refusal to turn from sin to the Lord. This teaching of the law, as exemplified in the proper, Reformed exegesis of Malachi 3:7, serves the doctrine of glorious, complete, sovereign, and irresistible grace, that salvation in every respect

is the work of grace alone. This proper preaching of the law in Reformed churches makes absolutely clear what is well stated in the Canons of Dordt: “Whereupon the will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence becomes itself active. Wherefore also, man is himself rightly said to believe and repent by virtue of that grace received” (3–4.12, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 169).

By grace alone.

—MVW

EDITORIAL RESPONSE

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

A Long Time Coming

I have read and reread the exchange between Professor Engelsma and Reverend Lanning. It was my opinion, and I expressed this very strongly to Reverend Lanning, that this exchange must be printed in the *Sword and Shield*. I warn you at the outset that if you have not read that exchange, there are parts of my article that will make no sense.

First, I wanted this published in the *Sword and Shield* because it was this kind of exchange that should have taken place in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) about five years ago. I have lamented repeatedly the massive censorship and dead silence of the *Standard Bearer* during the doctrinal controversy in the PRC. The *Standard Bearer* was a closed forum. Because of this, there was virtually no public writing about the disputed doctrines by the leading ministers in the PRC. That was deliberate and calculated. Such writing would have made them engage publicly, throw off the charade that there were not two sides and that there was no controversy, and come out with their theology.

They agreed with Rev. David Overway. In the early part of the controversy, they defended him, helped him, and encouraged him, and only later did they flee from him like rats abandoning a sinking ship. One of these days the PRC should get around to apologizing to him for her perfidy and betrayal. Reverend Overway did not teach a whit differently from Prof. Ronald Cammenga, Rev. Kenneth Koole, Rev. Ronald Van Overloop, and others too numerous to mention. If the denomination

condemned Reverend Overway’s theology, then the denomination must also condemn the ideas that works confirm faith as assurance and that Christ did not personally do everything for our salvation (Cammenga in Hudsonville PR Church); there is something man must do to be saved and the call to seek the grace that is available (Koole in the *Standard Bearer* and Hope PR Church); and two rails to heaven (Van Overloop in Grace PR Church). If the Protestant Reformed Churches do not condemn those statements—and I will let you in on a little secret: they are not going to condemn them—then they should reinstate David Overway into the ministry. He was not even as blatant or as obnoxious as these others. And if the doctrines of these ministers and others stand as the proclamation of the gospel in the PRC, then the denomination must repent to Jesus Christ for its decision in 2018 condemning the theology of Reverend Overway.

But about this all there is dead silence in the PRC. I could only wish that Professor Engelsma had come out as strongly against the statements of Overway, Koole, Cammenga, or Van Overloop. He will not because these ministers are in his denomination, and Reverend Lanning no longer is. Even if one were inclined to oppose the statements of the Protestant Reformed ministers mentioned, the most one could do is write an impotent protest that would take years to wind its way through the assemblies and would more than likely be DOA (dead on arrival) when it got there. One certainly could not issue such a damning broadside as Professor Engelsma issued against Reverend Lanning. So I say, “*Finally*, some theological interaction.”

Second, the exchange needs to be printed because it is about the issues at hand in the reformation of the church that is now taking place. Although there was a complete lack of public writing by the leading theologians in the Protestant Reformed Churches leading up to Synod 2018, there was an explosion of writing after Synod 2018. One could never argue that Synod 2018 was a packed synod. Most of the delegates there were completely unprepared—whether from incompetence or malice—to handle the doctrinal issues before the synod. Partly this was because in the previous months they had been busy assuring themselves and others that the real issue was not justification and the experience of covenant fellowship with God but a rabble of antinomians in the churches. It was only *after* the decision of Synod 2018, which came as a bolt out of the blue to most of the leading theologians, that ministers and professors ramped up their writing and preaching. Men who had been dead silent in their preaching and writing for years and who repeated to anyone who would listen that there was no doctrinal controversy in the churches now stumbled over themselves to talk about the doctrinal controversy. This was not in defense and explanation of the truth that synod had defended, but to undermine the truth by bringing up again all the rejected theological bogeymen; trotting out again all the refuted arguments used to defend false doctrine; repeating to the point of nausea all the deceptive jargon, such as “the need for good works,” “active faith,” the “experience of salvation,” and “conscious enjoyment”; and quoting and twisting all the same articles from the creeds—Lord’s Day 32, Canons 3–4.12–13 and 17, and Canons 5.5—in the service of false doctrine.

The impression was created that the PRC faced—as Vienna, the Turks—a vicious onslaught from an overwhelming horde of those who denied the call of the gospel, the preaching of the law, and the calling to do good works, and, seemingly the worst of all, those who made men stocks and blocks. It was a lie, and those who espoused it knew that it was a lie. No one, not even the most ardent antinomian, has ever made man a stock and a block. That was a slander of the Arminians against the truth of sovereign grace, and those who take it in their mouths pick up the slander the Arminians hurled against the truth. No one, of course, could say where the antinomians and hyper-Calvinists were, or who they were, or when they were coming, or what they were saying that earned the rebukes; but the PRC was assured this was the denomination’s great and dangerous foe.

This is all laughable, of course. We know that now. The only “antinomians” and “hyper-Calvinists” the PRC actually cared to fight were those who rebuked her for denying justification by faith alone and the unconditional

covenant and displacing the work of Christ (!), which is to say, no antinomians at all but those who were contending earnestly for the gospel that the PRC was busy undermining at the seminary, from her pulpits, and in her writing. Professor Engelsma now repeats the slander that has been the line and explanation of the controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches since the beginning.

The behavior of the PRC may be likened to that of the French after World War I, who at great expense of men, money, and material built the Maginot Line to protect themselves from a German assault that came in the back door of Belgium. The French neither learned the lessons of World War I, nor did they listen to the warnings they were given prior to the invasion, and they were completely overrun. Having built a Maginot Line against the hyper-Calvinists, who will never threaten them, the PRC will be overrun by the conditional theology that does.

As a result of all this—and some shady church political maneuvering—there is no longer a doctrinal controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches. Those who carried it on against the false doctrine that was being preached and written have been ousted or are in the process of being ousted. I say *ousted* because when the departing church makes decisions that are evil, then she drives the people of God out of their inheritance as really as if they were removed by vote. The apostatizing church departs; she departs from the truth and from the people of God and by her intolerable decisions drives her children from her home as really as a mother who says that her children must do evil in order to live in her home drives them away from her house. The fleeing of the children cannot be blamed on them but must be blamed on the intolerable regime of the mother.

Having driven out many of her children, the PRC now will have her peace. The recent jaunty report in the *Standard Bearer* about the last Protestant Reformed synod makes that plain. The peace will be the peace of the graveyard—or of the theological museum—where the tombs of the dead prophets are built and they are praised to the heights, while prayers of thanksgiving are offered that the prophets are dead. This is true. I would ask the editors of the *Standard Bearer* whether they would have liked Rev. Herman Hoeksema as the editor of the *Standard Bearer* during the recent theological controversy that the PRC went through. They would not have. They never agreed with the way Hoeksema wrote publicly against the false doctrine in 1953 and criticized him for it. He is fine as long as he stays in a book, preferably a very old and not a very well-read book. So little are they his heirs at the editorship of the *Standard Bearer* that the editors closed the pages of the magazine to Protestant Reformed ministers in the middle of a doctrinal controversy in a stunning

historical repeat of what the Christian Reformed Church did to Hoeksema. Then when those ministers started their own magazine, the *Standard Bearer* editors screamed “Schism” and “Slander,” or got others to scream “Schism” and “Slander” for them.

Having driven out many of her children, the Protestant Reformed Churches will be left with the theology of Professor Cammenga (Christ is not enough) and Reverend Koole (If a man will be saved, there is that which he must do) and with the inane analyses of Professor Dykstra (There was no false doctrine taught). The denomination will have neutered ministers who are unable or terrified to engage in theological controversy, or worse, able teachers of false doctrine and a deadly peace.

That is the thing about false doctrine. It is like a cancer. It must be diagnosed by the doctor. If the doctor tells you that you have gout when you really have cancer, then you die of cancer. Having diagnosed the cancer, the doctor must eradicate it, or it comes back. The PRC suffered from bad physicians who engaged in theological malpractice on a grand scale. The physicians misdiagnosed the disease and worse. It is bad enough when the patient has cancer that the doctor tells him he has gout; but then worse, when the patient’s cancer is diagnosed, that the doctor continues to say the patient has gout and then prescribes an excruciating remedy. So the patient not only dies of untreated cancer but also all the while suffers in agony from the incompetent treatment of his nonexistent gout. The physicians of the PRC, with the patient writhing in agony with treatable cancer for five years, all shouted that the patient had gout (antinomianism). Once the cancer (denying justification and the unconditional covenant) was diagnosed, they continued to shout that the patient had gout and treated that gout with agonizing doses of Herman Witsius. The Protestant Reformed Churches may have such physicians.

The exchange, then, between Professor Engelsma and Reverend Lanning is too late for the PRC. It should have happened years ago. Professor Engelsma’s arguments will serve two purposes in the denomination, as I see it.

First, those who could not care less about the doctrinal controversy—or doctrine generally, whether Engelsma’s or Lanning’s—will console themselves that everything is fine in the PRC and that the issue was after all a pack of radical, hyper-Calvinistic, antinomian schismatics who have—*finally*—been driven out and now are definitely and definitively exposed by Professor Engelsma. Many of these people will cheer without ever having bothered to read the exchange or think about the arguments. It is enough for them that Professor Engelsma has said so.

Second, those who are interested in using Professor

Engelsma for their purposes—they did not particularly care for his writing before this but find him useful now—will drive the issue of man’s preceding God in the experience of salvation in a supposed defense of the gospel against nonexistent hyper-Calvinists. It will be an explanation of the fellowship of the covenant that does not in fact do justice to the mutuality of the covenant and the believer’s experience, but which makes the covenant bilateral and is a denial of the unconditionality of the covenant at the point of the believer’s experience and his activity in the covenant. It will be the teaching of man’s preceding God at the vital point of his experience and the assurance of his salvation and God’s love of him. Professor Engelsma’s response will serve no positive purpose for the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Profitable for Development

However, the exchange is very profitable for the Reformed Protestant Churches: the reason for her existence is about covenant fellowship; conscious covenant fellowship; assurance of covenant fellowship; the experience of covenant fellowship. The reason for her existence is about what might be called the *mutuality of the covenant* and how this is to be explained. I want to thank Professor Engelsma for coming to and stating the heart of the issue between us. Finally, a clear statement about what we have been fighting about for five years.

He dismissed this issue in his protest to Synod 2017. He made it strictly about justification and the exegesis of John 14:6, but the issue of covenant fellowship never went away. Justification in relationship to the covenant is precisely about how the believer has peace with his God, lives in peace with God, and is assured of God’s favor toward him. Justification is very much concerned with the believer’s experience and conscious enjoyment of God as his God. John 14:6 is about coming to the Father, and that surely involves this issue of the covenant, for Christ was talking to his disciples, who had grown up with the law of Moses and had been circumcised the eighth day and were all good Jews. They were in the sphere of the covenant. He taught them that in the covenant, initially and always, no man comes to the Father but by Jesus Christ, and no man comes but the one who is drawn by the Father. Christ taught that in covenant fellowship, in its experience, in its enjoyment, in its assurance, and in its mutuality, God is absolutely sovereign, is first, precedes, and draws. Article 26 of the Belgic Confession uses John 14:6 to the same purpose and speaks about the believer’s coming to God through Christ in prayer—covenant fellowship in which the believer draws near to God and communes with the God of his salvation.

The issue always was this matter of the experience

of fellowship in the covenant and now especially as that matter comes to a head in such passages as Malachi 3:7, James 4:8, and 2 Chronicles 15:1–7. I lament that Professor Engelsma and I now find ourselves in different churches and on opposite sides of this issue. I do not agree with his analysis of Malachi 3 or the other passages. I will grant him that the passages are talking about the call of the gospel. I will not grant him the rest. But he has sharpened me as no other in this whole controversy over the past five or more years. He has stated the issues clearer and more forcefully than any, and for that he is to be commended. He may insult us that we are merely a pack of the ultra-orthodox, the proverbial two hundred percenters, but with the very forcefulness of his language he agrees with us that this matter is one of truth and lie, orthodoxy and unorthodoxy, and above all is deadly serious—a matter in which the very gospel of Jesus Christ is at stake.

The position that he stakes out is not new. It is perhaps a development, but it is not new. While I was in seminary in his Old Testament history class, he said that the task of a Protestant Reformed minister is to develop the mutuality of the covenant. He said this specifically, as I remember, in connection with our extended treatment of 2 Chronicles 15:1–7. In this instruction he referred favorably to volume 3 of Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* and his treatment of the doctrine of the covenant. Professor Engelsma noted at length that Herman Bavinck taught an unconditional covenant. My professor stressed that within that framework of the unconditional character of the covenant controlled by election, there is development to do in the doctrine of the covenant, especially concerning its mutuality. Then he referred to Bavinck's statement that the covenant, established unilaterally, is destined to become bilateral. Knowing that the word *bilateral* was for a seminary student in the Protestant Reformed seminary about the same as saying *conditional*, Professor Engelsma explained that what Bavinck referred to was the mutuality of the covenant. The mutuality of the covenant he laid before me as the work of the Protestant Reformed theologian. I never forgot that. I do not know if I questioned my professor in class regarding that whole matter of Bavinck's using the word *bilateral*, but I never forgot the exhortation. There was work to do on the doctrine of the covenant, and it

Professor Engelsma has stated the denomination's position: in the realm of experience and assurance, *there is that which man must do to be saved*. In this realm man precedes God, and man's activity is that upon which the blessing of God depends.

involved what Professor Engelsma called *the mutuality of the covenant* and what Herman Bavinck called *bilateral*.

This is important because Herman Bavinck used the word *bilateral*. He said that the covenant is destined to become bilateral. Now *bilateral* and *mutual* are very different terms. In theology *bilateral* has come to mean *conditional*. It simply has that usage. The bilateral covenant means the conditional covenant established with God as one party and man as another party. The term *bilateral* means two parties involved. *Mutual* means or intends to teach that the covenant is a real relationship between God and his people. The covenant is a relationship; and for a relationship to be a relationship, it must be reciprocal, or mutual. There are in all covenants contained two parts. You cannot have a relationship with a rock.

Professor Engelsma in this recent exchange has come to the heart of the issue: *in explanation of the mutuality of the covenant*—for surely no one denies that the covenant is mutual and indeed a real relationship between the triune God and his elect people in Christ—is it proper to explain as part of the mutuality of the covenant that there is an activity of man that precedes an activity of God in any sense? Further, is it necessary in order to maintain that the covenant is a real relationship between God and his people to explain that there is an activity of man that precedes the blessing of God? Is this the only and necessary way to maintain the mutuality of the covenant, the responsibility of man, and the activity of man?

In this exchange we are in the realm of the mutuality of the covenant. No one will deny that. The text in question was preached in Malachi's day to Israel, and in our day it was preached to a living church, the manifestation of the Israel of God in the New Testament. It was preached to those long familiar with God's word and law, his doctrine and commandments. It was preached in the sphere of the covenant. It was preached to those who could be accused of straying from Jehovah in his covenant. It was preached as the word of the sovereign Jehovah God. So we are in the realm of the covenant. We are in the covenant, among the baptized and circumcised, and regarding the elect we are in the realm of the communion and fellowship of the covenant people of God with God as their God. Now in that sphere of the covenant is it proper to speak of an activity of man that precedes a blessing of God? And the issue is not merely a

temporal one: first this; then this; then this. But the issue is very much a theological one and involves the theology of salvation. Professor Engelsma admits this and states it repeatedly. We are dealing with the explanation of salvation, of the covenant, of repentance, and of blessing. We are talking—not to put too fine a point on it—of the elect, regenerated, justified, and sanctified child of God’s relationship with his God, in which relationship he has strayed from his God and is walking in sin.

Now Professor Engelsma says that there is a certain, important, and specific sense in which an activity of man precedes the blessing of God. Such he says is the plain, idiot-proof meaning of Malachi 3:7, James 4:8 (I would add 2 Chronicles 15:1–7), and any other similar passage of scripture where God says, “Seek me, return to me, repent, believe,” and the like. In all of these passages, there is a specific, important sense in which an activity of man precedes the blessing of God. When asked what this sense is, Professor Engelsma replies that it has to do with the experience of salvation and the assurance of salvation. In the experience of salvation and in the assurance of salvation, the activity of man precedes the blessing of God, not merely in the temporal sense. This is his settled doctrine of experience and assurance in the covenant of grace. There is an activity of man that precedes the blessing of God.

Answering the obvious question, how can man precede God, he explains that God comes to men in the call of the gospel, in which call there is grace and Christ and in which call God allures his people to himself with the promise of blessing. Professor Engelsma says that God has the last word. God calls them. They by nature say, “I will not,” and yet God has the last word; they come to him. He says that God has the last word; but with regard to the experience and assurance of man, there is an activity of man, worked by the grace of God, of course, wherein man precedes God and in the way of which God gives a blessing, and without which there is no blessing.

If I may be permitted an explanation of the professor’s doctrine as stated in this exchange, it is this: God draws nigh to us in the call of the gospel but not all the way because we have not drawn nigh to him yet. God draws nigh to us but stands partly afar off because we have not drawn nigh to him. God calls and by the effectual call draws us, so that our drawing near (by God’s call) is before God’s drawing near to us in our experience and after, of course, he has already drawn near to us in the call, but not totally drawn near to us because we have not drawn near to him (by grace, of course, not in our own strength, of course, and by the call—by which he draws near us—but not all the way draws near to us, but only stands afar off calling sweetly and tenderly and makes us

draw near to him, and after which he draws near to us).

Is that clear?

Professor Engelsma says that to deny this is the same as and as obvious as a denial of Genesis 1.

Herman Bavinck, for all his brilliance, was wrong to speak of the covenant as being destined to become bilateral. The covenant is never in any sense whatsoever bilateral any more than the covenant in any sense is conditional. The covenant is mutual, but that is not bilateral. There is real friendship, a real relationship between God and his people, but that is not bilateral. There are two *parts* in the covenant; there are never two *parties*. There are two parts in the covenant, and the parts are mutually related.

The question is, how is this mutuality to be explained? When God comes and declares in the gospel, “Return to me, draw near to me, seek me,” and all the rest, how is that to be explained? And when scripture places the matter so strikingly as to reveal God saying, “Draw near to me, and I will draw near to you,” what is it teaching by that language? Is the whole point of that language to teach that there is an activity of man that precedes the blessing of God? Is the whole point of that language to teach that man is active and actively believes?

I do not believe this is the point of the language, because teaching that there is an activity of man that precedes the blessing of God is fundamentally Pelagian, however the one who teaches it may howl that he is not a Pelagian. These passages that are in question in this exchange are not fundamentally different from Christ’s words calling his people to come to him and promising that all who do will find rest. Is the emphasis on man’s activity of coming to Christ? Is it all about man? Man must come, man must believe, man must repent, man must draw near, man must seek God, and all the emphasis is on man? Without that activity of man, man receives nothing from God? Appeals to grace do not change the charge either, because the Pelagians, Rome, the Arminians, and the teachers of a conditional covenant all always appeal to grace.

The emphasis of these passages is on God and his calling—his powerful, effectual, irresistible, infallible calling. What we are dealing with in all of these passages is the call of the gospel in the covenant—the preaching of the gospel within the sphere of the covenant. I maintain that Malachi 3:7, James 4:8, and 2 Chronicles 15:1–7 are not essentially different from Matthew 11:28–30, Acts 2:38–39, and Acts 16:30–31, and the answer to the exegetical questions of Malachi 3:7, James 4:8, and 2 Chronicles 15:1–7 may not be essentially different from the explanation of Acts 16:30–31 and the rest. All the passages involve the call of the gospel, or I will at least grant that argument because Professor Engelsma makes the issue the call of the gospel and really every admonition of scripture.

My question is, what is the Protestant Reformed interpretation of Acts 16:30–31? Not what has the PRC done in the *Standard Bearer* with that passage of late? But when the truth was on the line, when men were preaching calling and responsibility, and conditions were being introduced subtly in the preaching, what was the Protestant Reformed explanation of that passage? Everyone knows. It was not nonsense.

Unfinished Business

There is the unfinished business in the Protestant Reformed Churches of Rev. Ken Koole's article in the *Standard Bearer* on Herman Hoeksema's sermon on Acts 16:30–31. In his article Koole ridiculed Reverend Hoeksema's exegesis of the text because as any idiot can see, the apostle did not say, "Nothing, do nothing." The words of the text inspired by the Holy Ghost were, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ," and that in response to the question, "What must I DO to be saved?" Reverend Hoeksema was plainly denying the very words of the text and not doing them justice. As any idiot can plainly see, *there is something that a man must do to be saved.*

Professor Engelsma knows of this because he was involved in that miserable exchange that went nowhere because no one after him was allowed to write about it in the *Standard Bearer*. In the text the apostle Paul responded to the question of the Philippian jailor. The jailor had asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." Reverend Hoeksema explained that memorably as, "Do nothing, nothing but believe." And he specifically addressed the issue of man's responsibility and activity. Man's responsibility means that no one has the right not to believe. All men must believe. All who do will be saved. All who do not will be damned. All men must be called to believe. Believing is also an activity of man worked by the gospel. No one denied any of these things. But that is *not* the gospel: the call, the urgent, serious call of the gospel in the text was "Believe," which call meant to do nothing for your salvation.

Reverend Koole, of course, which anyone who cares to remembers, ridiculed that and spoke about *his* full-orbed gospel and new phrases to prompt godliness. One of those new phrases to prompt godliness and responsibility was, "If a man would be saved, there is that which he *must* do." Of course, all of this is to be explained because the people are regenerated, the gospel is a powerful call, and

the Holy Spirit works in a man. But man must really do it! That is the emphasis. That is the message. After all the talk about grace, the Holy Spirit, regeneration, and the rest of the wiggle words, the real point of the message is that man **MUST** do it, **MAN** must do it, man must **DO IT**. Recognizing the obviously offensive character of that, Reverend Koole added words such as *experientially* and *in his conscience* and *consciously*, so that if a man would experientially know salvation in Christ, *there is that which he must do*. All of this was a distraction from the main issue, which was that Koole was teaching that the call of the gospel teaches that *if a man would be saved, there is that which he must do*. He sailed the ship right into Arminian waters.

That was not merely an exegetical point, but it served a theological point in the midst of a doctrinal controversy about the covenant that only *after you do something do you get something; man precedes God*. You do the repenting and believing, and God gives the experience and salvation. Reverend Koole made a point in his initial article and in later articles of emphasizing that he was talking about *the experience of salvation*. He moved the whole matter into the realm of experience—the objective explanation of salvation versus the experience of salvation.

This is unfinished business in the Protestant Reformed Churches. The denomination may not waffle on this matter. Either she has Hoeksema's do nothing or she has Koole's do something, and Professor Engelsma has come down squarely on the side of Reverend Koole's do something, by grace of course and by the call of course—but *do something*. The Protestant Reformed Churches must come to an understanding on this. I think the denomination already has. She has jettisoned Hoeksema and embraced Koole. She has made up her mind that she will never be accused again of being Reformed with a tendency to one-sidedness.

And this is the result of unfinished business that goes back to the report of the majority committee that came to the May session of Classis East in 1953. That report never was repudiated. That report was a defense of conditions. That report explained in explicit—some might say exquisite and others might say excruciating—detail how and in what context a Protestant Reformed minister could preach and teach conditions in salvation, of course so long as he used the right words, such as *in the way of* and the like. After all, De Wolf himself insisted that he was not tied too much to the word *condition*, only as long as the substance remained. His colleagues agreed and found the way for his

I do not see any discernible difference between what Professor Engelsma has written and the theology of the 1953 majority report.

statements to be defended: we are not talking about the *initial* entrance into the kingdom but the *daily* entrance into the kingdom, which pretty soon would become a distinction without a difference. I do not see any discernible difference between what Professor Engelsma has written and the theology of the 1953 majority report.

The issue again is not that the word *condition* is used or not used, but what does conditional preaching sound like, and in what context is that preaching desirable and indeed necessary? The report made clear that such preaching is not desirable when the issue is the initial entering into the kingdom of heaven or into the covenant of grace. That kind of preaching is, however, desirable when talking about the daily experience of entering the kingdom: that kind of preaching is desirable when the issue is experience and assurance. If a man would be saved—consciously, experientially—there is that which he must do. If a man would have God draw near to him—experientially—he must first draw near to God.

The Protestant Reformed Churches were rocked by controversy for years. As that controversy is now finished for the PRC, Professor Engelsma has stated the denomination's position: in the realm of experience and assurance, *there is that which man must do to be saved*. In this realm man precedes God, and man's activity in this realm is that upon which the blessing of God depends.

Experience is Salvation

What of this matter of man's experience? Is it true that when we come into the realm of experience, we may begin to speak of man's preceding God? It must be emphasized strongly over against the false doctrine that has appeared in the PRC that the experience of salvation *is* salvation. So it must be insisted that what is true of experience is true of salvation, what you say of experience you say of salvation, your doctrine of experience *is* your doctrine of salvation. That is the fact of it. Justification *is* the experience of justification. Sanctification *is* the experience of it. And still more, man is such a liar that he needs God's word and truth to tell him what his experience is; otherwise he will get it wrong and put himself into places and take honors for himself that he does not deserve.

Now one can kick and scream against that, and holler and yell that the *plain* word of God says, "Turn and I will turn to you" or something similar to that. But the word of God says, "If" frequently too. The word of God says, "There is no God." It is that same kind of insistence that we are only talking about the *plain sense* that false teachers down through the ages have used to corrupt the word of God.

Then there is that whole matter of the distinction that is being made between *turning* and *falling*. Professor Engelsma makes a big point of this in his criticism of

Reverend Lanning's sermon. If the point is that if you are falling, you cannot be expected to stop yourself; but if you are turning, then you can be asked to turn yourself; then I deny the distinction between the two terms. Man can as little stop himself from falling as man can turn himself to the living God. But the living voice of the living God can as easily stop a man from falling as he can turn a man in his apostasy from God. The difference in analogy makes no difference as to the *substance* of the doctrine. *Turn* is not used instead of *fall* to emphasize what man can do. If the fact that the word *turn* is so important is because man can turn, whereas man cannot stop falling, then I say, "Interpret *turn* as *fall*, because the point of the text is that man can as little turn himself as he can stop falling. Both are equally impossible." That man turns to God when God says, "Turn" is as easy for God as that man stops falling and ascends to God when God says, "Stop falling." Both are to be explained the same way.

The analogy of all this is exactly the one to which Professor Engelsma referred when he said that a denial of his explanation of Malachi, James, and other passages is as much and as plain a denial of the word of God as a denial of Genesis 1. But he must consider that in Genesis 1 God called the things that are not as though they were, and by that call he made the light to stand out of darkness. The light was not in some specific and important sense first. And Professor Engelsma will say that any idiot knows that light is inanimate and not rational and moral, and so that does not hold. But then I would point him to the analogy that the apostle uses to explain the call of the gospel, always, at all times, and everywhere, whether the words are *come, seek, turn, or believe*: "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). The call creates what it speaks; calls into being what it says; moves, draws, turns, and saves; and that according to God's eternal good pleasure. Many are called, few are chosen. The promise is to all who are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

In the call of God, when he says, "Turn, draw near, repent, believe," the child of God does not hear the voice of the law but of Christ in the gospel. In that call God does not stand afar off or hold himself aloof from his children until they do something by his grace, and then God gives himself to them as a result. Rather, God calls, and in the very calling of his children, he draws near them. In the very call of the gospel, his child hears God speak to him and *experiences* God as his God speaking to him, as Christ says, "My sheep hear my voice, and they know me and are known of me, and they follow me." Because I

hear God speak to me, as the result of God's speaking to me, in the power of the call, I draw near to God, repent, believe, turn, or however else one wants to describe it. All the emphasis when God says, "Draw near to me, and I will draw near to you" is on God and the work of God to save his people. None of the emphasis is on man and what man must do to be saved.

Saying this does not prohibit or hinder me from preaching the call urgently and everywhere God sends me with the gospel. It explains why I give the call. I know that God will work his sovereign good pleasure by it; a savor of life to life and of death to death; dividing man asunder by the powerful voice of him who always speaks in the church; turning in repentance and hardening in unbelief; drawing near to him or pushing away far from him. The relationship between God and his people in the covenant—the covenant mutuality—is always out of God, for all things, including covenant fellowship, covenant mutuality, and covenant experience are of God, through God, and to God. There is never a sense in which an activity of man precedes God's blessing. God's blessing, his eternal and unchanging favor toward his people, is the cause and explanation of their part and their fulfillment of their part in the covenant of grace.

The relationship between the two parts of the baptism form is that God does his part and fulfills his promise, and as the infallible result man becomes active, believes, repents, and the rest. The mutuality of the covenant is that man's activity in the covenant is always the result of God's, always follows God, and is always the fruit of God's blessing. The very fellowship of the believer with God in every respect is of God; its very experience is of God.

An Invitation

Professor Engelsma can turn on us now with vigor because we have left the Protestant Reformed Churches. I will not lament his strong language. I do not care if he used the word *idiot* or calls us devils, if that is what we are being. I would ask him to consider *why* he treats his theological sons worse than he treats outright deniers of the gospel. What is our sin? Why does he repeat now the slander of our enemies? I note that I have no problem with a vigorous argument, even with him. I do not relish it, but if it is necessary—and in this case it is necessary—I will do it.

But my question is: having vanquished us antinomians

My question is: having vanquished us antinomians and hyper-Calvinists, will he turn on the false theology that is threatening his denomination?

and hyper-Calvinists, will he turn on the false theology that is threatening his denomination? I will make it easy for him to inquire of his colleagues by including their names; perhaps he will send out a blistering email against them. Does he agree with grace that is available (Koole); that there is something man must do to be saved (Koole); with the use of the conditional covenant theologian Witsius (Koole); with justification in the final judgment by our works, so that God finds out who believes in the final judgment by works (Bruinsma); with two rails to heaven (Van Overloop); that Christ is not enough (Cammenga); that there are aspects of our salvation that Christ did not personally accomplish (!) (Cammenga)? *All of that is a lot about man.* I do not see how these are any different than that in some specific, important, and vital sense—experience and assurance (!)—there is an activity of man that precedes the activity of God. *Which also is a lot about man.*

Further, I do not believe that his emails were written to me or to Reverend Lanning or to anyone who left the Protestant Reformed Churches. They were written for the PRC to dissuade anyone from leaving by making us look like a pile of radicals, like those who have fallen off our theological rockers, those who are reactionary, and those

who now confirm with our preaching the charge that has always been raised against us that we are antinomians and hyper-Calvinists.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. I would remind him that we are his most congenial disciples, even if we do disagree with him on a point and he is embarrassed by us now. We have taken him dead seriously. He has helped us sharpen. We have listened, read, digested, considered, learned from, and been taught by him. He might do us the courtesy of remembering that.

I also want to make sure that he knows that we have not closed our pages to him. He should stop pretending that he is surprised that his emails get around. He knows that they will get around. He writes them to get around. He may write more of them, and we will answer them. But I want him to know that he may write against us in these pages. I will give him space in my own rubric to do it, if he wants to. But I fear he has written us off. I fear he is blinded by his love for the institute of the PRC. I am sorry for that. I am sorry for him. I never thought it would come to this. But God's ways are in the sea, and his footsteps are unknown.

—NJL



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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

Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the LORD. —Jeremiah 1:8

Brethren, be not afraid of the faces of men. Necessary exhortation! For, oh, how the face of man can make one's heart quail. The face of a brother, a father, a mother, a spouse, a friend. Or the face of a powerful one in the church or in the world. It is our wretched idolatry to quiver before the face of man, for we regard the truth of God less than the face of man. Who wants to stand face to face with such a one and confess God and Christ and grace and truth over against that beloved? To look into the face of the powerful and to say to him, "You are wrong"? To see the face of our beloved cloud with shock and anger and bitterness and hatred? To see the heart of the powerful harden toward us, as reflected in the hard look of his face? And to know that the price of standing face to face with such a man is the loss of all of one's name and all of one's life?

So it was for Jeremiah. God called him to speak God's hard words of rebuke to the hard-hearted church members of Judah and Jerusalem. God told Jeremiah that the kings, the princes, the priests, and the people would fight against him. And so they did. Jeremiah's own family in Anathoth plotted to kill him; when the people ever deigned to listen to his rebuke, they took personal offense at it; the priests and the prophets laid hold on him and accused him; men threw him into prison and clapped him in the painful, limb-twisting stocks; the princes demanded his death; the king connived at his being cast into the pit; the people kidnapped him and brought him to Egypt. So many faces arrayed against him for forty years!

So many faces arrayed against you from now until your death.

But, brethren, be not afraid of the faces of men.

They are only men! Dear men, close men, powerful men. They can break your bones and break your body and break your heart. But they are only men.

After all, what saith Jehovah? "I am with thee to deliver thee!"

Jehovah too has a face. In his face he reveals his thoughts. Just as a man's heart can be read on his face, so Jehovah reveals all the content of his heart on his face. And what is upon Jehovah's face as he looks upon his elect people in their sorrows and persecutions? This: He makes his face shine upon them and is gracious unto them. He lifts up the light of his countenance upon them and gives them peace. He is with his people, and his face is upon them. Therefore, nothing shall overcome them, not even the gates of hell. They are bathed forever in the light of the grace and favor of their God. This face of God is revealed in the holy gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

Brethren, be not afraid of the faces of men. "For I am with thee to deliver thee," saith Jehovah.