

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

# SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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

Deuteronomy 33:29

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*Sword and Shield* is a monthly periodical published by Reformed Believers Publishing.

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All quotations from scripture are from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.

Quotations from the Reformed and ecumenical creeds, Church Order, and liturgical forms are taken from *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), unless otherwise noted.

Every writer is solely responsible for the content of his own writing.

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2705 48th Ave  
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325 84th St SW, Suite 102  
Byron Center, MI 49315  
Website: [reformedbelieverspub.org](http://reformedbelieverspub.org)  
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*Although the fig tree shall not blossom,  
Neither shall fruit be in the vines;  
The labour of the olive shall fail,  
And the fields shall yield no meat;  
The flock shall be cut off from the fold,  
And there shall be no herd in the stalls:  
Yet I will rejoice in the LORD,  
I will joy in the God of my salvation.  
The LORD God is my strength,  
And he will make my feet like hinds' feet,  
And he will make me to walk upon mine high places.*  
—Habakkuk 3:17–19

**P**rofound thanksgiving, beloved! The absolute antithesis of the thanksgiving of the world. The believer's thanksgiving is profound. The world's thanksgiving is superficial. These two stand opposed in every respect: the one of grace; the other of the flesh; the one lasting; the other fleeting as a shadow dependent upon the shining of the light; the one in God, the God of our salvation; the other in things, and no better than a swine's whose trough is full.

You can find a superficial thanksgiving anywhere. In many churches and in many hearts, there is an abundance of superficial thanksgiving. Superficial thanksgiving for the abundance of earthly things—a joy in that earthly abundance and rejoicing because of that earthly abundance. Superficial thanksgiving leaps for joy at abundance and is thrown into disquiet and curses in time of lack. It is a thanksgiving that is rooted in an earthly mind that is of the earth. It is the thanksgiving of those whose god is their belly and who mind earthly things. You will see that on vivid display this year.

Superficial thanksgiving is also present with us. The thanksgiving of the natural man is only and can only be thanks of this kind. If he minds a god at all as he is stuffing his face with food, he gives a superficial prayer of thanks for the many things that he has and that he has gotten—thanks to his god—with his own ingenuity, intelligence, and hard labors. He rejoices that his god has smiled on him for the year, as is so evident to his carnal mind in the abundance that he possesses, having more than heart could wish.

More common will be thanksgiving to the gods of fortune, mammon, markets, and economic improvement—the rank praise of his savvy, farsightedness, and skill. Regardless of form, it is superficial thanksgiving.

The proof? If you take away the abundance, the thanksgiving evaporates too. The rejoicing will be replaced by

cursing when the abundance that came so quickly disappears as quickly.

The believer's thanksgiving is antithetical.

Habakkuk was a prophet, but he was first of all a believer. He lived during a terrible time in the church. The church, as far as the outward and the majority were concerned, had long ago departed from God. It was a carnal and rotten church. The church was wrapped up in earthly success and the abundance of earthly things. In that church, for the sake of earthly success, there were also all kinds of oppression, and perhaps that oppression explains in some part Habakkuk's lack.

He hears clearly the prophecy of God's coming, bitter judgment in the Chaldeans and again in God's overthrow of the Chaldeans. A tumultuous and unstable time. He speaks now as a believer—a believer in response to the word of his God. A resolve to give thanks, an expression of profound thanksgiving.

The rejoicing and leaping for joy of the believer here are part of our thanksgiving. When the prophet speaks of his joy and his rejoicing, he is speaking of thanksgiving. The entire life of the believer is thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is obedience to the law of God out of faith, and thanksgiving is chiefly prayer to God. So with a joyful and thankful heart, the believer prays to God to thank him for all things because he is the believer's God. Our singing is also part of our thanksgiving—to sing from the heart and to rejoice before God. Especially is public worship part of our thanksgiving. Much of the superficiality that passes for thanksgiving is that it is completely unconnected with the public worship of God. Habakkuk's words were intended to be part of the public worship of the nation of Israel because he wrote instructions to the chief singer and thus for the temple worship of God. We give thanks with God's people in public worship, united in profound thanksgiving to God, singing and praying to him.

Rejoicing and leaping for joy characterize that thanksgiving.

A bitter man does not give thanks. He complains, howls, growls, and curses God, sometimes in his heart in the very public worship of God. But he does not give thanks. He is seething inside, sullen and rebellious.

The man who is joyful gives thanks. And importantly, his joy is a victory. He exults. He is upon high places. He is like a hind, free! Joyfulness is basically happiness and is connected with contentment. He is free in his contentment. Being content, he is joyful; and being joyful, he is content. Out of that freedom and joy, he gives thanks.

Yet!

Yet in the face of relentless, numbing, destructive calamity, he will rejoice and joy and give thanks.

You have to admit that the situation of the believer here in the passage is terrible. It is not profoundly joyful. It is profoundly terrible. In sharp contrast with his joy stands the reality of his earthly situation. Here we have the description of the complete devastation of the believer's life. As far as this man's earthly estate is concerned, there is hardly a worse one that can be conceived. There is here one calamity after another. That is the worst kind of calamity—one after the other in succession and without letup. When calamities come in succession, their force is magnified. Here is one calamity after another: first the figs, then the olives, then the fields, then the flocks, and then the herds. One devastating failure after another. One piece of bad news and then another. Every sphere of his life is affected. From figs to flocks, nothing of his earthly estate has been left untouched.

And as it were after much toil and perhaps some promise.

It is one thing if the failure comes from the beginning. But here the failure comes after much trouble and toil and after even some promise of hope. The labor of the olive deceives! The prophet is referring to his own labor in his olive trees and to the fact that the trees put forth their leaves and bloom. It appears that, although the figs and vines failed, at least there will be the olives. But, alas, the olives fail too; deceptively, they also fail, after much promise. There is nothing. And then the flocks and herds are gone. Probably, some stolen by a robber, more mauled by a wild beast, and the rest emaciated and dead or dying from lack of food or water. With them the last of the prophet's hope is gone.

For the believer today also, there are many toils, shattered hopes, deceptive signs of turn-around, and great disappointments. First the weather was too warm, then it was too cold, then there was too much rain, and after that drought, and here a storm and hail and there thieves and robbers. Crushing disappointment on every front. His business failed. His truck is gone. His house is gone. His money is gone. His food is gone. At last only the large bills remain.

Your heart breaks for him because he is flesh and blood too. He eats bread and water like you. His muscles are weary with labor, his bones ache from struggle, and his hopes shatter too. You cannot come to him with the superficial word, "You had a bad year this year, but it will all even out in the end. You will have a better year next year." You cannot come to him with the stoic indifference that riches and poverty are the same. You cannot exhort him any longer that he must pull himself together and pull through. He has nothing left. He is going to be hungry. His children cry too. No, your heart breaks for him, and with every piece of news you feel worse and worse for him.

Indeed, because he is a church man, when you hear of his latest loss, you go to see him and to bring him some comfort. As you approach his house and are mulling over what to say to him, you stop, and your ears tune into the lusty voice reverberating through the house and spilling out of the window. He is singing! You come to him, and he stops singing and thanks you for coming. What was he singing? Something like this: "God is King forever: let the nations tremble..." and, "Merciful as mighty, He delights in justice..." and, "He forgave their sins, although they felt His chast'ning rod"! You are about to speak, and he interrupts you and tells you that he rejoices in God as the God of his salvation. He praises and gives thanks. He does not merely endure his calamity; he does not merely undergo his affliction; but he rejoices.

That is profound thanksgiving!

His song, understand, is not of the abundance, or even the adequacy, of earthly things. The object of his rejoicing is not and clearly cannot be earthly things because he has nothing left. He has lost all.

Yet!

Yet he rejoices.

It is one thing to give thanks for prosperity. That kind of thanksgiving is commonplace. It is by nature in our hearts too. It is the thanksgiving of the natural man. With his mouth stuffed and his round belly full, he can muster enough strength to mumble some thanks for good things. The natural man is like a pig that snorts and grunts because his trough is full. That is a kind of beastly thanksgiving, and it is not thanksgiving at all. The joy of that thanksgiving is beastly too. The moment there is adversity and his trough is empty, the natural man belows and howls.

Neither is the believer's song without mention of earthly things. It is not that he fails to give thanks for earthly things. He gives thanks for them. He confesses that he does. He says, "Although the fig tree shall not blossom." In that he implies that if the fig tree did blossom, he would still rejoice with the same rejoicing, but his rejoicing is not changed because the fig tree does not

blossom. That is because this profound thanksgiving does not have earthly things as its object.

Neither is his song merely a mournful and woe-filled song of self-pity or a litany of his devastating losses. He obviously feels keenly the losses. He can tell you his losses. He does so in the text. He tells you that his figs are gone, his wine is gone, his oil is gone, his flocks are gone, and his herds are gone. He tells you, but that is not what he sings.

He rejoices in the midst of his losses!

We are not there very often. In principle we are there. This is the profound thanksgiving of a believer. This is always his thanksgiving from his new heart. But we are not on this mountain of faith very often. That is because we do not live in the presence of God as we should. The believer's song, his profound song of thanksgiving, is of God and his salvation. The believer rejoices in the midst of this trouble because he rejoices in Jehovah and glories in the God of his salvation.

His joy is not dependent on earthly things or the abundance of earthly things, but upon God. His thanksgiving is not dependent on earthly things or their abundance, but upon God's salvation.

As superficial thanksgiving has as its object earthly things, so profound thanksgiving has God as its object.

The prophet here lives in the presence of God and sees in the coming of all these things nothing but God. God takes up all his vision.

The prophet sees a sovereign Lord, the I AM THAT I AM, who does not change, who made all things, and who upholds and governs all things by his sovereign power. The prophet sees in his entire calamity nothing but the work of the sovereign Lord. The Lord who is absolute ruler over all, who decreed all things, and who decreed all these things. The Lord who likewise upholds all things, who governs all things, and who upholds the believer and governs all these things for the believer.

He does not see a storm come and destroy his crops, but he sees God behind it. He does not see a cloud of locusts come and eat his fields, but he sees God's hand. He does not see his sheep cut off, but he sees God's work. Jehovah gave, and Jehovah takes away, and blessed be the name of Jehovah! He sees God come from Teman and the Holy One from Mount Paran, his glory covering the heaven and his chariots pulled by mighty beasts charging over land and sea.

Yet if that is all that he would see, then he must tremble and quake, and rottenness would enter his bones because he is a sinner before that God, unthankful and unrighteous and far more attached to his olive trees, vines, sheep, and oxen than to his God. He knows that very often deep down he loved those things far more than he loved God. He knows better than anyone that he was not always so profoundly thankful, that often he was

earthly-minded and minded earthly things and that his thanksgiving was superficial. And before the coming of the righteous God, he must be undone.

But that is not all he sees. He sees in the coming of that God the coming of Jehovah, the unchangeable God of the covenant promises, whose mercies fail not and whose compassions know no bound. He sees not just God but the God of his salvation. Who is merciful as mighty! The God who in wrath remembers mercy, who has given commandment to save his servants, and who has decreed their salvation from eternity in his unfailing and unchanging love for them.

The God of his salvation who is revealed in Jesus Christ. He saved the believer from his sin, from its guilt and from its dominion, and set him in the fellowship of his covenant of grace. God released him from the bondage to sin, Satan, and earthly-mindedness. The God who comes in all these calamities is the same God who commended his love to us in Christ and who, if he gave us Christ, will also with him freely give us all things. He sees the God who in his sovereignty turns every evil to the profit of his people; otherwise, he will avert it from them. He sees that God comes in all the calamities and in all the troubles and is with him in the midst of them, so that he rests in the day of trouble.

He sees the God of his salvation, who in those calamities is neither vengeful toward him, nor has designed them for his destruction, but has decreed them for his salvation, so that also in calamities God is gracious toward him and wills his salvation through them. That way is the profound way of the grace of God that saves his people. That grace produces such profound thanksgiving and a deep sorrow for all our superficial thanksgiving.

Then the believer rests in the day of trouble. No, no, he does more than that! Because God, the God of his salvation, is with him, he rejoices and leaps for joy.

Where does this profound thanksgiving come from?

Its source is God himself. In God, by a true faith, is the thanksgiving of the believer. He says that: in Jehovah and in the God of my salvation. That is a true faith. True faith joins us to Jesus Christ. As superficial thanksgiving comes from an earthly mind, profound thanksgiving comes from the believing, regenerated heart and thus from God himself. Thus from God in Jesus Christ, the believer receives strength to rejoice in every situation with profound thanksgiving.

Such a man is free. He is free from bondage to sin and the worship of earthly things. He is free from the superficial and damning thanksgiving of the world. He is free from the bondage of having his joy tied to earthly things. He is free as a deer upon the mountains, so his feet walk in the high places. With that kind of thanksgiving, resting in this God and giving thanks in all things, he is really in heaven already.

—NJL

## THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL AS DEMAND OF THE COVENANT (2)

The burden of the October 1, 2021, editorial was that the Christian school is a demand of the covenant. The burden of this editorial is that the form of the Christian school must be governed by the covenantal principles of Christian education. When I speak of the *form* of the Christian school, I mean how the school is structured and arranged. As parents join together for the rearing and instruction of their covenant seed, their joining together will necessarily have some form of organization. The burden of this editorial is that whatever form of the Christian school the parents decide upon, that form must be governed by the covenantal principles of Christian education.

### *The Meaning and Essence of the Covenantal Principles*

There are covenantal principles of Christian education. These principles are certain truths of scripture that form the basis upon which Christian education rests. Before listing these covenantal principles, let us see the meaning and the essence of these principles.

First, the *meaning* of these principles is that they are the *foundation* of Christian education. Christian education needs a foundation. Christian education cannot be established without a foundation. Christian education cannot be maintained without a foundation. Christian education without a foundation will inevitably crumble and fall. Christian education must stand upon a solid foundation.

There are many reasons that Christian education needs a foundation. For example, it needs a foundation because of the children who are being instructed. The children are the covenant seed that God has given to his people. As the covenant seed, the children belong to God, even as many of them as he has called. The fact that the children belong to God also means that the children do not belong to the parents, or to the church, or to other believers, or to the school, but to God. When God gives his elect children to parents, he does not give the children away to the parents. Rather, he makes the parents to be the stewards of his children, who remain the children of God. “Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward” (Ps. 127:3). God gives the children as gifts to the parents because it pleases God

to govern his children by the parents’ hand (Lord’s Day 39, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 129). For parents, who know that they are filled with weakness and vanity, it is a great comfort of the gospel to know that their children belong to God. Just as the believer confesses that his only comfort in life and in death is that he is not his own but belongs to his faithful savior Jesus Christ, so the parent confesses that his only comfort in rearing his children is that they are not his own but belong to their faithful savior Jesus Christ. Because of who these children are as the children of God, their education and rearing must rest upon a solid—and even divine—foundation.

Or, for another example, Christian education needs a solid foundation because of what this Christian education must accomplish. Christian education must accomplish the spiritual rearing of the covenant seed so that they are equipped to serve God in this world. The children must be trained to spiritual maturity. The children must be reared in the fear of the Lord. The children must be equipped spiritually, intellectually, physically, and from every point of view to serve their God in whatever vocation he has determined for them. Such tasks are humanly impossible. What parent is sufficient for this calling? What teacher, who stands in the parent’s place, is sufficient for this calling? Without a foundation for this Christian education, the parents and teachers would despair of their calling. But when Christian education rests on a solid—and even divine—foundation, then the parents and the teachers who stand in their place have the confidence that the rearing of the covenant seed belongs to God. According to his everlasting covenant mercies and by the means that he has appointed, God will see to the covenant rearing of his own covenant seed.

The meaning of the covenantal principles is that they are the foundation and basis upon which Christian education stands.

Second, the *essence* of the covenantal principles of Christian education is that these principles all arise out of scripture. The principles are God’s truth as that truth is revealed in the holy scriptures. When the Christian school is established upon these principles, the Christian school rests upon God’s own word and upon God himself.

The fact that the principles of Christian education are the principles of God’s word also means that they are



not of man. The principles are not the latest education theories that may be popular in the educational world, even if those theories happen to be sound. Nor are the principles the latest practices that may be popular in the educational world, even if those practices may be truly useful for education. The principles are not the invention of man, they are not the discovery of man, and they do not proceed from the will of man. The principles do not depend upon man, nor do they ask for man's approval and endorsement. Rather, the principles are eternal and abiding principles. They are the truth as that truth is revealed in the Bible.

The fact that these principles are the truth of scripture is an application of the great truth that scripture is the only rule of faith and life for the believer and his seed. God determines for the believer what his family must believe and how they must live. God reveals in the scriptures what his will for the believer and his family is. Therefore, scripture as the rule of faith and life also serves as the foundation of the Christian school.

The fact that the covenantal principles of Christian education arise out of the word of God is a tremendous encouragement to the parents as they work with other believers to establish a school. The foundation of the school is not their own weakness and folly but the word of God. The education of their covenant seed does not rest upon the impotence of man but upon the omnipotent God. The basis of the school is divine, being God's own word and God's own truth. The parent even can take courage that God himself lays the foundation of the school, God himself builds the school, and God himself rears the covenant seed in the school. Oh, yes, let the parents labor with other parents, let them be diligent, let them take up the demands of the covenant with zeal. But let all of their labor be the labor of the gospel and the labor of freedom and the labor of gratitude as they rest in the divine foundation of God's own truth.

### *Covenantal Principles of Christian Education*

Having seen the *meaning* and the *essence* of the covenantal principles of Christian education, let us list those principles. The following is a quotation from the constitution of the Association for Covenantal Reformed Education, in West Michigan, which association runs the K–12 school, Grace Reformed Protestant School. Article 2 of that constitution is entitled “Basis,” and it summarizes well the covenantal principles of Christian education.

#### ARTICLE 2—BASIS

A. The basis of the Association for Covenantal Reformed Education shall be the Scriptures as set forth in the Old and New Testament, which are

the inspired and infallible Word of God, faithfully translated and preserved for us in the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, the doctrine of which is confessed in the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordrecht. The basis for the administration, instruction, and discipline in Grace Reformed Protestant School shall likewise be these Scriptures.

B. Our sovereign, Triune, covenant God establishes his covenant of grace with believers and their elect seed, whom he has chosen in Jesus Christ from all eternity and formed as a people unto himself in time. God's covenant is gracious, unconditional, and unilateral in every respect, including in its establishment, maintenance, and perfection; as well as in its fellowship, friendship, and communion, which are the essence of God's covenant with his people. God calls and sovereignly causes his covenant friends and servants to live a thankful life of love to his glory and praise in all spheres of life, in the midst of and over against a sinful world. The covenant education of the covenant seed prepares them to live in life-long covenant service to their covenant God in their God-given station and vocation.

C. God calls parents to rear their covenant seed in the fear of his name, which the parents also promise to do in their baptismal vows. In fulfillment of their calling, the parents may seek the help of like-minded Christian teachers to stand in their place in order to bring God's Word to bear on all the subjects in the curriculum. The school is thus parental and is one means by which covenant parents see to the training of their covenant seed.

D. God calls parents to cooperate in the rearing of their covenant seed as every man looks not only on his own things but also on the things of others. In the good Christian school, the parents of spiritual Israel join together to teach God's words diligently unto their children, and to show to all the children of the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done.

In that article the covenantal principles of Christian education are set forth, all of which arise out of God's word and are the truth of God's word.

There is the principle of God's covenant, which he establishes with believers and their elect seed: “Our sovereign, Triune, covenant God establishes his covenant of grace with believers and their elect seed.” “I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee

in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee” (Gen. 17:7).

There is the principle that God’s covenant and membership in God’s covenant are determined by his eternal decree of election in Christ: “God establishes his covenant of grace with believers and their elect seed, whom he has chosen in Jesus Christ from all eternity and formed as a people unto himself in time.” “Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, in Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed” (Rom. 9:6–8).

There is the principle that the essence of God’s covenant is fellowship, friendship, and communion between God and his people in Jesus Christ: “As well as in its fellowship, friendship, and communion, which are the essence of God’s covenant with his people.” “The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant” (Ps. 25:14).

There is the principle that God’s covenant is entirely unconditional and is not in any sense dependent upon the works of man: “God’s covenant is gracious, unconditional, and unilateral in every respect.” “For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth” (Rom. 9:11).

There is the principle that man’s part in the covenant is not that of being a party over against God but that of serving God in a life of gratitude: “God calls and sovereignly causes his covenant friends and servants to live a thankful life of love to his glory and praise in all spheres of life.” “When Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect” (Gen. 17:1).

There is the principle that believers and their seed do not go out of this world or flee from this world in an Anabaptist world-flight but that they live as God’s servants in the midst of this world: “God calls and sovereignly causes his covenant friends and servants to live a thankful life... in the midst of...a sinful world.” “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may

see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:14–16).

There is the principle of the antithesis in the covenant, so that although believers and their seed are in the world, they are not of the world but stand against the world as God’s party in the world: “God calls and sovereignly causes his covenant friends and servants to live a thankful life...over against a sinful world.” “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world” (1 John 2:15–16).

There is the principle of the covenant seeds’ station and calling and occupation from God, so that they are to be instructed in the earthly facts of mathematics and history and language and the sciences and all things so that they may serve God in whatever calling he gives them:

“The covenant education of the covenant seed prepares them to live in life-long covenant service to their covenant God in their God-given station and vocation.” “Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labour until the evening” (Ps. 104:23).

There is the principle that the education of the covenant seed must be done in the light of the scriptures, so that they not only learn the earthly facts of the curriculum, but they also learn to see them in the light of the scriptures: “In order to bring God’s Word to bear on all the subjects in the curriculum.” “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge” (Ps. 19:1–2).

There is the principle that the parents of the covenant seed are obligated by God to rear their covenant seed in his fear: “God calls parents to rear their covenant seed in the fear of his name, which the parents also promise to do in their baptismal vows.” “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6).

There is the principle that a Christian school teacher stands in the place of the parents and represents the parents in the rearing of the seed, imparting the instruction that the parents are not able to impart: “In fulfillment of their calling, the parents may seek the help of like-minded Christian teachers to stand in their place in order to bring God’s Word to bear on all the subjects in the curriculum.” “God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on

The children are the covenant seed that God has given to his people. As the covenant seed, the children belong to God, even as many of them as he has called.



the sea shore. And he spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five. And he spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes. And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom” (1 Kings 4:29, 32–34). “Hear, ye children, the instruction of a father, and attend to know understanding” (Prov. 4:1).

There is the principle that the school is parental, not a parochial school or a state school: “The school is thus parental and is one means by which covenant parents see to the training of their covenant seed.” “Thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up” (Deut. 6:7).

There is the principle that covenant parents cooperate together in the rearing of their covenant seed, not in isolation from one another but laboring together in their calling: “God calls parents to cooperate in the rearing of their covenant seed as every man looks not only on his own things but also on the things of others.” “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up” (Deut. 6:4–7).

What great treasures of Christian education God has given to his people in his word! What a solid foundation for a Christian school! Established upon these principles, the Christian school is well-founded by God himself. These principles mean that God himself sees to the rearing and covenant education of his own covenant seed.

### *Advance and Development*

The covenantal principles of Christian education as set forth in the above constitution also reflect an advance and development in the believer’s understanding of the covenant. The schools of the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC) have been born out of the same reformation that God has worked in the churches of the Reformed Protestant denomination. The same doctrine of unconditional covenant fellowship that brought forth the Reformed Protestant denomination has also brought forth the schools of the RPC. Through the all-out war in the controversy over the doctrine of unconditional fellowship, God has brought the parents of the RPC to understand the truth of the unconditional covenant more clearly. This

advance in understanding as a result of the controversy is reflected in especially two places in the constitution.

First, the constitution explicitly states that fellowship with God in God’s covenant is gracious, unconditional, and unilateral. It had become something of a formula in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) that God’s covenant is unconditional in its establishment, in its maintenance, and in its perfection. This formula meant to teach that God graciously establishes his covenant with man without any condition or cooperation of man; that God graciously maintains his covenant with man without any condition or cooperation of man; and that God graciously perfects his covenant with man without any condition or cooperation of man. While this formula itself is good, the denomination failed to live up to this formula in her actual theology. The denomination teaches that in the realm of man’s experience of God’s covenant fellowship, there are conditions and prerequisites for fellowship. She teaches and allows that communion with God is conditional. She teaches and allows that for man to experience justification and remission of sins, man must perform the prerequisite of repenting and believing. Man’s activity precedes God’s activity in such a way that God’s activity waits upon man’s activity. All of this makes fellowship with God in God’s covenant a matter of conditions and prerequisites. All of this has been documented and demonstrated in previous issues of *Sword and Shield*, and, indeed, elsewhere in this issue.

The constitution of the Association for Covenantal Reformed Education returns to the old paths of unconditional covenant fellowship. “God’s covenant is gracious, unconditional, and unilateral in every respect, including in its establishment, maintenance, and perfection; as well as in its fellowship, friendship, and communion, which are the essence of God’s covenant with his people.” By this, the constitution teaches that God graciously enters into fellowship with his people without any condition or cooperation of man, and that God’s people enjoy this fellowship without any condition or cooperation on their part. In every respect, including the vital respect of fellowship and communion, the covenant is gracious, unconditional, and unilateral.

Second, the constitution affirms that man’s thankful life of obedience and good works in God’s covenant is sovereignly accomplished by God himself. Throughout the controversy, the Protestant Reformed Churches showed a curious fear of God’s sovereignty causing and accomplishing man’s obedience. Whether in reaction against Mr. Neil Meyer’s statement that God provides man’s obedience, or in reaction against Rev. Nathan Langerak’s statement (and later mine) that man did not build the ark but God did, or in reaction to my sermon

that the command of God's law serves to expose the inability of fallen man to obey that law, the Protestant Reformed denomination has loudly accused us that we have been making man a stock and a block and that we have been denying the real spiritual activity of man. The accusation is empty air, as has also been demonstrated at length before. The reason for the accusation is the PRC's teaching of conditional fellowship. If one is going to have real prerequisites for fellowship, then man had better be able to operate as a party over against God. If man's obedience is truly a condition for his fellowship, then God had better not provide and accomplish man's obedience himself but must leave it to man.

The constitution of the Association for Covenantal Reformed Education returns to the old paths of teaching that God causes the obedience of his people, not by making them stocks and blocks, but by giving them what he calls them to do. "God calls and sovereignly causes his covenant friends and servants to live a thankful life of love to his glory and praise in all spheres of life, in the midst of and over against a sinful world." In the "sovereignly causes" of the constitution, Reformed Protestant parents affirm that God accomplishes the obedience of believers and their seed. This is the gospel of freedom for parents and their children that sends them forth to their obedience as joyful sons and daughters and not as hopeless slaves and mercenaries.

God preserved his church through the reformation of his church this year, and God has now caused his people to set forth their conviction of his truth in this constitution. By this advance and development of doctrinal understanding that God has given in the constitution, the constitution of the Association for Covenantal Reformed Education has become one of the foundational documents of the reformation. As one searches through the official documents for a record of the reformation, one would not only look to various *Acts of Synod* and Acts of Separation, but also to the constitution of the Association for Covenantal Reformed Education.

### *The Form of the Christian School*

The form of the Christian school that parents establish together for the rearing of their covenant seed must be governed by the covenantal principles of Christian education. When covenant parents join together for the instruction of their children, their joining together will have some kind of arrangement and organization. That arrangement and that form must be governed by the covenantal principles of Christian education.

These covenantal principles of Christian education are also the freedom of the parents as they form their school. The parents are not bound by the will of man. They are not bound by the preferences of men. They are not bound

by the traditions of men. They are bound by the word of God alone, and this is great freedom.

It is here that I must admit that I find it hard to imagine any other form for the Christian school than that to which we have become accustomed. That form includes the establishment of an association of like-minded parents, the adoption of a constitution, and the election of a board to operate the school on behalf of the association. That form includes the building or renting of a brick and mortar school to which the parents bundle up their children and send them. That form includes the hiring of teachers to instruct and rear the children on behalf of the parents. What other form could best meet the covenantal principles? When parents cooperate to educate their children, they must organize themselves somehow, mustn't they? What would this organization look like other than an association? And parents must have some common basis for their organization, mustn't they? What would the statement of this common basis look like other than a constitution? And their organization must have a body to carry out the operations, mustn't they? What would this body be other than a board? And parents must bring their children together to be instructed by competent teachers, mustn't they? How would this be done other than in some building with the teachers that have been hired? I freely admit that I do not see how parents could join together for the education of their children without an association, a constitution, a board, some sort of building, and teachers.

However, the fact remains that no parent or group of parents are bound by the limitations of my imagination. My imagination does not and may not govern the form of the Christian school. My imagination is one of the things of man that is flimsy and foolish and that perishes. Rather, parents are governed by the covenantal principles of Christian education in the rearing of their covenant seed. That is, parents are governed by the truths of the word of God in the rearing of their covenant seed. They are free to follow those principles in the formation and establishment of whatever form of school meets those principles. Their school must be parental, covenantal, and the cooperation of parents together. Their school must be a school and not something less than or other than an institution in which their children and the children of their fellow parents are prepared for their God-given station and vocation. Their school must rest on the covenantal principles of Christian education, and then it is a good Christian school, whatever its form.

The covenantal principles of Christian education also guide parents in those places where they cannot yet form a Christian school, either because of size limitations or because of government interference or a host of other reasons. The covenantal principles of Christian education give those parents a solid basis upon which to stand as they



seek the establishment of a school. Perhaps the form of their endeavor for now is that of cooperation and joining together in working toward a school. Perhaps the form of their endeavor for now includes looking for what help they can receive from like-minded believers in other parts of North America. The covenantal principles will keep those believers together in their endeavor. Let those parents not conclude that they do not need a school and that they are satisfied without one. Rather, let those parents take hold of the principles. Better, let those covenantal principles take hold of the parents, and let the parents labor together for the establishment of a good Christian school.

The covenantal principles of Christian education also

guide parents in those places where they can and do have a Christian school. The covenantal principles are what has brought those parents together and what has given them their school. Let the parents now see to it that their school is indeed founded upon the covenantal principles of Christian education and that it remains upon them. Let those parents not conclude that the work is finished in the establishment of the school. Rather, let those covenantal principles take hold of the parents, and let the parents labor together for the maintaining of a good Christian school.

A brief lesson from history must yet be noted. Next time, Lord willing.

—AL

## FROM THE EDITOR

By the time you read this, the annual meeting of Reformed Believers Publishing (RBP) will be finished. The speeches from the annual meeting will appear in some form in future editions of *Sword and Shield*, Lord willing, so keep an eye out for those. On behalf of the editors, the board, and the organization, a warm welcome to all who have joined Reformed Believers Publishing this year. We are thankful to be able to labor with you in the publication of *Sword and Shield*. May God bless the witness of his truth in the magazine.

For those who are not yet members but would like to be, it is not too soon to start thinking about joining RBP. At the next annual meeting in October 2022, new members will be received. Since you are thinking about it now, this would be a good time to email the office or visit the website and request membership: <https://reformedbelieverspub.org/membership/>.

While you are writing your email or are on the website, you could also let the board know your interest in obtaining bound volumes of *Sword and Shield*. The board provides this notification: “Now that we are well into the second volume year of *Sword and Shield*, the RBP board is interested in hearing from our readership about the interest in obtaining the issues from the first year in a bound volume. Please send an email or letter to the business office and indicate your interest in getting a bound volume. Depending on the level of interest, we will respond with a price and procedure to order.” This is exciting news, and I, for one, am looking forward to having bound volumes. Looks like it’s time to start finding those stray issues from under the couch and on top of the bookshelf and getting them in order for binding.

For those of our readers who have been burning their copies of the magazine, I am guessing that there will be some sort of option to purchase a bound volume without turning in your old copies. We will wait to hear what is possible, but for now I encourage all of our readers to let the board know if you are interested in bound volumes.

With thanksgiving to God, we present to you this issue of *Sword and Shield*. Most of the writers in this issue have already been introduced to you. We do have one new contributor: Dr. Hilgard Goosen. Dr. Goosen and his family were most recently members of the Immanuel Protestant Reformed Church in Lacombe, Alberta, Canada. As an elder at the time of Synod 2018, Dr. Goosen was a delegate to the synod and served on the committee of preadvice regarding the Reverend Overway sermons and the appeal of Mrs. Meyer. He recounts the fascinating history of his own role in the controversy, including his work on the committee. His article was originally submitted as a personal letter to the members of Immanuel Protestant Reformed Church when he and his family left the church to worship with the faithful congregation, the consistory, and Rev. M. VanderWal in Edmonton. Several people encouraged him to submit his letter as an article for publication, and we gladly publish it here. With his permission, his letter has been copyedited for printing. Not only does his article serve as an important part of the historical record of the reformation that God has worked, but Dr. Goosen also teaches sound doctrine in his letter.

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

—AL



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

## PROFESSOR SETTLED AND BINDING (2): THE REAL ANTINOMIAN

### *A Hypocritical Charge*

Prof. Ronald Cammenga of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) has issued a malicious, ignorant, and graceless email condemning the elders of Cornerstone Reformed Protestant Church, formerly of Wingham Protestant Reformed Church. Those elders judged that the PRC departed from the truth.

I began an examination of his shabby screed that would be unworthy of a reply, as merely transparent self-promotion, if it were not so full of lies and deception that must be exposed for the truth's sake.

In his email Professor Cammenga brings up the matter of antinomianism in the controversy recently finished in the PRC. The PRC finished that controversy by the unrighteous ecclesiastical murder of a couple of ministers deemed by the churches to be ringleaders of a mob of troublers in Israel. As is the Lord's way, that evil served—by the grace and sovereign work of God—the forming of a new Reformed denomination. Professor Cammenga says that he has known all along that antinomians were the problem and that now this is coming out in their teaching and writing. He does not prove his charge but simply asserts it. He does not even bother to cite a single instance of this alleged ongoing antinomianism.

His charges of antinomianism are simply a continuation of his mantra throughout the recent controversy, and they are of a piece with his rants in a sermon, “Shall We Continue in Sin?” that he is preaching in numerous Protestant Reformed churches. For instance, recently in that sermon as he preached it in Randolph, he charged me specifically with antinomianism. For the benefit of those who have heard him preach this sermon, I am the one who supposedly put my own personal liberty above the calling to listen to the elders.

I will not answer that charge in this article. At a later date, the Lord willing, I will answer his slander by writing about what happened at Crete Protestant Reformed Church, including the names of the ringleaders in the plot to oust the truth and the names of the elders who knew better and perjured themselves by failing to defend the truth, all the secret shenanigans that were going on

behind the scenes, and the details of the charges leveled against me; and by publishing my own protest, which never saw the light of day. Professor Cammenga speaks about my case as though he knows the details, which he does not. If he does, perhaps he could write about it for the benefit of the PRC, so that the members can learn how insubordinate I really was.

My purpose in bringing up his charges of antinomianism is to show that he is a hypocrite in his charges of antinomianism. To paraphrase the apostle Paul—who had some knowledge of dealing with hypocrites—Professor Cammenga sits to judge us after the law, but he smites us contrary to the law (Acts 23:3). In this instance he is going around publicly accusing me in a case that he knows nothing about. But the ninth commandment requires that he love the truth, not lie against it, and that he judge no man—not even his enemy, such as I am—rashly and unheard. The commandment also calls what Professor Cammenga is doing—lies and deceit—the proper works of the devil. So he is a breaker of the law. Worse, as James said, he is a judge of the law, and thus no doer of the law at all (James 4:11). He is like the antinomians whom Christ pointed out: On the one hand, they are Pharisees, who for a pretense made long prayers—or write long emails—and on the other hand, they are antinomians, who devoured widows' houses—or the names of men.

Pharisees in doctrine are frequently antinomians in life. Those same men, who supposedly were so zealous for the law, suborned false witnesses to lie against the truth, and Professor Cammenga does no differently. That is because the errors of the Pharisee and the antinomian are two sides of the same lie. The one exalts man in his righteousness. The other exalts man in his sin. But both exalt man, and both proceed from the same source as every lie, that men are lovers of their own selves (2 Tim. 3:2).

Professor Cammenga's lawlessness is also evident in his email regarding the elders formerly of Wingham Protestant Reformed Church. While he preaches and teaches that synodical decisions are settled and binding, he feels himself free now to criticize those decisions openly and to rewrite them. He does this probably because he knows

that his intended audience agrees with him and has no desire to prosecute him for his lawless militancy and his dishonest rewrite of history. He is pandering to them.

I point out only a few of his more egregious statements, and then I will show that he militates against his own synod, and he rewrites history and thus is also a hypocrite when he takes the charge of antinomianism on his lips.

He writes in his email,

Synod 2017 judged that a number of Mr. Meyer's statements were contrary to Scripture and our Reformed confessions...Synod 2018, it is true, judged that it should not have entered into a protest that had not been upheld. On purely technical and legal grounds, therefore, the decision of 2017 was set aside. In reality, however, it does not change the fact that a number of Mr. Meyer's statements are indeed contrary to Scripture and the Reformed confessions...

Synod 2017 did not sustain the charge of antinomianism because it was not demonstrated that Mr. Meyer "embraces some coherent and consistent form of the heresy." That was 2017. I seriously doubt that given developments since then, synod would make the same judgment today.<sup>1</sup>

The last statement in particular is telling and disgusting. Professor Cammenga is admitting that, as far as he is concerned, the synods of the PRC do not make judgments based on objective facts but on consequences and developments. What an unrighteous view of synods. If that is the view of synods by the delegates and advisers who go there and who have influence there, then the same warning applies to Protestant Reformed synods as Jacob applied to Simeon and Levi: "O my soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine honour, be not thou united" (Gen. 49:6).

Contrary to Professor Cammenga's unrighteous view of synods, Neil Meyer's exoneration was based on objective facts. Those objective facts do not change.

What Professor Cammenga does not mention in the interest of his own self-promotion is that Synod 2017 made statements that *denied the gospel of grace*. Those

statements were protested to Synod 2018. Thus at Synod 2018 the issue was finally decided.

I will give the cliff-notes of that decision from the summary of the controversy that was written and adopted by the consistory of Crete Protestant Reformed Church. Professor Cammenga should remember as well that a church in his denomination has a *settled and binding decision* about the controversy in the PRC, which decision he also contradicts by his email.

I do not know if the elders at Crete church still believe what they adopted. Some of them did not believe that summary of the controversy when it was adopted on April 15, 2021, so that it was adopted only by the narrowest of margins. They were deep into their plans by that time to suspend and depose me for insubordination. But if the elders still do believe what the consistory adopted, they should demand a retraction from Professor Cammenga because their decision said that the charge of antinomianism was a "false charge."<sup>2</sup> If the elders at Crete do not believe that, they should retract and recant that decision.

Regardless, for the present the decision stands, and that decision is that the charge of antinomianism in the whole controversy in the PRC was *false*.

Professor Cammenga does not feel himself compelled to deal with that in the orderly

way of protest and appeal but lawlessly contradicts it in public. And when I review that history, you will see that he also militates against his own synods and rewrites that history. It will be good for everyone to review how this all came to a head so that they will not be fooled by his dishonesty.

### *The Historical Record*

Elder Neil Meyer filed a protest with the consistory of Hope Protestant Reformed Church on July 7, 2015, against the sermon on John 14:6 preached by Rev. D. Overway.

By July 13, 2015, the consistory had decided that Elder Meyer maintained antinomianism. On July 26, 2015, the consistory decided to proceed with his suspension. On August 11, 2015, he was suspended in a combined meeting of the consistories of Hope and Grandville Protestant Reformed churches. On August 16, 2015, Mr. Meyer's

My purpose in bringing up Professor Cammenga's charges of antinomianism is to show that he is a hypocrite in his charges of antinomianism.

1 For the full email, see Prof. R. Cammenga, "Response to Wingham's 'A History of the Controversy,'" *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 7 (October 1, 2021): 21–22.

2 Consistory of Crete Protestant Reformed Church, "Explanation of the Doctrinal Controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches," 11.

suspension was announced to the Hope congregation. On September 20, 2015, the congregation was informed that Mr. Meyer had been deposed from the office of elder. Two and a half months from filing a protest to deposition! Protestant Reformed churches do not always move quickly; but when getting rid of the gospel is involved, they can move with the speed of a striking snake.

The grounds for the charge of antinomianism were three statements from Mr. Meyer's protest against Rev. D. Overway's sermon on John 14:6:

There are commands in Scripture and we preach them, but they are not the power to save. There is no power of the gospel to save in the preaching of the law, for the way is the way of mere grace, which preaches what God has done in Christ for us and in us, fulfilling the law. That leaves the commands to be a guide of thankfulness to us. But thankfulness is no small, leftover grace. Our fathers in 1953 emphasized the power of this grace and amply proved it.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Meyer made these statements over against the false teaching about John 14:6 that the way to the Father is Christ *and* the believer by his Spirit-wrought works—a teaching that was a blatant and glaring contradiction of the gospel of grace that *Christ* is our way to the Father and that we are not.

Hope's consistory maintained that Mr. Meyer taught antinomianism by those statements. The elders said that Mr. Meyer "is willing for the sake of grace to abandon every obligation that the child of God has to obedience and holiness and denies that there is any value in the preaching of the admonitions of Scripture" (86).

Hope's consistory also maintained that Mr. Meyer believed that

the commands are of some limited value in suggesting some things we could do, but God does not by any means actually require thankful obedience. This is a profoundly twisted view of the new life that is ours in Christ, and is completely antinomian in its demolition of our ability to actually walk with God in thankful obedience and communion. (91)

Further, Hope's consistory said, "Neil, the fact that you have a problem with Rev. Overway's preaching is reason in itself to suspect that you have antinomian leanings" (55).

The opposite is also true—a point that many refuse to see: Professor Cammenga, the fact that you did not have a problem with Reverend Overway's preaching and do have a problem with the preaching of the Reformed Protestant Churches is reason in itself to suspect that you are an Arminian.

Part of Hope's charge against Mr. Meyer involved the issue of the proper interpretation of Acts 16:30–31 and Acts 2:37–38. This is very fascinating because Rev. Kenneth Koole picked these texts in order to militate against Synod 2018 in the *Standard Bearer* by teaching that if a man would be saved there is that which he must do.<sup>4</sup> That is not coincidental: he was part of the decision to condemn Mr. Meyer on the basis of the corruption of those passages; he cannily recognized that that interpretation was threatened by Synod 2018's decision and so rushed to undermine that decision.

Hope's consistory wrote regarding Mr. Meyer's protest,

In support of the assertion that salvation is pure grace, page 168 of *Voice of our Fathers* is partially quoted, and then Elder Meyer makes the following statement: "Obedience is included here, but not as our activity—what we do, but as the perfect obedience and holiness of Christ in justification and sanctification." This is a false statement and contradicts the creeds and Scripture. The Philippian jailer asked the Apostle Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" The Apostle Paul answered him concretely with these words, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" Acts 16:30–31. The multitude present for Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost responded to Peter's preaching in this way, "Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" and the Apostle responded, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:37–38). Now, neither of the Apostles was teaching that salvation or the gift of the Holy Ghost was conditioned or based in any way on what the people did; however, they were teaching that repenting and believing were in fact the personal activity and obedience of God's people, worked in them through the preaching of the

3 Mr. Meyer's protest to Hope's consistory, July 7, 2015, *Acts of Synod 2016*, 82. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from his protest; Hope consistory's response to his protest, July 13, 2015; Mr. Meyer's appeal to the January 13, 2016, meeting of Classis East; and the 2016 synodical decision in the *Acts of Synod 2016* are in text.

4 See Kenneth Koole, "What Must I Do...?" *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 1 (October 1, 2018): 6–9.



commands to repent and believe. Canons 3/4.12 teaches explicitly that our wills do in fact become active and man is himself rightly said to believe and repent. (88)

Hope's doctrine and the doctrine of the PRC now is that faith and repentance are what man does—by grace, of course, but what man does—to be saved. And you have to remember that they were arguing over John 14:6 and the truth about the way to God, the way of salvation! The way to God is man's faith and repentance.

Obedience and man's activity of faith and repenting are simply not a part of that way. The way IS CHRIST! Alone! We come to God through Jesus Christ by faith alone—God's gift and not our work—doing nothing, nothing, nothing. Believing and doing are contrary here. Believing is a not doing. Believing that your doing is part of the way is not believing but doing, and whoever does that shall not come to the Father.

This is all shocking to reread. I almost cannot believe what I read. But there it is, black on white. And then this reality: almost everyone was just fine with that false doctrine and still is because this is the doctrine of Reverend Koole (if a man would be saved, there is that which he *must* do), of Professor Cammenga (Christ is not enough), and of Professor Engelsma (in a certain, specific sense, man is first in drawing near to God).

Mr. Meyer responded to Hope's assertion this way:

This point [the quote of the consistory above] objects to this statement: "Obedience is included here, but not as our activity—what we do, but as the perfect obedience and holiness of Christ in justification and sanctification." To prove this objection, texts are cited such as Acts 16:30–31, where the Philippian jailor asks, "What must I do to be saved."

I [Mr. Meyer] quote some excerpts from the sermon of Rev. H. Hoeksema, "The Calling of the Philippian Jailor," preached in Doon, IA, July 1953:

"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's no hope in that statement, and there's 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, that we

are [bound] before God to believe. Yes, yes, yes; there's no hope in that. That's not the gospel.

But when Christ says that, beloved, Christ, not I, but Christ—as He did here. As He did here through Paul and through the apostle, when Christ says that, then indeed, you do not answer, "Oh, I must believe." But then the fruit, the inevitable fruit, the sure fruit is that you say, "I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup>

This was all to no avail. Neil was an antinomian, according to Hope's consistory.

Mr. Meyer appealed the charge of antinomianism to the meeting of Classis East on January 13, 2016. He reiterated his position on the three heretical statements in the John 14:6 sermon:

My judgment on these statements is that because they make the way of salvation and covenant communion with God include our obedience, and be our holy life and godly life, that we then no longer need rely on Jesus Christ and His obedience alone as the way of salvation and communion with God and that this therefore teaches conditional covenant theology. (92–93)

Classis East did not sustain Mr. Meyer in his appeal against the charge of Hope's consistory that he "maintains and teaches antinomianism" (86). All his careful explanation was also to no avail. He was an antinomian, according to Classis East.

It was also becoming clearer and clearer that the Protestant Reformed denomination had a serious gospel-problem, by which I mean she had a serious problem with the gospel. It was antinomian to her.

Mr. Meyer appealed to Synod 2016.

Synod 2016 ruled that

Mr. Meyer does not fit classical and Reformed descriptions of an antinomian...

He is not against the necessity of preaching the law and its demands...

He is not against the need for obedience to the law in the life of the child of God...

He is not against the law in either of its uses as set forth in the Heidelberg Catechism, namely, to show our misery and to direct us in thankful obedience. (53–54; synod's emphasis)

Synod 2016 ruled that

Hope's consistory misrepresents Mr. Meyer's position on the commandments as a guide of thankfulness...

5 Chuck Doezema's appeal about Neil Meyer's discipline, Agenda for Classis East, January 10, 2018, 37–38.

Hope's consistory overstates Mr. Meyer's position regarding the law...

Hope's consistory prejudices itself against Mr. Meyer simply because he disagrees with their pastor's preaching. (54–55)

Synod 2016 ruled that

Classis East...asserts that Mr. Meyer is antinomian without interacting with the material of his defense in order to demonstrate this charge...

When Mr. Meyer rejects the law in connection with salvation, he is not rejecting the preaching of the law altogether. Instead, he is rejecting the preaching of obedience to the law as part of the "Way" to God in John 14:6, that is, as part of the basis for our salvation. (55–56)

Now a more thorough vindication of the man could not be written. *Mr. Meyer is not an antinomian. He does not teach or believe antinomianism. All the things he said were in defense of Christ and his perfect sufficiency as the way to the Father.*

However, that *all* was not enough for Professor Cammenga. Neil *is* an antinomian!

So Professor Cammenga protested the decision of Synod 2016 to Synod 2017. He wrote,

I believe that Synod 2016 erred in not condemning certain statements made by Mr. Meyer in his protest, statements that at the very least are not in harmony with our Reformed confessions, and statements at worst that betray the antinomian error.<sup>6</sup>

He rejected as antinomian the following contention of Mr. Meyer:

There are commands in Scripture and we preach them, *but they are not the power to save*. There is *no power* of the gospel to save in the preaching of the law, for the way is the way of mere grace, which preaches what God has done in Christ for us and in us, fulfilling the law. (274; Cammenga's emphasis)

Remember that Mr. Meyer was defending the gospel against the idea that obedience to the law is the way to fellowship with God and blessedness from God, and Christ alone is not the way.

Professor Cammenga stated his position on the law: "It has ever been the teaching of the Reformed that the law serves as an instrument of grace" (274).

Really!? Where is this "Reformed" teaching found? It surely is not found in the three forms of unity. The creeds speak about the *admonitions of the gospel*, which are admonitions to repentance and to thankfulness. The creeds teach that *the preaching of the gospel* is the means of grace. But the law? As a means of grace? Perhaps Professor Cammenga could still write about this new means of grace.

Professor Cammenga also rejected as antinomian this statement of Mr. Meyer: "I maintain that God does require thankful obedience, and provides it" (275).

Professor Cammenga said, "To say that God 'provides' our thankful obedience goes beyond the teaching of Scripture and our Reformed creeds" (275).

However, though he is a professor of theology, he is ignorant of the creeds because Belgic Confession, article 14, confesses, "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?*"

But Professor Cammenga *is* sufficient to provide his obedience and that by which he comes to God, no less.

And the professor does not know article 24 of the Belgic Confession, which says specifically about our good works, "We are beholden to God for the good works we do, and not He to us, since it is He *that worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure.*"

And the professor contradicts answer 26 of the Heidelberg Catechism, in which the believer confidently says, "[God] will provide me with all things necessary for soul and body" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 39–40, 54, 93).

He obviously still has not repented of his denial of Reformed theology in the creeds, because he thinks synod got it wrong when it let Neil go, and if given another

Pharisees in doctrine are frequently antinomians in life. These same men, who supposedly were so zealous for the law, suborned false witnesses to lie against the truth, and Professor Cammenga does no differently.

6 "Protest of Prof. Ronald Cammenga," *Acts of Synod 2017*, 268. Page numbers from the *Acts of Synod 2017* for subsequent quotations from his protest and synod's decision are in text.

go-around, synod would condemn him, according to Professor Cammenga, because he still thinks these statements of Neil are antinomian.

Synod 2017 royally botched the case. It ruled that “some of Mr. Meyer’s statements, taken at face value, are contrary to Scripture and the Reformed confessions” (88).

Over against Mr. Meyer’s statement, “There are commands in Scripture, and we preach them, but they are not the power to save,” Synod 2017 said, “But properly done, the preaching of the law *is* the preaching of the gospel, and the preaching of the gospel is the power of God unto salvation” (88; synod’s emphasis).

Over against Mr. Meyer’s statement, “I maintain that God does require thankful obedience, and provides it,” Synod 2017 said, “God does not *provide* our obedience; rather, He regenerates our heart and sanctifies us so that we bring forth the good works which He has before ordained that we should bring forth” (88; synod’s emphasis).

Over against Mr. Meyer’s statement, “To say that... after Adam and Eve fell ‘the way is barred’ for them as fallen sinners is to make the covenant conditioned on obedience,” Synod 2017 said, “Not only is it a historical fact that they were barred from the tree of life, but Isaiah 59:2 teaches that sins in which God’s covenant people persist *do separate* us from God so that He will not hear our prayers” (88; synod’s emphasis).

However, Synod 2017 did not sustain the protest of Professor Cammenga because he did *not*

prove conclusively that Mr. Meyer maintains and teaches antinomianism... [Mr. Meyer’s statements] do not conclusively confirm the charge of maintaining and teaching antinomianism...

Maintaining and teaching antinomianism implies that Mr. Meyer embraces some coherent and consistent form of the heresy, which can be demonstrated to be contrary to the confessions. Prof. Cammenga has not so demonstrated...

Although Prof. Cammenga challenges a few unrelated and unorthodox statements of Mr. Meyer, this challenge does not attain the level of certainty required to classify him as an antinomian. (89)

## **Synod 2018**

The whole mess came to Synod 2018 in several protests, which Professor Cammenga conveniently fails to mention in his email. Synod 2018 addressed the matter of Mr. Meyer’s supposedly “unorthodox statements” by its condemnation of Synod 2017’s statements that contradicted Mr. Meyer. It was either /or. Either Neil’s statements were

wrong or synod’s were wrong. With the condemnation of synod’s statements, Neil was vindicated, and the charge that he was an antinomian fell away. Synod said that. Anyone who cares can read the decision.

Now Professor Cammenga militates against the decision of 2018 and rewrites the history. He wants to pretend that the decision about Mr. Meyer was a pure technicality. But there were concrete synodical decisions made about *what is and what is not antinomian*. Professor Cammenga and others never were content with the decisions of synod in this matter. They are still militating against them. And they dare to lecture on what is the proper church orderly way of protest and appeal.

Rev. Andrew Lanning protested to Synod 2018 against the decision of Synod 2017 that “properly done, the preaching of the law *is* the preaching of the gospel, and the preaching of the gospel is the power of God unto salvation.”<sup>7</sup> He argued that this statement “contradicts the biblical and confessional distinction between the law... and the gospel” and that “by identifying the law with the gospel as the power of God unto salvation, synod’s declaration brings the law into our salvation at exactly that point that Scripture and the confessions exclude the law” (340–41). He argued that this statement contradicts Canons 3–4.5–6. The law cannot be the gospel because the message of the law does not include Christ. Further, the law cannot give man the power to obey it, but the law is weak through the flesh.

However, the gospel is

“the glad tidings concerning the Messiah”... The Canons explicitly state that this salvation from sin could not be accomplished by the law, and that this salvation from sin God accomplishes only through the gospel...

Synod’s declaration that the preaching of the law *is* the preaching of the gospel contradicts the Heidelberg Catechism...(Q&A 19, 21, 59, 65, 67, 83, 84)... According to the Heidelberg Catechism, the law’s role is not to save us, but to teach us our sin and misery (Q&A 3, 115) and to be the rule, guide, and standard of our thankful life of obedience (Q&A 86, 91, 114, 115). (342)

Further, Reverend Lanning objected to this statement of Synod 2017: “God does not *provide* our obedience; rather, He regenerates our heart and sanctifies us so that we bring forth the good works which He has before ordained that we should bring forth” (343). The statement contradicts this phrase in Canons 3–4.16: “Wherefore, unless the admirable Author of every good work

7 “Protest of Rev. Andrew Lanning,” *Acts of Synod 2018*, 340. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from his protest are in text.



wrought in us...” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 170). Thus Reverend Lanning said, “The good works that man truly performs out of his regenerated heart are furnished, given, granted, bestowed, imparted to him—that is, provided—by God” (343). The fact of God’s providing is confessed in answer 26 of the Heidelberg Catechism: “I have no doubt but He [my God and Father] will provide me with all things necessary for soul and body,” of which our good works are a part (*Confessions and Church Order*, 93). Reverend Lanning contended that “the Scripture passages that synod cites all teach that God is the Author of our obedience by His regeneration of us...by His eternal counsel...and by His sanctification of us” (343).

Mr. Meyer protested to Synod 2018 against Synod 2017’s condemnation of three of his statements, which Professor Cammenga had quoted in his protest and charged with antinomianism. Mr. Meyer wrote,

I contend that those statements are conclusive evidence that the author of those statements holds to and confesses that the covenant of God with His people in “absolute terms” is unconditional. In effect, these decisions [of synod to condemn his statements] have made binding on all those in the PRC, that, to hold to and confess the truth of the unconditional covenant, in absolute terms, is antinomian heresy.”<sup>8</sup>

He maintained that “such a false charge of antinomianism, when dealing with the doctrines of salvation, will necessarily involve whether the covenant of God is unconditional or not” (346).

Keeping the issue in line with his original protest to Hope’s consistory regarding Reverend Overway’s sermon on John 14:6, Mr. Meyer noted that Synod 2017 overturned Synod 2016’s decision and sustained his objection to obedience being made part of the way to the Father in John 14:6. Then he noted that Synod 2017’s decision against his confession of the unconditional covenant in those three statements “puts good works back into the ‘way’ of John 14:6” (347).

*That* is what was at stake, *that* is what is still at stake, and *that* is what separates the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC). The PRC has good works as part of the way of salvation. The Reformed Protestant denomination rejects good works as part of the way of salvation. By having good works as part of the way of salvation, the PRC has a *conditional* covenant. By excluding good works from the way of salvation, the RPC has an *unconditional* covenant.

Synod 2017 spoke out of both sides of its mouth. It said that Neil’s interpretation of John 14:6 was right, and then synod went on to contradict itself and say that Neil was an antinomian.

Specifically, with regard to his statement, “There are commands in Scripture and we preach them, but they are not the power to save,” Mr. Meyer said that this statement “is in plain harmony with Canons 3/4.5” (350). Further, he said that Synod 2017’s condemnation of this statement and its teaching that “properly done, the preaching of the law *is* the preaching of the gospel” (*Acts of Synod 2017*, 88) is “to mix law and gospel to the destruction of the gospel as gospel and is to receive the doctrine of the conditional covenant into the midst of the PRC” (351).

Regarding his statement, “I maintain that God does require thankful obedience, and provides it...,” which Synod 2017 had condemned as antinomian and about which synod had said, “God does not *provide* our obedience; rather, He regenerates our heart and sanctifies us so that we bring forth the good works which He before ordained” (*Acts of Synod 2017*, 88), Mr. Meyer maintained that this means that “man...is active in providing obedience” (351). He quoted from the Declaration of Principles: “The sure promise of God...makes it impossible that we should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.” And he quoted from *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant*: “The child’s faith and obedience, therefore, are not conditions upon which the covenant depends—to the overthrow of divine sovereignty, but fruits of thankfulness” (351–52). Neil pointed out that

to say other than God provides is to uphold the covenant as conditional...

That God provides our thankful obedience is the teaching of Belgic Confession, Article 24...“we are beholden to God for the good works we do, and not He to us, since it is He *that worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure*.” We are beholden to God for our good works and not He to us because He has provided those good works. This article of faith quotes Phil. 2:13 here to say that if man provides his own good works, then that provision would be meritorious and would make God “beholden” to us...

Also, to say other than God provides our thankful obedience is to “make the believer’s good works part of the way of salvation, which way John 14:6 declares to be Christ alone”...To say other than God provides is to uphold the covenant as conditional. (352–53)

<sup>8</sup> “Protest of Mr. Neil Meyer,” *Acts of Synod 2018*, 345. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from his protest are in text.

In defense of his statement, “To say that...after Adam and Eve fell ‘the way is barred’ for them as fallen sinners is to make the covenant conditioned on obedience,” Mr. Meyer noted,

I wrote in my protest [to Synod 2016] concerning this statement: “To teach in all this that Adam was barred from fellowship with the Father is, again, completely omitting the truth of election. Adam and Eve did not ‘stand as fallen sinners’... but were elect, redeemed sinners...raised to a higher, heavenly life in Christ [the head of the covenant].”...Prof. Cammenga characterizes my arguments as “typical antinomian reasoning.”... Decisive election and unconditional covenant are inseparable. For Prof. Cammenga to oppose my reasoning, which reasoning flows from the truth that election governs the covenant, is to establish and maintain that the covenant is conditional. (353–54)

Neil maintained that by his statement he was *not* denying “that Adam and Eve were put out of the Garden of Eden. I do deny that they were put out of Father’s fellowship thereby.” He pointed to the Belgic Confession and wrote,

Article 26 speaks of “access to the divine Majesty, which access would otherwise be barred against us,” talking about what happened in the garden as a result of Adam’s sin. The truth is that as our head Adam would, indeed, otherwise be barred, and we in him. But thanks be to God that the second head, Jesus Christ, is Adam’s head and our head and that God has revealed this truth to us to believe and confess...that we have no access unto God but alone through the only Mediator and Advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous...If our access to God is not in Jesus Christ alone...our access would be in our works. Works are the condition, therefore, to having fellowship with God if we are, indeed, otherwise barred from that access...

At face value, Adam was put out of the garden...in reality he was clothed in a higher, saving fellowship with God in Jesus Christ, no more to return to the typical pictures in the Garden of Eden. (354)

Neil’s reasoning was perfectly sound. But Professor Cammenga keeps repeating his lie about it.

Synod 2018 sustained “the protests of Rev. A. Lanning and M. Overway...and rescind[ed] this statement [of Synod 2017]”: “Properly done, the preaching of the law *is* the preaching of the gospel, and the preaching of the gospel is the power of God unto salvation” (89). Regarding the statement of Synod 2017, “God does not provide our obedience...” Synod 2018 decided to “sustain the protests of Rev. A. Lanning, N. Meyer, and M. Overway...and rescind” that statement (89–90).

Now Professor Cammenga can say all he wants that Synod 2018 “on purely technical and legal grounds” said that Synod 2017 erred when it entered into the substance of his protest, but the decision of Synod 2018 was far more than that. It was a thorough vindication of Mr. Meyer as not antinomian and a thorough vindication that Mr. Meyer’s statements to which Professor Cammenga objected were not antinomian either.

What makes this even more remarkable and clear is that the 2018 case against Synod 2017, which had called Neil’s statements antinomian, was so compelling that even those who hated him had to vindicate him.

So Professor Cammenga’s dishonest rewrite of history is contradicted by the decisions of Synod 2018 black on white. Further, he shows that in so construing history, he is militating against the *settled and binding decisions* of his own synod. He is also then a hypocrite when he preaches that decisions of synods are *settled and binding* and when he says that the only way to deal with those decisions is by way of protest. He is not only a hypocrite, but also he is himself lawless. He is one of the Pharisee-antinomians, or as Paul said, a “whited wall” (Acts 23:3). He shows and has shown that he does not know what the gospel is. He has made the gospel his enemy, and he slanders it constantly as antinomian.

### *A Shocking Protest*

This may explain his own atrocious protest to Synod 2017, in which he quoted favorably from the book *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology’s Unwelcome Guest?* by Mark Jones.<sup>9</sup> Mark Jones was the supposed expert on antinomianism by whom Professor Cammenga was going to instruct the Protestant Reformed synod and churches in their controversy.

The PRC has good works as part of the way of salvation. The Reformed Protestant denomination rejects good works as part of the way of salvation.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Jones, *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology’s Unwelcome Guest?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013).

I will remind the reader who Mark Jones is. As a basic premise, Mark Jones holds to a conditional covenant and salvation, and connects the denial of conditions in the covenant and salvation with antinomianism.

They [antinomians] were so concerned to maintain the graciousness of salvation that they not only denied that there are conditions for salvation...but also suggested that even in the application of salvation man does not “act”... Faith is an antecedent condition to receiving the blessings of justification, adoption, and sanctification... That is to say, Christ’s death would be meaningless apart from a covenantal agreement between the Father and the Son... The covenant of grace may be unconditional in its origin, but ultimately it requires that conditions be met on man’s part... If faith is an antecedent condition required of sinners in order to receive pardon of sins... then as Reformed theologians insisted, good works... are consequent conditions for salvation.”<sup>10</sup>

The quotes from Mark Jones that Professor Cammenga used to substantiate his protest against Mr. Meyer are shocking in their denial of the truth. Mark Jones said that the more moderate antinomians

blur the distinction between impetration [Christ’s work for us] and application [Christ’s work in us], and so make Christ totally responsible, not only for our imputed righteousness, but also for our imparted righteousness. On the surface, such a view appears to honor Christ. But on closer inspection, this view obliterates human responsibility to the point that antinomianism ends up becoming a form of hyper-Calvinism. (*Acts of Synod 2017*, 273)

Professor Cammenga had so little understanding of the gospel that he was fine with Mark Jones’ savaging of Christ and his perfect work at the cross and in us. *Jones* was going to be the PRC’s instructor regarding antinomianism.

Anyone who desires can read my book review of Mark Jones’ book from which Professor Cammenga quoted to substantiate his protest against Mr. Meyer.<sup>11</sup> The Protestant Reformed synod—the Protestant Reformed

synod!—was getting instruction from its sitting professor of dogmatics about antinomianism, and the authority the professor cited was Mark Jones. Mark Jones!

Was anyone appalled by that?

Did the Theological School Committee even question its professor on that?

Did anyone ever raise even so much as an eyebrow? Mr. Meyer wrote to Synod 2018,

As Protestant Reformed theology distinctively witnesses to the truth of the unconditional covenant, by his teaching Mark Jones must condemn Protestant Reformed theology as antinomian. By quoting favorably from this book Prof. Cammenga also demonstrates his condemnation of the unconditional covenant as antinomian. By synod’s acknowledgment of three key points made in Prof. Cammenga’s protest, synod also demonstrates condemnation of the unconditional covenant as antinomian. (347)

Neil was right.

Professor Cammenga’s use of Jones is shocking because Mark Jones is a conditional covenant theologian. One might say that he has made it his business—his *raison d’être*—to ridicule the unconditional covenant as antinomian and to teach that the conditional covenant is the only antidote to antinomianism. Jones will grant that the covenant is unconditional in its origin, but it is destined to become conditional.

This is Professor Cammenga’s theology too, but he is too cowardly to come out with it, and he hides behind the tactic of labeling the truth that he hates with being antinomian and instructing us on what antinomianism is by means of the books of those who hate the truth too.

If Mark Jones is your authority on antinomianism, then you have a conditional covenant, and whether you use the word *condition* or not is completely immaterial. Mark Jones calls the gospel antinomian, and if he is your authority on antinomianism, you, too, have likewise called the gospel antinomian. Professor Cammenga will continue to teach this to his seminary students and thus corrupt the pulpits of the PRC.

When Mr. Meyer pointed out to Synod 2018 that the sitting professor of dogmatics in the Protestant Reformed

Professor Cammenga had so little understanding of the gospel that he was fine with Mark Jones’ savaging of Christ and his perfect work at the cross and in us.

10 Mark Jones, *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology’s Unwelcome Guest?* 62–64, as quoted in *Acts of Synod 2018*, 346–47.

11 See the book review in a series of nine blogs dated October 27, 2017, through December 15, 2017. The first blog, Nathan J. Langerak, “The Charge of Antinomianism (1): A False Charge,” can be found at <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/the-charge-of-antinomianism-1-a-false-charge>.



seminary, in a theological controversy of life or death importance, quoted a man who says that *by definition the unconditional covenant is antinomian*, one of the delegates—Howard Pastoor—said that the protestant had “pointed a gun at the professor’s head” with his protest. A legitimate protest was pointing a gun at the professor’s head! Perhaps—more than likely—the delegate was parroting a phrase he had heard earlier and was carrying someone else’s water.

The synod surely did not express gratitude to Neil for the thankless task of protesting to synod yet again about a danger to the denomination and a *danger this time at the very seminary of the denomination*.

Is not a protest a right of believers in the church?

Are we not excoriated by Professor Cammenga for not protesting?

But he sat mutely as the delegate so maliciously maligned the protestant.

No matter, the comment stood—most of the delegates hated Neil Meyer—and encouraged by the delegates, the synod duly rebuked Mr. Meyer as being “inappropriate

and uncharitable,” which is about the only crime Protestant Reformed synods know of these days (98).

Synod 2018 should have investigated Professor Cammenga, for he had given abundant evidence that he contradicted the creeds. He continues to do so to this day and shows himself to be lawless in that sense too. He does not uphold his oath of subscription but violates it constantly.

He chides us for “mischaracterization, misrepresentation, and slander” and calls it “a hallmark of this group and its leaders.”

I have shown that he is guilty of it himself. He should be quiet about antinomianism or condemn himself. He is the real antinomian. The gospel and the people that Professor Cammenga ridicules, slanders, and maligns in preaching and writing are Reformed, not antinomian. By casting them out, the Protestant Reformed denomination has shown that she is not Reformed but Arminian.

Next time I will deal with his slander against the truth as being schismatic.

—NJL

## SOUND DOCTRINE

*Speak thou the things which become sound doctrine.—Titus 2:1*

# ONE LITTLE WORD

Can they really be serious?  
Are they really that ignorant?

Or are they so insistent that they cannot be wrong? Wrong about good works? Wrong about faith? Wrong about antinomianism? Doubling down, digging their hole deeper and deeper, and getting more and more authoritative and judgmental.

In the present circumstances one can only say after the Lord himself, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Matt. 11:15). Or “Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind” (15:14). Or with the inspired apostle John, “They loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” (John 12:43).

However that may be, what is written is not first of all for those who have no ears to hear and no hearts to understand. It is not written for the praise of men or out of respect of persons. But it is written for the glory of God in the truth, the truth that the upright in heart delight to follow, no matter the cost. It must be explained for

the care of God’s people, who must know the greatness of the salvation of their God and find all their assurance and peace not in or by anything they do but only by the finished work of their Lord and Savior.

Let me be so bold as to propose that one little word in the controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) these past years has been largely ignored. This one little word is the hinge upon which this controversy spiritually has turned.

Unashamedly, the provocateurs of this controversy have trolled for visceral reactions and gotten them. They have gotten what they wanted from the lovers and defenders of the truth, those who were not ashamed to stand practically alone for the sake of the truth of salvation by grace alone. Those defenders of the truth did not bow or bend when they felt the weight of the entire denomination against them. They did not yield when they were publicly reviled by their consistories and the broader assemblies of the churches, by the official

preaching in the churches, by *Standard Bearer* editorials, and by blogs and circulated emails. Those people looked not to men but to the Lord to vindicate the cause of his truth. They looked to the Lord's vindication, uncaring whether that vindication would come through the repentance of the denomination or at the return of their Lord on the clouds of glory.

The provocateurs used many words and phrases to troll for these reactions. They did not care which doctrines they attacked. Their objective was not the truth. It was never to defend the truth of salvation by sovereign grace alone. Their purposes were very different. Their purpose was, first, to stir up controversy. They knew that the only way to do that was to attack the truth. But they had to be careful about the manner of their attack. No open, outright attack would do. They needed a camouflage. Yes, they were upholding the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, have no fear. In fact, they were upholding the doctrine of salvation by grace alone but defending it against antinomian attackers. They were upholding the doctrine of sanctification against evil antinomian attacks. They were upholding the doctrine of the call of the gospel against hyper-Calvinists. They were protecting the current direction of the denomination against those who would take it in a new direction of antinomian hyper-Calvinism. They were protecting the unity of the church against schismatic persons who were causing trouble for their own shameless gratification.

But all these insistences and justifications were only camouflages. They were camouflages for the introduction of what was new. New teachings. New teachings about assurance. New teachings about good works and their relationship to assurance. New teachings about faith, what faith is and what faith is not. New teachings about man's responsibility. New teachings about balance and two tracks. New teachings about covenant fellowship and friendship.

All these new teachings came to be tied into a new justification for these provocateurs. An old phrase was dredged up that met with instant, widespread approval. It was so highly acclaimed because it met with the stated approval of Herman Hoeksema himself. Yes, faith as man's doing, assurance by good works, man's responsibility, the importance of good works, all because of *in the way of*. "We are saved *in the way of* faith." This new phrase made everything right and good. So in the PRC a crop of new mantras arose, which were quickly adopted and widely circulated, to the delight and approval of the majority.

"We receive assurance only in the way of our good works."

"God blesses us only in the way of our good works."

"We enjoy prosperity in the way of our walking with God."

"We are conscious of our salvation only in the way of our believing in God."

The list can go on and on.

Indeed, so much can be said about the context of these various sentences that makes them suspect. At times the context indicates that the benefits that follow our actions are identified as reasons and motivations for what we do. *In order to obtain* these benefits from God, we must do these things. What else is this but to say that these are *conditions* that we must fulfill, *prerequisites* that we must perform, to get the mentioned benefits? Regardless of whether the small print *it is all by grace* is added, the sentiment remains the same. Subsequent benefits and blessings are still dependent on what we do. The things we do are conditions that we fulfill. There is no way around it.

Indeed, the statements themselves, considered by themselves, are suspect. Regardless of how *in the way of* is stated, the very forcefulness given the statements as dogmatic assertions is cause for suspicion. The statements were made cornerstones of theology. The same thing can be said of the arrangement found in a similar construction, such as "When we do good works, only then does God bless us." Suspicion only grows when these statements are placed adversely to statements about grace. "Oh, yes, we are truly saved by grace alone, and all that we do is by grace alone. *But* only in the way of our doing good works does God bless us." That adversative position pits works against grace. It establishes a completely different track of doctrine, which differs from the track of grace alone. It is also the same adversative relationship that presents itself in such statements as listed above. Subsequent blessings and benefits are placed in an adversative relationship to faith, good works, walking with God, and the like. As if to say that neither faith nor good works nor walking with God are blessings and benefits in comparison with what follows faith, good works, or walking with God.

Yet controversy continues. What is stated above is further debated and contested. Of course, grace is never denied! All these matters are by grace through faith. All is only the proper application of the order of salvation. All is only meant to give to faith, conversion, repentance, sanctification, good works, and walking with God proper places and roles in the Christian life. These statements are only meant to fend off the charges of hyper-Calvinism and antinomianism. They are required to do justice to the commandments and callings of scripture and to find a proper place for them in our Reformed theology and doctrine. Are not faith, conversion, good works, and

all the rest real gifts of God, given to his people in time and history?

Why is this so controversial?

Because it is meant to be controversial. As with so many doctrinal controversies in the history of the church of Jesus Christ, the point is political. The doctrinal controversy is a smokescreen employed by those who care not a whit about the truth or about true doctrine, much less about good works, sanctification, or walking with God. The point is power. Power to control. Power to direct and steer. Power to be rid of obstacles and barriers to the wanton exercise of power for the gratification of the powerful. Power to be rid of accountability and responsibility to the truth of God's word and to Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

Thus the doctrinal controversy, first used as a smoke-screen, has become a means to this political end. Once orthodoxy has been overthrown as the standard, heterodoxy (wrong doctrine) takes its place as the new standard. Those who yet oppose the new standard are judged to be heretical and thus enemies of the peace and unity of the church of Jesus Christ. There is no longer room for such quarrelsome members. The devil's playbook is well-worn because it is certainly effective.

Why is it so effective? Why is the smokescreen so effective? Why is this kind of controversy such a powerful way to rid a church or denomination of the orthodox?

Because of one little word that is presented. Such a little, seemingly innocent word. But that word is so very attractive to pride. Used so often by Satan, it is a tool as powerful as it is subtle.

That word is *our*. "Our faith." "Our prayers." "Our conversion." "Our repentance." "Our obedience." "Our good works." "Our walk with God."

Do not be deceived by that word *our*. Understand that *our* truly can mean many different things.

Originally, that word was used in the controversy to denote particularity, the particularity of election and the covenant. "Our obedience" was originally trotted out to indicate that this could not be any so-called "obedience" of the reprobate wicked, even of the reprobate wicked in the line of the generations of believers and their seed. It was said that "our obedience" cannot be meritorious or conditional, no matter how it is explained in relationship to following blessings. Why not? Because it is the obedience of those who are elect and therefore are already in the realm of God's grace in Christ.

That little word *our* was trucked in under the guise of covenant theology. Once trucked in, it took on a life of its own, growing and moving and entering into places where it had no business.

It is certainly true, this little word *our* has its proper use in theology. It is properly explained in Canons of Dordt 3–4.14. Indeed, by the working of God's grace in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, we actually believe. By that same grace, faith is made fruitful, so that we actually do good works, beginning with true conversion: true mortification of the old man and true putting on of the new man. As a consequence, faith is so worked in us that it becomes truly and really our faith. Good works are given to us, so that they become truly the good works that we do. They become our good works (*Confessions and Church Order*, 169). Such is the language of question and answer 62 of the Heidelberg Catechism, and answer 86 speaks of "our conduct" and of "our godly conversation" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 107, 120).

No controversy so far.

However, we can speak of the use of this pronoun *our* in different ways. From a more technical, grammatical standpoint, there are different possible ways to understand the relationship between this pronoun in the genitive case and that to which *our* is attached.

Most simply and directly, there is the genitive of possession. This is the common, ordinary use of the genitive case. It answers the question, whose? Whose are these good works? They are so given to us by the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit that they become really and truly ours.

There is another way in which we can speak of faith, good works, and repentance as ours. That is by the use of the genitive of the subject. This answers the question, who did it? Who believed? Who walked with God? Who did the good works? As we indeed believe, repent, and do good works, they are ours.

But there is another use of the genitive case, called genitive of source. It answers the question, whence? We speak of cow's milk because it comes from cows. We say of a man, "He is his father's son" because it is evident from the son's character traits that he demonstrates his source. He has come from his father. The sound of a drum means the distinctive sound that comes from a drum.

Can this genitive of source be used to explain the *our* of "our good works"? Can we say, "Our good works" because *we* are the source of these good works? Can we

What a wonder it is to find the cross of Jesus Christ to be the fountainhead of every part and aspect of faith!



say, “Our faith” and mean that *we* are the source of our faith, of our activity of believing?

Scripture forbids this use of the word *our*. Faith is not *ours* in this sense. Good works are not *ours*. Conversion is not *ours*. Our walk with God is not *ours*.

Ephesians 2:8–9 strictly forbid identifying ourselves as the source of any part or aspect of our salvation. Concerning faith, the word of God tells us, “that not of yourselves.” Addressing all that he did as an apostle of Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul denied himself to be their source. “I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (1 Cor. 15:10).

*Source*, then, is at the heart of the controversy. Not good works or faith as a gift. Not good works or faith as the believer believing or doing good works. Rather *that* believers, in some way or another, are themselves the source of their believing or the source of their doing good works.

The believer must not be deceived by any false claims. He must not be led astray by all kinds of categorical denials. “I never said we are the source.” “Of course, it is all by grace.” “Remember the context of grace alone.” “Remember what was said elsewhere: not by works.”

What has been said? What has been taught? What has been affirmed?

As noted above, an adversative relationship has been taught. Teachings have been laid out in contrast to one another. Following so many affirmations of grace, there comes the point of contrast: “But we must still...” Faith is certainly God’s gift, *but* we must still believe. Good works have been ordained for us to do, *but* it is up to us to do them. There is grace to some degree and in some way as the source, *but* then we must believe—the activity to some degree and in some way proceeds *from us*. The same thing can be said of good works. Grace enables, grace equips. So far, so good. *But* we still must do them. The actual doing of good works is separated from the grace of God that enables and equips.

This same adversative relationship is evident in the statements that run in a typical manner as follows: “We must do good works because only in the way of our good works God blesses us.” God’s blessing of his people waits. He is the source of their blessing. But there is something standing in the way of his blessings upon them. What stands in the way is their good works, which they must do. God’s people stand before the necessity of good works and *their* doing of their good works, and God’s blessing them for their good works is suspended upon *their* doing of their good works. According to this simple representation, *we* are made to stand over against God. *We* are the source of good works, and God is the source of the blessings that follow them. With this construction article 24 of the Belgic Confession is denied. “Nay, we

are beholden to God for the good works we do, and not He to us” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 54).

There is also the new teaching of a two-track theology. It is said that there are two tracks running side by side. One track is God’s sovereignty, the sovereignty of grace. That track is necessary. But there is another track, the track of man’s responsibility. That track is established by commands in the Bible and God’s promises related to those commands. Both tracks are necessary for the production of good works. Both tracks working mysteriously together are necessary for us to do good works. Neither track by itself is capable of producing good works. Grace is therefore in part a source. But to that one track God’s grace is *confined*. Therefore, believers themselves are in part a source as well. Responsibility is necessary for good works to be truly the good works of *believers themselves*.

Thus there is a new teaching in the PRC. There are now two tracks. There is now a balance. God’s sovereignty of grace in salvation is no longer enough. “All by grace” certainly must be injected somewhere into the sermon or article. “All by grace” can even be brought closer to the subject. Yes, grace makes both tracks. Yes, grace makes possible the balance. Yes, look at what God’s grace can make of a man. Grace, as grace, makes man able to be *the source* of his good works.

There is one last way in which the phrase *our good works* identifies *us*, rather than God’s grace, as the source. God’s grace in relationship to faith and good works is that grace enables us. God’s grace enables us to believe. God’s grace enables us to do good works. Without this grace no one can ever believe or do good works. Further, since this is sovereign, particular grace, only the elect are enabled to believe. Only the elect are enabled to do good works. As a result, this enabling grace is strictly within the realm of the covenant. A further consequence, we are told, is that this grace remains unconditional because it is given unconditionally to covenant members only. That is the reason it cannot lead to conditions in the covenant or to conditional covenant theology. (A caveat here: do not try to analyze this logically.) Here Canons of Dordt 3–4.13 may even be invoked: “Notwithstanding which, they rest satisfied with knowing and experiencing that by this grace of God they are enabled to believe with the heart, and love their Savior” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 169). (Please continue on to article 14 to see the whole truth about grace and faith.)

Grace enables, but it is *up to us* to actually believe. Grace enables, but it is *up to us* to actually do good works. These statements require a division. In the realm of faith and in the realm of good works, the ability does come from God’s grace. But the actuality of believing and of doing good works comes from believers themselves.

Why *not ours*? Why the “not of yourselves” of Ephesians 2:8–9?

To be sure, “lest any man should boast” (v. 9). To be sure, that we may glory only in the Lord and not in ourselves (1 Cor. 1:31).

And for the sake of the truth of God’s everlasting covenant of grace.

To make man—in any respect, to any degree, or in any way—the source of anything good before God is of the essence of pride that is a revolt from God. It is disastrous to the truth of faith as delightfully complete dependence on the God of our salvation for every aspect and part of that salvation. It is disastrous to the heart of the covenant of grace, which is fellowship between God and man that is truly life and peace. To make man the source of anything good before God makes man a party over against God; and insofar as it does, it makes the covenant into a contract between the two parties. God will do his part, and man will do his part, and man *must* do his part before he receives further blessings from God. Man must look to God and his grace for some blessings, but he must look to himself for other blessings.

Why *not ours*? Why the “not of yourselves” of Ephesians 2:8–9?

For the sake of the truth of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Most of all, damage is done to the truth of the gospel of the cross of Jesus Christ. Has that precious blood shed by the Lamb of God actually purchased *everything* necessary to our salvation? Is it sufficient to that cross to say that its blood has purchased grace that only *enables* faith and good works? Is it sufficient to say that the cross has purchased the blessings of assurance that follow actual believing and the blessings of God that follow actual good works done by believers? What damage is done to the fullness of Calvary’s cross to say that grace only goes so far, and then it is *up to the believer*!

Conversely, what glory and blessedness it is to ascribe *everything* to the almighty power of God’s grace! What a wonder it is to find the cross of Jesus Christ to be the fountainhead of *every* part and aspect of faith, both the ability to believe and the act of believing itself! To find that cross to be the source of both the ability and the doing of all our good works, from the willing of the heart to the doing of the hands and the speaking of the lips! What blessedness to know that any and every reward of grace is truly gracious, not because of anything that we have done but from our complete savior, Jesus Christ.

“By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves...not of works, lest any man should boast.”

—MVW

## CONTRIBUTION

# WHY DID THE GOOSEN FAMILY LEAVE?

October 15, 2021

Dear congregation of Immanuel,

I write this letter to you, the beloved people of our Lord Jesus Christ, because I love you in the Lord. We have walked among you for the last fifteen years, and we care deeply for the people in Immanuel. My motive in writing this is to honor our covenant God, in love for him and out of love and concern for his precious church. “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

Many of you have heard by now that the Lord has led

us to withdraw our membership from Immanuel Protestant Reformed Church. Coming to this conviction was only done after much prayer, reading, studying, considering, and reconsidering many doctrinal issues. The decision to leave Immanuel was difficult and painful.

Our only reason for joining the Reformed Protestant Churches is the ongoing “controversy” in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). You might have read very little or much about this, yet I believe calling it merely a “controversy” is already part of the problem, for there is much more. Doctrinal error is present in the denomination. Calling this a “controversy” minimizes the importance of the fact that the truth of God is at stake!

Salvation is at stake! Knowing you are saved, experiencing salvation is at stake! There is truth, and there is lie. Do not be deceived into thinking that this is not as black and white as that. Do not be deceived into thinking that this is not serious. There can be nothing more important. The loss of possessions, health, children, spouses, family, and our very earthly lives simply cannot begin to compare with the corruption of the honor and glory of God and his truth.

Yet there are many who deny this. I am not ignorant of that. However, denying that there is a fatal error in the denomination is only aggravating and reinforcing the error. Accusing those who voice their valid concerns of slander, schism, revolt, lies, antinomianism, or whatever else will *not* make the facts disappear.

I entreat you to bear with me, a weak, sinful believer, as I try to explain the error in the denomination *from my perspective*. I have no intent to slander or lie. God is my witness.

### *Synod 2018*

I am ashamed that I was totally ignorant regarding the doctrinal events in our denomination that had started already in 2015. This ignorance on my part rapidly changed in March 2018, when Classis West chose me to be a delegate to Synod 2018. At that point I had only heard a few rumors of some “difficult and stubborn” people out East who were causing “trouble within the denomination.” But I had to judge for myself, and the Lord had to lead me to a conviction in the matter. Synod would deal with this matter. As an elder and a delegate, I would be called upon to express my opinion and to vote on right versus wrong.

The main issue before synod would be the appeal of Mrs. Connie Meyer against seventeen sermons preached by Rev. David Overway in Hope Protestant Reformed Church. To my further disgrace and embarrassment, I must admit my initial inability to grasp the issues. One moment I agreed with Reverend Overway and with Hope’s consistory and Classis East, which had defended Reverend Overway’s sermons. The next moment I would agree with Mrs. Meyer. I was quite confused.

Eventually, I set all the material aside and went to scripture and the confessions, with Rev. Herman Hoeksema, John Calvin, and some of Prof. David Engelsma’s writings

at my side, and studied the basics of the Reformed faith.<sup>1</sup> The Lord especially laid John 15:10 on my mind: “If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love.”

After studying the basics, I went back to the agenda material, and then I could clearly see the error preached by Reverend Overway, which error was being defended by his consistory at Hope and by Classis East. Then I could not “un-see” the problem. It became very clear that the truth was at stake and that there was a serious error in the PRC—a serious error about basic and fundamental doctrine that would lead the churches back to full-blown works-righteousness, for we always have to see where an error will end up if it fully develops.

I kept wondering in amazement how some of the most learned men in the denomination could stumble or struggle like me over the building blocks of the Reformed faith. History shows though that the reason is easy to understand: the lie never comes out stating that it is a lie. We all know that the lie always has an element of truth to it and pretends to be just that. For, indeed, the devil himself comes as an angel of light. “And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14). Furthermore, we always find the lie attractive, as it appeals to our sinful flesh. The lie was cloaked with Reformed language and took many off guard. It sounds very pious: “We only want to promote holiness.” Nevertheless, it remains a destructive lie.

I became very concerned as Synod 2018 approached, for as I read and reread the material, it became clear to me that there was a deep division in our churches. At a minimum it had begun back in 2015 already. A serious division not over homeschooling, Church Order article 21, Psalter revision, or NAPARC, but actually over fundamental scriptural truth. It could not be more serious. Already then I feared that there might be a split coming in the denomination.

Finally, Synod 2018 started. I was nervous and excited. I was humbled as synod appointed me to the committee that was to deal with Connie Meyer’s protest.<sup>2</sup> My humility stemmed from the fact that the Lord appointed me for this work when there were many other elders more capable and better experienced in and knowledgeable of the Reformed faith than I.

Our committee spent seven very long days and nights preparing our report. After some initial disagreement,

1 For anyone interested in reading further, I recommend the entire section on soteriology from Herman Hoeksema’s *Reformed Dogmatics*; Lord’s Days 7, 23–24, and 32 in his *Triple Knowledge*; and Belgic Confession 22–24 as a start.

2 For those who do not know how synod or classis works, the advice usually adopted and written in the *Acts of Synod* or the minutes of classis originates with a committee consisting of four or five men. In this case at Synod 2018, the committee consisted of two elders and two ministers and a professor advising. Thus the actual legwork is done by the committees in most instances. Committee reports can be adopted as presented, amended, or rejected by the synod or classis. The bulk of our committee’s report for Synod 2018 was adopted with minimal changes to its major portion.



our committee became unanimous that we should sustain Mrs. Meyer in her appeal to synod. Her main contention was against her minister's "teaching...that our obedience is a condition that we must perform in order to experience the fellowship of God."<sup>3</sup> Her protest was *sustained* by synod, which was significant, for Mrs. Meyer clearly stated that this is *the teaching of a conditional covenant!*

Think about this: Reverend Overway taught that God saves us, but we don't know it. God keeps that knowledge from us until *we* do something—some good work, some obedience—and *then only* do we know and experience the joy of salvation. Stop doing the good works, and you don't know you are saved. If I sin (which I do every day), I lose the knowledge and assurance of my salvation. If I do good works and even more good works, I maintain my salvation and gain richer blessings and more fellowship.

There simply is no comfort but only terror in such an erroneous teaching, which really is the heresy of Pelagianism brought back from hell. How can the holy God overlook the sin in my best good works? Even that one little sin in my best work still damns me before God. God's people will live in dreadful terror if in any sense works are instrumental in salvation, or our salvation depends on or is based on what *we* do.

The correct order is, in fact, the opposite: because God saves, redeems, and delivers us from bondage to sin and through his gift of faith, we assuredly know (experience) that we are saved, and we are incredibly thankful for that salvation. Therefore, we *are* obedient; we *must*, we *will*, and we *can* do good works; but only because of what Christ has first done for us and keeps doing in us. God always first, then us!

I have recalled many times over the years the days when our committee worked on answering Mrs. Meyer's protest. I have pondered much over the fact that I did make some concessions while working with the committee members, holding before me the truth that "in the multitude of counsellors there is safety" (Prov. 11:14). I wanted the committee's advice to be stronger—forcibly condemning the error—for example, that Reverend Overway's teaching "undermined the confessions"

versus that his teaching was "out of harmony with the confessions."<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, advice written in love and not in anger is still the truth. It will still penetrate into the heart of our denomination and lead to repentance. We were going to "drop a bomb" on synod! I think it is safe to say that the majority expected that we would simply go along with the previous advice of Classis East and again reject Mrs. Meyer's protest. So we did not state as clearly as we should have that Reverend Overway taught and others defended conditional theology. Remember, conditional theology is federal vision theology, which is in effect Arminianism, which is Pelagianism, which is out of hell!

But people will connect the dots.

Surely, these learned theologians (Overway, Hope's consistory, Classis East, and the committee of classis assigned to assist Hope), whom we rebuked by telling them they had erred, would *connect the dots*. We don't need to call the error *rank heresy*. They would know; they would repent; and they would confess their error.

Surely, the recommendation that the Lord led synod to adopt with minimal change will be a surprise to many, an embarrassment to many, and hopefully a shame to others as well. But they are brothers in Christ; no doubt they will respond with a contrite heart. Even the seminary professors—who I am reliably told all agreed prior to synod that Neil and Connie Meyer were antinomians, as supported by their personal appeals and writings—will admit their mistake, difficult as that might be, for they are men whom others look up to, and they are training the next generation of ministers who will bring the gospel to my children and grandchildren. In my heart I felt this would be the smallest obstacle to overcome. For the child of God is spiritually sensitive. When his sin is pointed out, he cries out in shame, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." And there would be no greater joy! Unity will be restored in our beloved denomination, for the truth has been maintained! Thus I even defended Hope's consistory when it was suggested that the officebearers all should be either deposed or replaced, as they surely could not lead their minister out of the error if they themselves had missed it.

The truth of God is at stake!  
Salvation is at stake! Knowing  
you are saved, experiencing  
salvation is at stake!

<sup>3</sup> *Acts of Synod 2018*, 103.

<sup>4</sup> Our committee considered at length how to bring criticism across. We ended up using language, such as "no matter how the error is labeled." We did not use the same language as the protestant, for example, "rank heresy" or "gross false doctrine." But importantly in the end, we did not rebuke her for using that language either. Thus the synodical decision leaves room for interpretation. We were gentle, loving, and not overly harsh. We could somewhat spare the brothers involved, as there were senior, well-respected ministers and professors involved in defending or not seeing the error.

I was naive, terribly so. The repentance never came. The shame and embarrassment was covered up by a continued deflection of the issue and insisting that the real problem was antinomianism. Men and their reputations were sheltered.

### *The Other Issue: Professor Cammenga and Neil Meyer's Deposition*

For many who did not follow the events of Synod 2018 and prior assemblies closely, it should be stated that there were several other issues in the background of this all-important synod. One of these was a protest from Prof. Ronald Cammenga that originated in 2017. He protested that Synod 2016 had erred when it did not declare Neil Meyer to be an antinomian.<sup>5</sup> Professor Cammenga made a fatal flaw in his protest when he favorably quoted a federal vision theologian's book to support his contention of antinomianism against Neil Meyer.<sup>6</sup>

In my mind this was significant; for according to the Form for the Installation of Professors of Theology, one of the main tasks of the professor of theology is to "caution them [the students] in regard to the errors and heresies of the old, but especially of the new day" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 297).

However, Professor Cammenga did exactly the opposite. He failed to warn the churches against a new book from Mark Jones. Instead of pointing out the errors in the book and warning the churches *against* Jones' false teaching (the book essentially calls those who maintain an unconditional covenant *antinomian*), he used the book in support of his (false) arguments.

Surely, this will create a firestorm. Surely, Professor Cammenga will need to be rebuked, perhaps even disciplined, and perhaps even removed from the seminary. Most certainly, synod will connect the dots: a professor uses a federal visionist in order falsely to call Neil Meyer an antinomian! Reverend Overway preached federal vision theology, and Professor Cammenga supports Reverend Overway. Surely, even the so-called "spiritual idiot" can connect the dots.

Sadly, the opposite happened. Neil Meyer was instead rebuked for his "charges of heresy against Prof. R. Cammenga."<sup>7</sup> Yet more reason for Hope's consistory to wrongfully keep Neil Meyer under discipline for the false charge of antinomianism. Let's not forget that Neil Meyer by then had been deposed from office and was under discipline for three years. Let's not forget that the litmus test for elders in applying discipline is that the sin is so

serious that it needs to lead to excommunication if not repented of; it needs to be so serious that eventually the sinner will be placed outside the kingdom; he will not be saved; he will go to hell and eternal damnation if he does not repent.

But the charge was false! Neil Meyer did not sin! The opposite is true. A straw-man argument, a distraction from the real issue. Conditional theology was preached, defended, and maintained for years. Neil Meyer correctly pointed this out.

Not a word was said against Professor Cammenga—sadly, not by me either.

### *After Synod 2018 and Currently*

God's truth triumphed momentarily in the PRC. The correct doctrine was upheld. Repentance will follow, as these men are brothers in Christ. Preaching and writing will have to follow to expose the error—to explain to the people exactly what the error was, to explain the error clearly, and to set it over against the truth—so that it will never, ever creep back into the PRC. If I did not see the error, if Professor Dykstra admitted on the floor of synod that he did not see the error, if Hope's consistory did not see the error, if Classis East did not see the error, obviously many in the denomination did not see it either. But they all see it now because synod explained it to them. God judged through synod and spoke. The decision is settled and binding, after all.

I could not have been more wrong! The aftermath was completely the opposite of what I had hoped and prayed for. Instead of being rooted out, the error would develop and grip the denomination further. The soft rebuke was twisted to state that the synod was actually "balanced"—incredibly, even to the point of stating that Classis East and synod actually agreed in 2018, which was a full-orbed lie.

This lie became evident already at synod. Right after the decision was passed to sustain Mrs. Meyer's protest and the doctrinal statement was condemned, Rev. Carl Haak—one of the authors of the doctrinal position paper that contained the same error as Reverend Overway's condemned sermons—stood up and addressed the synod. Reverend Haak expressed that this [the doctrinal errors just condemned by synod] was the way he had always preached, and he would continue to preach that way. He was not rebuked for his open and public rebellion. As a delegate, I did not rebuke him; Rev. Ronald Van Overloop, the president of synod, did not rebuke him; nor did any delegate publicly rebuke him.

<sup>5</sup> *Acts of Synod 2017*, 268.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Jones, *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> *Acts of Synod 2018*, 97.

Nobody brought up the “settled-and-binding”-Church Order-article-31 argument at that time. No, that would be reserved for others.

The *Standard Bearer* began right after synod to sound a word just slightly different than the synodical decision.<sup>8</sup> I was disappointed in Professor Dykstra’s article in the *Standard Bearer* right after synod.<sup>9</sup> We had worked closely together in a committee for several days, hammering out the advice. He had admitted on the floor of synod that he had not seen the error before. Surely, if anyone was going to take the lead in exposing the error, it would be Professor Dykstra!

Yet he did, indeed, minimize the error by distraction—focusing on warning and threatening with excommunication anybody who would call the error “Federal Vision, or a conditional covenant.”<sup>10</sup>

That was *not* what synod had said! Our committee was not going to be harsh. Professor Dykstra even pleaded for soft language for those “solid Reformed men” when our committee came to deal with the erroneous doctrinal position paper. But we all knew it was conditional theology; we all could connect the dots.

The error was boldly and forcibly repeated with the well-known article by Rev. K. Koole: “If a man would be saved, there is that which he *must* do.”<sup>11</sup> A clear heretical statement that he has never retracted but continues to defend. Open criticism of the correct theology of Rev. Herman Hoeksema followed.<sup>12</sup> Dreadful promotion of Witsius’ conditional theology followed.<sup>13</sup>

Professor Cammenga came out with his insistence that there are antinomians in the denomination. He brought distortion and destruction of assurance. He further denigrates Christ in his preaching: “Jesus [does not] accomplish himself personally every aspect of our salvation.” The fact that the professor qualifies his statement with “personally” makes no material difference, as you cannot separate Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, who is *the Spirit of Christ*.

After Synod 2018 there never was any clear explanation of the error; it was never exposed. And it’s not just that there was silence in the *Standard Bearer* and on many pulpits (our own included) regarding the error; there was rather a continuation of the same error that synod had rejected.

God’s judgment on this led to the preaching of full-orbed false theology, as pointed out by Rev. Nathan Langerak in the *Sword and Shield*: grace that is available to us, Christ who did not personally do everything for our salvation, two-track theology and conditions in the maintenance of the covenant, being active in the matter of assurance—all Arminian statements!<sup>14</sup>

### *What Was and Remains the Error*

In short: Faith was made a work. Faith was twisted to be the activity of faith or the exercise of faith, which can still be correct if it means that we turn from self to Christ, cling to him, embrace him, hunger after him, thirst for him, rest in him. Faith has fruit (good works and obedience), but *the fruit of faith was confused with faith itself*. The fruit of faith (wrongly defined as either the “activity of faith” or the “exercise of faith”)

is held out as a condition (prerequisite) that we must fulfill first, before we experience fellowship with God.

But faith is never a work. Faith is an *instrument* that keeps us in communion with Christ. Faith is chiefly a bond, so that we become bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. *Faith is active. Nobody denies that*, but the chief activity of faith is to look away from self to Christ—to his work, his obedience, his merit, not ours.

Faith is not being presented as a gift from God but as something “we must do.”

The Reformed faith has always maintained that the *essence* of faith is assurance, but erroneously, *assurance has been destroyed* by making faith a work. Herman Hoeksema is quite emphatic regarding faith and assurance in his commentary on Lord’s Day 32:

Because God saves, redeems, and delivers us from bondage to sin and through his gift of faith, we assuredly know (experience) that we are saved, and we are incredibly thankful for that salvation. Therefore, we *are* obedient; we *must*, we *will*, and we *can* do good works.

8 This has been pointed out at length by the *Sword and Shield* and by Dewey Engelsma’s blog, “A Strait Betwixt Two,” <https://astraitbetwixttwo.com>.

9 Russell J. Dykstra, “Synod 2018: Obedience and Covenant Fellowship,” *Standard Bearer* 94, no. 18 (July 2018): 413–15.

10 Russell J. Dykstra, “Synod 2018: Obedience and Covenant Fellowship,” 415.

11 Kenneth Koole, “What Must I Do...?” *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 1 (October 1, 2018): 7.

12 Kenneth Koole, “Response,” *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 12 (March 15, 2019): 278–82.

13 See *Standard Bearer* 97, nos. 4–8 (November 15, 2020–January 15, 2021).

14 Nathan J. Langerak, “Unfinished Business,” *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 5 (August 15, 2021): 36–43.



True and saving faith does not require any props, or external supports. It can and does indeed stand alone. For faith is itself assurance...

We must therefore never say that faith is assured by good works. For faith itself is assurance.

We must never attempt to make our good works the ground of our assurance of faith...

Never forget that the Holy Spirit is the author of our faith. And He is also the author of the assurance of faith. Faith and the well-being of faith both are the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup>

I will give but a few examples of how faith is being made a work.

Reverend Overway preached, “We look at our good works [the fruit of faith] in the same way. Never of any value to make me be declared righteous before God, but always of help in finding and maintaining assurance...”<sup>16</sup>

The doctrinal position paper—after first wrongly defining the activity of faith this way: “It is by the exercise of this faith [later defined as obedience] that the believer experiences fellowship with the Father”—concluded with this: “It is important to establish why a holy life of obedience [exercise of faith] is necessary to experience fellowship with God.”<sup>17</sup>

Professor Cammenga wrote just four weeks ago in the *Standard Bearer*: “These are the evidences of grace [earlier defined as obedience and good works] within the children of God, which confirm their assurance of salvation... But assurance that they have been ‘chosen to everlasting life’ [election] is enjoyed by those who *are faithful, living and active church members*.” Note that it is not faith itself that assures us but rather *being faithful*. Faith is made synonymous with being “faithful,” a clear and classic line of argumentation from the federal vision. Even more troubling is Professor Cammenga’s favorable attitude toward the “mystical syllogism” in this article, but that as a side note.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, it is my contention that Synod 2020 and Synod 2021 at the very least have severely weakened the decision of Synod 2018, and at worst the decision has effectively been overturned. I will try to demonstrate this briefly.

Synod 2018 declared as doctrinal error the following statement:

If we but meet these requirements [obedience and godliness] a little bit, by the grace of God, of course, and by God’s grace working them in us— if we meet these requirements but a little, then we will enjoy a little of God’s fellowship. That’s the truth. If we meet these requirements a lot, then we will enjoy much of God’s fellowship.<sup>19</sup>

Yet Synod 2020 and Synod 2021 dealt with protests against Reverend Overway’s preaching in December 2018, which preaching stated:

We do little, God rewards greatly. And yet there is a correlation, so that we understand the less of a good work, or the less good that a good work is, the less or smaller the reward. The less number of works, the less of a reward one receives. So too with regard to the more. The more that one walks in good works, the more of a reward is received. [Significantly, part of the reward was described as fellowship.]<sup>20</sup>

Synod 2020 and Synod 2021 failed to uphold protests that showed that these statements militated against Synod 2018.<sup>21</sup> They failed to judge these statements as heretical and failed to point out that, although different language was used, the exact same principle had been taught. Synod 2021 even agreed that the two statements are similar, yet synod declared that that does not prove militancy.<sup>22</sup>

This is erroneous though, because the same minister continued to preach false doctrine after it had been condemned as false by Synod 2018. Now that false doctrine becomes the very definition of *heresy*. That continuing false doctrine must be judged as militating against previous settled and binding decisions. If not that, it should have been declared heresy.

How will we ever get rid of the error, if in love for God we are not willing to condemn it when it is repeated? Going the way of articles 79 and 80 of the Church Order is *still* an act of love for the brother.

I am also concerned that the decisions [that became doctrinal positions] of Synod 2020 and Synod 2021 weaken and will compromise the gospel, *especially as they are given in the context of protests against conditional preaching*.

15 Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association), 48–51.

16 *Acts of Synod 2018*, 143.

17 “Doctrinal Statement: RE: Experiencing Fellowship with the Father (November 21, 2017)” *Acts of Synod 2018*, 196–97.

18 Prof. Ronald Cammenga, “Assurance and Good Works (4),” *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 21 (September 15, 2021): 490–91; emphasis added.

19 *Acts of Synod 2018*, 65.

20 *Acts of Synod 2020*, 114.

21 *Acts of Synod 2020*, 88.

22 *Acts of Synod 2021*, 101.

Synod 2021, in rejecting a protest against Reverend Overway's preaching, declared:

Mr. Doezema denies the plain teaching of the Canons by saying, "Canons V-5 does not teach that repentance is some necessary activity that we must perform before we will again experience God's fatherly countenance."

Mr. Doezema's understanding is contrary to Scripture's teaching that repentance precedes the reception of God's merciful pardon in Christ by faith: Prov. 28:13, Ps. 32:5...

Repentance occurs temporally prior to the reception of God's pardon by faith.<sup>23</sup>

I am very concerned about the current emphasis that there is some necessary, temporal, God-wrought activity that precedes a blessing from God. For if we *develop* this concept, we can completely justify De Wolf's heretical statement from 1953: "Our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter into the kingdom." De Wolf clarified later that he was emphasizing "daily entering, always entering, and conscious activity."<sup>24</sup> This presentation also strongly suggests that a heretical statement, such as "If a man would be saved, there is that which he *must* do," is indeed completely correct.<sup>25</sup>

Synod 2021 quoted Psalm 32:5 as proof of its assertion.

However, studying Calvin's commentary on the *entire* Psalm 32, Calvin emphasizes that God first declares the *blessedness* of man established on the basis of Christ's work for us in reconciling us to God and removing our guile. *That* is the blessing (vv. 1–2). This includes removing the guile of not having a heart that is bothered by God's wrath or heavy hand against sin. Then we are placed under the heavy hand of God, in time, before we repent. This heavy hand of God, this anguish of bones waxing old and moisture turned to drought, however, *is part of the blessing of salvation*. It is a blessing, not a curse. The blessing is not for the wicked; it is only for the elect, as Calvin states: "Those [the elect]...whom God has truly awakened so as to be affected with a lively sense of their misery, are so constantly agitated and disquieted that it is difficult to restore peace to their minds." After this follows repentance and confession with its joy, and the first verse is again

But faith is never a work. Faith is an *instrument* that keeps us in communion with Christ.

experienced. And the wicked reprobate are never bothered by the hand of God. They "put away from them, as far as they can, the terrors of conscience, and all fear of Divine wrath."<sup>26</sup>

Thus always God first, in every aspect, even temporally.

Another text illustrates this: "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love" (John 15:10).

Calvin comments, "For the obedience that believers render is not the cause why he continues his love toward us, but rather the effect of his love." Not us, but God first, and then because *God has regenerated us, God has called us, God has given us faith, we do experience his blessings (which can include the severe anguish of his hand); we do repent; and we are converted to experience the blessing already established.*

Finally, in support of the argument of Synod 2021, appeal is made to Lord's Day 45: "God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 134).

This exposes the danger of focusing on the temporal order, which is far less important than the *logical* order of our salvation, leading to conditional

thought. A good friend reminded me what Ursinus wrote regarding Lord's Day 45: "The effect [receiving God's grace after prayer] is not prior to its own cause in order and nature, *but in time they both exist together.*"<sup>27</sup> In other words, praying and then receiving grace happen simultaneously. Ursinus states this repeatedly.

### *Edmonton, Rev. A. Lanning, and Rev. N. Langerak*

I cannot agree with the manner in which Classis West dealt with Edmonton's consistory. Calling it a "revolt" to voice serious and valid concerns about the compromise of the gospel, truth, and salvation completely misses the point. Classis West matter-of-factly dismissed the consistory's concerns and enforced the church visitors' advice that Edmonton's grounds for separation were unsubstantiated and then, even worse, sinful and slanderous.

The truth of the matter is that Edmonton's concerns were not unsubstantiated slander. Edmonton's office-bearers were fulfilling their duty to watch over the flock

23 *Acts of Synod 2021*, 122–23.

24 Nathan J. Langerak, "The Majority Report," *Sword and Shield* 1, no. 13 (March 2021): 15.

25 Kenneth Koole, "What Must I Do...?" *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 1 (October 1, 2018): 7.

26 All quotations are from Calvin's commentaries at <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom08.html>.

27 G. W. Williard, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 621; my emphasis.

Christ has appointed them, to “maintain faithfulness to the only Head and King of the Church our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>28</sup> For Classis to pretend that “all is okay” and “there is nothing to see here or be concerned about” is not an honest assessment of what transpired over the last several years in our denomination.

A consistory has the God-given right, in the care and interest of the spiritual welfare of themselves and the flock, to remove the *congregation and itself* from a denomination. Rev. T. Miersma, the church visitors, Immanuel’s consistory, and finally Classis West undermined the autonomy of the local congregation in this sordid affair by leveling charges of sin against the consistory. They should have allowed the consistory to deal with this matter as they saw fit.

The proper procedure for the Miersma group would have been to separate from Edmonton if they did not want to acquiesce with the consistory’s decision “to remove the Church.” But until then the Miersma group still remained under its consistory, which was still the God-appointed rule of Christ over the group. Be consistent: if you want to *insist* that the consistory removed *itself*, you *must necessarily* admit that the entire congregation is then also removed from the PRC. And the documents make it clear that the consistory’s intent was only to act once the congregation had approved the consistory’s recommendation.<sup>29</sup>

This letter’s content also points out that Rev. A. Lanning and Rev. N. Langerak were absolutely correct in calling out the denomination for minimizing and not ridding herself of the error. They have been valiantly fulfilling their God-given calling. Their deposition and suspension were wrong. Indeed, they were persecuted for rebuking her for her errors (*Confessions and Church Order*, 64), while the rebukes of ministers and consistories against them (and Edmonton) are not deemed sin but instead justified.

## *Events in Our Own Congregation*

Principles work through. If the above is not understood by a minister, it will reflect in his preaching. I do believe that the preaching in our own congregation has indeed changed. It is not my intention to demonstrate this at length, but suffice it to say that I had significant difficulty with recent sermons. In essence, the preaching is not Christ-centered but centers on man, our “activity,” and our experiences.

Reverend Bleyenbergh sadly missed the point of the whole controversy with his letter “Pastor’s study.” In his very first concrete writing about the controversy, he completely ignores that the “activity of faith” was and still is *wrongly presented* as obedience. When that happens, preaching essentially becomes Christless. For then who has a need of Christ if our good works must be brought to the congregation as necessary *for any blessing of salvation?*

I also want to emphatically state that the recent events that happened in the school, the implied charges of sin leveled against us by a deacon, and the whole difficulty with COVID plays absolutely no part in our decision to withdraw. It is and always will be distracting background noise. None of those things concern salvation.

## *Conclusion*

I never intended to be this long-winded. It is difficult to summarize all that has happened in the last six years. Many other issues could be mentioned. There are wrongs on both sides, and I am not blind to that. I do not claim to know it all. I do not claim to know more, have more spiritual insight, and have more knowledge or ability than any of you. Yet I cannot ignore these issues. I cannot live with this theology. I cannot agree with the PRC’s dismissal of the controversy as a mere weakness. It is repackaged Arminianism in the covenant. It will choke me, my wife, and our children to death.

In Christian love,  
Hilgard

28 Agenda for Classis West September 29, 2021, 7.

29 The second main paragraph in Edmonton’s letter to the congregation, Agenda for Classis West September 29, 2021, 7. Also see pages 64–65.



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

## TRUTH FALLEN

*And judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off: for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter.—Isaiah 59:14*

**T**ruth is fallen in the street! The truth had a place in the homes of the city. It had a place of honor in these homes and was a welcome guest. It was the speech and judgment of these homes, so that there was life and peace in these homes. Truth was loved and embraced for the health and peace that it brought.

But love of the truth turned into hatred of the truth. Formerly honored, the truth came to be despised. Love turned to sin. “In transgressing and lying against the LORD, and departing away from our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart words of falsehood” (Isa. 59:13). This could only mean hostility toward the truth, which is always the enemy of the lie. So these words follow: “And judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off” (v. 14). Likewise, the same treatment was accorded to those standing for the truth, still seeking to honor it. “Yea, truth faileth; and he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey” (v. 15).

So was the truth rejected, driven out, and then deprived of all strength to stand. Thoroughly, it was made into an outcast and banished from its home, from its hearth, and from its board.

No place for truth!

No place for true doctrine, the truth of God’s word. No place for true sanctification and true good works, from the heart, by faith alone without works and motivated by pure gratitude for salvation. Neither any place for the truth that is the sovereign work of God’s counsel in the church and church history. Neither any place for the truth of what has been said and done. Fabrications and deceit are the order of the day. Charges and accusations, from slander and schism to the heresy of antinomianism and hyper-Calvinism, are hurled with vicious anger. Truly, “he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey.”

In three different ways in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), besides the essential, doctrinal controversy about the role of good works in salvation, the truth has been denied its proper place and driven out to lie fallen in the street.

The first way is the broadest and has to do with the history of the PRC, with particular attention to the controversies that have taken place in those churches: the beginning in 1924, the schism of 1953, and the present condition of apostasy.

We can think of a simple line and direction that has been understood and embraced by the churches of the denomination. This line and direction has been drawn from the denomination’s beginning and can be identified in two ways.

First, the line can be identified as being clearly out of the Protestant Reformation and as being specifically in line with the Reformed doctrine of the three forms of unity. According to the understanding and application of this line, the Protestant Reformed denomination began out of a controversy regarding common grace. Because three ministers stood against common grace and were determined to stand in line with the Reformed creeds on the truth of sovereign, particular grace, they were deposed from the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) by their respective classes. Thus those ministers began a new denomination, the Protestant Reformed Churches. The three ministers’ stand and their churches’ support were clearly doctrinal in character. There was no other distinction between the PRC and the CRC, not in worship and not in practice.

The same Reformed line was evident in the controversy over conditions in the covenant that led to and followed the schism of 1953. On the basis of the doctrine of the three forms of unity, the Declaration of Principles was composed and the judgments of First Protestant Reformed Church and Classis East were made against the erroneous doctrinal statements preached by Rev. H. De Wolf that directly led to the schism of 1953. It became evident as the controversy developed on the pages of the *Standard Bearer* that the question facing the denomination was whether the line of 1924 would be followed or whether differing lines would be entertained. Following the controversy, preaching and teaching in the Protestant Reformed Churches emphasized the doctrinal issues. Even those who left the PRC and eventually returned to

the CRC admitted that those doctrinal issues were paramount in the controversy.

Second, this same line runs beyond the denomination into the history of the church long before the Protestant Reformed denomination came into existence. It is the line of the division that always runs through church history between salvation by grace and salvation by works. This was the line between the Protestant Reformation and Roman Catholicism, the line between the Synod of Dordt and the Remonstrants, the line between the corrupt state church of the Netherlands on one side and the *Afscheiding* (1834) and the *Doleantie* (1886) on the other. That line continued between the PRC and the CRC in 1924. It is the line not only between grace and works, between the truth and the lie, but also between apostasy and faithfulness to the truth. It is the line between the liberalism of the lie and the conservatism of the truth.

What about this line? It is a line of orientation. It is also a line of demarcation that demands commitment. As drawn from the past into the present, so it must continue into the future as a standard to be maintained by churches and Christians that desire to be faithful to the same truth of the everlasting, infallible word of God. What does it mean to be faithful? It means to keep to the same Reformed line that has been drawn through the past into the present. For this reason the line must be straight.

The truth is both a proper understanding of this line and a proper understanding of this line as straight.

The lie that is destruction of the truth to drive it out of its place must have reference to the very same Reformed line. The lie lays hold on that line, definitely claims fidelity to that line, and declares the straightness of that line. But, as with all deceit, the lie does something else. At the very same time that the lie declares faithfulness to the line as a straight line, in reality the lie bends or curves the line.

The lie bends or curves the line in two ways.

The first way the lie works is to lay out all kinds of credentials for authority. These credentials are meant to suppose faithfulness in the minds of the hearers or readers. An ordained minister or professor has formal credentials, even of a conservative, Reformed or Presbyterian denomination. Deliberative assemblies are assumed to be always led by the Spirit into the truth. This first way is the use of the position of authority to bend the line of truth by introducing subtle changes. At the same time, authority will insist that the line is just as straight as it ever was.

Honoring authority, and invoking the fifth commandment to that end, must mean agreeing that, yes, the line is as straight as it ever was.

The second manner of the lie is first to cause confusion and within the caused confusion to bend the line. The lie makes the line fuzzy and indiscernible to the hearers or readers. Then false doctrines are slyly introduced to bend or curve the line in a different direction. False statements are introduced, surrounded with all kinds of true. These false statements can be supported, retracted, changed, and presented again, even numerous times. They are claimed with authority to be truth, even with apologies for confusion that might have been caused, confusion often attributed to the hearers or readers rather than to the authors of the false statements.

At the same time, the purveyors of the lie garner the power of institutions and assemblies for their own protection. At first this power is used to grant toleration for the lie to bend and curve the line, later on this power is used to support and maintain the lie, and still later on it is used to destroy and cast out those who try to show the bend or curve in the line. “He that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey.”

The second way in which the truth is driven out is by a rewriting of history. The terms of a controversy as officially and authoritatively reported are changed, often into the very opposite of what is true. The nature of the controversy is changed. Analysis is drastically changed. Ends and means are completely overturned.

At this point it may be exceedingly hard to understand, but the recent controversy in the PRC was originally about the role of good works in salvation *and* about those good works *displacing* the perfect work of Jesus Christ. So had a minister preached. So had a consistory supported that preaching against protestants. So had a special committee of classis supported that preaching. So had a classis supported that preaching against appellants. But a synod said no. That synod sustained the appellants against the classis, against the special committee, against the consistory, and against the pastor. That synod ruled that the controversial statements indeed displaced the perfect work of Christ.

There was also a middle point in the historical proceeding of the controversy, with Synod 2018 of the PRC. This middle point was one of forgiving and forgetting. Good decisions had been made, it was said. It was time to move on for the sake of peace and unity.

To speak further about the controversy, or to implicate individuals in terms of the controversy, would bring charges of slander and schism.

Bygones must be bygones. This controversy must not be spoken of, for it wasn't very much at all, just a little confusion about terminology. Certainly nothing approaching a heresy trial. Judgment was strongly expressed in the *Standard Bearer* following Synod 2018. To speak further about the controversy, or to implicate individuals in terms of the controversy, would bring charges of slander and schism. Those who brought those charges were not kidding.

Once that middle point was given room and time to work, the process of overturning the clear history began. It was time to drive the truth out into the street. No longer were the decisions of Synod 2018 to uphold the doctrine of salvation by grace alone without works. The history was revised. What really happened at the synod was not a condemnation of certain statements as displacing the perfect work of Christ with good works done by believers. It was not about a minister being wrong, or a consistory or a classis being wrong about good works. It was not about any threat to the doctrine of justification by faith alone without works or to the doctrine of the unconditional covenant.

Instead, the controversy was about the importance and necessity of good works. It was about the positive relationship between good works and following blessings and benefits of God. The believer's good deed of faith is indeed necessary and required for receiving from God the assurance of justification. The believer's good works are necessary and required for receiving following blessings from God: peace and prosperity, ordered home and family, and much more.

What happened to the truth of this history? The truth was gagged: "Speak no more of this!" Then the truth was driven out: "No displacement by good works, just the necessity of good works."

There is another line of the controversy that was also rewritten, another way in which the truth was driven out to fall in the street.

Antinomianism.

The best defense is a good offense.

This was an earlier work of rewriting, one that had happened nearly from the start of the controversy. In fact, the argument has some merit that this rewriting had been going on for many years in the denomination.<sup>1</sup> This rewriting had to do with answers to protests. Protestants and those agreeing with protestants had their documents and statements analyzed. Those people were found to be antinomians. Thus charges of antinomianism were maintained. These charges of the heresy of antinomianism, laid by the same consistory which had supported the

statements that displaced the perfect work of Christ, were also supported by the classis involved.

When appeals were made to synods, as before, the synods overturned the charges of antinomianism, denying that the individuals in question were antinomian. The *Acts of Synod* for the years 2016 and 2017 can very easily be consulted to show this.

However, just as with good works, this additional line of antinomianism would also be rewritten and re-presented. The lie was published. The lie was welcomed. Really and truly, the authorities have reported, the controversy was about antinomianism. Antinomians have always been at the root of unrest and controversy. The antinomians tried to drive out the preaching of the necessity and importance of good works in the life of the believer. The antinomians tried to drive out the preaching of the necessity and importance of faith. The antinomians tried to drive out the call of the gospel and the use of the law to guide the believer in a life of gratitude. But the church assemblies joined forces to repel the attack for the sake of the unity and peace of the church.

So has the truth been driven out and left fallen in the street, and the lie is welcomed to stand and to stay.

Yet a third way in which the truth has been driven out is by the use of deception, rumor, and innuendo. "They deny the necessity of good works." "They deny the will of the regenerate." "They deny the call of the gospel." "They deny that the Christian can repent." "They deny regeneration." "They deny sanctification." "They deny the reward of grace." "They deny the authority of the assemblies." "They deny the way of Matthew 18." "They deny the promises and threatenings of the Bible." "They are bitter." "They are jealous." "They are angry." "They are desperate."

No matter how much these falsehoods are proven false by what has been preached and written by those laboring to depart from evil (Isa. 59:15), it makes no difference. For at bottom, the lie is really one: departing from the PRC can only mean leaving the kingdom. There can be no reasons of conscience. Such a departure can only mean getting further involved in all kinds of errors of antinomianism and hyper-Calvinism.

Or, there are other rumors afloat. One: "Oh, we know that some pretty awful things have been done. The leaders of the denomination at present are not on the right track in many ways. But there are younger ministers who see through these things. They see the duplicity. They see the misuse and abuse. They see the distortions. When they have their opportunity, they will work hard to set things right. They will speak up. They will sort out the confusion. They will see that protestants

<sup>1</sup> See Nathan J. Langerak, "The Majority Report," *Sword and Shield* 1, no. 13 (March 2021): 12–18.



and appellants are treated fairly. They will put things back on track.”

Another: “Yes, things are certainly in deep turmoil now. There is a great deal of pain and agony. Not everything has been done well, and for some not-very-good reasons. But that is no reason to leave. It is the nature of the case to have things like this go on. But when this is all finished and the bad actors on both sides are gone, then everything will be as it should be. Confusion will be gone, and the truth will shine brightly and clearly again. We will find ourselves in full possession of our heritage, and the assemblies will protect it. God’s eternal grace will be on the PRC and will always be on the PRC.”

How can these rumors possibly be true? Can men, even young men, who are presently busy holding their peace at all these things, be expected or relied upon to open their mouths later on? Can it possibly be expected that when the truth has been so badly savaged, cut off, starved out, and driven out to fall in the street, that the

truth will find its legs, rise up, go back in, and take its rightful place? The true history of the church tells a far different story. Apostasy remains apostasy. The truth remains as a distant memory, once in the homes, once honored and welcomed, but now only lies there, where it fell, in the street.

But church history is also a history of reformation. There are those who depart from evil. And, according to Isaiah 59:15, they make themselves a prey. They are pursued, hunted, caught, and pilloried. They must be made to serve as examples.

Yet they find their way out, happy and blessed to have the truth that has been driven out before them. They know the happiness of Psalm 94:15: “Judgment shall return unto righteousness: and all the upright in heart shall follow it.” To them is spoken the beatitude that Christ spoke for John the Baptist’s encouragement while he sat in Herod’s prison: “Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.”

—MVW

## CONTRIBUTION

# DEBATING WITH THE DEVIL (2)

### *Introduction*

In my previous article, “Debating with the Devil,” in the October 1 issue of *Sword and Shield*, I proved that the exegetical history of James’ leadership of the Jerusalem Council; his subsequent wholehearted agreement with the special revelation of the gospel and of justification, which the apostle Paul received directly from the risen Lord; and James’ epistle written to educate his scattered Jerusalem brethren about being vindicated by faith and works because there were many false brethren all contradict what Norman Shepherd wrote thus far in his book *The Way of Righteousness*.<sup>1</sup>

Further evaluation of what Shepherd wrote in *The Way of Righteousness* will demonstrate that he is seriously mistaken in the rest of his book. James was not reverting to the Pharisees’ doctrine when he wrote chapter 2:14–26, but he was emphasizing his Lord’s instructions to his disciples: “Ye are the light of the world...Let your light so

shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:14–16). James *would not, could not, and did not* write that a man is forensically justified by faith and works.

### *How This Debate Ends in the Church*

Consider more of Shepherd’s writing. He writes,

James writes in 2:24, “You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.” There are at least two questions that need to be addressed as we seek to understand the meaning of this verse. First, what does James mean by the word “justified”? What is this justification? And second, what does James mean when he says that this justification is by works and not by faith alone? (20)

Shepherd makes little effort to explain exegetically the meaning of the word *justified* in verse 24. He merely says,

1 Norman Shepherd, *The Way of Righteousness: Justification Beginning with James* (La Grange, CA: Kerygma Press, 2009). Page numbers for quotations from this book are given in text.

“James is using the word ‘justify’ [in v. 24] in a sense parallel to the word ‘save’ in verse 14... The same reality is in view in both verses because the affirmation in verse 24 answers the question posed in verse 14” (21). Not necessarily; James’ affirmation could be successive instead of conclusive: As dead faith doesn’t save, neither does it vindicate.

However, Shepherd never really understood “the same reality” of which he spoke, mistaking the specific, wrong faith James was writing about for the true faith of scripture; then concluding, again wrongly, that true faith does not justify without works. As demonstrated, in James’ use of the word *δικαιούται*, it means *to vindicate, to verify*. But, assuming (wrongly) he had proved *δικαιούται* to mean forensic justification, Shepherd then (again, wrongly) states his conclusion as James’ conclusion: “His [James’] conclusion is that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (21).

Shepherd is seriously mistaken, but he continues,

Verse 24 comes at the end of a line of reasoning that begins with what is really a rhetorical question in verse 14. “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?” James develops an argument in answer to this question and reaches a conclusion in verse 24. His conclusion is that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. In verse 26 he says, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” The point is that “faith alone” is dead faith and therefore cannot justify. (21)

Shepherd is wrong about James’ conclusion in verse 24. Shepherd misunderstood the word *justified* that James used, as well as the point of James’ rhetorical question in verse 14, and therefore failed to grasp the true meaning of James’ line of reasoning.

James began with someone claiming to have faith, yet having no works. That suggests the rhetorical question of verse 14. But it is vital to understand the precise wording of that question, particularly the use of the Greek article in the phrase “*μη δύναται ἢ πίστις σώσαι αὐτόν*,” because the article in Greek “is invaluable as a means of gaining precision.”<sup>2</sup> The Greek article specifically points out or distinguishes something in particular (Robertson, 756). In James’ question the Greek article indicates that James was alluding to the specific (wrong) faith just spoken of, not true faith. James was distinguishing *that* faith, holding it up to scrutiny throughout this discussion. His rhetorical question really asked, “Can *that kind of faith* [not

faith in general] save him?” His line of reasoning was: “That kind of faith” can’t save him before God (James 2:14) nor vindicate him before men in the church (v. 24). James’ conclusion—contra Shepherd—was, “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified [vindicated], and not by faith only” (v. 24).

The Greek article indicates that James had *that specific type of faith* in mind and not faith in general, as Shepherd implies; so that when Shepherd says that James’ conclusion is “that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone,” he is twice wrong. Wrong because James wasn’t writing about forensic justification but vindication; and wrong because James was not writing in verse 24 about true faith either but *that kind of faith*, that kind of (false, antinomian) faith without works that will not vindicate a person.

*These serious errors lead Shepherd to condemn the true faith*, faith that is belief in Christ and trust in all God has said, the faith of Lord’s Day 7. That faith, Shepherd says, will not justify without works! Those following Shepherd are equally guilty of condemning the biblical faith, as well as the truth of Lord’s Day 7.

James continued to write of that man who *thinks that he is religious* but doesn’t do the things James had spoken of previously: he doesn’t bridle his tongue, doesn’t visit orphans and widows, and doesn’t keep himself unspotted from the world (James 1:26–27). In short, he doesn’t “fulfil the royal law” (2:8). He is one of those causing confusion in the church, the very reason James was writing his epistle; not to “envision a courtroom scene,” as Shepherd proposes (21), but to teach the scattered brethren to “do well,” as the Jerusalem Council had proclaimed.

Then Shepherd quickly transforms the “royal law” into the law of Moses (“The implication is that this law of God...” [21]) to further his misconception in the direction of forensic justification, which justification, according to Shepherd, is not completed until we get to heaven (stand before God). “Salvation in verse 14 is therefore salvation from condemnation when we stand before the Lord God to be judged” (21). James’ words have now been twisted to support Shepherd’s false idea that *justified* in James is forensic justification, which justification is only final and complete at the last judgment. Not realizing his serious errors but compounding them, Shepherd writes, “That is why James can use the word ‘justified’ in verse 24” (21).

Returning to my explanation, in 2:15–16 James continued to describe that man who claims to have faith: A brother is naked, but his fellow brother in the church gives him nothing and just says, “Depart in peace.” Following Jesus (“Every tree is known by his own fruit”

2 A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 767.

[Luke 6:44]), James concluded that such so-called faith is a fruitless tree—it's dead (James 2:17). It can't pass the test of verse 18: Show us that faith without works, that is, let us examine that tree with no fruit. It's dead! That line of reasoning led James to write in verse 20: "But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith [that kind of faith] without works is dead?"

To further expose and scrutinize that dead faith without works, James proposed Abraham as a good example of faith (vv. 21–23), particularly because the facts cited about him would never be disputed, even by antinomian Jews. James said in verse 21, "Was not Abraham our father justified [vindicated] by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?" That led James to his conclusion in verse 24. He began with the words, "Ye see." His purpose was to teach his scattered brethren so that they would see—that is, understand and be convinced—that a person with that kind of faith without works is like a dead tree, totally different from Abraham, who was vindicated by offering Isaac. From this example James' brethren should have seen (understood) why that person without works could not be justified (vindicated). *That kind of faith* is not like Abraham's faith. It's dead. Which led James to his conclusion in verse 26: "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." To mix the metaphors but to make James' point: dead trees get cut down; they don't get vindicated!

Shepherd, believing he has established his meaning of *justified*, proceeds with this: "When James says that 'a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone,' he is using the word 'justify' in the same forensic-soteric sense as Paul when Paul says that 'a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law'" (22).

Shepherd is correct when he admits, "It is this fact [his wrong understanding] that appears to bring James into direct conflict with Paul" (22). *Shepherd caused the conflict, not James*. Shepherd then appeals to Matthew 18:21–35 and 25:31–46 to support his misinterpretation

that James has the final judgment in view (23). It has been demonstrated that James had no such thing in view but was instructing the scattered brethren concerning the vindication of true faith, which needed clarification at that time, rather than the Pharisees' view of justification by faith and works, which had been recently condemned by the Jerusalem Council.

Norman Shepherd is aware of the view that James might be using *justify* in the non-soteric sense of vindication. Shepherd even says, "If this interpretation is adopted, we are relieved of the discrepancy between James and Paul." Shepherd gives two observations to disprove that "demonstrative sense." The first: that "*persons*" are spoken of, "not *faith*." The second: that the word "justify...cannot mean 'show to be justified'" (24).

Before examining Shepherd's observations, it is necessary to point out that he omits reference to any linguistic authority for his definition of *justify*. Also, he conveniently omits the prominent meaning of *to vindicate* in his definition of *justify*.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding his first objection, yes, three *persons* were "justified." *They were vindicated* (a satisfactory usage of the verb *ἐδικαιώθη*). Regarding the second, as mentioned, Shepherd cites no authority for the definitions or the exclusion proposed regarding *justify*; and he conveniently omits the prominent definition *to vindicate*.

Shepherd then asks "whether James is using 'justify' in the demonstrative sense." Shepherd concedes that it is possible, that it is a convenient way to reconcile James and Paul, but says that possibility is not proof that James was *thinking* that, neither is it an exegetical argument, just a theological one; neither does it "fit into the flow" of James' argument (24–25). Then follows Shepherd's verdict. He says that "the compelling argument" is "*only if* 'justify' in verse 24 carries the forensic-soteric sense does the verse answer the question posed in verse 14" (25; emphasis added). So, basically, his real proof is the connection between verse 14 and verse 24.

But contrary to Shepherd, first, my previous *exegetical*

How could servants doing *unprofitable* works ever be justified, ever be sanctified, ever fellowship with the Father by *unprofitable* works? Works that have no profit! Works that gain nothing for us! Nothing! That is what *unprofitable* means, and that is the Lord's evaluation of his servants' obedience: "It profits you nothing!"

3 See Gottlieb G. Schrenk, TWNT. In James 2:14–26 the apostle used a Greek Old Testament (LXX) sense of the word *to justify* that means *to vindicate, to establish as right, to validate*, which use was still prevalent during our Lord's earthly ministry (see 2:212). For other examples in scripture of the use of *to justify* in this sense, see my comments in "Debating with the Devil (1)," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 7 (October 1, 2021): 34.



argument is proof that James used *justify* in the demonstrative, not the forensic, sense; proof that effectively reconciles James and Paul.

Second, by an *exegetically* based history of the Jerusalem Council, I also demonstrated what James was *thinking* and applied that to the writing of James' epistle.

Third, I demonstrated by exegetical arguments that accurately represent James' thinking and "the flow" of James' argument that it is an integral part of a follow-up letter promoting the Jerusalem Council's decree to his scattered brethren that they must let men see their good works.

Fourth, I demonstrated that James had neither reason nor intention to teach that a man is forensically justified by faith and works (the Pharisees' position). James, along with the whole church, guided by the Holy Spirit, rejected that demonic notion, and my articles have proved that.

Fifth, therefore, I have demonstrated that none of Norman Shepherd's qualifications and arguments promoting his view of *working faith* are valid. James wrote of vindication, not forensic justification.

I pass over the rest of Shepherd's "theorizing" about James, believing that the true interpretation has been sufficiently presented. I conclude that without any support from James' epistle, Shepherd's concept of *working faith*, or *obedient faith*, is merely his imaginary construct, which denies the uniform teaching of scripture on forensic justification by grace alone through faith alone apart from works (Luke 18:13–14; John 8:11; Rom. 3:21–28; 4:5–6; 5:1, 8–10, 18–19; 9:16; Gal. 2:16).

Also, first, in view of the expanding influence of Shepherd's work, with its many public and private advocates, a solemn warning is appropriate.

Second, because there is *no such thing* as *working faith* in James (or in the rest of scripture), all the substitute phrases and derivative statements expounding, supporting, or dissembling it are equally false and contrary to scripture.

Third, those promoting and defending these unbiblical concepts are promoting *another gospel* and seriously misleading God's people away from the truth.

Fourth, those who forsake what God has said are as guilty as Eve for debating with the devil and ultimately for blaspheming God.

Fifth, hopefully, today's "Reformed" advocates of Shepherd's scheme will consider the proof given here concerning James 2:14–26.

Sixth, James *would not, could not, and did not* write that a man is forensically justified by faith and works. Therefore, the current *doing* theological debate, based on Shepherd's non-existent *working faith*, or *obedient faith*, is a deceitful and false debate with the devil, which will end in disaster.

Therefore, having demonstrated that Norman Shepherd's view contradicts the truth of scripture, that truth is briefly summarized here to confound that lie.

First, God's Spirit creates a new heart and a right spirit in his people (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26–27). In this new creation (John 3:3), God's Spirit permanently indwells God's people. He abides with them forever (14:16). Ephesians 1:4–7 and Philippians 1:6 prove that this salvation process begins with and is completed by God himself without conditions. Salvation is all of grace through faith and not of works (Eph. 2:8–9).

Second, the Holy Spirit, then, who is the believer's permanent, personal possession, takes the things of Christ (read, *is taking*, the Greek present tense indicating continuing action) and makes them ours (read, *is making them ours*, the same Greek present tense) (John 16:14). These things of Christ are his blood-bought, gracious gifts of election, predestination, calling, faith, regeneration, sanctification, and final glorification. Every aspect of the Christian life—all our believing and obedience—are *the things of Christ* that the Spirit is making ours. No sign of conditions, requirements, or *working faith* here; nothing about *the believer's doing*, just the *Spirit's* continuous *doing*, producing everything in the believer from regeneration through sanctification unto glorification.

Third, the Holy Spirit is the acting subject of John 16:14. The Spirit uses the instrument that he creates—faith—to accomplish all that God has willed and Christ has purchased. The instrument is most suitable, but it has no power, mind, or sense of direction on its own. It must be wielded—like a sword—by the instrument user, the abiding Holy Spirit. He continually gives to our faith its mind, power, and direction, as he wills (John 3:5–8), according to the will of Christ (10:27–28). The Spirit wields the instrument of faith, not us. In scripture our *doing* is the expression of the faith that the Spirit creates, empowers, and directs. Our personal possession of faith—my faith—never implies our control or activating power of that faith; rather, the *our* in *our faith* means that now faith in Christ is an organic, constituent, permanent part of us, making us believers.

Notice Paul's expression of this truth: "I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me" (1 Cor. 15:10). Note well: "The grace of God" did it; not Paul and not his *obedient faith*. I note particularly that Paul does *not* summarize: "There was something I was called to do, and I did it." Unthinkable. Rather, "not I, but the grace of God which was with me" is the only true-to-scripture answer. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:7). Again,

NOT US! Not, I did it. The excellency of the power is of God, not of man.

Fourth, consider that in connection with Acts 16:30–31, where the Philippian jailor asks, “What must I do to be saved?” the answers given are quite revealing. The simplistic (Shepherdistic?) description is, “There was something he was called to do, and he did it.” But why say that when Paul says, “Not I. I didn’t do it; the grace of God did it”? Why prefer man to the grace of Christ? Why commend man rather than God’s Spirit? Why go in that direction of man?

Also, it’s totally wrong. According to Acts 16:33, what was done? It was repentance and faith in Christ. The jailor couldn’t do that. He was not capable of doing that. As stated previously, commands don’t imply ability (man’s doing). Only Arminians and Pelagians (and now Shepherdites?) credit man with free will or doing-faith. But God’s commands are meant to reveal inability, hostility, and depravity! In that way the totally gracious character of salvation in Christ is revealed for God’s glory. That’s not *nonsense*. Acts 16:33 says the jailor was baptized, implying that what he did was repent and believe in the Lord Jesus. That he cannot *do*. That the Holy Spirit did! He regenerated the jailor, created faith in him, and caused him to say, “Jesus is Lord.” The jailor could not move his mouth to say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). Paul is right: the grace of God did it; the jailor didn’t.

The person saying, “*He* did it” is seriously wrong. Jesus might say to that person, “Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures” (Matt. 22:29). The statement “*He* did it” denies the essential, indwelling, motivating, and empowering work of the Holy Spirit and does not give God the glory (John 3:5–8; 16:14; 1 Cor. 12:3; 15:10; Eph. 2:8–10).

However, it raises the real question with the Philippian jailor. Perhaps, there is reason for this silence about the Spirit; perhaps there’s an agenda behind it? Because if he, the Spirit of Christ, is credited for *doing it*, the working of the Spirit to create faith in someone indicates election and sovereign grace *doing it*, not man’s *working faith* doing it. That is a different direction than *man*.

Fifth, those faithful to God’s word will use the language of scripture. Those following Shepherd will not. It is the Spirit who moves us to obedience, according to God’s sovereign will of election (Rom. 8:4). We do not move ourselves to obey (7:19). We can’t even move our mouths to say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). Only by the Spirit are we repenting and putting to

death the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13). Even our smallest prayer, “Abba, Father,” is only by the Spirit (v. 15). That is what scripture teaches, and I doubt that when Paul wrote it he thought it made us stocks and blocks, antinomians, or hyper-Calvinists. Scripture makes clear the ever-present, determining, and controlling factor (person) in all the believer’s faith and all faith’s activities is God the Holy Spirit. That new freedom of the believer is freedom *in Christ*, freedom from the dominion of sin, replaced by the dominion of Christ, our head. That is freedom indeed (John 8:36).

Sixth, concerning the believer’s works, the scripture speaks clearly: “We are his [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). This text informs us of the origins and certainty of a believer’s good works. God ordained those works; they will be done. God causes our good works to be done by us by ordaining them in past eternity and then by manufacturing them (“his workmanship”) in us. God’s production of good works in us is exactly parallel to his production of scripture. Every single word of scripture is God-breathed and was produced by God’s Spirit using fully human persons to think and write the exact words God wanted (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21). The same is true of every good work the Christian does. Those works are designed, ordained, and fabricated in us by God himself using fully human persons to do the exact works he ordained, also by the power of his Spirit. “Walk in them” is parallel to “write them.” God’s inspiration does not produce typewriters. Neither does his crafting the exact works we do make us stocks and blocks. “Walk in them” assures us the doers of these good works are living, thinking, acting persons when they are doing, by God’s Spirit, exactly the good works God *ordained before creation*.<sup>4</sup>

Seventh, imagine...What would our Lord say to us if we asked him about our obedience in faith? Suppose we obeyed his word in answer to his commands and were wondering, “Lord, is our obedience the way to fellowship with you?”

His answer would be this: “When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do” (Luke 17:10).

Those claiming that “obedience is the way to fellowship with God” should answer this question: How could servants doing *unprofitable* works ever be justified, ever be sanctified, ever fellowship with the Father by *unprofitable*

4 See Herman Hoeksema, “His Workmanship,” *Standard Bearer* 18, no. 20 (August 1, 1942): 441–43. This article was reprinted in Herman Hoeksema, *All Glory to the Only Good God* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2013), 166–72.

works? Works that have *no* profit! Works that gain nothing for us! Nothing! That is what *unprofitable* means, and that is the Lord's evaluation of his servants' obedience: "It profits you nothing! Everything you attain is by my blood and my grace alone. Your obedience is not the way to the Father nor to anything else." We must agree with our Lord. We either agree with him, or we are against him. Your doing his will gains you nothing! It is only your duty in gratitude to your gracious Lord.

Eighth, those with an open mind will take to heart our Lord's evaluation of their works; those with an agenda will deny what is written here and continue with their "way." "There is a way which seemeth right unto a

man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Prov. 14:12).

Ninth, Paul marveled at how soon the Galatians had departed from "him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel" (Gal. 1:6). How could anyone forsake the riches of Christ freely given to his elect in an unconditional covenant that is all of grace to rush into a false, man-centered, conditional covenant and conditional salvation? The mystery of iniquity, of course!

Nonetheless, the once-delivered faith given to the saints will be upheld by the true church. Jesus said so: "Wisdom is justified of her children" (Matt. 11:19).

—Rev. Stuart Pastine

## EDITORIAL CONTRIBUTION

# ERRONEOUS EQUATION

The lecture promised by the Reformed Free Publishing Association this past September, entitled "2021 in the PRC: Whom the Lord Loveth, He Chasteneth," garnered my attention. It held a great deal of promise. The controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) and the recent departure of many from the denomination would be directly addressed. These events would be addressed critically and viewed as the Lord's chastening of the denomination. Lessons from that chastening would be considered. Was the denomination to learn something? What place would there be in the churches for correction? What corrections would the speaker suggest? Would a professor in the denomination be willing publicly to question the denomination's direction and behavior?

As I listened to and thought about the lecture, I felt that something was wrong.

Something did not add up. The math was off. The equation was wrong.

The speaker, Prof. Brian Huizinga, presented one side of the equation as the Lord's chastening. That chastening was represented as the sovereign act of God. What has been going on in the Protestant Reformed Churches was reckoned to be a sharp, severe blow. The professor recited a litany of past events. As that litany was recited, a theme emerged—the theme of separation. Separations had happened in four Protestant Reformed churches in different ways and at different times.

But there was a commonality in those separations that was not mentioned. The unmentioned commonality was that all these separations (and more separations could be added) were due to the same reason. However, that reason was the proverbial "elephant in the room." The reason, though not mentioned or explained directly, was identified in the most indirect manner.

The professor insisted that the denomination has been and is faithful to the doctrines of scripture and the three forms of unity. He insisted that some mistakes have been made, but the denomination has corrected them and made the appropriate apologies. Further, he insisted that all the decisions taken by the broader assemblies were according to God's word and that the assemblies truly answered all the protests and appeals.

However, if you would listen to those who are departing from the denomination, you might hear the exact opposite of this insistence. Maybe, just maybe, this opposite explanation could be the reason for these departures. Maybe this opposite explanation could be the reason for what is viewed as so much trouble for the PRC in 2021.

Professor Huizinga continued by emphasizing the trouble, grief, and sorrow that members of the faithful PRC have experienced. So much toil on the part of the assemblies became necessary. So many conversations—some unpleasant, others heated, and still others burdensome—carried their effects of alienation and hostility.



Families and marriages became divided. These issues carried their effects into the Christian schools, among boards, faculties, and students. The year 2021 is unprecedented in the hearts and minds of every living member of the PRC. So the lecture maintained.

This side of the equation, the professor maintained, was the chastening of the Lord.

This side of the equation, the professor maintained, could not possibly be the Lord's judgment. It could not possibly be a sign of the Lord's judgment upon apostasy. It could not be a sign of judgment that the denomination has grown cold toward the truth of salvation by grace alone, without works. It could not be a sign that the denomination acted maliciously against those individuals and officebearers who had called attention to doctrinal deviation borne out of this coldness. It could not be a sign that the denomination has been straying from the path of its own precious heritage of the truth of the unconditional covenant. It could not be a sign that the denomination is straying into the territory of the heresy of the federal vision.

Why not?

Because the PRC is faithful. And because the PRC is faithful, the Lord must love her. And because the PRC is faithful, the Lord can only be chastening her. He could not possibly be judging her.

What lies on the other side of the equation?

What lies on the other side is the lesson to be learned from this chastening of the Lord. What lies on the other side is what the Lord is lovingly trying to show to the denomination.

What is the Lord trying to show with his chastisement sent in love?

According to the professor, the denomination needs to be more faithful.

He mentioned some specifics where the denomination had not been as faithful as she should have been. He admitted that ecclesiastical decisions could have been more clearly written. He admitted that more scripture could have been used. The professor admitted that he could have written more on the subject of the controversy and been less concerned about the toll his writing might have taken on the psyches of persons involved.

Regarding becoming more faithful in the future, members of the denomination must be reading and studying scripture more. They must be more well-read and educated about doctrine. They must also learn to proceed with objections in the way explained in Matthew 18, privately and not publicly. They must be more knowledgeable about protesting to consistories and appealing to broader assemblies according to the Church Order. They must learn to be more patient with the way of protest

and appeal. Members must learn how better to formulate materials submitted to the ecclesiastical assemblies. And officebearers, on their part, must practice better hearing and reception of aggrieved members.

So, the two sides of the equation.

Does it compute? Does it add up? Is this a correct calculation?

It is not.

It is not at all.

It is impossible that 20x equals 3x.

The chastening is all out of proportion to the need to be "more faithful."

There are three ways to address this inequality.

One way is to realize that one side of the equation or the other is wrong.

Perhaps the professor over-emphasized the chastening. There have been separations, but the burdens of separation and toil are not as great as presented. There is not this level of disruption in the life of the churches. Only some complaints here and there, business as usual. Things are really just fine.

The argument could be made that the professor's assessment was completely wrong. There has been no chastening of the Lord. The controversy and separation are simply the effects of faithful labors to clear the denomination of its radical element. This radical element has long bothered and troubled denominational efforts to attain greater holiness by a greater emphasis on good works and the true believers' activities of faith, conversion, and repentance. The radical element, having its tendencies and errors of hyper-Calvinism and antinomianism, needed to be shown the door and even ushered out. Such efforts were bound to result in short-term toil and pain. But these results could not be chastening. It is simply the cost of discipleship, of purging the foreign, corrupting element for the sake of faithfulness to God and his word. Such faithfulness is bound to be rewarded, not chastened.

Or, perhaps, the other side of the equation is to be considered. Maybe more is necessary than to be "more faithful" in the future. Maybe the lessons to be learned are far deeper and more probing. Maybe more than just a few slight "mistakes" were made. Maybe more apologies were required. Maybe more repentance; maybe more sorrow; maybe more protests and appeals should have been upheld.

There is another way to address this inequality.

It is the way of truly understanding the Lord's chastening as a form of judgment. It has to do with the passage the professor used, Hebrews 12:6, and with seeing the first part of the verse ("whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth") in the light of the second part ("and scourgeth

every son whom he receiveth”). This understanding of the verse takes into consideration that the “chastening” *is* the scourge, the lash of the whip against flesh, which causes so much pain because the lesson must be painfully taught. The lesson is not to improve but to turn in sorrow and shame from a prior evil course of conduct and behavior. The chastisement is so sharp and painful that in it is felt no affirmation. The chastisement leaves no feeling that one is on the right pathway and that he needs only to improve himself in his present course. Knowledge of love must be sought elsewhere—not in the path but in the knowledge of the cross of Christ. And, truly, we can see only in the light of the blessed cross of Calvary what depths of reform the Lord’s chastisement requires. Without the cross, no hearts can be broken and no true reform can ever be expected.

To me, the most striking reference in the lecture was to the church at Corinth. The professor used that church, as described in holy scripture in 1 and 2 Corinthians, as a basis of reasoning. That reasoning made a comparison. He compared the Protestant Reformed Churches to the church at Corinth. Why cannot the Protestant Reformed Churches be called unfaithful, apostate, or even “an apostate whore”? Because of the church at Corinth. How many problems that Corinthian church had! The professor enumerated those problems. But that church, as bad as it was, was still reckoned by the inspired apostle as a church, not as apostate. Since the Protestant Reformed denomination is nowhere near that bad, she must still be a proper church of Jesus Christ.

Would that the professor had proceeded properly along that line of comparison of the PRC to the church of Christ at Corinth! Would that the PRC could proceed properly along that line! If the lesson to be gained from a comparison of the PRC to Corinth is, “We’re pretty good here, only in need of a few improvements and more faithfulness,” we need not wonder at the professor’s faulty equation.

But what does the Lord say to his beloved church at Corinth?

“I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ... For ye are yet carnal” (1 Cor. 3:1, 3).

“Therefore let no man glory in men” (v. 21).

“Who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?” (4:7).

“I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you” (v. 14).

“What will ye? shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness?” (v. 21).

“Ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you” (5:2).

“I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you?” (6:5).

“What shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise you not” (11:22).

“For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep” (v. 30).

As the professor pointed out, 2 Corinthians demonstrates the gracious power of the Spirit. The Corinthian church was not offended. She did not bar the apostle Paul from coming or his communications to her. She humbly received those sharp, scourging rebukes from the apostle. She went to painful lengths to turn from her sinful ways. The man formerly esteemed as a champion of progress she disciplined with saving effect. She did not affirm herself. She did not determine a need for mere improvement in this or that area. She did not attempt to negotiate with the apostle a path forward.

Could it happen in the churches of the Protestant Reformed denomination?

Could it happen that the chastening no longer is repudiated as sharp judgment or seen merely as an indication of God’s affirming love? Could it happen that the chastening will lead to thorough, necessary, deep reformation and repentance? Could the chastening lead to such a reformation and repentance that those who have departed from the PRC would be glad to return in order to express together deep love and commitment to the doctrines of salvation by grace alone, exclusive of all works?

Only if the Protestant Reformed Churches would take to heart the chastening judgments of the Lord. If only the churches would follow the word of 1 Corinthians 11:31: “If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.” If only they might seek to fulfill the words of 2 Corinthians 7:11:

Behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

As has become so evident, only by the grace of God worked by the Holy Spirit alone.

—MVW





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## FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

*So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper,  
and I will not fear what man shall do unto me. — Hebrews 13:6*

**T**he Lord is on my side! Such is the bold declaration of the believer. So confident is he in the righteousness of his cause and the truth of his position that he declares his side to be the side that the Lord is on.

Such is the hated declaration of the believer. *Sides?* That is a very loathsome word to many. They prefer to think that there are no sides. If they must have sides, then they prefer that there be as many sides as man wishes, and above all and at all costs—the costs of the truth and righteousness—let all the sides get along. And surely if there are sides, then let there not be two sides. So they will declare before all, “There are not two sides!”

But there are, there only ever have been, and there only ever will be two sides. Not three or four or ten or twenty. There are two: the Lord’s and the devil’s, the truth’s and the lie’s, and justice’s and evil’s.

And all those who deny that there are two sides stand on the side of the lie. They will unite with and have a good word about everyone, except about those who stand on the side of the truth.

And do not suppose that these two sides are equal. The Lord’s side is always victorious. Such is the confidence in which the believer makes his bold declaration. Indeed, more profoundly, the devil’s side and all his opposition must serve the Lord’s side as that which is strictly subservient to and sovereignly determined by God as the necessary way to the realization of the Lord’s victory.

The Lord and his people are one. His side is their side; their side is his side; his cause is their cause; and their cause is his cause. He took them to be of his party! You cannot be attacked without the Lord being attacked, and no one can attack the Lord apart from attacking you.

And the devil’s side hates the Lord and his side, so the devil’s side constantly attacks. And the attacks are fearsome. The devil’s side attacks by discontent, insinuation, false doctrine, lusts, evil reports, persecutions, afflictions, family, friends, lovers, and avowed enemies. And the devil’s side can do many things to you—ultimately take your life; or worse, torture you by a thousand cuts and stabs to your soul to wear you out and to wear you down, but more than that, to make you afraid.

The devil loves fear. His side operates out of fear and seeks to instill fear. He loves this fear above all: “The Lord is not on your side. The Lord has left you and forsaken you.” That paralyzes the Christian soldier. If the Lord is not on his side, that soldier cannot stand for a moment, and his cause is all wrong, and he must lose. Indeed, the fearful soldier stops fighting, abandons the struggle, and casts away his sword and shield in headlong flight from the field.

He who overcomes shall inherit all things, but the fearful shall have their part in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone.

The Lord says to his beleaguered troops, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” The Lord says that so that we may boldly say, “The Lord is on my side, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me. If father and mother forsake, the Lord will take me up. If friend and lover forsake, the Lord will be my friend. If I lose my life in this world, the Lord will give me my soul in heaven. If I lose house and job, and have nothing, the Lord is with me, and so I have all.” So I may boldly say, “The Lord is on my side.”

—NJL