

The background features a stylized, orange-toned illustration. On the left, a sword is shown in profile, pointing upwards and to the right. On the right, a shield is depicted, partially overlapping the sword's blade. The shield has a circular design with several smaller circles inside. The overall style is minimalist and graphic.

SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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

Deuteronomy 33:29

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And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. — John 1:14

Who is Jesus? Jesus is the Word made flesh. He is the Word. He is flesh. He is both in one person. In his becoming flesh and in his flesh, we behold the glory of God as the omnipotent, sovereign, gracious, merciful, and faithful God. Surely, you can behold the glory of God in the whirlwind, in fire, in thunder, and in the shaking of the earth. But nowhere was the glory of God so revealed as when the Word became flesh. There we see God as the God of all truth and all grace.

In these few words—the Word became flesh—the whole Christian religion is summarized. Herein the gospel is summarized. On these words rest the hope, comfort, and joy of the believer. The Word was made flesh; thus all of salvation is sure, the promise of God is sure, and eternal life is sure.

By this truth every lie is exposed too. That man must first repent before God may forgive man is a lie that is exposed by the truth that the Word was made flesh. That the reception of, joy in, and assurance of the blessings of salvation cannot come apart from the obedience of man is revealed as a lie of the devil by the truth that the Word was made flesh. That there are activities of man that precede blessings of God is shown to be a damning false doctrine by the truth that the Word was made flesh. That believers abide in Christ by faith and by the works of faith is shown to be a wicked teaching by the truth that the Word was made flesh. All these lies, as every lie in the history of the church, make God dependent on man in the matter of salvation. These lies, as all lies before them, teach an impotent God, not an omnipotent God—an impotent God who waits on man to be first, not an omnipotent God who does all his pleasure. A God who is not omnipotent cannot perform the incarnation. Thus to teach an impotent God is to make the incarnation impossible. Indeed, if man must first repent, first turn, first forgive, and first obey, then the incarnation never happened. Such is the seriousness of the issues that we face. These false doctrines deny that the Word was made flesh.

But the Word was made flesh. Wonder of wonders! All glory to the only true, ever-gracious, perfectly sovereign, and omnipotent God, who does not wait on man, who is able to do all that he willed to do, and who is able to do all that he willed to do especially in connection with the salvation of his people in his eternal covenant of grace to the glory of his everlasting name. Man is not

and never can be first in any sense whatsoever, but God accomplishes all things that he willed for the salvation of his people, including making them alive; causing them to believe and to repent; and justifying, sanctifying, and glorifying them according to his own sovereign will. For the Word was made flesh, so that everything God wills he is also able to accomplish.

Does not the truth that the Word was made flesh fill you with unspeakable joy and assurance? That the Word was made flesh means that Jesus Christ is God with us, that in Christ God came unto us, and that in Christ God fulfilled his promise and oath and showed himself the God who is able to do the impossible and thus who is able to accomplish all things for our salvation. If God were to say publicly and before the whole world, “God was made an angel,” would that not fill the angels with unspeakable joy? Would they not shout and sing and tell everyone that God was made an angel? But God says that God was made flesh.

All the scriptures proclaim this fact. That is certainly at the heart of the Old Testament. The whole Old Testament is nothing more than a revelation of God concerning Jesus Christ his Son, the seed of the woman, who would come and would crush the head of the serpent. And the New Testament and all its doctrine are nothing more than the revelation of God that Jesus of Nazareth, who was born of Mary and crucified at Golgotha, is the fulfillment of that promise of God that God would be made flesh.

In that becoming flesh the Word came unto his own. This does not refer to God’s entrance into the world, for God does not come into the world. He made the world. He is always present in the world, so that there is nothing and no one who is nearer to the world than God himself, who while he is totally transcendent above the world is also immanent in the world, present with the whole of his being in every point of space. That the transcendent and immanent God came unto his own means that God, the maker of all men, became a man, really and truly became a man; so that he did not take the nature of angels, did not become an exalted spiritual being aloof from man; but he took of the flesh and blood of man, of the lowly Adam, and became truly and really a man in all points except sin.

Still more, that the Word came unto his own means not only that he became a man but also that he became a

man for the purpose of redeeming those who were his by eternal election in order to bring them into most precious fellowship with God. They were his own not only because he shared with them a nature of flesh and blood, but also they were his own because as the electing God he had chosen them in love and appointed them to salvation in an eternal covenant of grace. To realize that will of God, the Word came to them.

And in order to come unto his own, the Word became flesh. The Word of God was with God in the beginning. The Word of God is God, and the Word as God was with God. He is the God by whom all things were made and without whom was not anything made that was made.

In the beginning was the Word. So before he made anything that was made, he already was. He was already, not as the first and highest of creatures; but he was already as God, coequal and coeternal with the Father.

The Word is the only-begotten from the Father. Not merely the only-begotten *of* the Father but the only-begotten *from* the Father. The Word is begotten as God from God, light of light, true God of true God, being begotten essentially and personally of the Father.

Here is the most basic and most profound confession of Christ that a believer can make, the great mystery of godliness. Upon this fact that Jesus is the only-begotten Son of God depends all our salvation; on this truth rests all our hope; in this truth is all our joy. It is the confession about Jesus: that this man is the only-begotten Son of God, God's eternal Son according to his divine nature. He did not become a Son of God. It is true that according to his human nature he was begotten of God. He is the one human being who was begotten of God. He is that because he was begotten of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the virgin Mary. But when the Son of God was begotten in the womb of the virgin Mary, that was the revelation of who he was essentially and eternally.

When we confess that he is the only-begotten Son, we mean that the man Christ Jesus, who was conceived in the womb of Mary, who was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger and upon whose life Herod had designs, who walked among men, who spoke such gracious words and performed so many wonderful works, who was crucified upon Calvary and rose the third day according to the scripture—this Jesus is God. He was God in the womb; he was God in his mother's arms; he was God as he walked among men; he was God when he

spoke; he was God on the cross; he was God in the grave; he was declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead when God said, "Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee."

To beget is an act of love. God the Father begat his Son in love, and he loves his only-begotten Son in the Spirit. Father presses Son into his bosom, and Son presses himself into the bosom of the Father. The Word—who is God and who was with God, who made all things and without whom was not anything made that was made—is the only-begotten Son of God who is in the bosom of the Father, and the Son has declared the Father. Here scripture takes us into the divine love-life of God. Scripture takes us deep into the being of God and deep into eternity and reveals God the Father's great love for his Son. Scripture lets us into a profound secret and mystery that are hid in God but that he revealed for our comfort and glory. God loved his Son, and he loved his people in his Son.

The Word became flesh. Oh, how far down we come from those heights! God, God of God, now has become flesh. God and flesh: how antithetical these two realities stand to one another. How different could two natures be!

Flesh is an ugly word. Flesh smacks of sin and smells of lust—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. "Flesh" in verse 14 means the whole human nature. Man as he came from the dust by God's act of creation was flesh. Man was flesh in body and soul, in mind, heart, and will. He was of the earth earthy even in his perfection. As created he was upright flesh; but he could not see, hear, understand, and know the things of the kingdom of heaven. His heaven was Eden. But he did not so remain. He fell, and flesh was declared guilty and bound under sin. *Flesh* then signifies the nature of man as it fell under the power of sin, as it became weak, wretched, dead, and decayed. Now, what is born of flesh is flesh. It is full of lusts and sins. Flesh shakes, hurts, tires, and needs to be fed and watered. Flesh betrays us, so that although we will to do in the flesh, yet we cannot do in the flesh. Flesh cannot keep the law of God.

And the Word became flesh. He did not take to himself the nature of angels, those glorious and ministering spirits that he made in the beginning. Perfect, full of light and life, and faithful sons of God, bearing his image and partaking of his spirituality. We might be tempted to say that it would have been far more fitting to the Word to

Nowhere was the glory of God so revealed as when the Word became flesh. There we see God as the God of all truth and all grace.

have taken the nature of angels. But he took flesh and became flesh. Thus the Word became man.

So the Word is two things: he is very God and he is very man, and that in one person. All that is God's is the Word's according to his eternal begetting. All that is man's is the Word's according to his conception by the Holy Ghost in the womb of Mary.

And the Word became flesh in order to dwell among us. If you would go to live in a chicken coop and would strip yourself of all your clothes and put on feathers and peck around in the dirt and cluck like a hen; if you would strip yourself of all your clothes and would wallow around in the mud in a pigsty; or if some mighty king would dismiss all his bodyguards and give up all his honors in order to live in a slum—in none of these does the humiliation come close to what the Son of God did when he became flesh. He exchanged his sapphire throne for a stable floor.

When he became flesh, he did not dwell in the air, in some ivory tower, in a castle in the sky, or even in cloistered luxury on the earth; but he dwelt among us. He did not come to us to make it appear as though he had a concern for those to whom he came, all the while remaining aloof and returning nightly to his high and lofty place. He actually came to us and took up his abode with us and dwelt among us.

These words are full of love and intimacy. The Word did not stand aloof from us and from our misery, but he entered fully into it and took his place in it.

That the Word became flesh to dwell among us speaks then of his inexpressible humiliation. Man cannot comprehend fully the wrath of God against sin, a wrath of God against all who are born of the flesh and all who are flesh. For in Adam all perished. In Adam all flesh was made subject to sin and death. And the Word became flesh and thus made himself the object of the wrath of God against sin. When the Word was made flesh, he was also made sin and a curse. He was the most cursed and the most sinful flesh that ever was because he bore in his flesh all the sins of his people. He bore their original sin. He bore their actual sins. He became flesh; and when he did, God imputed to the Word all the sins of his people and made him to be sin for us and to be a curse for us.

So also when the Word became flesh, he became the lowliest and most miserable of all men, and he bore that in his flesh all his life long; but especially on the cross he bore the terrible wrath of God against sin. So great was that weight that it pressed out of his flesh bloody sweat. It also pressed out of him his great and terrible cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

And in that humiliation when the Word dwelt among us, he demonstrated his glory. I believe that is the meaning of the words "we beheld his glory, the glory as of

the only begotten of the Father." These words cannot be separated from the words that the Word became flesh. In that becoming flesh, in that flesh, in his weakness, in his humiliation, and in all his anguish he showed, and all beheld, the very glory of God. Behold him! He had to be swaddled as every other little baby. He needed his mother to nurse him and change his diapers. He had to be washed and fed and put to bed. He had to learn to walk and talk and learn. He had no place to lay his head; he tired and was weary; and he groaned and wept. He spoke and taught. He ate and drank as men and did all the things that men do. And he was despised and rejected and ridiculed. The people tied him up like a thief; they put him under oath and finally crucified him. How was he not a man like every other man?

In that humiliation he showed the glory of God. As God manifested his glory to Elijah, not in a whirlwind or in an earthquake but in the still small voice, so God manifested his glory in the highest sense when the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. In Christ is seen clearly the power, sovereignty, grace, mercy, righteousness, holiness, wisdom, loving-kindness, and faithfulness of the triune God. Christ declares with saving power and with damning truth the name of God.

The glory of God is the radiant splendor of God in all the fullness of his goodness and perfection. The Word made flesh showed that too. All of that was obvious and demonstrably true in him. No one could gainsay that. By word and by deed, he proved that he is the only-begotten Son of God. Just as God brought all things into being by his Word—he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast—so Jesus spoke, and it was done. All who heard him bore witness that he spoke with authority, and they testified of the graciousness of his words. He said to the dead little Tabitha, "Arise." He said to dead, stinking Lazarus, "Lazarus, come forth!" To the lame he said, "Arise and walk." To the blind he said, "See" and to the devils, "Come out of him" and to the wind and the waves, "Be still!"

But that still was not the fullest revelation of the glory of God. The glory of God is the praise of God as the only good and ever-gracious God. The Word made flesh showed that too. The people saw that. All heard his gracious words full of grace and truth.

But that revelation of the glory of God came especially at the end of that life in the flesh. Was it when the mob came and he said, "I AM," and they all fell over? Oh, that was thrilling indeed. But that was not the full revelation of the glory of God.

You can see and all could see and all did see the glory of God when they took Jesus. They bound him; they tried him; they put him under oath; and they bore false witness

against him, betrayed him, condemned him, and crucified him. And he prayed, “Father, forgive them,” spoke comforting words to the formerly blaspheming thief, and there in the darkness of Golgotha gave the piercing and anguished cry of the cross declaring, “It is finished!” There is the glory of God.

That is what the astonished and then believing centurion confessed: “Truly, this man was the Son of God!” Beholding the glory of God in Jesus Christ crucified transformed the centurion. That is what the Pharisees in their unbelief hardened themselves against when they asked for a guard for Jesus’ tomb. They beheld the glory of God in Christ crucified and were hardened in hatred against him.

He showed forth the glory of God as the God who has grace and pity and tender compassion on his dear, sinful people; so that Christ Jesus, for us and for our salvation, came down to us to perform in the flesh all things necessary for our salvation and glory. Because he is the only-begotten Son of God in the flesh, his flesh is strong to save. Because he is the only-begotten Son of God in the flesh, he did save because in his humiliation and in all his suffering he made full and complete satisfaction for the sins of all his people.

All this he did in the flesh and as flesh in order to save flesh. Us! Flesh! He came to dwell among us! That we might dwell with him forever. What glory of God especially did they behold? That God is such a God that he condescends to us, who are of low estate, to glorify us in himself. That is the glory of God for which he wills to be praised to all eternity. A God full of grace and truth, who brought the fullness of that grace and truth to us.

The Word who became flesh is full of grace and truth! In a few words John describes the glory of God that all beheld in Jesus Christ. Flesh full of grace and truth. This is impossible. Flesh is full of sin, death, and condemnation. Flesh by nature is full of nothing but lies, wickedness, and death. That is what happened to flesh in Adam. To see how glorious flesh is in Christ, you have to contrast him with Adam. In Adam flesh, all flesh, became full of sin, death, and wickedness. To be in Adam, then, all that one has is sin, death, wickedness, shame, and condemnation. Adam is full of evil. That is all men are too in Adam. Christ is full of grace and truth as flesh. He took that flesh; and he filled that flesh with life, light, glory, grace, and truth because the one who became flesh is the only-begotten of the Father. He does not merely partake

of grace and truth, but he is full of it; that is, he *is* all grace and all truth. He is grace and truth, and there is no grace and truth apart from him. To have grace and truth, you must have him; for he is full of grace and truth. If you have him, then, you also have all grace and truth that is necessary for salvation.

The incarnate Christ is full of grace. This means that everything in him and everything about him pleases God. God delights in him, loves him, anoints him with the oil of gladness above all his fellows, lifts him up, and glorifies him and will be glorified in him alone. The Father finds nothing in Christ but what is lovely and altogether pleasing to God. Nothing in the world pleases God except Christ. He is grace. He is the fullness of grace. He is the fullness of grace to overcome sin, death, hell, and the grave. He is the fullness of grace to forgive the sins of all who believe in him, to deliver them from the bondage of sin and from the pollution of that sin. He is the fullness of grace to make them not only servants but also sons and daughters of the living God and to make them unspeakably and eternally blessed in heaven. Whoever has Christ has the fullness of grace, and whoever has him has God for him and not against him. Then whoever has Christ has nothing to worry about or fear in this life, for God is working all things for his salvation.

And in Christ God revealed himself as the God of truth. Christ is full of truth. That truth is God’s promise. God in Christ, when the Son was made flesh, declared that he is the God of truth. That he does all that he promises and that his promise is fully accomplished in Jesus Christ. That is why to believe that the Word was made flesh is to believe that God is true to his word, so that without any doubt we believe that God is also favorable toward us, gracious toward us, and that he will certainly bring us to heavenly glory in Christ and perform all that he promises to us in Christ. To believe that the Word was made flesh is to believe that no sin or evil in us can hinder us from being received of God in mercy, to believe that God will destroy sin and all the works of the devil, and to believe that God will make us eternally blessed in Christ. And on the faithful God we alone rely for all of our salvation. The Word was made flesh to save flesh by doing in the flesh what flesh could not do, so that we might be made perfect in Christ in body and soul forevermore.

Oh, wonder of wonders, the Word was made flesh. Let all adore and worship and believe on him.

—NJL

The Word was made flesh;
thus all of salvation is sure,
the promise of God is sure,
and eternal life is sure.

THE REFORMED PROTESTANT CHURCHES (RPC): FREE FORGIVENESS!

Introduction

Prof. David J. Engelsma has made it his mission in his ninth decade upon the earth to damn the doctrine of the Reformed Protestant Churches. The professor's condemnation of Reformed Protestant doctrine is that it makes men impenitent, debauched, and profane. His condemnation is that Reformed Protestant doctrine is essentially the antinomian cry, "Let us sin!" The title of one of his latest email articles to his family, intended for wider distribution, states the charge: "The Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC): Sin Freely!"¹

The professor must condemn the RPC because the RPC teach that justification is by faith alone. Justification by faith alone! Not justification by repentance. Not justification by faith and repentance. But justification by faith alone, which is to say, justification for the sake of Christ alone. Professor Engelsma's doctrine of justification, on the other hand, is justification by repentance. Therefore, Professor Engelsma must damn the doctrine of the RPC as making men impenitent and profane.

I, for one, welcome Professor Engelsma's condemnation. His condemnation is the slander that must always be hurled against the gospel of grace. Wherever the gospel of grace is, that gospel inevitably draws the charge that it makes men careless and profane. Therefore, it makes me very glad that men would cast out the name of the RPC as evil in this way, for so did they to the prophets before us. No one anymore is charging the doctrine of Professor Engelsma or the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) with making men careless and profane because Professor Engelsma and the PRC no longer teach the gospel of grace. But every few weeks Professor Engelsma pokes his head out of his window to shake his fist at the RPC and to condemn our doctrine as antinomian. So much the better for us. And, let Professor Engelsma remember, so much the worse for him.

Phantasmagoria

Professor Engelsma's description of Reformed Protestant doctrine is like an old-time phantasmagoria. The charlatans of the late eighteenth century used theatrics, lanterns, mirrors, smoke, clever contraptions, and other special effects in darkened rooms to project all manner of specters and ghosts and ghouls and horrors to their credulous audiences. The images in the phantasmagoria were not real but were only projections made by the hucksters who had gulled their customers out of their money. Professor Engelsma has set up a modern-day theological phantasmagoria in which he projects all manner of theological horrors, to the shuddering delight of his readers. With great solemnity he informs his readers that what they are about to witness is the grotesque doctrine of the Reformed Protestant Churches. With a showman's flourish he unveils the flickering horrors of the RPC, to the gasps and whimpers of his audience. But just as the ghosts of old were nothing but smoke and mirrors, so the professor's description of Reformed Protestant theology is not reality. What he projects on the wall as Reformed Protestant doctrine is nothing but the contents of his own fevered imagination, assisted by some theological sleight of hand. Just like the phantasmagorists of old, Professor Engelsma is a fraud.

In fact, the professor's claims by now are so outlandish that I have a hard time believing that anyone continues to be taken in by the professor. Professor Engelsma himself admits that his charges must seem far-fetched. "At this early stage in their history, this charge may, I hope, seem far-fetched to the unsuspecting people." Yes, I should say it seems far-fetched! Phantasmagoric, even. Nevertheless, there are very many who are all too willing to take what Professor Engelsma writes as truth, not because it is the truth but merely because Professor Engelsma says so. So we must once again enter the professor's phantasmagoria to point out the deceitful contraptions by which he has overthrown many.

¹ David J. Engelsma, "The Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC): Sin Freely!," June 21, 2022. All quotations of Professor Engelsma are taken from this document.

Here is the phantom that Professor Engelsma presents as Reformed Protestant doctrine: “It is inherent in the doctrine of the RPC that they allow, and essentially encourage, their congregations, including the ministers, to sin freely, without the conviction of guilt.”

Is that so? Is that what Reformed Protestant ministers preach? Sin freely without the conviction of guilt?

Is that what Reformed Protestant doctrine teaches? Sin freely without the conviction of guilt?

Is that how Reformed Protestant members think and live? Sin freely without the conviction of guilt?

That seems far-fetched!

What is the professor’s proof for his charge? Where can the RPC be found to teach that we must sin freely without the conviction of guilt? Ah, here is where the professor’s sleight of hand begins. He cannot quote any Reformed Protestant sermon, article, or other material in which the RPC teach “Sin freely, without the conviction of guilt.” He cannot quote this because the RPC have not said it. The RPC simply do not teach “Let us do evil, that good may come.” The RPC do not teach “Let us continue in sin, that grace may abound.” To every suggestion “Let us do evil” or “Let us continue in sin” or “Let us know the depths of Satan,” the RPC respond with all vigor, “God forbid!” To the suggestion that we are allowed to sin freely or that we are encouraged to sin freely, the RPC respond with all vigor, “God forbid!”

Because he cannot quote the RPC’s encouraging God’s people to sin, the professor instead must maintain his charge through a couple of deceitful contraptions.

Contraption one: “The basis of the charge that the RPC teach that it is permitted to sin freely is the teaching of the RPC that repentance for sins is not necessary for forgiveness.”

Ah, yes, here we are back at the only thing that the professor knows anymore: repentance for forgiveness. In the whole church world today, Professor Engelsma has become the foremost champion of prerequisite repentance for forgiveness. According to the professor, because the RPC deny that repentance is necessary (requisite) before (pre-) forgiveness, as though God waited upon our repenting before he will forgive our sins, then the RPC must teach that man should continue in sin freely.

But this is just a clever mirror box. The phantom isn’t real. I can deny that repentance is a necessary prerequisite for forgiveness and at the very same time deny that I may sin as I please. To both I can say a vigorous “God forbid!” In fact, the two things are inseparably connected. Because God has forgiven my sin freely for Christ’s sake without any prerequisite whatsoever, including repentance, I can delight in good works and do good works,

including the good work of repentance, as my holy life of gratitude to God. Jesus connected the two in his gracious word to the woman taken in adultery. Though the woman never repented in the passage, Jesus forgave her: “Neither do I condemn thee.” Jesus’ own doctrine and practice was forgiveness without prerequisite repentance. And that did not make Jesus a teacher of impenitent living any more than it makes the RPC teachers of impenitent living, for Jesus continued, “Go, and sin no more” (John 8:11).

Contraption two:

In the same issue of the magazine [*Sword and Shield*, March 15, 2022], with characteristic vitriol, an editor defends the unreformed and unbiblical doctrine that repentance does not precede forgiveness, and that it is heresy to teach that it does...

This amounts to denying that they any longer have sins at all; they have no sins with regard to the guilt and shame of sinful thoughts, desires, words, and deeds. For if they still sin, these sins would have to be repented of.

And again: “The members of the RPC confess as semi-official church doctrine that they have no sins.”

Here again we still must deal with the only thing the professor knows anymore: prerequisite repentance for forgiveness. According to the professor, because the RPC deny that God’s activity of forgiveness is contingent upon man’s activity of repentance, the RPC must teach that its members are not sinners and that they do not sin.

The professor has actually come very, very close to the gospel here. The professor does not know it as the gospel, and he means something different by it, but he has come very close to the gospel.

Here is the gospel that the professor has come close to but which he ridicules: I am not a sinner, and I do not have any sin. That is true! I am not a sinner, and I do not have any sin...in Christ. This is the beautiful doctrine of justification by faith alone. Justification by faith alone means that I have no sin in God’s eyes. None! Justification by faith alone means that I have no guilt, no shame, and no debt before God. None! Justification by faith alone means that I have the perfect righteousness and obedience of Christ counted as mine. Justification by faith alone means that when God looks at me, he looks at me in Christ, judges me in Christ, and deals with me in Christ. He has not dealt with me after my sins, nor rewarded me according to my iniquities (Ps. 103:10). He has not beheld iniquity in Jacob, nor has he seen perverseness in Israel (Num. 23:21). In the blood and the sweat and the tears and the obedience of his Son,

Jehovah has smelled a sweet savor and has not destroyed me but blessed me.

So much is Christ's righteousness my righteousness that as far as God is concerned in his dealings with me, I am Christ. I am a member of Christ's body, and the head and the body are one. All the things of my head are mine as a member of his body. My righteousness is not something different than Christ's righteousness, but Christ's righteousness is my righteousness. My obedience is not something different than Christ's obedience, but Christ's obedience is my obedience. Jesus Christ has suffered my curse and has obeyed God instead of me and in place of me, without my obeying God being any part of it. Jesus Christ himself personally is now my righteousness, entirely independent of anything I have ever done or will do.

This is justification! This is the gospel! And this is the doctrine and confession of the RPC. "But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness" (Belgic Confession 22, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 50).

So if Professor Engelsma wants to charge the RPC with teaching that we have no sin, then he is only charging us with teaching justification and with teaching the gospel. I like that charge. Let's have more of it. And let Professor Engelsma and all men know about the RPC that it is not merely our "semi-official church doctrine that they have no sins," but that it is our official church doctrine that we have no sins in Christ. It is our official church doctrine according to the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23, Q&A 59: "I am righteous in Christ, before God, and an heir of eternal life" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 106). It is our official church doctrine according to Q&A 60: In Christ it is "as if I never had had nor committed any sin." And in Christ it is "as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 106-7). It is our official church doctrine according to the Lord's supper form: "The perfect righteousness of Christ is imputed and freely given him as his own, yea, so perfectly as if he had satisfied in his own person for all his sins and fulfilled all righteousness" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 268).

Yes, Professor Engelsma comes very close to the gospel with his charge against us. But that is not what he means to do. In his article Professor Engelsma is not interested in Christ or in what it means to be in Christ. See if you can find Christ taught with any meaningful substance in

his entire article. Rather, what the professor means to do is set up another mirror box and smoke screen to make it seem that the RPC teach that *in ourselves* we are not sinners and *in ourselves* we have no sins. When the professor writes, "The members of the RPC confess as semi-official church doctrine that they have no sins," he means that we confess as semi-official church doctrine that we have no sins *in ourselves*.

Well, balderdash, baloney, and malarkey. Aren't the RPC supposedly the ones who are too strong on total depravity? That is, aren't the RPC supposedly the ones who teach too much sin in the believer? The RPC teach that even the regenerated child of God is still totally depraved in himself. For this we have been falsely accused of denying regeneration. We have been falsely accused of teaching that the child of God is spiritually inactive. We have been falsely accused of denying the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in a man. Professor Engelsma has made this charge publicly against the RPC and her ministers for some time now. Professor Engelsma has helped make the RPC famous (or infamous) for the denomination's teaching that the regenerated man is still totally depraved by nature. But now the professor would have everyone believe that the RPC also teach that the believer has no sin in himself? On the one hand this: the believer is totally depraved in himself. And on the other hand this: the believer has no sin in himself.

Is anyone really taken in by this? When the professor one night at his show says that the RPC are too strong on the total depravity of the believer in himself, and the people all say, "Ooooooh!" then when the professor the next night at his show says that the RPC teach that the believer has no sin in himself, only the gullible can all say, "Aaaaaah!" Like an old-time charlatan who doesn't even bother hiding the lanterns and mirrors by which he conjures his phantasms, Professor Engelsma is not even trying to hide his theological contraptions. Don't be taken in by such an obvious fraud. And that's not "vitriol," as the professor claims it is. It's just plain sound advice. Heed it or don't heed it, but at least know that when you go to Professor Engelsma's show, you are dealing with a humbug.

Free Forgiveness

If Professor Engelsma's specters of Reformed Protestant doctrine evaporate like smoke, what is the actual substance of Reformed Protestant doctrine? When one exits the dark theater of the absurd and comes into the clear

Just like the phantasmagorists
of old, Professor Engelsma is
a fraud.

light of day, what do the Reformed Protestant Churches actually teach?

Not this: Sin freely!

But this: Free forgiveness!

The doctrine of the Reformed Protestant Churches, as it is the doctrine of the gospel and the doctrine of the Reformed faith, is that God's forgiveness of the sinner is absolutely, sovereignly, and graciously free. There are no conditions that the sinner must fulfill in order to be forgiven. There are no prerequisites that the sinner must meet in order to be forgiven. There are no payments that the sinner must make in order to be forgiven. There is simply nothing that the sinner must do, nothing that the sinner must bring, and nothing that the sinner must be in order to be forgiven of his sins. God forgives the transgressions of his elect people without any regard to any activity that they have performed. God forgives the transgressions of his elect people strictly because it is God's will to do so, strictly because it pleases him to do so. God forgives the transgressions of his elect people solely with an eye to what Christ has accomplished by his obedience and atonement and without any eye whatsoever on what they have done. God forgives, and that utterly freely.

Especially with regard to the elect sinner's repenting, God's forgiveness is absolutely free. God does not check to see if the sinner has repented before God forgives the sinner. God does not withhold his mercy until the sinner has acknowledged his sin and shown sufficient sorrow for his sin. God does not wait upon the sinner to repent before God forgives. God does not even wait upon God's own work of bringing the sinner to repentance before God forgives. God forgives the sinner freely, without regard for the sinner's repenting but only with regard for God's own will and the righteousness of his Son.

There are many ways to describe this free forgiveness: justification by faith alone, salvation by grace, unconditional salvation, sovereign salvation, the Reformed faith, the gospel, and so on. At their heart all of these describe this reality: free forgiveness of sins.

We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied; as David and Paul teach us, declaring this to be the happiness of man, that God imputes righteousness to him without works. And the same apostle saith that we are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ. (Belgic Confession 23, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 51)

The truth of the gospel that forgiveness is truly free for the child of God without condition of repenting or

any other work or activity of the sinner is truly liberating for the child of God. Without that gospel the child of God is not free but is in terrible bondage. He is in bondage to the law with all of its requirements. He is in bondage to all of the accusations of his conscience and all of the accusations of the devil that he has not obeyed perfectly. He is in bondage to fear and to self-love, which are the only motives that he can find to try to obey God's law. In the doctrine that repentance is a prerequisite for forgiveness, the sinner will never know forgiveness. He will forever be bound by his own imperfect repenting.

But when he is set free by the gospel of free forgiveness, the child of God is free from every demand of the law for righteousness (Gal. 3:13). He is free from every accusation of his conscience that he has disobeyed the entire law of God (LD 23). He is free from every charge of the devil and the false church that he is condemned (Rom. 8:33–34). He is free to live his life before God's face in faith and without terror (Ps. 130:3–4). He is free to obey God in gratitude, free from self-love and the fear of damnation (Belgic Confession 24). He is free to approach God in prayer without any terror or dread (Belgic Confession 23). He is free to decide boldly and to do boldly those things that God requires, even knowing that he will sin in doing them because of his old man, and knowing also that God does not impute to him those sins (Ps. 103:12). And he is free to sin boldly in doing those things (let the reader understand) without it ever becoming license for him to sin. This is some freedom!

The gospel of free forgiveness in Jesus Christ also frees the sinner to repent. Without the gospel of free forgiveness, the sinner would never repent. Without the gospel of free forgiveness, the sinner would only do what Adam did: flee from God and hide from God. If the sinner must repent before he hears that he is forgiven, then the sinner would never, never come to God. He would never come to God in prayer. He would never come to God with the petition "Forgive us our debts." He would never come to God in sorrow for his sins. He would never come to God with a broken heart and with a contrite spirit. He would never come to God with his tears and his groanings over his sin. He would only run from God as fast as he could! Why? Because there is no mercy with God! Not as far as the sinner knows. The sinner has no knowledge that the righteousness of Christ is his. The sinner has no knowledge that God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy. The sinner only knows his sin. Professor Engelsma will not permit the sinner to know anything other than the sinner's sin until the sinner first repents.

Professor Engelsma will not permit the sinner to hear the blessed declaration of God in Christ, “I pardon your iniquity,” until the sinner completes his necessary, pre-requisite repentance.

The believer must hear God say, “I pardon your iniquity.” Without forgiveness, daily, he cannot *live*. To know this saving word and act of God experientially, the believer must repent, and God calls for, and works, this necessary repentance.

According to Professor Engelsma, until the sinner repents he has no knowledge of the pardon of his iniquity. Until he repents he never hears God say, “I pardon your iniquity.” In Professor Engelsma’s doctrine the sinner is not free!

But knowing his forgiveness in the blood of Christ according to the eternal and unchangeable good pleasure of God, the sinner is free to repent. Knowing his forgiveness in the blood of Christ, the sinner will certainly and inevitably repent. He will be sorry for his sins and abhor his iniquities. The forgiven sinner is a repentant sinner. Not because he must repent in order to be forgiven but because his whole life before God arises out of and stands upon God’s mercy in Christ. Knowing God’s mercy in Christ that justifies him independently of all of the sinner’s repenting and working and obeying and loving, the sinner will hate and mourn his sin as contrary to the God who has so mercifully received him. He will cry out to God and flee to God, who receives sinners for Jesus’ sake. God’s mercy in Christ has made the sinner free to do so. By God’s mercy in Christ, the sinner is free to approach unto God. He is free to beseech God, “Enter not into judgment with thy servant” (Ps. 143:2). Only knowing the mercy of God in Christ that forgives his sins—only *after* knowing the mercy of God in Christ that forgives his sins—is the sinner free to repent.

This [obedience of Christ crucified alone] is sufficient to cover all our iniquities, and to give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror, and dread, without following the example of our first father, Adam, who, trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig leaves. And, verily, if we should appear before God, relying on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should, alas! be consumed. And therefore every one must pray with David: *O Lord, enter not into judgment with Thy servant: for in Thy sight shall no man living be justified.* (Belgic Confession 23, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 51–52)

Freedom from the guilt, shame, and curse of sin—in Christ! Freedom to repent—because of Christ! That is some freedom!

Professor Engelsma noticed that the doctrine of the Reformed Protestant Churches is a doctrine of freedom. He saw that what we preach, write, and confess has to do with being free. It is evident that he saw this because he describes our doctrine this way: “Sin freely!” There it is: “Freely!” Yes, Reformed Protestant doctrine has to do with being free. It is the gospel of free forgiveness. But when Professor Engelsma saw the gospel of freedom, it scared him. Professor Engelsma is afraid of the gospel. He is frightened by the prospect that God’s forgiveness of sins is absolutely free, without regard to the activity of the sinner. For Professor Engelsma such a free gospel must inevitably make men impenitent. When the little children are taught that free gospel, it breaks the professor’s heart because he thinks those little children will not repent. Therefore, Professor Engelsma charges the free gospel with making men careless and profane. The professor charges the gospel of sovereign, gracious, free forgiveness as being the teaching “Sin freely.” And Professor Engelsma goes to work to make the gospel safe for people by stripping the gospel of its freedom. He takes away the grace of the gospel and replaces it with a condition: pre-requisite repentance.

Well, Professor Engelsma can keep his safe and conditional gospel. I want nothing to do with it. And let Professor Engelsma be warned that his is not a safe gospel, for he will go to hell with it if he truly believes it. Let him repent of his safe gospel, let him believe the true gospel of free forgiveness in Christ, and let him be saved.

As for me, let me have the gospel that makes my salvation to be all of God and all of Christ and nothing of me. Let me have the gospel of the Reformed Protestant Churches, whose doctrine is not this: “Sin freely, without the conviction of guilt”; but whose doctrine is this: free forgiveness! And this: live freely without the burden of guilt for Jesus’ sake, who is your righteousness!

Election Theology versus Repentance Theology

In all of Professor Engelsma’s writing, there is a true horror present. That horror is not the phantasmagoric and falsely projected doctrine of the Reformed Protestant Churches. Rather, that horror is the actual and substantial doctrine of Professor Engelsma. Professor Engelsma’s doctrine is that God’s forgiveness of the sinner (in the sinner’s conscious experience) waits upon the sinner’s repenting of his sins (by the power and operation of God).

Here is Professor Engelsma's doctrine in his own words from his "Sin Freely!" article.

The believer must hear God say, "I pardon your iniquity." Without forgiveness, daily, he cannot *live*. To know this saving word and act of God experientially, the believer must repent, and God calls for, and works, this necessary repentance

And a little later, referring to Psalm 51, the professor writes: "For the psalmist puts confession of sin and repentance 'before' forgiveness."

Professor Engelsma's doctrine is that the sinner's repentance is necessary (requisite) before (pre-) God will say to that sinner, "I pardon your iniquity." Professor Engelsma's doctrine is that the sinner's repentance is a prerequisite for God's forgiveness of the sinner. The fact that God himself works the repentance of the sinner does not change the fact that the sinner's God-worked repentance is a prerequisite for God's forgiveness.

For Professor Engelsma repentance functions with all of the conditional force of a prerequisite. Professor Engelsma will not say *condition*. He will not say *prerequisite*. But he does not need to say *condition* and *prerequisite* in order to teach a condition and a prerequisite. The question is how repentance *functions* in what he does say.

And in what he does say, repentance functions with all of the conditional force of a prerequisite. God's forgiveness of the sinner is contingent upon the sinner's repentance. God's forgiveness waits upon the sinner's repentance. God's forgiveness cannot proceed until the sinner repents. The issue is not merely that repentance is necessary. Rather, the issue is that repentance is necessary *in order to know God's forgiveness*. "To know this saving word and act of God experientially, the believer must repent, and God calls for, and works, this necessary repentance." This is a conditional theology of prerequisite repentance.

What is striking about Professor Engelsma's development of prerequisite repentance is that it is so thoroughly saturated with man. Professor Engelsma's theology of repentance is so filled with man that God's counsel and Christ's cross and God's gift of faith can hardly make an appearance. You will not find election in Professor Engelsma's article. Even though the subject of the article is essentially justification—that is, how the sinner may be forgiven all his sins in his conscious experience—there is no mention of God's sovereign decree and good pleasure. If you want to find Christ in Professor Engelsma's article or if you want to find faith in the

article, you have to arm yourself with an Acme Corporation industrial-strength fine-tooth comb. And even then you will only find a passing reference to Christ and to faith. Even though the subject of the article is essentially justification, that truth is not developed out of the cross of Jesus Christ.

What you will find on every page and in almost every paragraph is man's repentance, man's repentance, man's repentance. When the reader finishes the article, the one message that he has heard is this: for justification man's repentance is the thing! Not this: for justification God's eternal and electing mercy is the thing! Not this: for justification God's gift of his Son is the thing! Not this: for justification the shed blood of Jesus Christ is the thing! Not this: for justification faith that repudiates all its own activity and works and clings alone to Christ is the thing! But this: for justification man's repentance is the thing.

Professor Engelsma's theology is a repentance theology. It is not an election theology. It is not a theology of sovereign grace. It is not the theology of the cross. It is not the Reformed theology of justification by faith alone. Rather, it is a repentance theology: justification by repentance, forgiveness by repentance, comfort by repentance, and peace by repentance.

Having a repentance theology, Professor Engelsma abhors election theology. He will not suffer the doctrine of God's sovereign, gracious election to govern the sinner's experience of the forgiveness of his sins. The professor will not suffer the shed blood of Christ and Christ's substitutionary atonement at the cross to govern the sinner's experience of the forgiveness of his sins. For the professor the sinner's experience of the forgiveness of his sins must be governed by the sinner's repentance. First the sinner must repent! And God's whole gift of forgiveness and assurance and comfort and salvation waits upon the sinner's repenting.

Because he abhors election theology, Professor Engelsma condemns as antinomian Rev. Nathan Langerak's clear and comforting confession of election theology. In the March 15, 2022, *Sword and Shield*, Reverend Langerak made God's election of the sinner to be the sinner's comfort regarding the forgiveness of his sins. Reverend Langerak made the cross of Christ to be the sinner's comfort regarding the forgiveness of his sins. In election there is nothing of man. In election God is first. At the cross there is nothing of man. At the cross Christ is first. Reverend Langerak's election theology is that because the forgiveness of the sinner is the gracious decree of God and because the forgiveness of the sinner

What do the Reformed Protestant Churches actually teach? Not this: Sin freely! But this: Free forgiveness!

is accomplished by the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ, the sinner's assurance of his forgiveness has nothing to do with his repentance. In election and at the cross, the sinner already has the righteousness of Christ, without the sinner's first repenting. Reverend Langerak summarized his election theology thus: "This is the gospel message of the Reformed Protestant Churches. The sinner has forgiveness without repenting."²

Professor Engelsma hates that confession of election. He hates that confession of the atonement. Why? Because Professor Engelsma does not have an election theology. Professor Engelsma has a repentance theology. For Professor Engelsma the sinner's experience and comfort of forgiveness may not be governed by God's election and Christ's cross but by the sinner's repenting.

The believer must hear God say, "I pardon your iniquity." Without forgiveness, daily, he cannot *live*. To know this saving word and act of God experientially, the believer must repent, and God calls for, and works, this necessary repentance.

Not having an election theology, Professor Engelsma also abhors the doctrine of justification by faith alone. For Professor Engelsma the sinner may not know and have comfort in his justification until the sinner first repents. The sinner's comfort is not found in Christ alone, who is known by means of faith alone, but the sinner's comfort is found by means of his repenting of his sins.

Because Professor Engelsma abhors election theology, he condemns as antinomian the undersigned's confession of justification by faith alone and the undersigned's rejection of justification by repentance or any other work of the sinner. My election theology is that faith alone is the instrument of justification because faith's object is Jesus Christ, who is the sinner's righteousness. My election theology is that repentance is not at all the instrument of justification but is the fruit of faith and the inevitable and sure result of the sinner's salvation. In the March 15, 2022, *Sword and Shield*, I wrote regarding the means of justification: "Repentance has no bearing whatsoever on that man's remission of sins or his justification."³

Professor Engelsma hates that confession of faith as the sole means of justification. For Professor Engelsma repentance does have a bearing on a man's remission of

sins and justification. Repentance is first as the necessary prerequisite to a man's justification. Professor Engelsma's doctrine is not justification by faith alone but justification by repentance. Professor Engelsma's doctrine is not election theology but repentance theology.

Conclusion

Professor Engelsma and the Protestant Reformed Churches with him are drunk on man. They are drunk on man's repentance. They are drunk on man's prerequisites. They are drunk on man's activity. They are in a stupor in which they cannot see, hear, or think anything but man and his prerequisites. The Protestant Reformed Churches as an institution will not wake up from her stupor. The denomination is beyond reform. God has shown this by bringing reformation to the PRC. But when God brought reformation, he brought it outside the denomination and not within. Within the PRC there is only increasing spiritual madness and blindness, as Professor Engelsma's articles attest. The PRC as an institution will go to hell with her prerequisites, after she has made as many other men as possible drunk with the wine of the wrath of her theological and spiritual fornication. If there are any spiritual sons and daughters of God in the Protestant Reformed Churches, flee the wrath to come. "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues. For her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities" (Rev. 18:4–5).

Away with Professor Engelsma's phantasmagoria. Away with his repentance theology. Let us have Reformed Protestant doctrine, which is the gospel: free forgiveness.

We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied; as David and Paul teach us, declaring this to be the happiness of man, that God imputes righteousness to him without works. And the same apostle saith that we are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ. (Belgic Confession 23, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 51)

—AL

2 Nathan J. Langerak, "Engelsma's Order," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 16 (March 15, 2022): 43.

3 Andrew Lanning, "Reply," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 16 (March 15, 2022): 11.

Ah, summer!
 Long hot days at work and play, and pleasant evenings reading *Sword and Shield*.

A day at the beach to swim in the lake, and burying one's toes in the sand while reading *Sword and Shield*.

A family vacation at the campground, and reading *Sword and Shield* around the fire.

Iced tea, lemonade, and *Sword and Shield*.

Hot dogs, baseball, and *Sword and Shield*.

Ah, summer!

Ah, *Sword and Shield*!

In this August issue of the magazine, Rev. Stuart Pastine brings his series on Norman Shepherd to a close with his eighth article. Reverend Pastine did not expect to write this many articles when he started his series in the October 2021 issue. That is part of the beauty of a believer's magazine, in which God's people can write without restriction and without censure. We thank Reverend Pastine for his insightful analysis of Norman Shepherd's theology and for his bold polemics against all conditional theology. Undoubtedly, the readers of *Sword and Shield* have profited from this series.

A brief note about Rev. Nathan Langerak's rubric. His article in *Understanding the Times* is a modified version of the graduation speech that he gave at the occasion of the first graduation of Genesis Reformed

Protestant School in Dyer, Indiana. The school's existence is a wonder of God's grace, as is the existence of every Reformed Protestant school and every association of Reformed Protestant parents who labor toward a school. May the Lord use Reverend Langerak's speech for the encouragement of all of those who give themselves on behalf of Reformed Protestant education and the Reformed Protestant schools.

It is not too early to start thinking about the third annual meeting of Reformed Believers Publishing, to be held Thursday, October 20, 2022. More details regarding the location, program, and speakers will be forthcoming. If anyone desires to join Reformed Believers Publishing as a member of the organization, submit your name to the board by using the website (reformedbelieverspub.org) or the other information on the masthead. New members are received at the annual meeting, so consider getting your name in now.

Also, we continue to invite correspondence from our readers for publication. We have received a few letters that we have stashed away for a Letters Edition. When we receive a few more letters, we will publish them together. The Letters Editions continue to be some of our most anticipated issues. Thank you in advance to all our correspondents.

With that, the August issue is before you. Take up and read. And may God speed the truths written herein to your heart and the next issue into your hands.

—AL

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

TRUE REPENTANCE (3)

*Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness.
—Psalm 51:1*

The humble prayer of the publican in the temple was set by the Lord Jesus Christ in complete contrast to the proud prayer of the Pharisee.

How complete a contrast?

Carefully observe the so-called repentance of the Pharisee. His proud, self-righteous repentance was that he was “not as other men.” He was not an extortioner. He was not unjust. He was not an adulterer. Nor was he “even as this publican” (Luke 18:11). The Pharisee’s repentance was *his righteousness* before God. His so-called repentance was the reason that God did not need to show mercy to the Pharisee, the reason that God did not need to justify the Pharisee.

In contrast was the publican and everything about him.

The Lord placed the publican in the same place as the Pharisee: in the temple. There in the presence of God, the publican was “standing afar off.” In harmony with his place of standing afar off was his demeanor and posture of deep humility. He “would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven.” He “smote upon his breast” (v. 13).

In perfect agreement with his demeanor and posture, the contrast continued with the words of the publican: “God be merciful to me a sinner” (v. 13).

What was missing from the publican’s words, words placed in his mouth by Christ?

Missing was what was found on the lips of the Pharisee. According to the parable of Christ, the Pharisee spoke words of separation, words of so-called repentance.

But no such words were found on the lips of the publican. He was, after all, a publican. He was the sinner whom the Pharisee had identified in his proud prayer, boasting of his penitence and of his being not “as this publican.”

According to the parable of Christ, the publican had

one identification. He was “a sinner.” He was “a sinner” in need of the mercy of God.

Even though the King James Version, for reasons of a good translation, does not indicate it, the Greek records the use of the definite article *the* in the words “a sinner.” While a more accurate translation (in the case of the New American Standard Bible, for example) has “the sinner,” the English cannot really capture the true use of the word *the*. The point of Jesus’ use of the definite article was to indicate that the publican had upon his heart and upon his mind only *one* sinner to talk about: himself. The publican’s mind was not going to compare himself to any other. He did not compare himself to the Pharisee, not even to the one standing in the middle of the temple. No other publican. No other extortioner, no other unjust man, no other adulterer. No, the publican was *the* sinner.

Before God and before God’s holy law, the publican felt the weight of its guilt and condemning power.

Nor was the publican about to compare himself in his repentance to the Pharisee with his proud, self-righteous prayer. It is impossible to suppose that before God the publican would say, “I thank thee that I am not as that Pharisee over there. I thank thee that my repentance is genuine. I thank thee that I might say, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner.’ I thank thee that I might have the humility to be exalted by thee. I am in a right and proper position to be the object of thy mercy.”

Such is the wonder of true repentance—such a good, wonderful gift of God’s grace. Such is its wonderful power that repentance has nothing of which to boast. Repentance simply cannot speak of itself. It must speak of the sinner as sinner, the sinner that is in complete and entire need of one thing alone: the mercy of God.

The reason that repentance cannot speak of itself before

Repentance cannot be compromised by the sentiment that the penitence of the penitent is some good thing that gives him a right before God.

God is because repentance has one force and one direction. Its force is self-condemnation as the sinner applies God's law to himself as *the sinner*. Repentance allows for no self-justification. Repentance must deny the existence of any good thing in the penitent. Its direction is downward. Repentance is abasing and humbling. Repentance cannot be compromised by the sentiment that the penitence of the penitent is some good thing that gives him a right before God.

True repentance, the repentance that sees only that one is a sinner, has its perfect point for the first part of the publican's prayer: "God be merciful to me."

Only broken, only poor, only ruined, only mired in sin and depravity, only burdened with guilt, and therefore in complete and perfect need of the mercy of God, is who that publican was.

There was no exchange to be made. There was no qualification to be raised. There was no condition to be fulfilled. Any such exchange, qualification, and condition had to diminish because they would have ultimately denied the mercy of God.

That mercy Christ properly placed only in the prayer of the publican. In doing so Christ excluded mercy from the prayer of the Pharisee. Despite all of the Pharisee's speaking about his separation from sinners, there was no plea from his lips for mercy. Despite his giving thanks to God and acknowledging God's grace for giving him that separation, there was no plea for mercy. He needed no mercy because, as the Holy Spirit indicated in Luke 18:9, the Pharisee was one of those "certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others."

God's mercy to the sinner is exactly what his mercy is all about. His glory is to be a God who is compassionate toward the weak and takes pity upon the wretched. His mercy is a mercy that flows from his will alone to the poor and needy. His mercy is to reach all the way down to them and to lift them out of their misery. He is the God who resists the proud but gives grace to the lowly.

Here is the true wonder, the glorious grace of true repentance. Finding no good thing in self but finding only what is evil and condemnable is the way to call on God's mercy. Finding and bringing before God some supposed good in self is to find no mercy but only judgment.

Exactly here understand that the plea of the publican was completely different than the thankful declaration of the proud Pharisee. The difference was God's grace alone. Grace alone had to give the publican his true repentance.

Anything less, as indicated by the words of the Pharisee, was not of God but of man.

Legal repentance, the repentance that is seen to prepare, qualify, or condition man for God's mercy, is truly no repentance at all. It is not of God at all. Because it is not at all of God, it is no recipient of the mercy of God.

The wonder of God's sovereign grace is to work this prayer by his Holy Spirit in the hearts of those upon whom he chooses to show this mercy. Only God's grace can so thoroughly break the pride of the self-righteousness of all whom God has chosen, so that each one of them prays this prayer of the publican: "God be merciful to me a sinner." His grace is the only power to break the stubborn, proud heart. His grace is the only power to strip away all self-righteousness, especially the self-righteousness of legal repentance. His grace is the only power to so humble the elect sinner in the heart and soul to bring about this blessed, glorious prayer: "God be merciful to me a sinner." The antithesis between the Pharisee and the publican in their respective manners and prayers was of God's mercy alone.

God's mercy is always first, just as his grace is always first. Mercy upon mercy is the way of God, as well as grace upon grace.

The end of the parable was the declaration of the Savior about the publican: "I tell you, this man went down to his house

justified rather than the other" (Luke 18:14).

The mercy sought by the publican in his prayer he received. Not the penitent was justified. Not even was the truly penitent justified. The sinner was justified. After the language of Romans 4:5, God justified the ungodly sinner, who was the publican.

That end of the parable, the justification of the publican sinner, powerfully connected to the beginning of the parable. God's justification of the sinner was the rebuke of the one who trusted in himself that he was righteous rather than others. All the pronounced righteousness of the Pharisee—his outward signs of repentance and expressed superiority to other sinners or even to "this publican"—was not honored by God but rejected. The Pharisee's righteousness had no standing before God. All of the Pharisee's boasted righteousness was his condemnation by God, in spite of the Pharisee's words of thanksgiving. He was the one who did not return to his house justified.

There is yet another way that Christ's distinction in this parable between the publican and the Pharisee must be applied. What of the penitential prayer of the publican? What was its true relationship to his justification by

Finding and bringing before
God some supposed good in
self is to find no mercy but only
judgment.

the God to whom he prayed? Was his prayer answered with the mercy of God to justify the publican because he had the correct attitude? Because he had the right demeanor and actions? Because he said the right words and made his entire appeal to God's mercy alone and nothing in himself?

Certainly not!

First, such a notion must overturn the entirety of the parable. It must violate the very reason for the parable, according to scripture. Taking up this parable to teach a condition or a way can only lead to a new brand of self-righteousness—a self-righteousness of humility, of outward confessions of sins, and of smitings upon the breast. It can only foster the very same doctrine taught and practiced by the self-righteous Pharisees—justification before God by works. It can only lead to a new crop of Pharisees, now become publicans and now aping these actions and parroting these words in order to go to their houses justified rather than the others.

Second, such a notion denies the very reason for the last statement of the Lord: “He that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Luke 18:14). What a perversity to turn humility into a new pride!

How often and how badly this is done! How perverse is sinful pride! Not the whole law but only circumcision. Not meritorious good works but good works done by grace in gratitude. Not good works but coming forward, accepting the invitation, and praying the sinner's prayer. Not coming forward and accepting the invitation but only faith as the act of free will. Not faith as the act of free will but faith as the good deed or good work. Not faith as a good deed or a good work but only as a doing, an active faith. Not faith as a mere condition but as a condition fulfilled by God's grace. Or faith not as a condition fulfilled by grace but only *in the way of*.

It all becomes a new pride, a new self-righteousness, which cloaks itself in humility.

Not in words and in feelings but in the truth of the words is the teaching of Christ. The truth is that there is only one cause for justification: the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. That truth was reflected in the one, glorious supplication of the publican. Glorifying God as the God wonderful in mercy, the publican had to speak accordingly of himself as only the sinner in need of that mercy of God.

The glory of repentance, then, is the glory of God's mercy reflected in repentance. It is the brokenness that needs wholeness. Repentance is the death that needs life, the sorrow that needs joy, the emptiness that needs fullness. Repentance is the sin that needs righteousness for its covering. Repentance is the humiliation that needs the exaltation of God's mercy.

The later was the reason for the Lord's statement that finished his parable: “He that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” It is the mercy of God that exalts the humble. Humility serves the mercy of God. And it is the mercy of God that humbles the proud, to give them the very humility that he so mercifully answers.

To guard against all the abuse of self-deceptive pride, the subject of true repentance for the glory of God's mercy and the humility of his people must be properly understood in its twofold respect. Like the doctrine of faith, the doctrine of repentance must be distinguished

from repentance itself. Understanding repentance, talking about repentance, and being able to distinguish the truth of true repentance from the error of false repentance are not repentance itself. Having and confessing the correct doctrine of true repentance are not repentance itself. And the ability to defend vigorously and successfully the truth of repentance is not repentance.

This difference becomes especially important when considering exactly how repentance is of God's grace alone and not of man. In this consideration it becomes especially easy to suppose that because one has in his mind that repentance is from God alone and because one has the proper understanding of repentance, he must be repentant. Likewise, one might easily suppose that because he is convinced that repentance is not of man at all and that man's repentance is not first in any respect, he is indeed repentant.

What is the difference? It is all the difference between the intellectual pride that knows what repentance is and the abasing of all that very same pride, melted in the deep humility of true repentance. It is all the difference between the pride that seeks to hide itself in the vain attempt to make so many distinctions of first, second, and third, what is intervening and what is consequential, so as to ignore that God's grace alone is in the true repentance itself.

The humility of true repentance must carry its force into all the doctrine of true repentance. This humility will

Taking up this parable to teach a condition or a way can only lead to a new brand of self-righteousness—a self-righteousness of humility, of outward confessions of sins, and of smitings upon the breast.

determine that, no, repentance does not precede grace. Humility must determine that, no, repentance does not precede forgiveness. Humility must determine that, no, repentance does not precede the mercy of God. Humility must determine that, no, repentance does not precede faith.

The humility of repentance *is* the knowledge that God justifies the ungodly. The humility of repentance *is* the knowledge that God's grace gives repentance as the fruit of the cross of Christ, the Christ who died for his own while they were yet sinners and his enemies. The humility of repentance *is* the knowledge that the sinner has nothing good in himself, *ever*, under any circumstances, that makes him worthy of anything good from his God.

Two simple points make clear the first necessity of God's grace.

The first is the promiscuous preaching of the gospel. The gospel is first as the good and glad tidings of salvation—what God has done in reconciling sinners to himself through the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ. That gospel is preached to men in the one condition of who they are according to that gospel: sinners. That gospel, preached to all men as sinners, declares to them the blessed tidings of salvation. To be specific, that gospel is promiscuously preached to all men as the tidings of complete salvation in Christ. The gospel proclaims Christ as the complete savior. It speaks not of stages or degrees of salvation. The gospel does not speak of being given certain gifts or blessings; and then, if certain conditions are met, additional gifts and blessings will be given. That gospel is preached with the understanding that through the gospel and its preaching the Holy Spirit blesses with repentance those whom he inwardly calls by sovereign, irresistible grace according to the election of God.

Suppose that were not the promiscuously preached gospel. Suppose it were another gospel, a conditional gospel. That conditional gospel would be that God will

show the mercy of justification only to those who truly repent of their sins. The truth is that such a gospel is no gospel at all. It is only law. Further, according to such a gospel in its preaching and doctrine, God would not give the gift of repentance. It would be up to man to produce repentance. It would be a condition on man's part. Since that man is truly a sinner, totally depraved by nature, he cannot truly repent of his sins. He cannot of himself put himself to death, mortifying the flesh that he is and all that he is.

The gospel of gracious salvation, including the gift of repentance, is the gospel that brings salvation, including with it all true repentance.

The second point, standing in close connection, is God's gracious administration of the gospel by the Holy Spirit to the hearts of the elect. According to the truth of Psalm 130:4, God must first show himself to the hearts of his elect as being a merciful and gracious God. So he leads them by sovereign grace to repentance because they know him to be a merciful God. This same apprehension of God's mercy is powerfully demonstrated in David's supplication in Psalm 51:1. In language strikingly similar to that of the publican, David prayed, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions." In this same respect stands the proper manner of Psalm 32. First is the word of blessedness in verses 1 and 2: "Blessed is he" and "Blessed is the man." The rest of Psalm 32 describes thoroughly what this blessedness is. Not only in receiving the testimony and seal of forgiveness that is described in verse 5, but also that blessedness itself is in the acknowledging and confessing of sin. That blessedness is also powerfully represented in the beginning of verse 6: "For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee."

The blessedness of gracious salvation is in the publican's prayer: "God be merciful to me a sinner."

—MVW

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

GRADUATION 2022

The seniors asked me to speak on Psalm 28:7: “The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him.” The text that the seniors chose is especially fitting for the occasion of the first graduation from Genesis Reformed Protestant School.

First, the existence of this school is the work of the grace of God alone. Still more, the existence of the instruction and now the finishing of a year of education here are a testaments to the unfailing and, I might add, the undeserving nature of the grace of God. God’s favor upon us alone explains the existence of the church out of which the school arose. He had favor on us by causing a remnant to escape. Unless the Lord had preserved a remnant, we had been as Sodom and as Gomorrah. Then out of that reformation of the church, the school arose.

The school did not arise out of the church without much struggle. I remember well the very many meetings that we had with regard to the school. We had doubts. We wiggled and we squirmed about what to do. One had this thought, and another had that thought. This trouble of our church members with regard to the school is the fault of those who cruelly cast us out of the church and as cruelly and callously cast us out of our schools. In the words of the psalm, may God give them according to their deeds and reward them according to the wickedness of their works.

Although our trouble and affliction were the fault of those who cruelly cast us out, it was to our shame that upon signing the Act of Separation, whereby the church of Jesus Christ was formed anew, we did not immediately draw up a charter for a Reformed Protestant school. If the Protestant Reformed Churches had, indeed, compromised the gospel of grace; if they had, indeed, denied the truth of justification by faith alone; if they had, indeed, taught contrary to the unconditional nature of God’s covenant, then we had no business even contemplating sending our children to the Protestant Reformed schools.

This is proving true. The magazines for young people,

the communications from the teachers and schools, the church bulletins, and the productions of the schools in the Protestant Reformed Churches are full of their theology of man. The theology that the people eat from the pulpit they evacuate into the schools and fill the souls and hearts of the children with that theology.

All of our debating and all of our wondering—save for one man—was our unbelief. It was our unbelief in the grace of God. It was our unbelief in the promise of God. It was that unbelief that God forgave; and God forgiving, God blessed us in spite of ourselves and out of his pure mercy toward us and our children. The Lord put in our hearts to start a school. The formation of this school is as glorious a triumph of the gospel of grace as the formation of the church out of which the school came. The formation of this school, a year of instruction, and a first graduating class are testaments to the grace of God. “Therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise him.”

Second, it is a testament to the grace of God and his saving strength that the school that was formed was a Reformed Protestant school. There were those who had joined the Reformed Protestant Churches who were opposed to Reformed Protestant schools. They desired to form undenominational schools with no attachment to the churches and with no mention of the Reformed Protestant Churches and their doctrine in the constitutions or the bylaws of the schools. Others were not committed to schools at all but were—and many still are—committed to homeschooling, so that the covenantal demand for the school is replaced by the independentism of the homeschool movement. The Lord preserved us from that assault on the church, and the Lord put in our hearts not only to form a school but also to form a Reformed Protestant school.

The school that is formed by the parents must arise out of and be consistent with their doctrinal confession and church membership. It is as inconceivable that I would not have a Reformed Protestant school as that I would not have a Reformed Protestant home. The Reformed Protestant school rests on the baptismal vows of Reformed Protestant parents. Reformed Protestant parents promise

at the baptism of each of their children that they will instruct their children in the doctrine as it “is taught here in this Christian church” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 260). The parents never promise to give a generically Reformed or generically Christian education, but they promise to give an education that harmonizes with and, indeed, flows out of the preaching of the church. God gave exactly that to us in order that our school may be the nursery of our church. When we understood that we had to form a school, there was no hesitation on the part of the parents that the school would be Reformed Protestant in name and in fact.

Third, we have witnessed the overflowing grace of God and the flourishing of the covenant of grace and the communion of the saints in the mutual help in Reformed Protestant schooling around the country. Just as important as the formation of the school and the formation of a Reformed Protestant school was that the Lord put in our hearts that to the best of our ability we would help any Reformed Protestant parent in Grand Rapids—where the children had also been shut out of the Protestant Reformed schools and where there was not a school—or parents anywhere in the country and even the world who needed our help to start their own schools. So much did the Lord put that in our hearts that we wrote that into our constitution, and we backed that up with a considerable expenditure of efforts to set up remote learning and resource sharing—an effort that is ongoing and that must continue.

The fruit of that conviction to provide mutual help in schooling by remote learning was that many from around the country benefited from the school that the Lord started here at Genesis.

The fruit of that conviction has also extended far beyond the schools. The schools are always nurseries of the church, and also here in this matter the school was the nursery of the church because out of the school and its commitment to remote learning also a seminary took shape—a seminary where now seven men receive instruction remotely in order to train them to be ministers of the gospel. The fruit of the efforts to establish not only a school but also a school equipped for remote learning is that we realized how we could utilize technology to spread the gospel, teach students, and advance Reformed Protestant education far and wide.

I say to you now as we are looking forward, just as we have looked backward, that by the grace of God this

all must continue. There must be the promotion of the school movement in our churches over against the concept of homeschooling. There must be the advance of the idea that the school must be Reformed Protestant over against the idea that the school is not to have a denominational character. There must be the continuation of online learning and resource sharing. Indeed, it must be written into the constitutions of the school associations that are formed. We may not allow the mentality to take hold that remote learning is not covenantal. We may not allow the mentality to take hold that we will not inconvenience ourselves and the education of our own children by expending resources—resources of our own that we use to hire teachers—to help in starting school associations and providing resources for educating other covenant children from around the country where schools are started but where teachers cannot be hired. The words *local* and *autonomous* in regard to the school may not mean *for ourselves alone, and let the others fend*

for themselves. Then *local* and *autonomous* are nothing more than high-sounding synonyms for *selfish* and *self-centered*. The schools that have hired teachers must share them remotely. The schools that cannot hire teachers may not allow that fact to hinder them from forming a school. Form the school. Form the school or die trying because

that is the demand of the covenant. And may we together as Reformed Protestant Churches have all things in common, including our teachers and the education of our children.

If those ideas—that is, the idea that remote learning is uncovenantal and the idea that we will not inconvenience ourselves for the education of other children from around the country where teachers cannot be hired—if those ideas take hold, then that will be the death of our churches. That will be the death of our churches, first of all, because such ideas will be a victory for legalism in the churches and thus the death of the gospel. We live and die by the gospel. If our reformation taught us anything, it was that without the gospel we perish and that a compromise to the gospel in any area of life destroys the gospel in every area of life. If the idea takes hold that remote learning is uncovenantal, then we will not have the gospel. And not having the gospel, we will not have churches and schools for very long.

Second, if those un-Reformed and uncovenantal ideas take hold, then it will be a victory for selfish independence and thus the death of the Christian calling to have

May we together as Reformed Protestant Churches have all things in common, including our teachers and the education of our children.

all things in common according to Acts 2:44: “All that believed were together, and had all things common.”

Third, if those ideas take hold, it will consign the smaller Reformed Protestant churches to slow and agonizing deaths by attrition. Schools are the nurseries of the churches, and without them the churches perish. They perish in their generations. The small groups of believers who cannot hire teachers may not allow the lack of teachers in their own specific areas to hinder the parents from forming schools. And the larger schools where teachers are hired may not begrudge a vast expenditure of time and energy to share their teachers.

Fourth, if the idea that remote learning is uncovenantal takes hold in the churches, it will be the death of seminary instruction in common. Right now, the churches by remote learning are able to instruct seminary students in common. We learned that from Genesis Reformed Protestant School. We learned that it could be done, that it could be done profitably, and that it could be done for the benefit of the Reformed Protestant Churches around the country. But if remote learning in the school is uncovenantal, then remote learning at the seminary is uncovenantal, and it will be the death of seminary instruction in common. The death, I say, of seminary instruction *in common*. It will not be the death of seminary instruction altogether because I, for one, will never bow to those legalistic, uncovenantal, and gospel-less ideas.

As we look back over the past year and look forward to the years to come, we confess that Genesis Reformed Protestant School is a wonder of grace and a gift of God to us in our Lord Jesus Christ. There were a thousand ways that we could have been swept away with the ungodly and dashed upon the rocks. But blessed be the Lord, who heard the voice of our supplication—the Lord who is our strength and our shield. He heard us, you understand, because he first heard Christ. That is who speaks in the psalm—Christ. Having heard Christ, he also always hears Christ’s church for Christ’s sake.

Now at graduation we must sing this psalm in Christ with thanksgiving: Jehovah is my strength.

To understand that exclamation of the psalmist, Jehovah is my strength, you must understand the context in which the psalmist uttered that song. The context in which the psalmist uttered that song was one in which he was in the deepest trouble and the most hopeless situation from an earthly point of view.

In the psalm he cries to the Lord in his misery. His cry is simply prayer. He was praying to God; he was

beseeking God for God’s deliverance, God’s salvation, God’s help, and God’s strength because the psalmist confessed that he had none of himself, and of himself he would perish. He confessed that there was no way out of his situation as far as human nature and man’s strength were concerned.

Indeed, in his crying he said that he made supplication. The nature of his cry was supplication. *Supplication* is a cry unto God from the deepest distress. If a cry is prayer, supplication is the cry of a hungry man for a piece of bread; supplication is the cry of the thirsty man for a drink; supplication is the cry of a weak man for deliverance from the proud; supplication is the cry of the oppressed from the hand of the oppressor.

David cries in the psalm, and he makes supplication in the psalm. And David’s situation was dire because he stood among men who spoke peace with their neighbors, and mischief was in their hearts. Mischief was in their hearts. They had a personal hatred and loathing of David. They sought David’s destruction. But they did that with a smile on their faces, with kisses of feigned love, and with honeyed words of friendship. They spoke peace to him with their mouths, while inwardly they hated him.

Is there any more wicked person to be around than one who speaks peace to you with his mouth but has mischief in his heart? Is there any more dangerous person to be around than one who speaks peace to you with his mouth but has mischief in his heart? When such persons are with you, they will say good things to you. When they see you face to face, they will smile at you and wish you a good day. When they are near you, they will put their arms around you, and they will speak soothing words in your ears. They take you off your guard and pretend friendship, but in their hearts they hate you. They loathe you and wish your destruction. Indeed, they plot it. Judas Iscariot was such a man. He betrayed his friend with a kiss.

And, you understand, here in the psalm this duplicity and treachery of the ungodly toward David were an attack on the truth—the truth specifically of salvation. What David’s enemies hated in David was that he was God’s salvation of Israel. They hated the truth of salvation that David represented. The truth of salvation that David represented was that God saved his people by grace alone, that God saved his people by his strength alone, and that God saved his people in his faithfulness alone. David stood for and spoke concerning the truth of salvation without works, justification by faith alone, and the absolutely unconditional character of

Having heard Christ, he also always hears Christ’s church for Christ’s sake.

God's covenant. Did he not write, "For they got not the land in possession by their own sword, neither did their own arm save them: but thy right hand, and thine arm, and the light of thy countenance, because thou hadst a favour unto them" (Ps. 44:3)? Did he not instruct Israel to sing, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile" (32:1–2)? Was it not about David, and in David about Christ, that Ethan wrote, "I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant, Thy seed will I establish for ever, and build up thy throne to all generations. Selah" (89:3–4)? Salvation by sovereign grace and not by a damning mixture of grace and works. David represented that, and his enemies spoke peace to David with their mouths, but they hated David in their hearts, and they plotted against David to overthrow him in order to establish in Israel the rule and wisdom and works of man.

David was a picture of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ understood the words of David because David spoke of Christ in the psalm. Who was Jesus Christ when he came to the church of his day but salvation itself? Who was Jesus Christ but the revelation of the wonderful works of God—the wonderful works of God's grace, the wonderful works of God's faithfulness, the wonderful works of God's doing that which was impossible for the salvation of his people? The Jews saw and beheld the wonderful works of God, and they hated those works of God. They hated Jesus Christ, and yet they spoke peace to him with their mouths: "Rabbi, rabbi, rabbi." And they plotted his destruction.

In the day of his flesh, Christ offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him who was able to save him from death. I can tell you the most powerful cry in all of scripture: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" In that cry is all our salvation. For God heard Christ's cry and delivered him, and on Sunday morning he arose from the dead. And he ascended into heaven and now sits at God's right hand and makes intercession for his church.

The cry of the psalmist, therefore, is the cry always of God's true church in her deepest distress and trouble, her deepest distress and trouble when she is the object of the duplicity and treachery of wicked men—wicked men who see in her the wonderful works of God; wicked men who see in her the evidence of the grace of God, the

power of God, and the faithfulness of God; and who, seeing the works of God, hate those works and plot to destroy them.

It is the prayer of the church when the wicked are strong and the righteous are weak. It is the prayer of the church when the workers of iniquity prosper and the righteous man fails. It is the prayer of the church when God seems afar off, so that he is silent in the church's distress, and when the wicked are very near and are very loud, threatening to take away and to swallow up the church. It is the prayer of the church always when her situation is from every human point of view impossible, indeed hopeless.

That is how it was with Christ. Christ came to his church as she was in a hopeless situation. She was in common partaker of the sin and condemnation of the world. There was no way out for her. Indeed, there was no way out for Christ—no way out but by the deadly and dreadful wrath-filled way of the cross. On the cross he offered up strong prayers and supplications, and he was heard in that he feared.

God raised Christ from the dead. Because God heard Christ and because God saved Christ and raised him up and set him at his own right hand, God hears his church. He forgives all her sins for Christ's sake and

accounts her perfectly righteous with Christ's obedience and holiness. God does not hear his church because she believes or because she repents or because of the righteousness of her works. He hears for Christ's sake because he forgives her sins. He hears his church not as one who is unwilling to hear his church. He hears his church as one who has appointed his church to salvation, who wrought all his wonders and mighty works for the sake of the salvation of his church. He hears his church for Christ's sake, inasmuch as Christ is the ground and the foundation of the church's blessing and the church's salvation. And hearing, God saves her with his strong hand and outstretched arm, and he blesses her with all the riches and treasures of Christ Jesus.

When God hears the church, she sings.

You must see tonight that God heard us. Our situation was impossible. I was half dead; we had a tiny congregation; we did not know what would happen with the school. We did not even know how to start a school. There were no teachers. Where would the resources come from? There were a thousand questions we could have asked. And we cried unto God. We made supplication to him, and in that we confessed, "Lord, there is with us

Our hearts rejoice, and we praise God. We praise him for his goodness. We praise him for his grace.

no strength. Lord, there is with us no worthiness. Lord, there is with us only the right to condemnation and to be swallowed up with the ungodly.” And God heard us even while we were in the act of praying. He heard us, and he answered us, and he gave to us a church and a school. He brought us now through a year of education, and he gave us our first graduating class.

Jehovah is our strength.

When you say that Jehovah is your strength, you mean that there is no other strength. There is no strength in my hand, my arm, my legs, my heart, or my brain; there is no strength among men; there is no strength in all of the power of the world. There is no strength but Jehovah’s. In Jehovah alone there is strength.

In Jehovah alone there is strength because Jehovah is Jehovah: he is the I AM THAT I AM. He is the God who is the same in all of the instant and constant fullness of his divine being from eternity to eternity. He is the God who is unchanging in his purpose to bless his church. He is the God who is gracious and merciful, who is long-suffering, full of kindness and tender mercy. He is the God of great power, so that nothing is impossible with God. He is the God of perfect sovereignty, so that all things happen according to the will of God—all things, even the bringing of the church into her hopeless situation. God did that. God brought us to where there was no strength. God brought us to where we wiggled and squirmed and suggested every way out but the way of faith. God brought us to such a point to show us our unbelief, our weakness, and our doubt and to try our faith that it would come forth like gold tried in the fire. God did that so that all the praise would be to his glorious name, that we would sing and worship him, and that we would pray to him again, again, and again.

And the God who has strength and who is strength itself gives power to his people. He causes us to increase

in strength; so that although men fall, our strength is renewed like the eagle’s.

Who is a God like our God? In him is strength; in us there is no strength. There is no strength to build a church; there is no strength to start a school; there is no strength to educate our children. You understand that, don’t you? There is no strength in you to educate your children because Reformed Protestant education is not about the mere inculcation of facts and figures. Oh, there must be the teaching of math, history, science, reading, and writing so that our children are educated. We must strive for the best education in the fundamentals of knowledge. But, you understand, that is not a Reformed education. A Reformed education involves faith. A Reformed education involves the receiving of all the instruction as from God himself, seeing all the instruction in the light of God’s covenant, and living out of the instruction unto the glory of the name of God and in recognition of God’s eternal purpose. You can’t do that. You can’t give your children faith. Only God can. God is our strength. He is our help, our covenant friend who always hears us. He hears us in spite of our sins.

Which of you had faith enough, so that God gave you a school? Which of you prayed enough, so that God gave you a school? Which of you repented enough, so that God gave you a school? He heard you.

He heard you out of his great love and his great mercy in his eternal and unchangeable purpose to bless you and your children after you.

So we are helped, and our hearts rejoice, and we praise God. We praise him for his goodness. We praise him for his grace. We praise him with the words of the prayer of David: “Lord, save thy people and bless thine inheritance. Feed them also, and lift them up forever.”

Thank you.

—NJL

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

IMPLICIT FAITH (2)

*Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.
—1 Peter 5:3*

A third sign of hierarchy in the church is that priority is given to formal, ecclesiastical unity over the true, spiritual unity of the truth of God's word. The familiar phrase *peace and unity* is established as the goal of the church's work. Will decisions taken by consistories and councils and classes and synods serve the peace and unity of the churches? Then they are good decisions. Is this peace and unity disturbed by persons or issues? Then those persons and issues must be stopped. Dissent, even perceived dissent, is evil because it attacks peace and unity. *Peace and unity* is also the measure of a church's and a denomination's well-being. When church visitors report that the churches they visited are in a state of peace and unity, then classes rejoice upon hearing such reports. *Peace and unity* becomes the watchword. The truth may be compromised. Apostasy may be the trend. But as long as everybody is in happy agreement with the compromise and apostasy, the condition of the churches is good.

What is highly revealing about the presence of hierarchy with this third sign is how dissent is treated. There comes to be one great, heinous sin with which individuals can be charged. This one dominant sin is sure to arouse great wrath and anger in the churches and on the parts of consistories, classes, and synods. This sin is worse than heresy, abuse, drunkenness, and adultery. While these other sins will be treated with a great deal of patience and long-suffering, this sin will not. While these other sins will be treated gently and sometimes haphazardly, this sin will meet with consistent, unrelenting force. The sin of schism is well-nigh the unpardonable sin. It demands immediate consequences. Patience, long-suffering, and forbearance will only allow the damage to grow. Thus sentence must be passed immediately.

The charge of schism will be accompanied with the charge of slander but not with the charge of false doctrine, error, or heresy. The schismatic has said bad things about others in the church; even worse, he has said them about

prominent leaders in the church; and worst of all, he has said them about the deliberative assemblies. The higher the assembly, the worse the offense. The schismatic will also be painted as a "radical." His great sin is that he has not "gone with the flow." He has not followed the multitude in its pursuit of peace and unity in the churches. The only reason that the schismatic dared to stand against the stream must be that he is a radical. There can be for him no listening ear, lest one partake of his "sin"—the terrible sin of schism. As quickly as humanly possible, he must be uprooted and cast out for the sake of the church's peace and unity.

With this third sign hierarchy manifests itself especially in the specific attention that such cases of schism receive in the broader assemblies. Broader assemblies will not do their proper work in treating these sins of schism. They will not rest content with the work of minor assemblies. Minor assemblies will have done their work. The minor assemblies will have done the work of actual discipline, whether of members or of officebearers. They will have made their decisions upon the grounds that they have written. But when appeals to that work come to the broader assemblies, the broader assemblies cannot simply deny such appeals. When the broader assemblies are required to approve the deposition of an officebearer charged with schism, they cannot merely state their approval and move on. The broader assemblies *must* do far more. Unable to recognize the autonomy of the local congregation and the rule by the consistory as executing the office of elder, the broader assemblies find it necessary to add their supposed weight to the issue. As if the consistory has not the authority to act of itself, classes and synods must add their own authority to make the decision stick. In this very practical way, hierarchy is demonstrated. Broader assemblies decide and act as if they possess their own, higher authority than the consistory.

This third sign of hierarchy is also related to implicit

faith. True faith, according to its nature, must know and see the only rule for true unity in the church of Jesus Christ. True faith must see the church's resting for all her peace and unity on the only true foundation, the word of God (Eph. 2:20). Moreover, for the sake of this true peace and unity, faith must follow and promote that word of God alone, especially where hierarchy departs from it. When true faith, for its seeking and maintaining of the truth, is assaulted as schismatic and slanderous and driven out of the church, implicit faith readily takes its place.

Considering these signs of hierarchy in the church, it becomes clear that hierarchy and implicit faith are necessary to one another. They develop mutually. While hierarchy arrogates power to itself away from the word of God, implicit faith welcomes the arrogation. Implicit faith prefers to trust in men and the institutions of men rather than in the word of God. Implicit faith finds it far easier to conform to outward superficial standards imposed by hierarchical assemblies than to have the word of God that so directly addresses the heart. Implicit faith prefers fear of men and respect of persons over the fear of God.

The preference for implicit faith is also true of church assemblies in their operations. If the assemblies truly trusted the word of God and that word in the mouth of the king of the church, Jesus Christ, they could not have taken the decisions they have. They would trust in the word to do its proper work, according to its own authority. They would trust the specific form of government given in the word of God, rule by the local consistory according to that word of God. They would trust that the church has its health and strength in having the word of God alone rule in the church. They would not feel the need to add their weight, as if the opinions of more, greater, or better men could possibly add to the authority of God's word. How grievous it is, then, when church assemblies turn from the wisdom of the word of God to their own devices! Delegates attempting to bring the truth of God's word to bear on doctrinal debates are set aside. Protests and appeals that are grounded in God's word and the Reformed confessions are not sustained because their weight is judged insufficient to overturn the decisions of the assemblies of men. The reputations of men and of ecclesiastical assemblies

are more highly valued than the rule of Christ over his church by his word and Spirit.

Relieving oneself of hierarchy and rejecting implicit faith ought to be easy. It ought to be as easy as saying no to all of it, a no that is as loud and vigorous as it must be liberating and joyful. How hard can it be to shake off the yoke of bondage? How hard can it be to turn from the unbelief of implicit faith to the simplicity of complete faith in the only savior, Jesus Christ, whose cross alone brings true freedom to serve the Lord in joyful gratitude? How difficult can it be to throw off the oppressive yoke of tyrannical hierarchy for the sake of joyful, Spirit-led submission to the word of God alone?

As it turns out, very hard. It is the struggle of the old man against the new, the flesh against the Spirit. It is the

struggle of blind pride against deep humility. The work of church reformation is hard. It is hard because it truly is spiritual in character.

It is hard because Satan would have the church make only a foolish exchange. The tempter would have God's people to think that to end hierarchy means only to exchange one denomination for another and to suppose that all is finished. Or to exchange a hierarchy that is easily detected in classes and synods for one that is merely of

a consistory or a classis instead. Or to exchange a hierarchy of broader assemblies (collegialism) for a hierarchy that is merely of leadership (oligarchy). Or to exchange rule by some identifiable men for rule by other men.

Another approach Satan can take is to encourage the deception that hierarchy must end when hierarchical men are either broken in repentance or are removed from their positions of control and influence in churches. The deceiver would have every officebearer forget that within him lies every ingredient to be a proud, hierarchical, unbelieving, and idolatrous tyrant. Satan would have that officebearer forget that scripture is not only addressing others with passages such as 1 Peter 5:2–3, and that in the light of verses 5–9, but is also addressing that officebearer. Every officebearer must remember that his proud depravity has desired and learned very well the lessons in tyranny to which he has been exposed. Even that which his new man has learned to hate and abhor is what his old man loves and seeks to restore.

However, the work of church reformation against all hierarchical tendencies is assisted when the subject of

Unable to recognize the autonomy of the local congregation and the rule by the consistory as executing the office of elder, the broader assemblies find it necessary to add their supposed weight to the issue.

implicit faith is brought to the foreground. Implicit faith goes more deeply than hierarchy to the root of the issue. Implicit faith also ties in to the Protestant Reformation, to help understand what true reformation is all about. Implicit faith also lays emphasis where it belongs: not just on the problem but also on the solution and the solution as spiritual. Implicit faith also puts into sharp focus the proper role of the believer, the role that is so fundamental to the breaking down of all hierarchical tendencies. The proper role of the believer, when understood and applied, must lead to the only proper rule in the whole church: the holy scriptures as apprehended by every believer as the only rule for faith and life, including all the government of the church.

The above honor given to the rule of holy scripture and faith in holy scripture must destroy not only hierarchy; but this honor must also destroy all coercion (bullying and threatening), all psychological manipulation (unlawful, subliminal control that is destructive of true faith), and all deceitful abuse of God's word. This honor must protect the believer's freedom clearly and consciously to follow the word of God alone. Where officebearers in the execution of their offices, singly or jointly in deliberative assemblies, work hard to honor and maintain this freedom, members in the office of believer will be delighted to walk in this freedom. God's people will be joined together in the true unity of the Spirit to serve their God, with the church's authority assisting them according to its calling in that same word of God.

One of the greatest instruments that stands against hierarchy and the doctrine of implicit faith is the Church Order of the Synod of Dordt.

That the Church Order is such a great instrument may not seem very evident. From the way the Church Order has been used in recent history, exactly the opposite seems true. It certainly is true that it has been quoted so many times for the purpose of denying legitimate protests. It has been incorporated into many ecclesiastical decisions that have been oppressive in churches. How many times have not article 31 and article 46 been quoted for the purpose of declaring protests illegal? How much have Church Order articles been authoritatively quoted on the floor of the ecclesiastical assemblies in order to turn delegates against appeals that were biblically sound and confessionally based? Based on the history of its abuse and not its use, it is easy to understand why God's people view the Church Order of Dordt with

The reputations of men and of ecclesiastical assemblies are more highly valued than the rule of Christ over his church by his word and Spirit.

suspicion. However, it should be no surprise that hierarchy would go out of its way to wrest so violently to its own purpose that which speaks out so clearly against it. The strong man must first be bound! It is also apparent that hierarchical authority would eagerly abuse the Church Order as a cloak to carry out its devices. Hierarchy will pay lip service to the Church Order to bolster its vain claim that all its work cannot be hierarchical at all. Who would dare even to suggest such a thing to the experts in church polity?!!!

In truth, the Church Order of Dordt is a great instrument against hierarchy when the Church Order is properly understood and implemented. The structure itself of the Church Order is anti-hierarchical. First treated are the offices of the church in the local congregation, beside which there are no other offices. These offices are so closely tied to the local congregation that they have their source in the local congregation, including the

minister of the word as called by and installed in the local congregation. And all delegates to all the broader assemblies have no place at those assemblies but by the decisions of the local consistories. Where the different assemblies are identified and described in the Church Order, the consistory is first, and the broader assemblies of the classis

and synod have no original authority of their own. The authority of the broader assemblies is derived from the consistories, which are *voluntarily* united in federations represented in classes and synods.

In connection with the above, it is helpful to remember that the three forms of unity, the confessions to which officebearers in Reformed churches subscribe, do not identify the broader assemblies at all. Only in article 30 of the Belgic Confession is mentioned once the word "council," which is a body comprised of "ministers or pastors" and "elders and deacons." Their purpose is to govern "this true church...by that spiritual policy which our Lord hath taught us in His Word." This article concludes: "By this means *everything* will be carried on in the church with good order and decency, when faithful men are chosen according to the rule prescribed by St. Paul in his epistle to Timothy" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 64–65; emphasis added.)

In the Church Order there are three specific articles that stand powerfully against hierarchy in the church of Jesus Christ. They are articles 30, 31, and 84.

The most evident article is one of the last in the Church Order, article 84: "No church shall in any way lord it over

other churches, no minister over other ministers, no elder or deacon over other elders or deacons” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 403).

The distinct force of article 84 is that it is *the* anti-hierarchical article. The entire article is negative, setting out nothing positive. It does not enjoin or command. It only prohibits. Its entire, prohibitive force is against lording, or tyranny. The article takes up for its subject matter every office in the church and every church. Addressing the relationship of church and churches, of minister and ministers, of elder and elders, of deacon and deacons, the article allows for no ascendancy of authority over others. No church may lord it over other churches. No officebearer may lord it over other officebearers. Not among churches nor even among officebearers in the same consistory.

It is possible to imagine some circumstances where this article of the Church Order could be invoked as a ground for a protest. In recent history there were such circumstances. Editors of the *Standard Bearer* as a body of officebearers invoked their status as officebearers in the church and insisted that consistories charge other officebearers with the sins of slander and schism. A consistory, invoking its authority as a consistory, insisted that another consistory discipline one of its officebearers. To be sure, article 84 could properly be used as a ground for declaring these insistences unlawful and could be a powerful rebuke against editors and consistory. But these circumstances themselves powerfully and clearly demonstrated a hierarchical system. Those men and that consistory were not ashamed at the very thought of their actions. They were not ashamed to put their thoughts into words and send them out. And those editors and elders, who did so in the confidence that their efforts would be upheld by the broader assemblies of their denomination, were so far from any shame in their lording over others. Even when Classis East treated the matter brought to it by the editors of the *Standard Bearer*, classis gave no word of rebuke based on article 84. The assembly had learned well its role in the hierarchy of the churches.

In spite of such extreme cases as should demand

Where officebearers in the execution of their offices, singly or jointly in deliberative assemblies, work hard to honor and maintain this freedom, members in the office of believer will be delighted to walk in this freedom.

that article 84 be openly invoked, its real force is that of a sharp check on the hearts of officebearers and the deliberations of consistories. If officebearers are to be Reformed, above all things they must heartily hate all hierarchy. Article 84 must resound in their hearts with a loud amen.

Let the lesson be sharply and clearly learned. When article 84 is considered in the light of the history of the Reformation, the article was not merely against hierarchy in an abstract manner; but it was also established against the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic institution, with the pope at its head. Moreover, the article was established against that papal hierarchy as anti-Christian in its character. Hierarchy is essentially anti-Christian, the rule of men displacing the rule of Christ. Hierarchy demands faith in men. Hierarchy must oppose faith in Christ alone for the sake of implicit faith.

Although article 84 is strictly negative and is negative for a very important reason, its purpose is to clear away hierarchy or lording for the sake of one goal: humble, devoted service. The purpose of the church is never to serve herself but to serve her lord and master, Jesus Christ. The purpose of the officebearer is to bear office in behalf of the one who has called and appointed him to office—Jesus Christ, the king of his church.

In serving Christ, the only king and head of his church, the church as an institution and the officebearer as the servant of Christ also serve the members of the church. To draw the line more directly and clearly, the servants of Christ serve his redeemed people. The sheep of God’s flock do not exist for the undershepherds’ benefit, but the undershepherds exist for the benefit of the sheep. Important to this truth of service are the words of Matthew 20:28: “Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Especially important is this verse as a rebuke both to the hierarchical thoughts of the disciples, indicated by the request brought by the mother of James and John, and the indignation of the ten.

Not hierarchy but service!

I will continue, the Lord willing, by considering article 31 of the Church Order.

—MVW

DEBATING WITH THE DEVIL (8)

My allegory has served its purpose. It therefore ceases. Those satirical words were written according to Psalm 2, that the Lord God holds in derision all who would defy his Son and the gospel of his grace. From these pages God's word has addressed Norman Shepherd's "vain imaginations" and "dashed them in pieces like a potter's vessel." What remains is the call to his followers: "Be wise...be instructed...kiss the Son, lest he be angry" (Ps. 2:10, 12).

Introduction

I begin with the past and quote words spoken by Dr. Edmund Clowney, president of Westminster Theological Seminary at the time of the Shepherd debacle:

It must be recognized that Professor Shepherd does present, in the areas of debate, much that must be described as classical Reformed doctrine. He was a diligent student of Professor Murray and is well read in Reformed theology. Few theologians, in this country at least, have his knowledge of the Latin theological works of the Reformation and post-Reformation periods...

Further, there are differences in tradition between the Reformed faith in Holland, in Scotland, and in the United States (to name but three countries!). Klaas Schilder's views of the covenant and the controversies that led to the establishment of the "liberated" churches in Holland are virtually unknown in U.S. Presbyterianism, but are well known to Professor Shepherd, who has spent many months in Holland, speaks Dutch fluently, and uses the literature regularly.¹

Those substantial qualifications of Prof. Norman Shepherd, especially his broad knowledge of Dutch Reformed theology and Klaas Schilder's view of the conditional covenant, alert us to the fact that with Norman Shepherd's writing we are dealing with an expert's understanding of the Reformed faith, not with a seminary's amateur blunders. We are dealing with an expert's cunning—as demonstrated by Shepherd's formulations that have been exposed as deceitful twisting

of God's word—concealing of contradictory scriptures and ignoring of exegetical data that contradict him, all of which are sufficient to condemn Shepherd's writing as another gospel.

Also, those facts concerning Shepherd's knowledge indicate that in what I have written so far as critical refutations of his views, I did not simply criticize someone's ignorance of the Reformed faith; but I exposed Norman Shepherd's deliberate, dangerous, and devious denials of scripture and the Reformed confessions.

Those facts also demonstrate that Shepherd's burying of biblical testimony that contradicts his views and his ignoring of exegetical data that refute his views were equally deliberate and disgraceful omissions.

For all these reasons I believe Shepherd's theology is merely a new costume for Pelagianism to return from hell and to deceive those not faithful to the gospel (2 Thess. 2:10–11; Rev. 20:7–9; Canons 3–4, rejection 9).

With this final article I will go beyond correcting Norman Shepherd's abuses of scripture and attack his devious theology of conditions and the surreptitious spreading of his conditional theology. I will survey these garments spotted by the flesh, hating the contradictions of scripture they produce but having compassion, making a difference, and pulling some out of the fire (see Jude 22–23).

I begin this final adventure with the *sharp sword* of the Spirit in hand.

At the very beginning of our Lord's ministry, he solemnly proclaimed ("Verily, verily...") to Nicodemus the great principle of the *believer's experience*. Jesus taught that the *means* of being born again was by the Spirit; so that one's seeing, entering, and remaining in the kingdom depend only on the Spirit (John 3:3, 5). Notice that well: "*Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*"

Jesus solemnly swore that his word and his Spirit are the only effective means that create the experience of the new birth (passive), the effective calling (passive), and the hearing of faith (passive, justification). Those operations of the Spirit and the word bring the elect sinner into permanent kingdom-citizenship and ongoing, uninterrupted

1 Edmund P. Clowney, "Report to the Visitation Committee of the Board of Trustees (of WTS), Revised for submission, November 11, 1981," 3–4.

fellowship with God that is both positive and negative: God's chastening is also God's love being expressed (Heb. 12:5–6; Rev. 3:19).

In addition, Jesus solemnly stated the principle of who is first and who is second in salvation: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish" (John 10:27–28). He is first: *his voice* is heard; his sheep are second: they *follow him*. All of the believer's salvation experience—means, cause, results—is the effective hearing of the Lord's word by the Spirit, the leading of the Spirit that produces the believer's walking in the Spirit and thus following Jesus.

What directs Jesus' voice and his sheep's following him is God's eternal counsel. "Because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:6; see also John 10:14, 26–27; Rom. 8:28–30; Eph. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13; Canons of Dordt 1.6–7; 3–4.11).

The experience of God's elect is *all election experience* (Ps. 33:12; 65:4; 135:4; Isa. 44:1; John 6:37, 39, 44; 15:16; 17:2, 6; Acts 2:39; 13:48; Rom. 9:15–16; Eph. 1:4–5; Col. 3:12; 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Pet. 1:2; Canons of Dordt 1.6–7, 9). Election directs all causes and controls all means, so that the elect person effectually hears the gospel, trusts in Christ, and repents and obeys God's word—all *because he is one of God's elect*. The elect's hearing of faith, his lifelong confessing of sin and repenting, and his ongoing obedience are all effectively produced by Jesus' word and the Holy Spirit within him *because he is one of God's elect*.

Having begun in the Spirit, each elect is made perfect not by his obedience but by the Spirit (Gal. 3:3). Therefore, God is *always first*, and man is *always second*: "For of him [God], and through him, and to him, are *all things*: to whom be glory for ever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36; see also Matt. 6:13; 10:8; 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 11:4; 12:32; John 1:12, 16; 3:27; 6:37, 39, 65; 10:28; 13:31; 17:1–2, 11; Rom. 8:32; 2 Cor. 1:20; Eph. 1:6; 3:21; Phil. 1:11; James 1:17; 2 Pet. 1:3; Rev. 4:11; 21:23).

The Believer's Experience

We are now ready for Shepherd's opening gambit about the *believer's experience*. Shepherd writes this:

The experience of God's elect is *all election experience*.

Our focus now is on the *experience* of justification among the people of God. How do people make the transition from wrath to grace, or from condemnation and death to justification and life? How do they get justified, how do they *stay* justified, and how do they know they are justified?²

Within this folksy little paragraph, in which Shepherd pretends to ask simple questions about justification, lies his continuing, complicated, and concealed deceit. It is hidden in the little word "stay." "How do they *stay* justified?" From all that preceded the fifth chapter in *The Way of Righteousness*, we know that hidden in the words "stay justified" is Shepherd's whole errant process theology of ongoing justification by penitent and obedient faith—man's doing right up to and including the last day of judgment. Believers *stay justified* by *their doing* in Norman Shepherd's devious drama. Remember that he has written, "The point in all of this [the final judgment according to works and a reward according to works] is that Jesus makes justification contingent upon obedience" (61).

So because of Shepherd's little qualification—that staying justified is *contingent* upon man's obedience—the whole paragraph is fouled with the smell of man's

works. "The transition from wrath to grace" depends on man's obedience. The transition "from condemnation and death to justification and life" depends on man's obedience. Being justified, staying justified, and knowing one is justified depend on man's obedience. Shepherd's whole gospel-pot bubbles over with man's obedience, not with God's Spirit.³

Shepherd's contingency is already a major contradiction of what Jesus solemnly stated in John 3, that seeing and entering the kingdom are by the Spirit, not by man's will or obedience (see also 1:13). "Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh" (Gal. 3:3)? Yes, Shepherdians are that foolish! They imagine that "*in some sense*," the clay precedes the potter's hand! (See Romans 9:22–23.)

Another question Shepherd's paragraph raises is this: Is God's justification a judicial verdict that is *final* when a sinner first believes, so that there is no question regarding his *staying justified*?

Shepherd's answer is no. Justification is not a final, forensic act of God's justifying a sinner when he first

2 Norman Shepherd, *The Way of Righteousness: Justification Beginning with James* (La Grange, CA: Kerygma Press, 2009), 79. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this book are given in text. All emphases in quotations from this book are Pastine's.

3 Stuart Pastine, "Debating with the Devil (7)," *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 2 (July 2022): 31–34. Three chapters in Shepherd's book and there is no substantive mention of the Holy Spirit.

believes. Shepherd writes a dismal paragraph characterizing the classic Reformed doctrine of justification as a sinister “secret assize” that nobody knows. He writes,

Because it [the judgment that has taken place at another time and in another place and in total secrecy] is so secret, no one can really know for sure that it has actually ever taken place at all.

The point to be made here is that the Bible knows nothing about a secret assize like the one just described. There is no secret courtroom where the sinner is not present to be judged, where he does not see the judge, and where neither he nor anyone else can hear this momentous ultimate judgment being pronounced. The Bible knows nothing of such a secret judgment. The secret judgment is a theological invention. (90)

By now Shepherd’s readers have been spoon-fed doctored scripture; and they might readily swallow that lie because of Shepherd’s previous false interpretations of James, Matthew, Paul, and Jesus, plus this shady characterization of the classic Reformed doctrine of justification as some horrible, hidden “assize.”

It is plainly deceitful for Shepherd to say, “Because it is so secret, no one can really know for sure that it has actually ever taken place at all.” This statement borders on blasphemy because God has publicly revealed the truth of justification in his word. God has said it, and faithful men have proclaimed it for the last five hundred years! Justification is not hidden or unknown!

As just one example, consider Romans 5:1: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The words “being justified” in the Greek (δικαιωθέντες—*aorist passive*) tell us that because God’s justification verdict is *completed*, we are having peace. One Greek expert translates it this way: We “keep on enjoying peace with God, the peace already made”⁴ (see Rom. 5:9; 1 Cor. 6:11; Belgic Confession 23). Romans 5:1 may be translated as “Our justification being completed, we are having peace with God.”

So we are off and running. But what have we learned so far? We have learned that Shepherd’s sweet little folksy paragraphs and innocent-sounding questions usually contain one small poisonous pill or phrase surreptitiously inserted—for example, “stay justified”—that falsifies his theology by making the whole crafty thing conditional.

As we shall see, there are levels or degrees of complexity in Shepherd’s deceit. This is a level-one deceit because “staying justified” is briefly described and easily spotted.

Level one is a simple, plain-language deceit. There are higher degrees of deceit yet to come, for example, when Shepherd attempts to prove that there is assurance based on his conditional faith. That’s a level three. But we will be ready.

After this sly introduction Shepherd continues speaking of the conversion of sinners. He refers to Old Testament Israel: “God had been wonderfully good to his people, Israel...He not only gave them life, he also taught them how to live” (79). But they rebelled and killed the Lord. Shepherd says,

By his death and resurrection Jesus accomplished what the law was intended to do, but never could. He made *definitive atonement* for sin as the ground of our forgiveness, our justification; and he destroyed the power and corruption of sin, laying the ground for the regeneration and sanctification of his people. (79)

Check your shoelaces because we are still running after Shepherd’s devious words. The law was *never* intended to do what Christ did. The law “entered, that the offence might abound” (Rom. 5:20). The law “could not do” what Christ did (8:3); and “if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law” (Gal. 3:21). God’s people swiftly reject Shepherd’s false statement because that statement also denies the necessity of our Lord’s incarnation (Matt. 26:39; John 10:18). That level-one deceit is also easily discerned and dispatched.

Then there is the next pothole for the reader: Shepherd’s statement that Jesus “made *definitive atonement* for sin as the ground of our forgiveness.” Here we notice that Shepherd chooses the adjective “definitive” to describe Jesus’ atonement rather than the classic Reformed adjective *definite*. There is a major difference of language in these two adjectives, which Shepherd exploits in this level-two deceit and which is the abuse of strategic language differences.

Shepherd has chosen his words very carefully to describe this “laying the ground for” the salvation of God’s people. Don’t be deceived by the ongoing subtlety of his words. Why the choice of “definitive” instead of *definite*? Remember he’s an expert theologian; he knows the difference. The *Illustrated Oxford Dictionary* says that these two words are often confused. Shepherd probably counted on that. *Definitive* contains the idea of decisive but not the sense of “exact and discernible limits” (or numbers), which *definite* does contain.⁵ *Webster’s*

4 A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 2nd ed. (1915), 850.

5 *Illustrated Oxford Dictionary* (1998): 216.

Collegiate Dictionary defines *definitive* as “decisive, that which decides or settles in a final way,” but *definite* is defined as “having exact limits...precise and clear in meaning...referring to a specific or precisely identified person, thing, etc.”⁶

So that’s it. Shepherd wants only the idea of *definiteness* but clearly not the idea of specific numbers or definite individuals for whom Jesus atoned. So we see that Shepherd has chosen his words carefully to create the subtle difference in meaning that he needs: an atonement that actually occurred—so that there is some kind of ground—but not a definite or limited atonement because that speaks of election and predestination. Shepherd needs an indefinite atonement with respect to individuals, not the specific or definite (limited) atonement of scripture and the Reformed creeds (John 10:15, 27; Canons 2). By this crafty choice of words, Shepherd has the definite ground for his indefinite salvation based on the contingent obedience of man rather than on the definite election of God’s eternal counsel and predestination (“I lay down my life for the sheep,” John 10:11, 15, 26–27). We take note of Shepherd’s subtle tiptoeing around the truth of scripture and condemn his level-two deceit.

Shepherd will only speak of Christ’s atonement as the possible “ground for” something but not the *definite accomplishment* of anything for anyone. Implied in Shepherd’s words is that, given the *definitive ground* provided—which is indefinite with reference to individuals—individual certainty can only come from the contingent obedience of man added to that foundation of Jesus’ atonement. It is Shepherd’s same old familiar song with a slightly different tune.

Then there is the next pothole. The words “ground for” are also ambiguous. “Ground for” could mean merely *intended for* without specifying any actual, definite, and permanent connection of anyone to that ground. “Ground for” exactly what? *For* believers to look at? *For* their encouragement in their doing? *For* them to build on themselves by their obedience? The vital element of exactly how that ground—our Lord’s atonement—actually functions is *not* stated.

So we see that right from the start of the last chapter of his book, Shepherd is coming on strong with the complete plan of his false theology: Jesus’ people have a *definitive* ground on which they add their repentant and

obedient doing; thereby they “*stay justified*”—and eventually get themselves *finally justified* at the last judgment.

Remember Shepherd’s last words in his chapter entitled “Justification According to Our Lord”: “The point in all of this is that Jesus makes justification contingent upon obedience” (61). Also, Jesus, Paul, and James all agree: They “all make justification and salvation contingent upon a penitent and obedient faith” (63). Again, “This is justification by works (‘words’ are ‘works’), and it is the teaching of our Lord” (60). A conditional atonement, covenant, and salvation are the message of Shepherd’s bewitching gospel built on deceit. It is no gospel! It is anathema! Those following it are deceived and need to be snatched from the fire (Jude 22–23).

But let us use our imaginations for a moment. Let us drag Shepherd’s ambiguity onto the pulpit. A preacher would proclaim that Jesus by his wonderful, “definitive” atonement has made our salvation *possible*! That would be a valid equivalent of Shepherd’s words. Let’s call it a

Shepherdism! A *Shepherdism* is a seemingly truthful way of sneaking salvation by man’s doing onto the pulpit. The preacher would proclaim in hearty, sincere, ambiguous tones the great blessing of Jesus’ atonement: by his atonement Jesus has made our salvation *possible*!

Think of the preacher’s saying to the bride of Christ, “Your salvation is possible!” “Your marriage to the Lamb of God is possible!” What robbery! What blasphemy! That kind of preaching demotes the church of Christ into a mere gathering of “possibles” *hoping* for salvation but not possessing it. By that Shepherdism God’s people are not being addressed as Christ’s beloved bride who possesses her salvation and her marriage to the Lamb of God. That preacher has robbed the bride of Christ! That is the effect of Shepherdite preachers who use ambiguous language to drag a man-centered gospel onto the pulpit. They rob Christ’s church of her salvation and her Lord! Time to flee these “thieves and robbers” (John 10:8).

Notice carefully how Shepherd ends the paragraph regarding Christ’s “definitive atonement”:

In the words of Paul to Timothy, Jesus destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light (2 Tim. 1:10). Following his resurrection Jesus ascended into heaven to reign as the ultimate king. Now Jesus sends his Holy Spirit to apply the benefits that he wrought for them by his

⁶ Webster’s *Collegiate Dictionary*, 4th ed. (2000): 379.

death and resurrection. Now he is building his church as sinners are transformed into saints and become the righteous who *live by faith*. (80)

Very fine words, until you get to the final qualifying phrase, “*become the righteous who live by faith*.” That phrase changes everything because we know that *faith* for Shepherd is man’s necessary doing of repentance and obedience. By that qualifying phrase at the end of the paragraph, Shepherd *again* subtly makes the requirement of man’s doing qualify everything. Man’s doing qualifies the Spirit’s application of Christ’s benefits, the building of the church, and the transformation of sinners into saints. These blessings are all contingent on man’s doing.

That is why Shepherd can talk all day about salvation by grace through faith—because for him faith is man’s doing, not the Holy Spirit’s creating repentance and obedience in God’s elect because of Christ’s *definite* atonement for his elect. As we continually see, the pattern we may count on is Shepherd’s stated decisiveness always being qualified and contradicted by the contingency (read, *condition*) of man’s necessary obedience. Those wishing to conceal their Shepherdite ancestry might substitute the words *in the way of*.

What follows next is a level-three exercise in devious dialectics, as Shepherd begins to unfold his view of the covenant and introduce the Holy Spirit. Remember the covenant is Shepherd’s major emphasis, and he knows quite well Schilder’s conditional covenant. (The Netherlands was Shepherd’s choice of advanced study.) I will quote the whole paragraph to show this and give us the flavor of his writing. Pay attention to Shepherd’s continual use of the editorial *we* and *us* throughout. That folksy device makes the whole thing universal (the free offer?) and, therefore, hypothetical because *we* and *us* being unspecified amounts to *everyone*. Also notice the profuse appearances now of the Holy Spirit (eighteen times) as Shepherd goes into the *believer’s experience* of justification and salvation. I will explain subsequently, but notice carefully that everything God does is stated in very positive language, but it’s false; it’s actually all hypothetical because it all requires man’s doing to become actual. You will see that at the end of this scripture-“supported” level-three deceit in the phrase I emphasize. Be ready.

What happens when sinners are converted? How is Christ building his church? In the beginning God created human beings for union and communion with himself, for covenant fellowship. Sin separates us from fellowship with God and alienates us from him. We become hostile to God. Therefore the initiative for restoration of that fellowship comes from God himself. That is

his saving grace. Because of our separation from God, God comes to us with his grace from outside of us, in the preaching of his gospel.

The Lord commissions his church to preach the gospel, to proclaim the word of life. That commission is fulfilled in a variety of ways, some of them more formal than others. In any case, the word of the gospel strikes our ears, and the Holy Spirit accompanies that word with power according to the sovereign will and purpose of God. “Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction” (1 Thess. 1:5). The Spirit drives that word home to the heart. This is the teaching or the testimony of the Holy Spirit. “You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth” (1 John 2:20). The Holy Spirit also transforms the heart to receive the word. In Acts 16:14 the Lord opens Lydia’s heart to respond to Paul’s message. This is the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, the new birth. At the same time the Holy Spirit takes up residence in us; he comes to live in us. Paul says in Romans 8:9 that the Holy Spirit lives in us so that we are activated, motivated, and controlled by the Holy Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit in us unites us to Christ because the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. In Romans 8:9 Paul calls the Holy Spirit the Spirit of Christ, the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. Because we have the Spirit of Christ, we have Christ in us. We are united to Christ and belong to him. Thus united to Christ we become the beneficiaries of all that Christ has done for us by his death and resurrection. Specifically, we are justified—our sins are forgiven—and we are sanctified—recreated in the image of God in righteousness and holiness.

Regeneration, justification, adoption, and sanctification represent the promise side of the new covenant, and these promises are received by faith. According to Romans 10:14, 15, faith comes by hearing the word preached or proclaimed. What do we do when we preach the gospel, and what kind of response are we looking for? (80–81)

Here we have a big mouthful to chew on. I will translate:

1. The initiative comes from God; it is his saving grace, but they are *only the promise side of the covenant*. That is, all those positively stated actions of God are just talk because they

require man's obedience (his working faith) to become actual. Hence all God's positively stated activity is contingent on man's doing, and therefore it is hypothetical.

2. *The word strikes our ears in company with the Spirit according to God's sovereign will and purpose*, but that too is just talk, *only the promise side of the covenant*. The promise requires man's obedience to become actual. Hence the promise is hypothetical and contingent.
3. *The Spirit drives home the word*, but that too is talk; it is *only the promise side of the covenant*. It is only a promise dependent on man's obedience—again hypothetical and conditional.
4. *The Spirit transforms the heart to receive the word. This is the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, the new birth*, but it is *only the promise side of the covenant*. Only words.
5. *The Holy Spirit lives in us so that we are activated, motivated, and controlled by the Holy Spirit. Because the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, we have Christ in us*, but it's all talk; it is *only the promise side of the covenant*, only a promise contingent on man's obedience.
6. *We are united to Christ...we become the beneficiaries of all that Christ has done for us by his death and resurrection*. But alas, that too is *only the promise side of the covenant*. Only words conditioned upon man's obedience. It is all hypothetical.

So we actually *have* nothing. It is all Shepherd-talk, another Shepherd-charade. All these definite covenant blessings are paraded in front of the reader; but being all hypothetical, they dance away like Tchaikovsky's sugar plum fairies. All that definiteness vanishes when the all-important qualifier is added at the end: "*These promises are received by faith*," that is, by man's doing. "*This is justification by works ('words' are 'works'), and it is the teaching of our Lord*" (60).

In Shepherd's conditional covenant the actualization of all its blessings takes place only through man's obedient faith, making man's doing the primary and prior ingredient for the effectualizing of promises. Throughout Shepherd's work there is *no priority* of grace; rather, man's doing takes the place of grace. Shepherd does not deny God's grace and Spirit, but Shepherd's actualization of promises by man's faith-action makes God's grace and Spirit secondary factors subjected to man's prior act.

Hence the current formula *man is first in some sense, and God is second* is being used by some to introduce Shepherd's conditional thinking into Reformed churches.

The Preaching of the Word

After pointing to Romans 10:14–15, that faith comes by hearing the word preached, Shepherd goes into the preaching of the word and asks more leading questions: "What do we do when we preach the gospel, and what kind of response are we looking for?" (81). He then mentions several steps for the preacher: expose the sin, condemnation, and death of the sinner "in dependence upon the teaching and transforming power of the Holy Spirit"; "tell guilty sinners what God has done for us in Christ"; "plead with sinners to come to Jesus so that their sins can be forgiven...[and] to come in the only way they can come, in repentance and faith" (81).

"When this preaching is accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit, sinners do respond in repentance and faith. At this point they are converted...*they are justified and saved*" (81).

Join me on Shepherd's linguistic roller-coaster. If I'm not mistaken, in the phrase "they are justified and saved," both verbs indicate finality and completion. The verbs are past tense. But not in Norman Shepherd's world. In his theology it is possible for the person who is "justified and saved" to become unjustified and unsaved and lost forever. Keeping Christ's commandments is required to *continue* being justified. Here it is in his twenty-third thesis:

Because faith which is not obedient faith is dead faith, and because repentance is necessary for the pardon of sin included in justification, and because abiding in Christ by keeping his commandments (John 15:5, 10; 1 John 3:13, 24) are all necessary for *continuing* in the state of justification, good works, works done from true faith, according to the law of God, and for his glory, being the new obedience wrought by the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer united to Christ, though not the ground of his justification, are nevertheless *necessary* for salvation from eternal condemnation and therefore for justification (Rom. 6:16, 22; Gal. 6:7–9).⁷

According to Shepherd's twenty-third thesis regarding *continuing* in Shepherd's state of justification, doing good works are "necessary for salvation...and therefore for justification." Therefore, when Shepherd says "They are justified and saved" (81), he is again using level-two deceitful

⁷ Norman Shepherd, *Thirty-four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance, and Good Works*, <https://pastor.trinity-pres.net/essays/ns13-1978-11-18NSLetterToThePresbyteryOfPhiladelphia34ThesesOnJustification.pdf>. These theses were presented to the Presbytery of Philadelphia of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church on November 18, 1978. Emphasis added.

language. They are not justified and saved. Those spoken of have not yet attained the finality and completeness those verbs signify! From his own words, “justified and saved” are *promises* contingent upon continued repentance and obedience to Jesus’ commands. By using positive language while speaking hypothetically, we have another serving of Shepherd’s deceitful theology of darkness. In the real world a completed condition that is permanently contingent upon something else happening is not a completed condition. But in Shepherd’s world it is: those “justified and saved” are not “justified and saved” until they complete their lifelong obedience to Jesus’ commands.

Shepherd’s linguistically-challenged paragraph continues with another conditional explanation of the church’s evangelism task. The church’s evangelistic preaching gets sinners “*started* walking on the path of righteousness, the Way of Holiness (Isa. 35:8)” (81). And then preachers “encourage God’s people to persevere in this faith” (82). It all ends with Shepherd’s usual subtle and devious qualifier: “Those who *endure* to the end will be saved because there is no condemnation *now or ever* for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1)” (82).

Another ride on Shepherd’s roller-coaster! The sinner is “justified and saved”—but this must be understood conditionally. It is not reality according to the meaning of those words. The Spirit is controlling that person, but he must *persevere* by his works if he is to remain “justified and saved,” even though “there is no condemnation *now or ever* for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Answer this: If there is no condemnation “now or ever,” how can the justified, saved, and Spirit-controlled sinner ever be lost? How? Because all that is only *promise*! The *deciding factor* is man’s doing, man’s works, not God’s eternal counsel, not God’s sovereign grace, and not Christ’s definite atonement. Shepherd is fully aware of the difference, but he holds tenaciously to his contingency and conditionality—his allegiance to darkness.

Using Romans 8:1 to secure a conditional justification and salvation shows us the depths of deceit in Norman Shepherd’s theology. He openly recites the words but insidiously falsifies their meanings, demonstrating that this theology deceitfully, recklessly, continuously, and blasphemously casts God’s word to the ground, just as Satan has done from the garden until now!

After explaining how the church evangelizes, Shepherd makes this statement: “Both perseverance and assurance are intimately tied in with the biblical doctrine of justification, and for that reason we need to reflect more fully on both of these graces in relation to justification” (82). This statement is also devious because Shepherd calls perseverance and assurance “graces,” but in saying this he abuses the term. *Grace* is God’s unmerited favor freely given unto someone by the effective working of God’s Spirit; but in Shepherd’s theology *grace* is merely offered to someone, who then has to secure it by his working faith (read, *works*). Don’t miss that curveball.⁸

Shepherd’s discussion of perseverance begins with his definition of *justification*: “We enter into a right relationship with God...because of what Jesus has done for us” (82). But then, of course, the qualifiers start to roll out, such as “We cannot turn to Christ in faith without turning

away from sin in repentance. Further, justifying faith is not a momentary act. It is not the act of a single moment...*justifying faith is an ongoing reality*” (82).

Before I list Shepherd’s qualifiers, realize that his justification is not only an “ongoing reality,” but justification is also a revolving door; it goes around, letting people in and out until judgment day. Therefore, justifying faith is both repentance

and obedience, that is, justification by works; justifying faith is not a momentary act, therefore not completed, so the person is not justified; justifying faith is an ongoing reality; therefore, justification is an uncertainty made certain only by the sum of man’s lifelong works. This is Roman Catholicism!

But then it’s time for Shepherd to add some clever covering words: “We cannot say that we enter into a justified state by faith and then we remain in that state by works” (82). Of course not; who would admit that we stay justified by our works? No, the point of these covering words is for Shepherd to introduce his *magnum opus*: “We enter into a justified state by means of a living faith and we remain in a justified state by means of a living faith” (82). I would imagine that all of Shepherd’s faithful followers salute him for this brilliant piece of falsehood.

Let us consider these pieces of contradiction. I translate: we enter into justification by turning to Christ in faith, but that faith is also repentance, which is then called *justifying faith* and which is not a momentary thing

The current formula *man is first in some sense, and God is second* is being used by some to introduce Shepherd’s conditional thinking into Reformed churches.

⁸ There are so many that if all were noted, this article would be too long to publish!

but an ongoing reality that keeps the believer in a state of justification; this is not by works, but it is by works. (Shepherd said so. He even said that Jesus said so: “This is justification by works (‘words’ are ‘works’), and it is the teaching of our Lord” [60].) So let me quote Shepherd’s last sentence, adding his own words:

This is to say that the sinner whose sin is forgiven and who has been transformed into the likeness of Christ—all by faith [which is by works]—perseveres in that faith [which is works] and so remains in a right relationship with God [which is not by works but actually is by works]. (82)

That double-talk is followed with more of the same. “Perseverance in faith is represented to us in Scripture as a gift from God” (82). This is followed by a reference to John 10:27–29: Jesus gives his sheep eternal life, and they shall never perish. Then this: “Paul gives this *promise* in 1 Corinthians 1:8, 9, ‘(God) will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ’” (83). So 1 Corinthians 1:8–9 is just a *promise*. Follow that. “On the basis of this *promise* Paul offers this prayer in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 25” (83). More follows: “In Philippians 1:6 Paul expresses his confidence ‘that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus’” (83). Shepherd adds to that 1 Peter 1:3–5 and then summarizes:

In all of these *promises* the end point in view is the Day of Judgment and the consummation of all things...Of course, this *promise* of perseverance, like all of God’s *promises*, must be received by faith, and *saving faith is always a living and active faith*. (83)

Here is a level-three deception in full bloom: multiple true-then-false catch-me-if-you-can statements threaded with scripture falsified by Shepherdian language games, swaddled in a positive-sounding verbal package and sweetly seasoned by Shepherd’s ever-faithful terminus: “Saving faith is always a living and active faith” (read, *man’s doing*).

I translate: Perseverance is a gift, but it is conditioned upon man’s works to possess it. Jesus’ assurance that his sheep will never perish is just a promise conditioned on man’s works. God’s infallible word “He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” is just Paul’s confidence! Top that fakery off now with Shepherd’s pernicious garble: “In all of these *promises* the end point in view is the Day of Judgment.” Hence man has much to do for his salvation. Then all of this is accompanied by Shepherd’s final, fatal fiction: “Of course, this *promise* of perseverance, like all

of God’s *promises*, must be received by faith, and *saving faith is always a living and active faith*.” Right to the end, there is no priority of grace in Shepherd’s scheme, just two tracks—God’s promises and man’s obedience (read, *works*). Those wishing to conceal this denial of the faith will call it “God’s grace and man’s responsibility.”

I summarize: God’s gifts and Jesus’ assurance to his elect are all conditioned on man’s obedience. God’s infallible word is just a man’s confidence. Each must earn the “gracious” promises by doing works until judgment day. And finally, remember: all of God’s promises must be earned by man’s *doing* his faith (read, *works*). So goes a level-three deception!

Naturally, Shepherd then links perseverance to man’s doing: “Therefore coupled with the promise of perseverance as a gift is the exhortation to persevere in faith and obedience to the Lord” (83). Shepherd says, “The New Testament is filled with this kind of exhortation and encouragement,” pointing to Christ’s warnings to the seven churches in the book of Revelation, and specifically to the church in Smyrna: “‘Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life’ (Rev. 2:10)” (83). Quite deceptive to cherry-pick a few dramatic verses that exhort God’s people to faithfulness. But Shepherd never comes near the exhortation of Philippians 2:12–13: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is *God which worketh in you* both to will and to do of his good pleasure.”

Latching on to the exhortations of Hebrews, Shepherd fuses works and justification again by using the writer’s exhortation in Hebrews 10:22–36, saying, “The verse that is of special interest because of its direct connection to justification is Hebrews 10:36” (84). Shepherd says the writer

urges them [believers] to hold unswervingly “to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (v. 23). He urges them to spur one another on “toward love and good deeds,” and to encourage one another as they see the Day approaching (vs. 24, 25). Then comes a solemn warning about the day to come when the Lord will judge his people. Now we are clearly in the sphere of justification. (84)

When Shepherd goes into detail about scripture, it is a big mistake. The exhortation of Hebrews 10:25 is based upon Jesus’ finished, high priestly sacrifice of atonement spelled out in verses 1–18, ending with the assurance to these believers that they have a high priest who made atonement for their sins, and those sins are eternally *forgiven* (v. 18). Therefore, *they have* boldness to enter the holy of holies (God’s presence) because of Jesus’ shed blood. “Let us draw near with a *true heart* in

full assurance of faith...Let us hold fast the profession of our faith...Let us consider one another to provoke unto love...and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (vv. 22–25).

These are all exhortations to justified believers grounded in a definite atonement that is past and completed because the hearts of these Hebrew believers had already been “sprinkled” *clean* (perfect passive tense is completed action) by the blood of Jesus, and their bodies *had been* “washed [perfect passive tense, again completed action] with pure water” by Spirit-baptism (Heb. 10:22). They draw near with a “true heart” (that is, a new heart, Jer. 31:33), the evidence of membership in the new covenant (Heb. 10:16). Therefore, the exhortation of verse 25 is to justified believers, who are to continue in their good works (“so much the more”) as judgment day nears, which day will “devour the adversaries” and all who “sin wilfully” after hearing the gospel, *but not the believers*: “But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul” (v. 39).

Take note: the justification of these believers has already been completed, and there is not one word about future justification at the last day. Shepherd’s stratagem “Now we are clearly in the sphere of justification” is one of his continual and costliest mistakes!⁹

In addition, I notice that the Holy Spirit has disappeared again. That’s right: Shepherd writes the whole section about “Perseverance in Faith,” and there’s not a word about God’s Spirit providing even the smallest assistance. No, it’s all done by man’s living faith (works). “We enter into a justified state by means of a living faith and we remain in a justified state by means of a living faith” (82). The section on perseverance ends with this tragedy of errors and twisting of scripture:

The message of Hebrews is that we who have believed in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and who persevere in that faith in spite of the obstacles and opposition we meet along the way, *will be justified and saved in the Day of Judgment*. Therefore we should not grow weary, but “hang in there.” (85)

By now you know all the tricks and devices Shepherd uses to convince his readers of his gospel. Despite his handicraft, Hebrews 10 ends clearly with the distinction made by the sharp sword of election theology: “But we are not of them who draw back [the reprobate] unto perdition; but of them [the elect] that believe to the saving of the soul” (v. 39).

When Are We Justified?

Following that fabrication, Shepherd launches into a discussion of “When are we justified?” (86). He begins by saying, “Theologians have offered a variety of answers to this question” (86). He then summarizes: some say justification occurs in God’s eternal decree, some when Jesus died and rose again, and others when one is baptized or at the moment of initial faith. At the end is Shepherd’s review: “And then there are those who say that we are justified really only in the final judgment” (86). After that review he gives his theory:

There is a measure of truth in all of these views, but the key to understanding the biblical doctrine lies in the last view mentioned. We will be justified on the day when we appear before the judgment seat of Christ, and when each one will receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad (2 Cor. 5:10). (86)

By using 2 Corinthians 5:10, Shepherd deliberately leaves the impression that a person is justified by what he does—by his works. This charade Shepherd carries on by referring to additional verses that appear to support him: John 5:29, that those who have done good will rise to life; Matthew 12:37, that by your words you will be acquitted; etc. Because all of this has already been disproved, especially Shepherd’s mistaken understanding of 2 Corinthians 5:10,¹⁰ I happily assign it to the wastebasket.

Shepherd then says, “The question of assurance is this, what is going to happen to me on that day, and can I know for sure what will happen to me?” (87).

He says that the Roman Catholic Church said no to the latter question. The Puritans said that one could know only by special experience. Calvin and the Reformation said yes. Shepherd, then, almost with alarm, says, “Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism *actually go so far* as to define justifying faith as ‘a deep-rooted assurance,... that...I too, have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation’ (Heid. Cat. Q. & A. 21)” (87–88).

Heads up now. One of Shepherd’s fastballs is coming. Following that quote of Lord’s Day 21, Shepherd gives an explanation of the Reformed position of justification but then immediately and slyly contradicts it all by saying,

All these things are true: I was justified when Jesus died for me; I was justified when I was converted; I am now in a justified state; and I *will be justified* in the Day of Judgment. But it is *precisely because* of what will happen in the Day of Judgment that

9 Stuart Pastine, “Debating with the Devil (4),” *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 12 (January 2022): 22–27.

10 Pastine, “Debating with the Devil (4),” 27.

I can speak of a justification now, by faith. *Justification as a present benefit in the application of redemption has meaning only because of what will happen in the Day of Judgment.* (88)

This is Shepherd's grand finale, so I will quote some more:

It is essential to note that this assurance is not simply information about the future and what is going to happen in the future. As believers we do not live by sight; we live by faith. It is the assurance that is given with faith in Jesus and faith in the promises that he has made to us. No one is privy to secret information about the future. *No one can peer into the mind of God, or into his eternal decree.* Assurance is the assurance that is given with faith in Jesus Christ. *It is not assurance that I have independently of my response to the gospel with a true and living faith.* Therefore this assurance does not stay at the same level all the time. Faith can waver; it can be stronger or weaker...*my assurance will rise as I walk closer to the Lord...* We must cultivate assurance of grace and salvation in the same way that we cultivate faith. (88–89)

Note well: we have here all the mendacity Shepherd relies on to con his readers. Denying God's decree of election (Eph. 1:4–6), Shepherd says, "Assurance is not simply information about the future and what is going to happen in the future" (88). Denying God's forensic justification of the believer (Rom. 3:28), Shepherd says, "the Bible knows nothing about a secret assize like the one just described" (89). Denying the believer's trusting what God has written in his word, Shepherd says that is to "live by sight" (88). Denying God's revelation of his sovereign will (Rom. 8:28–30), Shepherd says, "No one is privy to secret information about the future" (88). Denying that we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16; Phil. 2:5), Shepherd says, "No one can peer into the mind of God, or into his eternal decree" (88). Denying that the Holy Spirit creates faith in us, which is both knowledge and trust (John 6:44; 2 Cor. 4:6; Gal. 3:5; 1 Pet. 2:9; Belgic Confession 22), Shepherd says that assurance "is not an assurance that I have independently of *my response* to the gospel" (88–89). And finally Shepherd gives his parting advice: "My assurance will rise as I walk closer to the Lord" (89).

Building all of his conditional castle by falsifying James 2:14–26, Matthew 25:31–46, Romans 3:24–28, 2 Corinthians 5:10, and many more verses, Shepherd ends his sad theology with one final falsehood.

The gospel is not nearly as complicated as we might think from looking at the many heavy tomes of scholastic theology written on the subject. We are justified and saved according to the eternal plan and purpose of God. We are justified in the death and resurrection of Christ 2,000 years ago. We are now *justified by a living, active, penitent and obedient faith* in Jesus. And *we are sure to be justified* when the ascended Christ returns to this earth to judge the living and the dead. That is the good news of the gospel. (92–93)

How sad for those reading Shepherd's theological tome, thinking these stones are the gospel. Even sadder are Shepherd's compadres, who forsake God's effective grace for man's doing and forsake the faithful preaching of the word to promote the regenerated human's activity. Many are the casualties of the great deception spoken of in 2 Thessalonians.

Postlude: God is Always First

Now it is my turn to ask the questions. In the present controversy between the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Reformed Protestant Churches, several passages of scripture have been put forward as supposed proof that man is first in some sense. I believe these faux remarks do nothing but insult the gospel.

Consider Matthew 9:2, Mark 2:5, and Luke 5:20. Jesus said to the paralytic, "Your sins *have been forgiven*." The verb is ἀφέωνται in all three texts, which is the perfect, passive indicative, indicating completed action in the past with present effect.¹¹ Luke 7:48 is the same (εἶπεν δὲ αὐτῇ, Ἀφέωνται σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι). Jesus said to the woman who washed his feet, "Your sins *have been forgiven*." We must carefully understand his words.

First, "Jesus, *seeing* their faith..." (Matt. 9:2). Here is faith that could be *seen*. It was faith that could be seen by its works: the paralytic came to Jesus believing Jesus could heal him, and the woman's faith was seen by her loving devotion. This was true faith validated by works. Jesus called it "*seeing-faith*."

Second, to those having this "seeing-faith" Jesus said, "Your sins *have been forgiven*." That is, forgiven previously, before the people came to Jesus.

Third, the point of these texts is the gospel, not what is first and not healing. Jesus was preaching the gospel, preaching forgiveness of sins through faith in him. The paralytic and the woman believed in Jesus, were forgiven, and then came to him. Jesus saw their faith and authoritatively confirmed it by saying, "Your sins have been forgiven." What he said vindicated that previous justifying

¹¹ Bastiaan Van Elderen, *New Testament Greek Study Aids* (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Theological Seminary), 8.

faith and its forgiveness. *According to these texts, forgiveness is before the faith evidenced.* This is the very thing Paul would write in Romans 3:28 and James would also confirm: “Ye see then how that by works a man is [vindicated], and not by faith only” (James 2:24).

You see, one can explain this truth of salvation. But those turning these gospel texts into misleading remarks, such as *believing precedes remission*, when actually in these texts remission precedes faith, are only serving the present overthrow of the gospel by the inaccurate and impious abuse of Matthew 9:2, Mark 2:5, Luke 5:20, and Luke 7:48.

Suppose that the psalmist would decide to take the wings of the morning and go to the uttermost parts of the sea. Would you say that in some sense the psalmist is first and God is second? Not according to Psalm 139:10 because the psalmist plainly said, “Even there shall thy hand *lead me*, and thy right hand shall *hold me*.” What about the *leper* of Matthew 8:1–4? What about the *centurion* of Matthew 8:5–13? And the *woman with the issue of blood* in Matthew 9:20–22? And the *Syrophoenician woman* of Matthew 15:21–28?

Did all of them decide first to come to Jesus, and Jesus acted second in healing them? If you think that, you contradict John 6:44: “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him.” Notice very carefully that our Lord connected that truth about the *Father’s drawing* with the *Father’s sending Jesus*. That means that with any man’s *coming to Christ*, we are *in the sphere of God’s eternal counsel of election*. If God’s election is drawing the person to Christ, how is a regenerated human in some sense first?

This is why we fight you who say man is in some sense first. You deny that union with Christ means that Christ lives in a regenerated person, so that the regenerated human is now permanently walking after the Spirit (Rom. 8:1). Answer this: in all that regenerated human’s Spirit-filled activity, how is he first and God second? What is the Spirit doing at that time when the regenerated believer is *drawing nigh to God* (James 4:8)? Sitting on a chair? Can you not read Romans 7:15, 19? Paul says that the good he would do, he doesn’t do! He doesn’t *draw nigh*. He says, “What I hate I do! Who will save me from this body of death that can’t do the good? *That can’t draw nigh*? I thank God through Jesus Christ” (see vv. 24–25). Can you not see that Christ in Paul does the good that Paul cannot do? Christ, who lives in Paul by his Spirit—Christ does it! Paul said that! But you say that man does it; man is first. You blaspheme! Paul says, “Christ in me *draws nigh*!”

Furthermore, you insinuate that Paul is a radical. How so? Because if someone says something like “God built the ark, Noah didn’t,” you suggest that he is a radical, a hyper-Calvinist! But Paul said exactly the same thing: “I laboured more abundantly than they all: *yet not I*, but the grace of God which was with me” (1 Cor. 15:10). There it is! Paul said, “*I didn’t preach in Corinth, God did! I didn’t preach in Ephesus, God did!*” Does that make Paul a radical? Is he a hyper-Calvinist?

When you say that the *regenerated human* is first in some sense, you deny that the believer walks by the Spirit and that only by that walking in the Spirit does he repent and obey. Either man has the Spirit and walks by the Spirit, repenting and obeying; or else that man does not have the Spirit and does not belong to Christ (Rom. 8:9). Either you are a regenerated human being led by the Spirit, repenting and obeying; or you are a heathen dead in sin (v. 14). If your man who is in some sense first is first without the Spirit, your man is dead and lost and cannot obey God (v. 7). And if your man is first, having the Spirit, that man is not first; God is first, leading that man to obey by the Spirit (v. 5).

Any originating or doing of anything good by man apart from the Spirit’s leading and empowering is Pelagianism (Rom. 7:14, 18)! And once again the Pelagians went too far. They were supposed

to just get man’s toe in the room; but as in 1618–19 at the Synod of Dordt, they got man’s nose caught in the door. They insinuated that anyone who said “Noah didn’t build the ark, God did” had to be discredited as a radical because that truth would foil their game. But they foolishly exposed themselves by that ploy because it implied that Paul was a radical too for saying the same thing. Paul was a hyper-Calvinist for saying, “I didn’t preach in Corinth, God did.” This whole thing would be laughable, that Shepherd’s minions got their noses caught in the door, if it were not so sad and so serious for so many.

But God is not even second to him who is lost. God is controlling that lump of clay, enduring it with much long-suffering, while *fitting* that man for destruction (Rom. 9:22).

Tell me, were Jacob’s brothers first and God second when they plotted against their brother? Not according to Genesis 50:20. Was Sihon of Heshbon first and God second when God hardened Sihon’s heart against Israel, and he would not let the Israelites pass through his land? Not according to Deuteronomy 2:30. Was Rehoboam first and God second when Rehoboam decided to listen to the counsel of the young men and not lighten the

Man in no sense is ever first and God second. God is first with regenerated man. God is first with unregenerated man.

people's burden? Not according to 1 Kings 12:15. Was Cyrus first when he decided to build a house for the Lord in Jerusalem? Not according to 2 Chronicles 36:22–23 and Isaiah 45:5–6, 13. Was Darius first when he decided to strengthen the hands of the Jews in Jerusalem? Not according to Ezra 6:22. Was the king of Assyria first when he decided “to destroy and cut off nations not a few”? Not according to Isaiah 10:5–7. And was Judas Iscariot first and God second when Judas decided to betray Jesus? Not according to John 13:18–19 and John 17:12.

Man in *no sense* is ever first and God second. God is first with regenerated man. God is first with unregenerated man. God is first even with the birds! Jesus said that a bird cannot fall to the ground apart from the will of God (Matt. 10:29). Can you not see what fools you make of yourselves in following Shepherd? Do you really think that the clay could say to the potter, “I’m first”? You are not Calvinists, you are Laodiceans: blind and naked; but you can’t see it because God’s judgment is upon you. By casting off your first love, the truth is hidden from your eyes, and you serve an idol.

This is my final effort: a careful look at the Philippian jailor of Acts 16:22–34. I hope some will finally see that this whole *man-is-first* epidemic is just smoke and mirrors to conceal the introduction of conditions into the covenant. These are the facts:

1. God’s providence put Paul and Silas in that specific jailor’s prison.
2. God caused the prisoners to hear the gospel in song and prayer in such a way that they did not run away when the strange earthquake set them free.
3. God’s earthquake could have crashed the whole building. Or an angel could have opened the doors quietly, as in Peter’s prison escapes (Acts 5:19; 12:7–11).
4. God could have loosed only Paul and Silas and set them free, as he had done with Peter. God didn’t because he had his elect jailor and the jailor’s family that he would save.
5. Rather than crashing the whole building, the earthquake specifically opened the doors.
6. The jailor awoke, saw all the doors open, and attempted to kill himself. Why did Paul stop him? Calvin says that God directed Paul’s mind to perceive that the earthquake was for others, and therefore Paul did not run away.¹²
7. The Holy Spirit restrained the jailor by Paul’s command not to harm himself and also caused

the jailor to realize that none of the prisoners had run away. All of this was God’s sovereign intervention for his eternal purpose: the jailor was one of God’s elect being drawn to Christ.

8. Trembling, the jailor fell at Paul’s feet. Calvin says that the miracle brought the jailor down from his pride and made him submit to God. Calvin says that the jailor was seriously touched by the word, that it was genuine fear of God, reminding us that God’s power makes the wicked worse, but it makes the elect submissive, desirous of the word, and ready to obey.¹³
9. Hence the jailor’s question came from a heart opened by God, and the jailor said what God’s Spirit led him to say (1 Cor. 2:14; 12:3).

Now, if you can’t see, because the jailor was one of God’s elect (remember he was later baptized with his whole house), that in all his experience God was drawing the jailor to Christ, you are no Calvinist. The jailor’s heart was being opened and faith was being formed in him by the Holy Spirit, just as with Lydia in Acts 16:14. God’s sovereign will, providence, intervention, and particular saving grace were first. The jailor’s question was second. “What must I do to be saved?” was spoken by the Holy Spirit’s influence. Calvin reminds us that no reprobate would humbly ask such a thing.

“What must I do to be saved?” was the jailor’s childlike recognition of his need of Christ, God’s Spirit producing in him regeneration, the hearing of faith, and specifically those words of humble submission. “Nothing happens in this world without His appointment” (Belgic Confession 13, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 35–36; see also Heidelberg Catechism LD 10; Canons of Dort 3-4.10–11, 14). If you deny that, you don’t belong in a Reformed church. If you are an elder in a Reformed church and you deny that, you have violated your oath of subscription to the three forms of unity given before God and his people.

I conclude: God’s word has exposed Norman Shepherd’s “vain imaginations” and “dashed them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” Only the willfully blind will follow him now and debate with the devil. May they see their folly. We part with you because we want nothing of your gospel, which is the gospel of thieves and robbers. Jesus told us to flee from you (John 10:5). For us Christ is the end of the law, the *end of doing* for righteousness for everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4). We need nothing more, nor do we desire anything more, than Christ our righteousness. “In Christ’s coach they sweetly sing, as they to glory ride therein.”

—Rev. Stuart Pastine

12 John Calvin, *Commentary upon The Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 2:119ff.

13 Calvin, *Commentary upon The Acts of the Apostles*, 2:121.



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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL

*And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution?
then is the offence of the cross ceased.* — Galatians 5:11

Lord, how are they increased who trouble us! Persecution is our lot. The mighty array themselves against us. They call us schismatics, rebels, cowards, hirelings. They cut us out of their fellowship. They damn us before the world. They strip from us all honor and number us among the transgressors. They hang us up to be ridiculed and mocked.

Yes, Lord, because they did that to thee. The offense of the cross! To the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness. For the cross made all the works of the Jews—all their ceremonies, laws, forms, and way of life—useless for salvation. The cross took away their privileged position in the world. And the cross exposed that with all their laws all that they ever did was break them and bring on themselves condemnation and cause the name of God to be blasphemed in the world. And the cross made all the wisdom of the Greek folly and all the might of the Roman impotence. And man hates—we know this, Lord, ourselves—man hates to be made nothing. Man will not be made nothing. And man hates that God and Jesus Christ are everything. Oh, yes, perhaps more than he hates being made nothing, man hates that God is made everything. And in the cross man is made nothing with all his wisdom, works, words, and will—nothing but a damnable sinner. And in the cross God is made everything—all-wise and wonderful in all his works and ways. And the cross offends man, whether Jew or Gentile.

To embrace the cross, to love the cross, to believe the cross, to confess the cross, and to preach the cross; the Lord, whose cross it was, must lay hold on us. Lord, we love thy cross! We glory in it. And we are determined to teach nothing besides it and to know nothing save that cross. For in that cross is all our hope and salvation, the cross on which the Prince of glory died.

And, Lord, grant us thy grace that we may joyfully take up our cross—thy cross—and rejoice in the persecution that is ours, for so they persecuted thee before us and persecuted all thy prophets and apostles, who also were despised and rejected of men. Grant that we may forsake all to be associated with thee. Grant that we may renounce all rather than renounce thee. Grant that we may preach Christ's cross and that we may confess Christ's cross as it debases man absolutely and as it glorifies thee absolutely.

And for this we pray because the way to escape the persecution and the temptation to escape it we also know. And we know our nature; yes, that this other way is pleasing to our flesh. That we preach circumcision! To preach the deeds of man. To teach the will, words, and activities of man that are first, prerequisite, and decisive in his salvation. We see the accolades that are heaped on those who preach circumcision. And we see the comfortable and pleasant lives that they enjoy and the acceptance that they have in the world. Grant that we may reject that way and that we may continue on in this way: to preach Christ and him crucified.

Yes, brethren, if we preach circumcision too, there will be neither offense given nor persecution suffered. And there will not be salvation either. For there is no salvation in that doctrine of circumcision. Salvation, the only way of salvation, is in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!

—NJL