

The background features a stylized illustration in shades of orange and white. It depicts a hand holding a sword and a shield. The sword is positioned diagonally across the upper half of the image, pointing towards the top left. The shield is circular and occupies the lower left and center, featuring a decorative pattern of concentric circles and smaller circles. The hand is shown in profile, gripping the hilt of the sword.

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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Editor-in-chief

Rev. Andrew W. Lanning

Contributing editors

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak

Rev. Martin VanderWal

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Email: office@reformedbelieverspub.org

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And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. — Galatians 4:6

Redeemed by the precious blood of the Son of God!
You are sons, sons of the living God!
As sons, you are heirs of eternal life through Jesus Christ!

Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son, crying, “Abba, Father.”

Blessed assurance!

Oh, what blessed inheritance is yours. What a glorious position you have been given. It is higher than all the kings of the earth. All things are yours. You are Christ’s. Christ is God’s.

Without works at all!

All of grace!

To assure you of that inheritance, God sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, “Abba, Father.”

There are two sendings in the text and the context.

First, there is the sending of God’s Son when the fullness of time was come. The coming of Jesus Christ was the event that filled time as water fills an empty cup. The reason that God created time had happened: all of God’s promises were fulfilled; all of the purpose of God for the perfection of his covenant had been accomplished in principle. On the cross Christ said the same thing: “It is finished.” *It is finished* and *the fullness of time* have similar meanings. These words teach that the incarnation and the cross of Jesus Christ accomplished full and complete salvation. We are saved in the coming of Jesus Christ, and there is no work that can be added to his for our salvation.

Second, there is the sending of the Spirit. The sending of the Spirit is the fruit of the work of Jesus Christ when he came. Jesus Christ accomplished all of salvation. Salvation is perfect in him. You are saved in him. All the promises of God are yes and amen in Christ Jesus.

In order that God’s elect know, enjoy, and be assured of that salvation, God sends forth the Spirit of the Son. The believer’s possession of his salvation, his enjoyment of his salvation, and his experience of his salvation is no less the perfect work of God than the decree of God and the work of God on the cross. So there is a work of God for our salvation that consists of giving to us the possession and enjoyment of salvation. This is the special work of the Spirit.

God decreed our salvation. That is God’s work alone and not our work. He appointed us to redemption, regeneration, faith, justification, and glorification. That

has nothing to do with our works, deeds, or activities. Whose work was first before God’s decree?

Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, was sent forth in the fullness of time, made under the law, to redeem us who were under the law that we might receive the adoption of sons. This is God’s work alone. This has nothing to do with our deeds, activities, or works. Whose activity was first before the work of Christ? His own right hand and strong arm saved us.

And the Spirit has been sent into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father.” The salvation appointed to us and accomplished for us is given to us. That is God’s work alone; and that does not depend upon, wait on, or come from our works at all. It is as nonsensical and wicked to say that there are activities of man that precede the election of God and that there are activities of man that precede the cross of Christ as it is to say that there are activities of man that precede the blessings of God in time or that man must draw near to God before God draws near to him. The experience and enjoyment of salvation and our whole lives lived in that salvation with all their deeds and activities is the work of God the Holy Spirit.

The whole gift and experience of our salvation can be summarized in a single name: the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit incorporates us into Christ; and the Holy Spirit gives to us the possession of our salvation, the joy of our salvation, and the assurance of our salvation.

Our salvation is that we are sons of God. To be sons of God is to be heirs of all grace and all blessing and all things.

To know that we are sons of God and heirs of God through Christ is our blessed assurance.

To assure us of this fact, God sends the Spirit of his Son, crying, “Abba, Father.”

By faith alone!

Without any works!

The Spirit of God’s Son is the Spirit of Jesus Christ incarnated, crucified, risen, and ascended to heaven. God gave to Jesus Christ the promise of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit of God’s Son is God. The Spirit is God in the same sense that the man Jesus Christ is also God. Jesus Christ is the eternally begotten Word. He became man. The Spirit of Jesus Christ is God, who became the Spirit of God’s Son. He is God. The Spirit proceeds from God. The sending forth of the Spirit of Christ in time is a revelation of the eternal characteristic of the Spirit: he

is sent forth. He is the Spirit who proceeds. In God there are three persons. The first person we call Father. The second person we call Son. The third person we call the Holy Spirit. Each person has his unique property and activity in the being of God. The Father begets and breathes the Spirit to his Son. So the Son is begotten and breathes the Spirit to his Father. The Spirit is breathed.

He originates in the Father, and he is breathed to the Son, and he is breathed back to the Father. The Spirit is the eternal consecration of the Father to the Son and the Son to the Father and proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Spirit is God's binding God in eternal affection to God. The Father is in his Son in the Spirit, and the Son is in his Father in the Spirit. God's being is one loving family in which there is delightful fellowship and eternal friendship between the three persons. He is the eternal covenant God. Father with his Son in the Spirit and Son with his Father in the Spirit. They exchange a holy kiss with one another. They embrace and seek one other. That kiss, embrace, and seeking of each other is the Spirit. The Father breathes out love to his Son, and that is the Spirit; and the Son breathes forth love to his Father, and that is the Spirit. The Spirit is the breath of God on which is carried all the love of God.

Thus, as God-breathed, the Spirit is also very God. The Spirit is of the same essence with the Father and the Son. The Spirit made the worlds. He was the one who brooded upon the face of the deep in the beginning, and by him were made all the hosts of heaven and all the creatures of the earth. The Spirit is God. He is omnipotent as God. He is sovereign as God. He is gracious, merciful, righteous, and holy as God. The Spirit is all that God is, for he is God.

The Spirit is personally God. He is not a mere extension, power, or force of God. He is personally God. He too says "I." He has his mind and will. He plans, decrees, and carries out his will and good pleasure.

And God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son! What the Spirit is in God he becomes in us! This Spirit who is God is the Spirit of God's Son. God's Son is Jesus Christ. God's Son is the one who in the fullness of time God sent forth, made of a woman and made under the law, the man Christ Jesus. God the Holy Spirit is given to Jesus Christ to be his Spirit.

He is called the Spirit of God's Son in the possessive sense. Jesus Christ possesses the Spirit. Jesus Christ possesses the Spirit because of Christ's perfect obedience to God as a Son. He obeyed God perfectly. He loved God perfectly. He loved God from the depths of hell. He loved God's will, God's law, and God's purpose for the salvation of his elect people. God was Christ's all in all. Christ ate and lived on the will of God, and the zeal of God's house ate him up. In perfect love for God, Christ laid down

his life at the tribunal of God's justice and made perfect satisfaction for sin. That work of Jesus Christ earned and merited the eternal Spirit.

Only one who is very God can by his obedience earn such a precious gift as the Spirit. And only one who is very God can receive the Spirit. He does not receive a measure of the Spirit but the whole Spirit. Just as the Spirit is eternally breathed forth of the Son in the being of God, so the Spirit is sent forth of the Son in human flesh in time as the Spirit of God's Son. The Spirit becomes Christ's. So much is the Spirit Christ's Spirit that there is an identification of Jesus Christ and the Spirit. The Lord is that Spirit!

God sends the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. Our hearts are our spiritual, ethical, and moral centers or cores. The scripture calls our ethical, moral centers our hearts because those spiritual hearts are analogous to our physical hearts. As our physical hearts are the life-centers of our physical and mental lives, so that the health of our hearts determines our physical and mental states, so also our spiritual lives are seated in and flow out of our hearts.

Out of the heart are the issues of life. As a man's heart is, so is that man's life in a spiritual and ethical sense.

The natural man's heart is totally depraved and wicked. In his heart he stands in a relationship of hostility and hatred toward God. Thus the natural man's whole life is contrary to God. Out of such a wicked heart, the life cannot be good, and nothing in that heart or life is pleasing to God. The natural man loves sin, and he hates God. In the heart of the natural man lives a spirit that rebelled against God, that opposes God with all his might, and that hates God. Oh yes, the natural man has a spirit. He is always ruled by spirits. He has a blaspheming spirit that curses God.

And God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts! While we are enemies of God in our minds and while in our hearts we hate God, God sends forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. And a complete change occurs! As far as our flesh is concerned, it is wicked and evil. In our hearts we are changed. We do not any longer sin with our hearts, even though in our minds and with our wills we commit sin. The Spirit in our hearts keeps us from sin in our hearts.

With the coming of the Spirit, our hearts are made completely new. He takes out our old, stony hearts, and he gives to us hearts of flesh; and on these hearts of flesh, he writes the law of God. He creates in us clean hearts.

Greater and more glorious than his work of creating all things out of nothing, the Spirit recreates us as spiritual sons of God.

Is not that complete change expressed by the fact that the Spirit comes crying, "Abba, Father," so that out

of those human hearts into which the Spirit comes this lovely cry is heard? Can you imagine a human being crying, “Abba, Father”? Out of the dead and depraved hearts of men comes the cry, “God, we hate you!” But when the Spirit comes, out of those human hearts a new cry is heard: “Abba, Father.”

And this indicates that the Spirit has made those hearts completely new: new judgments, new sensibilities, new thoughts, and new desires. Before, we judged the things of the Spirit to be foolishness; and now we judge them to be the highest good and the sweetest gifts. Before, we judged ourselves as good; and now we judge ourselves as ungodly. Before, we judged God to be evil and man to be good; and now we judge man to be evil and God to be good. The Spirit gives a new sensibility to sin, to the word of God, and to heavenly and spiritual things. The Spirit gives new thoughts of God and of Christ and of heaven and of spiritual things. The Spirit creates in us a desire for eternal life and delight in the gospel. In our deepest beings he makes us new creatures.

The life of the elect child of God is the product of the Spirit. Holiness is not the result of an external code but of the influence of the Spirit. The law could be written on stone tables, on doorposts and lintels, and on the sides of the houses; but the law could never be written on men’s hearts except by the Spirit. The Spirit makes us delight in the law of God after the inward man.

This doctrine of the sending of the Spirit is, first, an answer to the carping critic who places all the emphasis on an external code. Israel had the best law, and it was only bondage. The law brought no comfort, joy, or happiness. The law was a weak and beggarly element. It had no power to make anyone keep it. It had no riches to give to anyone for keeping it. What it never could and never can give is the Spirit. Life under the law is always bondage. The law only ever made anyone think, “Did I do enough?” The law made everyone sinners because cursed is everyone who does not do the whole law. The law always answered the question about a man’s doing enough with the assurance that the man did *not* do enough and that what he did do he did improperly. The law never made anyone holy. The law cannot make sons. The law has no power to save at all or to give blessings to anyone. The law is not the promise, and the law cannot bring the promise.

God never intended that the law would rule forever, but he intended to cause the bondage of the law to give way to the liberty of the Spirit, so that one’s holiness would consist in a Spirit-directed life. So that arrangement of the law had to go away, and the better arrangement of the Spirit came. The holiness of the believer is rooted deeply in his heart, and he is moved and motivated by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, by a Spirit-wrought love

of God and not by an external code and a list of dos and do nots. The believer is full of the animating power of the Spirit; the believer is able to judge rightly about his life and the lives of others, about doctrine, and about right and wrong, so that his life of holiness is rooted deep in his being in the work of the Spirit. By the power of the Spirit, the summary of the believer’s heart and thus of his life is that he hates sin and loves righteousness.

The power of the Spirit is especially evident over against false doctrine and persecution, so that in love for the word, the gospel, God, and Jesus Christ—and against every calculation of man—the believer clings to the word. He loves to hear the word preached, and he judges it divine wisdom. This is simply the extension of the fact that the Spirit is the Spirit of God’s Son. He makes us receive Christ when Christ comes in the gospel. And where Christ is not received, there is without doubt no Spirit of Christ.

Second, this doctrine of the sending of the Spirit is an answer to the legalist whose constant refrain is, “Your doctrine allows people to sin freely.” When we say that you are justified by faith alone; when we say that whether you sin or do not sin, or obey or do not obey, or repent or do not repent has no bearing on your righteousness before God; and when we say that you must be an ungodly person to be justified, the legalist says, “You will make people careless.” When we say that all your sins are forgiven, even the ones that you have not committed yet; when we say that we do not need the laws of man or the law of God to make us righteous and acceptable before God, the legalist—the modern-day Pharisee—says, “People will not repent and will live evilly.” That is the legalist’s wicked slander of the gospel. He has never tasted of the power of the Spirit, who comes with the gospel. The apostle absolutely denies this wicked slander. The gospel of Jesus Christ brings with it Christ’s Spirit.

The law does not bring Christ’s Spirit. Thus there is no holiness or righteousness by the law for the simple reason that the law does not bring the Spirit. Christ brings the Spirit, and the Spirit comes with the gospel. The gospel cannot make God’s people careless and profane, for the gospel brings the Spirit.

God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. The work of God the Spirit in our hearts is as irresistible as God’s decree of election. That work of God the Spirit in our hearts does not wait on us. That work of the Spirit in our hearts is to assure us infallibly that we are sons.

God sends his Spirit into our hearts because we are sons. It is true that when he sends his Spirit into our hearts he makes us sons. He works this complete change in us. But that is not the apostle’s point with the words “because ye are sons.” All the emphasis must fall on the

words “because ye are sons.” What he means by “because ye are sons” is what in verse 5 he called “adoption.” We are sons by adoption. Christ came that we might receive the adoption of sons. And the apostle brings up adoption again in verse 7 when he says that through Christ we are heirs of God.

The words “because ye are sons” stand in contrast to two ideas. First, these words contrast with the idea that God sends his Spirit into our hearts because we obey. Because you are sons *and* because you act like sons, God sends his Spirit into your hearts. This is the thought of that comfortless doctrine that God gives the assurance and experience of salvation because you obey. No, not because you act like sons in obedience but because you *are* sons by adoption and without any acts of obedience or repentance or love on your part, he sends his Spirit. Second, these words contrast with the idea that God sends his Spirit into your hearts to make you sons, and then you act like sons and obey your Father; and in that way of faith and obedience, God sends his Spirit to assure you of eternal life. Then there are two sendings of the Spirit: one sending to enable you and another sending that is contingent on your faith and your obedience to assure you. But the Spirit says that he is sent because you *are* sons.

God sends his Spirit because we are sons! We really and truly are sons before we have the Spirit! We are sons by divine election. God chose us that Jesus Christ might be the firstborn among many brethren, and that will of God is the eternal reality and the irresistible divine power to realize and bring to pass what it wills.

We really were sons at the cross. Jesus died that we might receive adoption; and because he died, we did receive the adoption of sons. We are adopted of God. We are adopted of God and are sons of God without one sigh of repentance, without one act of obedience, without one word of regret. We *are* sons. You are sons of God before you ever hear one syllable of the gospel. You are sons of God before there ever arises in your hearts one sigh of repentance, before there comes one flicker of faith, or before one act of love. Because you *are* sons, God sent forth the Spirit of his Son!

So the Spirit is sent into the hearts of the afflicted who have no righteousness; he is sent into the hearts of the poor who have no obedience; he is sent into the hearts of the ungodly who have broken all the commandments of God and kept none of them. The Spirit is sent because you are sons for Christ’s sake. We have no obedience, but

Christ does. We have no righteousness, but Christ does. We have sin and iniquity, but Christ has perfection. We do not deserve to be sons, but for Christ’s sake we are sons. We are sons before we were born. Through Christ! And because we are sons, God sends forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts.

From his abode deep in our inner beings, the Spirit cries, “Abba, Father.” *Abba* is a cry of love and affection. It means *Father*, but it means more than that. *Abba* communicates all of the joy, trust, and happiness that a child has in his Father. *Abba* arises from the assurance that the child has that his Father loves him, will care for him, and seeks his best.

The Spirit does not cry, “Abba, Father” for himself. He cries out the truth of what is ours for Jesus Christ’s sake. The Spirit’s crying is always a crying in connection with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are sons in Christ, and the Spirit cries in our hearts, “Abba, Father,” impressing upon us the truth that *without* works, obedience, or acts

Free from the crushing bondage
of the law, we walk at liberty
before God in the Spirit as sons
and heirs of God through Christ.

of love we really are sons of God, that all our sins are forgiven, and that we are heirs of God. His cry of “Abba, Father” means that he brings to us Christ’s perfect work, by which we are made sons. The Spirit brings to us the perfection of our sonship in the cross and decree of God. The Spirit makes

the preaching of the gospel effectual in assuring and confirming in us our salvation and the certainty of eternal life for Christ’s sake.

The crying of the Spirit, “Abba, Father,” is the work of the Holy Spirit to assure us. God willed not only to appoint us to sonship, not only to secure that sonship in the cross, but also that we know and be assured of our sonship for Christ’s sake. God willed that we know him as our Father and that we know that he has forgiven our sins, that we stand in his grace, that we have peace with him, that he is for us and never against us, and that he never leaves us nor forsakes us.

The Spirit is granted without works at all, and with him comes the assurance that we are sons without any works at all. The Spirit, and thus the assurance of our salvation, is given to the poor, the afflicted, the wicked, the disobedient, and the ungodly, who have no righteousness of their own, who have no obedience, and who have broken God’s commandments.

That we know and are assured of our salvation without works is a very important point to emphasize over against the false doctrine that we have fellowship with God in the way of our obedience; or that we must first love our neighbors before God forgives us; or that we cannot experience

the assurance of our salvation except in the way of obedience; or that our righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is our acts of love toward our neighbors. The chief article of the faith of many is that there are activities of man that precede the blessings of God and especially this point: that there are activities of man that precede the assurance of salvation. Before man has assurance he must do this or do that. Really, in the end he can have no assurance. That demand that he has the fellowship of God in the way of obedience must carry through all the way to the final judgment, so that one's eternal fellowship with God is in the way of obedience; one's abiding in Christ unto the final judgment is by faith and in the way of obedience. So such teachers rob all their pupils of joy, comfort, and hope.

But the apostle says that because we are sons for Christ's sake, God sends his Spirit, crying, "Abba, Father." In that cry of the Spirit, all of our salvation, assurance, joy, happiness, and hope are found. He cries what is true. He bears witness with our spirits that we are sons of God and that we are heirs of God without works and for Christ's sake. We must believe that we are acceptable to God and pleasing in his sight not because of our obedience but because of Christ's obedience and suffering. This is the beginning of joy and of all peace. And this is the Spirit's work; this is the Spirit's work without any of our works, obedience, repentance, or love. So we rest in this declaration: because you are sons for Christ's sake. If we are sinners, Christ is not. If we are unrighteous, Christ is not.

The Spirit's cry is a great, divine noise—an irresistible sound like a mighty rushing wind—that overcomes every other testimony. False teachers say that you are not righteous until you have performed this or you have done that. The Spirit cries to overcome that wicked testimony. There are teachers who would bring us back into bondage to the law and who insert obedience to their commandments and doctrines before our enjoyment of Christ. The Spirit's cry drowns out that depressing sound with the joyful sound of the gospel. The law condemns us that we have broken all God's commandments and that we are terrible sinners. The Spirit's cry abolishes the testimony of the law from our consciences. The devil tries to turn us from Christ and his righteousness, and the Spirit's cry overcomes the devil's lies. The Spirit's cry is the crying in us of the one who chose and appointed us to be sons. It is his purpose that we know ourselves as sons of God without works and for Christ's sake. He realizes his own purpose in us and assures us that we are sons apart from any obedience on our part.

That testimony of the Spirit overcomes all other testimonies, and we cry, "Abba, Father." If someone is certain that he is a son of God, then the Spirit has done his

work. The Spirit so cries that you understand that you are not slaves, that you are not under law, and thus that you are not under sin but that you are sons and under grace. The Spirit so cries that you are not in doubt about your inheritance but understand that you are heirs of God through Christ.

This is our precious assurance. We cannot be unsure of God's grace toward us, for then nothing stands secure. Then we doubt the promise of God, we doubt the sufficiency of Christ's righteousness, and we doubt the very will of God for our salvation. And we count ourselves as reprobates. That is the wicked effect of the doctrine that we come to God in the way of our obedience or abide in Christ by faith and by obedience. That doctrine takes all joy and comfort out of our hearts. If we come to God for any other reason and in any other way than the death of Christ alone, then nothing will stand secure.

To use the language of the false teachers, if your love of the neighbor must be your righteousness whereby you come to the table of the Lord; if one of the requisites of true prayer is obedience to the law; if you abide in Christ by faith and by obedience; if you have fellowship with God in the way of obedience; if there are works of man that precede blessings of God, then nothing is certain at all, and there is no comfort. Our only certainty that we are sons of God and will be received of God in mercy is Christ.

So important is that assurance that God did not leave it to our own reasoning but assures us himself. It is the personal work of God the Holy Spirit, who is the personal bond of love in the triune being of God, to assure us that we are loved of God and are incorporated into his holy family. It is his gift to us by faith and without any obedience. Assurance is not found in flogging ourselves, in seeking to do more, in laboring harder, or in trying to be holier. Assurance is not found in leading a more disciplined, more orderly, or cleaner life. Assurance is not found in obeying the law of God. Assurance is not found in obeying God's law, and so assurance is certainly not found in obeying the doctrines and the commandments of men. Assurance is not found in a life that consists of the devilish doctrine of touch not, taste not, handle not. Assurance is not found in our repenting, which all the while is defiled with sin. Repentance is important. The Lord commands it. Ministers preach it. It is a great Christian virtue. But there is no assurance in it. Assurance is a gift of the Holy Spirit and the result of his cry and living testimony, "Abba, Father." The Spirit who assures us is given for Christ's sake and apart from obedience.

Then, free from the crushing bondage of the law, we walk at liberty before God in the Spirit as sons and heirs of God through Christ.

—NJL

CANONS 3–4.17: “GRACE IS CONFERRED BY MEANS OF ADMONITIONS”

Introduction

In the controversy of the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC) with the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), there are a few articles of the Canons of Dordt to which the PRC continually appeal. These articles are especially Canons 3–4.12, Canons 3–4.17, Canons 5.5, and Canons 5.7. They appeal to these articles as proof that Protestant Reformed doctrine as it is currently taught is the doctrine of the Reformed faith. They also appeal to these articles as proof that Reformed Protestant doctrine is a departure from the Reformed faith. Protestant Reformed theologians accuse the RPC of rejecting the clear teaching of the Canons. Protestant Reformed theologians predict that the RPC will eventually formally and officially remove these articles of the Canons that she now informally and unofficially supposedly finds offensive. The PRC’s accusation is that the RPC are not Reformed because they have departed from the doctrine of the Canons, which doctrine of the Canons defines what it means to be Reformed.

The Protestant Reformed accusation that the RPC have departed from the Canons is effective. The accusation is not effective because it is true, but it is effective exactly because it is a lie. In fact, it is an example of the big lie. The *big lie* is an untrue statement that one repeats loudly enough and often enough that men come to believe that statement as the truth. By now everyone who has even a passing knowledge of the controversy between the RPC and the PRC has heard the accusations that the RPC deny the law, that they deny regeneration, that they deny the real spiritual activity of the believer, and that they deny the necessity of repentance. These accusations are false and are part of the big lie that the RPC are not Reformed. By now most have also heard the accusations that the RPC disagree with Canons 3–4.12 that “man is himself rightly said to believe and repent by virtue of that grace received” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 169); that the RPC disagree with Canons 3–4.17 that “grace is conferred by means of admonitions” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 170); that the RPC disagree with Canons 5.5 that impenitent believers “sometimes lose the sense of God’s favor for a

time, until, on their returning into the right way of serious repentance, the light of God’s fatherly countenance again shines upon them” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 174); and that the RPC disagree with Canons 5.7 that God “certainly and effectually renews them [his own people] to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator, may again experience the favor of a reconciled God...” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 174). These accusations are false and are part of the big lie that the RPC are not Reformed. When these accusations are repeated loudly enough and often enough, even without proof, these accusations come to be seen as true.

The Protestant Reformed appeal to these articles of the Canons as establishing Protestant Reformed doctrine is also effective. In reality, the PRC have left the Reformed faith. Though the PRC now loudly pay lip service to certain articles of the Canons of Dordt, their appeals are superficial. One does not need to look far to find the PRC’s departure. Ask yourself if any of this sounds Reformed, according to the confessions; ask yourself if you think you could find any of this doctrine in the Canons: if a man would be saved, there is that which he must do. Or this: there is a vitally important sense in which, in our salvation, our drawing nigh to God precedes God’s drawing nigh to us. Or this: there is a sense in the sphere of salvation in which our forgiving each other is first and in which God’s forgiving us follows. Or this: as means, repentance precedes remission of sins; as end, remission of sins follows repentance. Or this: God is pleased to use the preaching of the commands of his word in order to accomplish the obedience that he commands.

All of that is Protestant Reformed theology, but none of it is Reformed. None of it is in the Canons. All of it is a denial of the Reformed faith. And yet Protestant Reformed theologians deceive men by proof-texting from the Canons. They find a single word or phrase in the Canons that sounds something like what they teach, quote that word or phrase out of context, and then condemn the RPC for not agreeing with their misrepresentations of the Canons.

Therefore, it is the happy burden of this and future editorials to examine these articles from the Canons as teaching the doctrine upon which the RPC squarely stand. Contrary to the big lie, the RPC do not reject the Canons. We do not reject them as a whole, and we do not reject any particular article in the Canons. We stand upon every article and doctrine of the Canons of Dordt, God being gracious. If the RPC ever do reject the Canons, whether informally or formally, and will not repent of their rejection, then that is the day that I (God being gracious) will condemn the RPC as apostate and either leave the RPC or be put out of the RPC. That is what I and others have done (God being gracious) in our controversy with the PRC. In doing so we rejected the PRC and their corruption of the truth, but we have not in any sense rejected the Canons. On the contrary, we love the Canons! We say with the original signers of the Canons, “That this is our faith and decision we certify by subscribing our names” (Conclusion [of the Canons], in *Confessions and Church Order*, 180). And these signatures are no mere lip service, for we are committed (God being gracious) to the pure doctrine and substance of the Canons.

In this first editorial in a series on select articles of the Canons, let us examine Canons 3–4.17. The Protestant Reformed misrepresentation of this article has become entrenched in the thinking of many. The chair of dogmatics in the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches also recently appealed to this article to establish his doctrine that God justifies and sanctifies his people by the commandments of the law. More important than the Protestant Reformed misrepresentation of this article is the fact that this article, properly understood, is a tremendous comfort to God’s people that he saves them from all their sin and death by means of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.

Canons 3–4.17

Canons 3–4.17 reads,

As the almighty operation of God whereby He prolongs and supports this our natural life does not exclude, but requires, the use of means, by which God of His infinite mercy and goodness hath chosen to exert His influence, so also the before mentioned supernatural operation of God by which we are regenerated in no wise excludes or subverts the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and food of the soul. Wherefore, as

the apostles and teachers who succeeded them piously instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to His glory, and the abasement of all pride, and in the meantime, however, neglected not to keep them by the sacred precepts of the gospel in the exercise of the Word, sacraments, and discipline; so, even to this day, be it far from either instructors or instructed to presume to tempt God in the church by separating what He of His good pleasure hath most intimately joined together. For grace is conferred by means of admonitions; and the more readily we perform our duty, the more eminent usually is this blessing of God working in us, and the more directly is His work advanced; to whom alone all the glory, both of means and of their saving fruit and efficacy, is forever due. Amen. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 170)

There is one particular statement in Canons 3–4.17 that is quoted more often than the rest of the article: “Grace is conferred by means of admonitions.” This statement is highly quotable because it is a pithy summary of the entire article. The article teaches the means by which God bestows the grace of salvation upon his people. A good title for the article would be

The means that God has appointed for the salvation of his elect people is the gospel.

“The Means of Grace.” Canons 3–4.17 is a sister article to Lord’s Day 25, Q&A 65 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Question 65 asks, “Whence this faith?” in order to teach the means by which God bestows the gift of faith upon his people. Both Canons 3–4.17 and Q&A 65 teach the means by which God saves his people. They both teach the means of grace. The oft-quoted statement from Canons 3–4.17 succinctly captures this doctrine: “Grace is conferred by means of admonitions.”

Now, that statement from Canons 3–4.17 is a beautiful statement about the *gospel*. You must read and understand the statement this way: “Grace is conferred by means of the gospel.” I know that some men will hoot that I am changing the plain language of the Canons and that I am rejecting the clear doctrine of the Canons. I know that other men will not hoot but that they will be genuinely concerned that I am changing the meaning of (and thus slyly rejecting) the Canons. The thought will be, “The Canons says, ‘Grace is conferred by means of admonitions,’ but Lanning says, ‘Grace is conferred by means of the gospel.’” Well, to the hooters I say, “Hoot away.” To those who are genuinely concerned that I am changing the meaning of the Canons, I will explain why the Canons itself demands that we understand this

statement as a statement about the gospel. But to all I say that when the Canons says, “Grace is conferred by means of admonitions,” you must read it this way: “Grace is conferred by means of the gospel.” The means of grace by which God confers grace, salvation, and faith upon his church is the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

The Popular Misrepresentation

Especially in the current controversy between the Reformed Protestant Churches and their mother, Canons 3–4.17 is grossly misrepresented. The misrepresentation concerns the word “admonitions.” According to this teaching, the word “admonitions” in Canons 3–4.17 means *commandments*. The oft-quoted statement from Canons 3–4.17, then, would read, “Grace is conferred by means of commandments.” In this teaching the admonitions or commandments refer to God’s holy law. They refer to the first commandment, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me”; to the sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill”; to the summary of the whole law, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God”; and to every other commandment of God’s law. In this teaching the “admonitions” of Canons 3–4.17 refer to all of the “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” of scripture.

This view of the word “admonitions” in Canons 3–4.17 is taught by Prof. Ronald Cammenga, the current professor of dogmatics and Old Testament studies in the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches. In the latest issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, Professor Cammenga writes,

Two articles in the Canons of Dordrecht address the issue of God’s use of the preaching of the law, including its admonitions, rebukes, and threatenings. Article seventeen of the third and fourth heads of doctrine begins by asserting that as God uses means to support our natural life, so He is pleased to use the preaching of His Word as “the seed of regeneration and food of the soul.” The article concludes,

For grace is conferred by means of admonitions; and the more readily we perform our duty, the more eminent usually is this blessing of God working in us, and the more directly is His work advanced; to whom alone all the glory, both of means and of their saving fruit and efficacy, is forever due.¹

Professor Cammenga’s entire article in the *Journal* is about God’s law. His article is a call to Reformed preachers to preach the commandments of the law.

The commands and warnings of Scripture must be preached from the Reformed pulpit. Reformed ministers must not draw back from issuing the imperatives of God’s Word, binding the will of God upon the hearts and minds of their hearers. (36)

It is in connection with the law that Professor Cammenga quotes Canons 3–4.17. He understands Canons 3–4.17 to refer to “God’s use of the preaching of the law.” He cites the Canons’ statement on admonitions as addressing “the issue of God’s use of the preaching of the law.” For Professor Cammenga the “admonitions” of Canons 3–4.17 are the *commandments* of God’s law, which law the church preaches. Professor Cammenga’s interpretation of Canons 3–4.17 is representative of the Protestant Reformed interpretation.

Professor Cammenga’s interpretation of Canons 3–4.17 is deceptive. Its deception is that it appeals to an apparent meaning of the word *admonitions* but conceals the actual meaning of the word “admonitions” as that word is used in the article. At first glance the word “admonitions” might very well appear to mean *commandments*. After all, an admonition might involve a warning, a rebuke, a threatening, an exhortation—all concepts that we assume are associated with the law. It might seem natural to take the word “admonitions” as *commandments*.

Add to this that Canons 3–4.17 immediately goes on to speak about our “duty”: “The more readily we perform our duty.” Which duty? According to Professor Cammenga’s teaching, the believer’s duty to obey God’s commandments. Without examining it any further, it might all appear to fit: grace is conferred by means of commandments, and the more readily we obey these commandments, the more eminent usually is the blessing of God working in us.

The Doctrine of the Misrepresentation

The doctrine that is being taught by this misrepresentation of Canons 3–4.17 is the doctrine of salvation by the law. It is the doctrine that God uses the law to bestow salvation on his people. It is the doctrine that God uses the law to work, effect, and accomplish his people’s salvation. It is the doctrine that the commandments of the law are a means of grace. It is the doctrine that God uses his commands to his people to obey him to accomplish their sanctification. It is even the doctrine that God uses his commands to his people to obey him to accomplish their justification. It is the doctrine that salvation is of the law, by the law, and under the law.

1 Ronald L. Cammenga, “‘Thou Shalt and Thou Shalt Not’: Preaching the Commands of the Gospel,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 55, no. 2 (April 2022): 55–56. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this article are given in text.

The doctrinal issue here is not whether God commands his people. Yes, God commands his people, and no one in this controversy denies it. Neither is the doctrinal issue whether commands are necessary for God's people. Yes, commands are necessary for God's people, and no one in this controversy denies it. Neither is the doctrinal issue whether God's law must be preached and preached strictly. Yes, God's law must be preached and preached strictly, and no one in this controversy denies it. Rather, the doctrinal issue is whether salvation is of the law or not. The doctrinal issue is whether the law is a means of grace or not. The doctrinal issue is whether God uses the law as the means by which he accomplishes the salvation and the obedience of his elect, regenerated people. Professor Cammenga and the PRC say that the law is a means of grace; that the law is the power by which God grants justification and sanctification; and that the law is the power by which God grants his people their obedient lives of gratitude. The RPC, on the other hand, say that the gospel, not the law, is the means of grace; that the gospel, not the law, is the power by which God grants justification and sanctification; and that the gospel, not the law, is the power by which God grants his people their obedient lives of gratitude.

When I say that Professor Cammenga's doctrine is the doctrine of salvation by the law, I am not merely inferring what his doctrine must be. I am not taking statements that he actually makes and then extrapolating to what he must eventually say but what he does not yet say. Rather, I am simply stating what Professor Cammenga himself teaches as his doctrine of the law. It is Professor Cammenga's teaching that God's commandments to his people to obey are the means of grace by which he grants them their salvation and obedience. Here is Professor Cammenga in his own words.

It is clear, both from our Reformed confessions and from the teaching of our spiritual forebearers, that preaching commands, admonitions, prohibitions, warnings, and rebukes is a positive means of grace in the lives of God's people. (45)

It ought to be no surprise that God is pleased to use the preaching of the commands of His Word to work the obedience that is commanded. He does the same with the command to elect sinners to repent and believe. Just as God is pleased to use commands for our justification, we should not wonder that He is pleased also to use commands for our sanctification. This is indeed the case. (46)

The gospel declares Jesus Christ and what he has done. The law declares thou and what thou must do.

If the whole great work of the Holy Spirit in us, the Spirit's work of sanctification, can be described in terms of the law and of indelibly impressing God's law upon our hearts, who can object to the preaching of the law as a positive means of grace? Who can object to the preaching of the law as that which calls forth the work of the Spirit in our hearts so that we do what the Spirit has put in our inward parts and written upon our hearts? Who can object to preaching that calls us to honor God's law and actively obey His commandments, which are already engraved within us? What God does by His Spirit inwardly, He calls to outward manifestation by the preaching of the very law that He has stamped upon the hearts of those whom He has regenerated. If that were not true, it is unimaginable that the Old Testament Scripture would prophesy the saving work of the Holy Spirit in terms of the law of God. (51)

God is pleased to use the preaching of the commands of His Word in order to accomplish the obedience that He commands. (53)

In regeneration, they have become new men and new women who *can* obey God's law. By the preaching of the law, that new life is roused to activity, the activity of obedience. (53)

As the command of God was effective in the beginning to cause all things to come into being, ("For he spake, and it was done; he commanded; and it stood fast," [Ps. 33:9]) so the word of God in the preaching of the law works to accomplish what God commands in the law. (55)

In the beginning, God was pleased to use His word of command to bring the universe and all creatures into existence. God is pleased to use His word of command sounded in the preaching of the gospel, "Repent and believe," to work repentance and faith in the elect who hear the command of the gospel. God is also pleased to use the preaching of the commands of His law to accomplish that which is commanded in the hearts and lives of the people of God. He is ever the God who uses His word of command to bring about that which He commands. (61)

Whatever else could be said about this doctrine, it is clearly and unambiguously a doctrine of salvation by the law. The justification of God's people is accomplished by God's commandments to them that they must obey. The sanctification of God's people is accomplished by God's commandments to them that they must obey. It makes no difference that Professor Cammenga also teaches that Christ redeemed his people. It makes no difference that Professor Cammenga also teaches that the Holy Spirit is at work in the hearer of the law. Whether the people are justified comes down to the law: thou shalt. Whether the people are sanctified comes down to the law: thou shalt not. For Professor Cammenga justification and sanctification are accomplished by means of the law, which tells the hearers of the law that which they must do. And Professor Cammenga's proof for his doctrine is his misrepresentation of Canons 3–4.17: grace is conferred by means of commandments.

This misrepresentation of Canons 3–4.17 explains why the PRC have been so enthusiastic about this article in their controversy with the RPC. The PRC have been developing a doctrine of man's experience of salvation. Protestant Reformed doctrine is that a man must perform good works of obedience to God's law in order to enjoy and experience his salvation. These good works are the prerequisite conditions for man's experience. So, in the well-documented language of the PRC, if a man would be saved (in the sense of consciously entering into and enjoying God's kingdom), there is that which he must do.² Or again, the more a man obeys God's law, the more he prospers in the great blessings of the covenant.³ Or again, in salvation there is a vital sense in which man's activity precedes God's activity.⁴ Or again, justification is by means of repentance, so that a man's repentance must precede God's forgiveness of that man's sins, and God's forgiveness must follow that man's repentance.⁵ How will the PRC find proof for their doctrine in the Reformed confessions? By misrepresenting Canons 3–4.17. Read the last part of the article with the Protestant Reformed misrepresentation in mind, and the article teaches Protestant Reformed doctrine with a vengeance.

Grace is conferred by means of [commandments]; and the more readily we perform our duty [of obeying God's commandments], the more eminent usually is this blessing of God working in us, and the more directly is His work advanced;

to whom alone all the glory, both of means and of their saving fruit and efficacy, is forever due. Amen.

The True Interpretation of Canons 3–4.17

Over against the Protestant Reformed misrepresentation of the article, the true interpretation of Canons 3–4.17 is as follows.

The Means of Grace

First, the subject of Canons 3–4.17 is the means of grace. The great question that Canons 3–4.17 answers is, how does God bestow his grace upon his elect people? How does God take his elect people out of the darkness of their sin and death and bring them into his marvelous light? Canons 3–4.17 teaches that God is pleased to save his people by the use of means. That is, God has appointed certain instruments as the tools by which he saves his people. Hypothetically speaking, God does not need to use these means to save his people. He could save them immediately, without the use of means, as the sovereign and omnipotent God. But God, in his infinite mercy and goodness, is pleased to use certain means to save his people.

Canons 3–4.17 compares God's use of means in the salvation of his people to his use of means in the support of man's natural life. God preserves and nourishes the physical life of man through food and drink, through the crop in the field and the meal on the table. The preservation and nourishment of man's life are due entirely to the almighty operation of God. But God is pleased to exercise his almighty operation through the means of food and drink. So also, God gives spiritual life and strength to his elect people through the specific means that he has ordained.

The opening sentence of Canons 3–4.17 establishes that the subject of the article is the spiritual means of grace.

As the almighty operation of God whereby He prolongs and supports this our natural life does not exclude, but requires, the use of means, by which God of His infinite mercy and goodness hath chosen to exert His influence, so also the before mentioned supernatural operation of God by which we are regenerated in no wise excludes or subverts the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and food of the soul.

2 Kenneth Koole, "What Must I Do...?" *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 1 (October 1, 2018): 7–8.

3 James Slopsema, "Treasure in the House of the Righteous," *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 2 (October 15, 2020): 28.

4 David J. Engelsma, "Professor Engelsma to the Engelsma Family Forum and Terry Dykstra, June 16, 2021," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 5 (August 15, 2021): 11.

5 David J. Engelsma, "'Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc?' Non!, or, 'Don't Kill the Rooster!'" September 8, 2021; <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/post-hoc-ergo-propter-hoc-non-or-don-t-kill-the-rooster>.

The Gospel Is the Means of Grace

Second, the means that God has appointed for the salvation of his elect people is the gospel. According to Canons 3–4.17, God has ordained the gospel “to be the seed of regeneration and food of the soul.” Just as earthly food and drink are God’s means to prolong and support man’s natural life, so the gospel is God’s means to save his elect people and to feed their spiritual lives.

The gospel is Jesus Christ. That is, the gospel is the message and announcement of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the good news that God has reconciled sinners to himself through Jesus Christ. The gospel is the good news that Christ has borne the iniquity of all his people so that they do not have to bear it. The gospel is the good news that Christ was made sin for his people so that they might be made the righteousness of God. The gospel is the good news that Christ was made a curse for his people’s sins so that they might be blessed of God. The gospel is the good news that Christ has obeyed the law perfectly instead of his elect people so that they do not have to obey the law for their salvation. The gospel is the good news that Christ has risen from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of his Father. The gospel is the good news that Christ has received from God the promise of the Spirit and has poured out that Spirit into the hearts of his people. The gospel is the good news that all of our crying out, “Abba, Father” is the crying of Christ’s Spirit in our hearts. The gospel is the good news that all of our working and doing the commandments of God is given to us as a gift through Christ. The gospel is the good news that all of our obedience is the activity of Christ’s Spirit within us. The gospel is the good news that Christ has prepared for us an inheritance in heaven that fades not away. The gospel announces and declares to us all of the things of Christ. The gospel is Jesus Christ.

This gospel is distinct from the law. This gospel is distinct from commandments. The law does not announce Christ. The commandments do not declare what Christ has done. The law of God teaches men what they must do. The law says, “Thou.” Thou shalt do this. Thou shalt not do that. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God. Thou shalt not have any other gods before the Lord thy God. Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother. Thou shalt not commit adultery.

The gospel declares Jesus Christ and what he has done. The law declares thou and what thou must do.

According to Canons 3–4.17, God’s means of grace is the gospel.

The before mentioned supernatural operation of God by which we are regenerated in no wise excludes or subverts the use of the gospel, which

the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and food of the soul.

The Canons is teaching what all scripture declares: God saves his people by the gospel. God saves his people by the announcement and declaration of Jesus Christ crucified.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. (Rom. 1:16)

So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Rom. 10:17)

But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor. 1:23–24)

And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:18)

Canons 3–4.17 teaches that the gospel is God’s means of grace. The entire article is about the gospel. The entire article is only about the gospel. The article has nothing to do with the law. The article has nothing to do with commandments. The article does not so much as mention the law. It does not mention the law in the word “admonitions.” It does not mention the law in the words “the more readily we perform our duty.” The article itself announces its own subject: the means of grace. The article itself identifies the means of grace: the gospel. Canons 3–4.17 is only about the gospel as the means of grace, and it is not at all about the law of God. Therefore, when men read the law into Canons 3–4.17, they introduce a subject that is entirely foreign to the article. “Grace is conferred by means of admonitions” has nothing to do with the law. That phrase is strictly about the gospel.

What is true of Canons 3–4.17 in particular is true generally of the entire third and fourth heads of doctrine in the Canons. Canons 3 and 4 are not about the law as any kind of means of grace. Canons 3 and 4 are strictly about the gospel as the means of grace. Canons 3 and 4 as a whole are entitled “Of the Corruption of Man, His Conversion to God and the Manner Thereof.” Notice that: “And the Manner Thereof.” The entire two heads of doctrine teach the manner (or the means) by which man is converted to God. The entire two heads teach the means of grace. And what do Canons 3 and 4 say in all of their articles is the means of grace? The gospel! The gospel

comes up again and again in Canons 3 and 4 as the means of grace. And what never comes up in these two heads as the means of grace? The law! The commandments! The Reformed doctrine of the means of grace, according to Canons 3 and 4, is that the gospel and the gospel alone is the means of grace.

What therefore neither the light of nature nor the law could do, that God performs by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the Word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the glad tidings concerning the Messiah, by means whereof it hath pleased God to save such as believe, as well under the Old as under the New Testament. (Canons 3–4.6, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 167)

As many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called. (Canons 3–4.8, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 168)

That others who are called by the gospel obey the call and are converted is not to be ascribed to the proper exercise of free will...but it must be wholly ascribed to God. (Canons 3–4.10, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 168)

This is only a smattering of quotations from Canons 3 and 4. One can read through the entire two heads and find that from beginning to end, the manner of man's conversion is the gospel, which God sovereignly and powerfully uses as the means by which he opens the heart and by which he gives faith and salvation. As one reads through these heads, one will not find anywhere that God uses the law as the means of man's salvation. When one comes to Canons 3–4.17, therefore, it is impossible to read the law into the article. Not only does Canons 3–4.17 clearly teach the gospel as the means of grace, but all of the third and fourth heads teach the gospel as the means of grace. The law simply has nothing to do with it.

In fact, the third and fourth heads are explicit that salvation does not come by the law and cannot come by the law. Canons 3 and 4 explicitly draw our attention to the decalogue—the ten commandments, the law—in order to deny that any kind of saving grace can come by the law.

In the same light are we to consider the law of the decalogue, delivered by God to His peculiar people, the Jews, by the hands of Moses. For though it discovers the greatness of sin, and more

and more convinces man thereof, yet as it neither points out a remedy nor imparts strength to extricate him from misery, and thus, being weak through the flesh, leaves the transgressor under the curse, man cannot by this law obtain saving grace. (Canons 3–4.5, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 167)

According to Canons 3–4.5, the law does some things. The law discovers the greatness of sin. The law convinces man that he is wicked. But there are also certain things that the law does not do and never was intended to do. The law does not point out a remedy for sin. The law only says, “Thou. Thou shalt, and thou shalt not.” The law never says, “Christ. Christ has done, and Christ has accomplished.” The law also does not impart strength to a man so that he can obey the law's commands. You can say “Thou shalt” to a man all you want, but that com-

mandment will never give him the strength to obey. That commandment will never effect or cause his obedience. Contrary to Professor Cammenga, who teaches that God uses the law to give the obedience that the law requires, Canons 3–4.5 says that the law does not impart any strength to a man.

The law is thus weak. Oh, yes, the law is powerful to point out sin. The law is powerful to condemn men. But the law is weak to save. The law is so weak that it cannot deliver a man from his sin but leaves him in it. The law is so weak that it cannot give obedience but leaves a man impotent to obey. The law's weakness is not the fault of the law. The law is holy, just, and good. The law is the holy law of God himself. Rather, the law is weak through the depravity and helplessness of man. The law is “weak through the flesh.” The law is weak by the ordination of God himself, who never intended the law as the means of grace and salvation. All that the law can do to the transgressor is to leave “the transgressor under the curse.” Because of this, “man cannot by this law obtain saving grace.” The law is not the manner of man's conversion! The law is not God's means of grace.

If the law cannot save and if the law cannot be the means of grace, then what is? The gospel! This is the crystal clear Reformed doctrine of the Canons.

What therefore neither the light of nature nor the law could do, that God performs by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the Word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the glad tidings concerning the Messiah, by means whereof it hath

If the law cannot save and if the law cannot be the means of grace, then what is? The gospel! This is the crystal clear Reformed doctrine of the Canons.

pleased God to save such as believe, as well under the Old as under the New Testament. (Canons 3–4.6, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 167)

The Canons teaches that the gospel and not the law is the means of grace because this is the clear doctrine of scripture.

For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. (Rom. 8:3–4)

Therefore, it is a flagrant denial of the Canons to teach that grace is conferred by commandments. It is a flagrant denial of the Canons to teach that the law of commandments is God's means of grace. When Professor Cammenga and the PRC introduce the law into Canons 3–4.17 as that by which God confers his grace, they are overthrowing the Reformed faith. The doctrine of the Canons, as it is the doctrine of the Reformed faith and as it is the doctrine of scripture, is that the law is not the means of grace and the means of salvation. The doctrine of the Canons, as it is the doctrine of the Reformed faith and as it is the doctrine of scripture, is that the gospel of Jesus Christ alone is the means of grace and the means of salvation.

God Wills the Means of Grace

Third, the true doctrine of Canons 3–4.17 is that God wills to use the means of grace in conferring salvation upon his people. According to the article, God “hath chosen to exert His influence” through means, and “the most wise God has ordained [the gospel] to be the seed of regeneration and food of the soul.” We (in our folly) could imagine a scenario in which God might save one of his elect children directly and immediately, without the use of the means of the gospel. Perhaps a man in a tribe on a remote island nation is elect, but he never hears the gospel at all. Yet when that man dies, he finds himself inexplicably in heaven. He never knew the name Jesus, never heard anything about forgiveness, and never believed in God. Yet God saved him. Why could not God do such a thing? God is sovereign and free and omnipotent. God could save a man in any way that he pleased, and no one could tell God that it was inappropriate.

But that is exactly the point: God could save a man in any way that he pleased, and he is only pleased to save by means of the gospel. It is not his good pleasure to save a man apart from the gospel. God is only pleased to save by means of his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. He

has “chosen to exert His influence” this way, and he has “ordained” this. Saving his people by means of the gospel pleases God as that which most displays his infinite mercy and goodness. This pleases God as that which most honors Jesus Christ as the only savior from sin and death. God declares his goodness and mercy in the gospel. God displays his lovingkindness and perfect righteousness in the gospel. God causes his elect people to know him and believe in him by the gospel. It is God's will not only to save men by his Son but also to make men know that they are saved by his Son. God wills to save his elect people by means of the gospel.

And therefore, the “supernatural operation of God by which we are regenerated in no wise excludes or subverts the use of the gospel” (Canons 3–4.17). The article is warding off a false charge by the Arminians against the Reformed faith. The false charge of the Arminians was that if salvation is by grace alone and not by the free will of the sinner, then what is the point of preaching the gospel? The sinner who hears the gospel cannot by his free will respond anyway. The sinner is going to be delivered by God sovereignly and supernaturally. Why even preach then? The Reformed answer, as it is the answer of scripture, is that God “hath most intimately joined together” the preaching of the gospel and the salvation of his elect people. God is pleased to use the means of the gospel because the glory of the means redounds to God: “To whom alone all the glory, both of means and of their saving fruit and efficacy, is forever due. Amen” (Canons 3–4.17).

Canons 3–4.17 points to the apostles and to the ministers appointed by the apostles as the authoritative example of the church's practice. On the one hand, the apostles taught clearly and forcefully that salvation is by grace alone. They taught that God's salvation of a man was a supernatural and sovereign work of God and not in any way the work of man. The apostles condemned all contrary teachings that justification and salvation were of man, of man's obedience, of the law, or of man's cooperation in any sense whatsoever. The doctrine of the apostles was salvation by grace alone. The apostles “piously instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to His glory, and the abasement of all pride.”

On the other hand, the apostles did not abandon the preaching of the gospel. The apostles did not conclude from their doctrine of salvation by the sovereign operation of God that the people no longer needed to hear the gospel. Rather, the apostles preached and instructed the ministers following them to preach. The apostles administered the sacraments and taught the church to administer the sacraments. The apostles exercised Christian discipline and taught the church to exercise Christian

discipline. Why did the apostles do this? Because the gospel is the means of grace, which God hath “most intimately joined together” with salvation as the means by which he saves his people. Therefore, the apostles, who taught the people that their salvation was by the free and gracious operation of God, “in the meantime, however, neglected not to keep them by the sacred precepts of the gospel in the exercise of the Word, sacraments, and discipline.”

When Canons 3–4.17 speaks of “the sacred precepts of the gospel,” it is not speaking of the law. We might think that the word “precepts” naturally refers to commandments or laws. But the word “precepts” is a poor translation of the original Latin of the Canons of Dordt. The original Latin uses the word *monitum*. The Latin word *monitum* means *admonition*. In fact, we get our English word *admonition* directly from the Latin *monitum*. In the oft-quoted section of Canons 3–4.17 about admonitions, the very same Latin word is in the original Canons of Dordt: “Grace is conferred by means of *monitum*.” A better translation of “the sacred precepts of the gospel” would be “the sacred admonitions of the gospel.”

And what are the sacred admonitions of the gospel? The sacred admonitions of the gospel are not the law: thou shalt, and thou shalt not. We must not understand these sacred admonitions of the gospel as the ten commandments. The ten commandments are not the sacred admonitions of the gospel, but they are the sacred commandments of the law. Remember that the Canons is referring to what the apostles did. The apostles did not teach salvation by grace alone in one breath and then turn around and teach salvation by means of the law in the next. Rather, “the sacred admonitions of the gospel” refers to the call of the gospel that always accompanies the gospel: believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. The essential meaning of that call of the gospel is Jesus Christ alone. Even though the call of the gospel comes in the form of a command—Believe!—the call of the gospel is not essentially the law. The call of the gospel is the gospel. The call of the gospel is Jesus Christ as the savior of the sinner from his death and misery. The call of the gospel does not point the sinner to himself: you must believe or else! The call of the gospel points the sinner away from himself to Jesus Christ and to the salvation that is found in Christ alone: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:31).

This sacred admonition of the gospel, which is the call of the gospel to believe in Jesus Christ, keeps God’s people in the gospel. When the apostles called men to believe in Jesus Christ, that sacred admonition of the gospel did not send believers away from the gospel. Rather, that preaching of the gospel with its sacred

admonition to believe in Jesus Christ kept God’s people in the exercise of that gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ was found in the word preached, and the sacred admonition of the gospel kept them under the word preached. The gospel of Jesus Christ was found in the administration of the sacraments, and the sacred admonition of the gospel kept God’s people in the use of the sacraments. The gospel of Jesus Christ was found in Christian discipline that called sinners to repent of their iniquity and to believe in Jesus Christ, and the sacred admonition of the gospel kept God’s people in the exercise of Christian discipline.

All of this, Canons 3–4.17 sets before the church as the example of the apostles. On the one hand, the apostles instructed God’s people in the truth of salvation by the sovereign and gracious operation of God. On the other hand, the apostles recognized the gospel in word, sacrament, and discipline as God’s means to confer his grace.

Wherefore, as the apostles and teachers who succeeded them piously instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to His glory, and the abasement of all pride, and in the meantime, however, neglected not to keep them by the sacred precepts of the gospel in the exercise of the Word, sacraments, and discipline...

The example of the apostles is prescriptive and normative for the church. The Canons warns ministers and members alike that God has willed the gospel as the means by which he saves his elect people. He wills the preaching of the gospel, the administration of the sacraments, and Christian discipline as the means of grace by which he delivers his people. Therefore,

even to this day, be it far from either instructors or instructed to presume to tempt God in the church by separating what He of His good pleasure hath most intimately joined together.

Grace Is Conferred by Means of the Gospel

Fourth, the true interpretation of Canons 3–4.17 is that the famous line “Grace is conferred by means of admonitions” means “Grace is conferred by means of the gospel.” In light of everything that has come before in this article of the Canons, and in light of everything that has come before in the third and fourth heads, the doctrine of this line is that grace is conferred by means of the gospel. The entire article is about the gospel, not the law, as the means of grace. The entire third and fourth heads are about the gospel, not the law, as the means of grace. Heads 3 and 4 have not taught the gospel as the means of grace and excluded the law as the means of grace only

to go back on that at the end of article 17. Canons 3–4.5 has not taught that “man cannot by this law obtain saving grace” only to teach in 3–4.17 that saving “grace is conferred by means of [this law].” The doctrine throughout the third and fourth heads and the doctrine throughout Canons 3–4.17 is that grace is conferred by means of the gospel.

This can be demonstrated in the language of the oft-quoted phrase itself: “Grace is conferred by means of admonitions.” The “admonitions” by which grace is conferred are not some new thing in the article. The admonitions came up earlier in the article and were defined earlier in the article. Although our English translation does not capture it, the admonitions came up earlier as “the sacred precepts [admonitions] of the gospel.” The same Latin word—*monitum*—was used earlier in the article and translated as “sacred precepts of the gospel.” Now that very same word is translated as “admonitions.” The admonitions have already been defined. And the admonitions have not been defined as law. The admonitions have not been defined as commandments. The admonitions have already been defined as “the sacred [admonitions] of the gospel.” They are the admonitions of the *gospel!* They are the sacred admonitions of the gospel call to believe in Jesus Christ, which call of the gospel is the gospel. Grace is conferred by means of the sacred admonitions of the gospel! Grace is conferred by means of the gospel!

This interpretation, and this interpretation alone, fits with Lord’s Day 25, Q&A 65 of the Heidelberg Catechism. In this sister confession to Canons 3–4.17, the Heidelberg Catechism teaches, “Since then we are made partakers of Christ and all His benefits by faith only, whence doth this faith proceed? From the Holy Ghost, who works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and confirms it by the use of the sacraments” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 108).

What is the means of grace in salvation? How is grace conferred? By the gospel! Grace is conferred by means of the gospel!

Away with the misrepresentation of Canons 3–4.17 as teaching salvation by the law, justification by the law, sanctification by the law, and obedience by the law. Away with the appeal to Canons 3–4.17 as teaching that grace is conferred by means of the law. Grace is not conferred by means of the law but by means of the sacred admonitions of the gospel.

God Blesses the Preaching of the Gospel

Fifth, the true interpretation of Canons 3–4.17 is that God blesses the gospel in his church. God blesses his people under the preaching of the gospel. God blesses his people under the administration of the sacraments. God blesses his people in the exercise of Christian discipline. God blesses the gospel!

Why does God bless the preaching of the gospel? Not because of the church’s obedience in the gospel but because God is pleased to confer his grace and salvation to his people by the gospel. God feeds and nourishes his people with Jesus Christ through the gospel unto everlasting life. God advances his work of salvation by the gospel. God has appointed the gospel as the means by which he saves; he has intimately joined together salvation and the gospel; and he blesses his own means of the gospel in his church.

For grace is conferred by means of admonitions; and the more readily we perform our duty, the more eminent usually is this blessing of God working in us, and the more directly is His work advanced; to whom alone all the glory, both of means and of their saving fruit and efficacy, is forever due. Amen.

It is at this point that the misrepresentation of Canons 3–4.17 makes its last-ditch attempt to introduce the law into the article. The word “duty” is taken to mean our duty to obey the law. Our performing our duty, then, is our obedience to the law. The teaching, then, would be that the more we obey God’s law, the more eminent is God’s blessing.

That interpretation is entirely wrong. The word “duty” is a poor translation. As Homer Hoeksema notes in his book *The Voice of Our Fathers*, a better translation would be *office*.⁶ The word *duty* or *office* is not a reference to any law or commandment. And our “performing” our duty or office is not the obeying of any law or commandment. Rather, the article refers to the office of minister in preaching the gospel and the office of believer in hearing the gospel. God does not bless puppet shows in church for the salvation of his people. God blesses the gospel. God does not bless personal testimonials in church for the salvation of his people. God blesses the gospel. God does not bless liturgical dance, Super Bowl screenings, religious dramatic presentations, or any other thing for

God feeds and nourishes his people with Jesus Christ through the gospel unto everlasting life.

⁶ Homer C. Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1980), 558.

the salvation of his people. God blesses the gospel. Why? Because he is pleased to confer grace by means of the gospel. The church that abandons the gospel will not be blessed and will not be saved. Why? Because God is pleased to confer grace by means of the gospel. This is the meaning of the statement about performing our duty.

For grace is conferred by means of admonitions; and the more readily we perform our duty, the more eminent usually is this blessing of God working in us, and the more directly is His work advanced.

And lest anyone think that somehow that still must be interpreted in terms of ministers' *obeying* God's *command* to preach the gospel and believers' *obeying* God's *command* to come to church, the Canons rules that out with

its last line: "To whom alone all the glory, both of means and of their saving fruit and efficacy, is forever due." The issue is not *obedience* to God's *law*. The issue is God's saving *means* of *grace*.

What a beautiful and comforting article this is for God's people! How awful for men to rob God's people of their comfort in this article by teaching it as law. How deadly to the soul to think and believe that grace comes by means of commandments and obedience. Let teachers of such things be accursed, for they do not teach the gospel, and they turn the comfort of the Canons into bondage. Thank God for his gospel, by which we are saved. And may God preserve that gospel among his true church. And he will! For grace is conferred by means of the gospel!

—AL

FROM THE EDITOR

We welcome two new contributors to *Sword and Shield* this month. Mr. Joel Langerak Jr. contributes an article on Christian education in the school. Joel is a husband and father, a member of First Reformed Protestant Church in Michigan, and a teacher at Grace Reformed Protestant School in Michigan. His article is timely as a new school year begins and as parents and teachers alike take up their calling to rear the covenant seed in the fear of God's name.

Mr. Eric Solanyk contributes an article on the danger of blindly following men and the need to discern the truth from the lie. He analyzes the doctrine of two prominent Protestant Reformed ministers who have not heretofore received much press in *Sword and Shield*. Eric is a husband and father and a member of the Loveland Reformed Protestant Fellowship. His article will be of great help to all of those who love God's truth.

Thank you to both Joel and Eric for your contributions this month.

Under God's blessing, plans continue to come together for the third annual meeting of Reformed Believers Publishing (RBP), the association that publishes *Sword and Shield*. The meeting will be held on Thursday, October 22, at 7:30 p.m. at the Wonderland Tire shop in Byron Center, MI (1 84th Street SW, Byron Center, MI 49315).

Rev. M. VanderWal will deliver the keynote speech on the topic "The Office of Believer: 1953 and Today." There also will be remarks and speeches by the other two editors and by members of the RBP board. It promises to be an evening of good instruction and fellowship. There are plans to livestream the meeting for those who are not able to make it out for the evening.

The annual meeting is also your opportunity to join Reformed Believers Publishing as an association member. Membership is open to all Reformed believers wherever God has placed you. Whether your back yard is the Great Lakes or the Rock River, the Pacific or the Rockies, the South China Sea or Fox Lake, you are invited to become a member of Reformed Believers Publishing and be part of the endeavor to publish sound, theological, and polemical Reformed literature. If you are interested in becoming a member, submit your request to the board by using the website (reformedbelieverspub.org) or the other information on the masthead. New members will be received by vote of the current RBP members at the annual meeting in October, so submit your request soon.

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

—AL

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

SLITHERING AROUND AGAIN (1): A REVIEW

Rev. Martyn McGeown's writing is slippery. Unless you grab him by the head, he will turn around and bite you or writhe out of your grasp. He switches seamlessly between true statements and false statements. This is again evident from his series "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness," published on the blog of the Reformed Free Publishing Association.¹

His purpose in the series is to explain Christ's command to his church prior to his ascension to preach repentance and forgiveness in the whole world. That is the command, if nothing else, to proclaim God's saving purpose and the saving work of Jesus Christ. That preaching is a proclamation about the work of God, the work of God to fulfill his promise.

However, for Reverend McGeown that preaching is about man and what man must do. In his series he sprinkles a little grace on the dish that he serves up. But the series is mostly about man.

Especially is his handling of scripture deceitful. I have complained about this before and will reiterate it again about Protestant Reformed writing: quoting a passage of scripture is not scriptural proof. One must explain the passage of scripture and how it applies to the issue at hand. Protestant Reformed ministers simply quote scriptural passages as though the passages alone prove the minister's point. The ministers and officebearers do this in their synodical, classical, and consistorial decisions and in their writings. It is deceitful handling of the word of God.

I will get to Reverend McGeown's quoting of scriptural passages in the next article.

In his series "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness," Reverend McGeown comes to explain his doctrine of conditional justification. He does so by means of a clever distinction. Protestant Reformed ministers are all about distinctions. They love distinctions. Distinctions are their theological bread and butter. By means of distinctions they confuse the people and steal away from them the truth. Reverend McGeown also has his distinctions. In his blog series "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness,"

he enlightens his readers about the distinction between justification and the forgiveness of sins. If you thought all of your life that justification and the forgiveness of sins are basically the same and that to say "Justification is by faith alone" and to say "Forgiveness is by faith alone" are to say the same thing, then you are in for a surprise because Reverend McGeown tells us that justification and forgiveness are to be distinguished.

This distinction is the key to understanding his doctrine of conditional justification, conditioned specifically on man's act of repentance. He brings up truths, such as eternal justification and objective justification, but only to get them out of the way so that he can come to the real issue, which is man's experience. Here he is typically Protestant Reformed: a conditional experience of salvation, specifically of justification and specifically conditioned on man's act of repenting. The doctrine of justification by faith alone has no real place in his writing about the experience of salvation. Justification is something that happens once at some unspecified time, and then he can be finished with that matter of justification by faith without works, and he can get to the experience of salvation and the experience of justification in particular, which very much is by works, specifically the work of repenting.

Whenever I read and write about Protestant Reformed ministers and professors, I always remind myself of what has transpired in the recent warfare between the truth and the lie. It keeps me grounded. Protestant Reformed ministers and professors are magicians; and unless you keep your head and actually look in another place than they want you to, they will by means of feint, deception, misdirection, smoke, and mirrors steal the truth from you and cause you to believe their lies. I have never understood better than I do now what Jesus Christ meant in Matthew 24:23–24 when he warned his church that at the end of time and as a sign of his coming false teachers would arise.

Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall

¹ Martyn McGeown, "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness." The seven-part blog series began April 27, 2022 (<https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-1-repentance>), and ended June 1, 2022 (<https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-7-repentance-and-remission>).

arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.

The message of the false teacher is that he brings Christ: Christ is with the false teacher, and Christ speaks through the false teacher. Thus he points here and there to Christ. The false teacher's message about Christ is confirmed by signs and wonders. Signs and wonders are dazzling displays performed under the power of the lie in order to deceive you. I used to think that this meant that the false teacher would call fire from heaven or heal a sick person, and perhaps in the future that might be true. But I am certain now that signs and wonders also mean dazzling displays of words, intellect, rhetoric, and argumentation.

Professor Engelsma is adept at this, perhaps more than any other. A dazzling display of intellect, a turn of phrases, and theological acumen with a healthy dose of scorn and a little jocularly; but the power and purpose behind that are to bewitch you and to turn you from the truth. Believe it not!

Reverend McGeown is also adept at this black art. After I have finished reading his articles, I always say to myself, after a great contest, that I thank God that I did not lose my faith. Reverend McGeown is slippery. He piles on resources that make the reader suppose that the whole scripture and the entirety of the Reformed faith back up his theology. But he is a deceiver whose writings also stand in the service of turning you from the truth to the lie. Believe them not!

I find it to be profitable in order to understand the times in which we live to know what has transpired in the recent controversy. The Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) and her ministers are experts at the big lie and crafting the narratives to fit their purposes. Their purposes are to cover the lies that they teach and preach and to deceive the simple. Their past narrative explained that there was no doctrinal issue in the PRC, but the split in the PRC was the result of the misbehavior of some ministers. This narrative continued and said that the PRC really would like Andy, Nathan, Marty, and others to come back to the PRC and be a happy family again. Some were even reluctant to call the separation *schism*, even though all who left the PRC were charged with schism. The narrative explained that the separation was a rather unfortunate event, the result of stubbornness and recalcitrance on the part of the ringleaders, but there was essentially

There is enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, between the truth and the lie, between the true church and the false church, and between a spiritual seed and a carnal seed.

no doctrinal difference between the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC) and the PRC. The ministers in the RPC especially were big meanies. So the narrative continued. Perhaps there was a tendency in the RPC toward antinomianism, but the two denominations were basically the same doctrinally. Then the narrative changed. After the split the RPC ministers were harsh in their rhetoric. The difference was only a matter of rhetoric, rhetoric that was over the top and unnecessary. Then the narrative changed again. There was, in fact, a doctrinal difference between the denominations, but the doctrinal difference was only perceived, a matter of misunderstanding and perhaps reactionary to a perceived threat to the gospel that did not in reality exist. Once again the narrative changed. While there was initially no doctrinal difference or only a perceived doctrinal difference, the continued writing and preaching in the RPC show that the Reformed Protestant denomination has developed her theology and is defini-

tely antinomian, makes believers stocks and blocks, denies that repentance is necessary, and in reality denies the Reformed faith and really the entirety of the Christian faith. In addition, the Reformed Protestant ministers are still big meanies who use harsh rhetoric and attack people. This narrative developed, so that now the view is that there really never was a controversy at all in the PRC. The whole issue was manufactured. Thus those

in the PRC now maintain that the denomination has held to the truth without change for the entirety of her existence. This narrative maintains that the controversy revealed that in the PRC the real problem has been radicals and those who do not love the church and those who have been plotting the overthrow of the PRC for years. Now thankfully the radicals and troublemakers are all gone from the PRC, so that the denomination can get on with her life. Many, many narratives! And I could give more. They change with the people with whom you talk and with the time of the day and month. The narratives change more frequently than changes of underwear. The purposes of all the narratives are to misdirect, confuse, and deceive.

And so it is good to remind ourselves that the narrative has not changed in nearly seven years. Indeed, the narrative has not changed for six thousand years. There is enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, between the truth and the lie, between the true church and the false church, and between a

spiritual seed and a carnal seed, as the apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 4:29: “As then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now.”

The issue between the PRC and the RPC *is* doctrinal. The issue involves the doctrine of justification by faith alone, especially as that doctrine is applied to the experience of the believer and his enjoyment and assurance of his salvation. The false doctrine in the PRC taught that in addition to faith the good works, deeds, and activities of man are the way to God, especially in a man’s conscious experience of salvation. The sermon that brought the doctrinal issue to light in the PRC taught that faith in Christ and the good works done by grace in the power of the Holy Spirit are the way to God. Faith and good works are the way to peace, happiness, joy, assurance, and the experience of salvation. That was defended tooth and nail in the PRC. And it was finally codified as official Protestant Reformed dogma by Synod 2020, which taught that there are activities of man that precede blessings of God.

The emeritus professor of dogmatics in the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, Prof. David Engelsma, has made clear that Protestant Reformed dogma is that there are activities of man that precede God’s justification of a man, so that those activities—forgiving the neighbor, repenting, believing with an active faith (active faith means faith as man’s act, not God’s act)—are unto God’s act of forgiving a man. By the word *unto* Professor Engelsma means that without which God may not forgive the sinner—that upon which God’s act of forgiving the sinner is conditioned. Professor Engelsma, more than any other, has advanced the doctrinal controversy and is responsible for the perishing of generations of people in the fires of false doctrine. His writing is an offense in the biblical sense of the term, that is, that by which many are hardened in their lies and many others stumble and break their spiritual necks. The false doctrine is conditional justification in man’s experience, justification by faith as man’s act and by man’s deeds and activities performed by grace. When the Protestant Reformed ministers use the words *precede*, *unto*, *in the way of*, and *active*, they mean condition and prerequisite. So when they say that there are activities of man that precede blessings of God, they mean conditions unto the blessings of God. When they say that repentance is unto forgiveness, they mean that repentance is the condition to forgiveness. When they say that fellowship with God is in the way of obedience, they

The issue between the PRC and the RPC *is* doctrinal. The issue involves the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

mean that fellowship with God is conditioned on obedience. When they say that forgiveness is experienced by an active faith, they mean conditioned on faith as man’s activity. Man must repent in order that God may forgive him; man must forgive his neighbor in order that God may forgive him; man must believe with an active faith—faith as man’s act, not God’s act—in order that God may forgive him. Protestant Reformed ministers must preach as the gospel of grace to their congregations, and Protestant Reformed professors must teach as sound Reformed doctrine to their students, that there are activities of man that precede blessings of God. And they are. The Protestant Reformed denomination has been swallowed up by this false theology.

The issue, in short, has been and remains the corruption of the doctrine of justification by faith alone in the believer’s experience. Along the way, as the controversy was unfolding in the Protestant Reformed Churches, a whole host of statements were made, and related doctrines were corrupted. These statements have been quoted and analyzed on the pages of *Sword and Shield*. But I will briefly review some of the statements for the reader: if a man would be saved, there is that which he must do; in the matter of repentance and drawing near to God, in a vital sense man’s drawing

nigh to God precedes God’s drawing nigh to man; regenerated man is not totally depraved; there is an available grace that is different from the irresistible grace of regeneration; man must work for his assurance; God uses man’s works to assure man of his salvation; Jesus Christ did not personally accomplish every aspect of our salvation; there are activities of man that precede blessings of God; the more one obeys, the greater are his blessings; faith and repentance are what man must do unto his justification; and the preaching of the law is the preaching of the gospel. The PRC yawned like a dog on a summer day also when ministers preached that there are conditions for fellowship with God (which was never declared heresy); justification in the final judgment is by man’s words and works; there are two rails to heaven that consist of God’s grace and man’s responsibility; in the end the choice of who to serve is up to man (by grace, of course); and it is not enough for our salvation that Christ died and arose, but we must also come to him.

A more thorough apostasy from the Reformed faith can hardly be imagined. Roman Catholic priests are not this bold in their denial of the gospel. Remember that none of the above has been repudiated as false and

heretical. And you must remember these things whenever you read anything written by a Protestant Reformed minister. If he does not repudiate the above statements, then he believes them; and his writing serves the purpose to cover, reinforce, or direct your attention away from the appalling apostasy evident in the theology of the statements above. At the heart of every one of those statements is the doctrine of conditional fellowship with God, which is the doctrine of conditional justification in the believer's conscience and experience.

This is true of Reverend McGeown's writing too. He writes of election, the death of Christ, and even justification. And in the course of his writing, he may say some true things. But I have come to realize that he brings up the truth to cast doubt on it or to get past it so that he can come to his real point, which is what man does. He has never repudiated but has defended all the false theology of the PRC. And so whatever truth he writes in his series "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness" serves the lie of conditional justification in the believer's experience.

Another point to remember before I get to my analysis of his series is that he has been exposed already as a false teacher and a crafty one too. His doctrine of justification is that God justifies the believer. Paul says that God justifies the ungodly. Reverend McGeown's doctrine of justification is that God justifies the believer because faith for McGeown is man's act, not God's act. Faith is what man does to be justified. I wrote against his blog "Passive Faith?," and I remind the reader both about what he wrote and my analysis of it.

I wrote,

So for McGeown faith and repentance are not God's acts. But note well: McGeown does not say merely that faith and repentance are man's activities. They are man's activities, *which are not God's acts*. So then also when McGeown says that faith and repentance are "God-given" and "God-worked" activities of the believer, he is simply speaking nonsense and deception. Whatever "God-given" and "God-worked" activities are for McGeown, *they are not God's acts*.²

I wrote,

Faith is an activity of man that "is *not* God's act." That is bold. That is a total corruption of the Reformed idea of faith as a gift. Whatever Reverend McGeown means by faith as a gift, it very definitely does not include faith as an activity.

That "is *not* God's act." There is for McGeown some aspect of faith—its activity—that "is *not* God's act." This is also what Reverend McGeown means then by "active faith." He means that the activity of faith is not God's work. (16)

Reverend McGeown wrote,

There is a difference between the PRC and the RPC on the instrument of justification...The difference is not that PRC theologians teach that justification is by means of works, which would be false doctrine and heresy. The difference is concerning the activity or passivity of faith in justification. Is faith an *active* or a *passive* instrument?³

I wrote,

We then allege that with his idea of active faith, that it "is *not* God's act," and with his rejection of passive faith, he establishes the Protestant Reformed position that makes faith man's work and what man must do for justification. In making faith what man must do for justification, the PRC add to the ground of justification and deny Christ's work alone as the only ground of justification. (14)

The same basic issue was present in McGeown's writing on repentance in his blog "Passive Faith?," in which he wrote,

Repentance is a God-given and God-worked activity of the believer, the activity of sorrowing over sin and turning from it, which God does not *perform* for us, and without which God does not forgive sin (Luke 13:3, 5; Acts 3:19; 2 Cor. 7:10).

My analysis was as follows:

Reverend McGeown creates a contrast between God's gift and man's activity. For McGeown, man's activity "is *not* God's act," and God "does not *perform*" it. There are two tracks in McGeown's idea of spiritual gifts. There is God's gift, and there is man's performance. Man's performance is not the inevitable fruit of God's gift. Man's performance is not what God gives. *God* gives, and *man* must perform, and together this is repentance. (15)

Then Reverend McGeown added these words: "Without...repentance"—God-given but not God's work, but

2 Nathan J. Langerak, "Slippery McGeown (2): Active Faith and Justification," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 13 (February 1, 2022): 13–14. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this article are given in text.

3 Martyn McGeown, "Passive Faith?," November 15, 2021, <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/passive-faith>.

man's activity—"God does not forgive sin." Forgiveness is the blessing that comes to man as he *performs*—*man* performs, not God—repentance.

I wrote,

If Reverend McGeown is not to be branded as a false teacher, let him repudiate his doctrine that faith "is *not* God's act," and with that let him repudiate his evil doctrine that there is that which man must do to be saved and his defense of Reverend Kooles' theology that there is that which man must do to be saved. Until Reverend McGeown repudiates his deceptive theology, he is to be branded as a theological huckster with no Reformed credibility at all, as a deceiver, and as a dead branch.

He pretends to be Reformed. He uses Reformed language. But he is Arminian and Pelagian in his doctrines of grace. Consequently, he is Arminian and Pelagian in his doctrine of faith. Being Arminian and Pelagian in his doctrines of grace

and faith, he corrupts the Reformed doctrine of justification and brings up again the wicked doctrine of justification by works. (19)

I review all of this because Reverend McGeown has not repudiated his false doctrine, and thus he stands exposed as a false teacher. Faith and repentance are what man does to be justified in his conscience and experience. It is justification by faith and works. And in his blog series "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness," he tells us about a new distinction between justification and forgiveness and by means of that distinction defends his doctrine of justification by faith and by works. One thing is to be said for Slippery McGeown: he at least admits that the issue is justification in the warfare between the truth and the lie.

I will begin an analysis next time of his doctrine of justification and with it his doctrine of faith and repentance.

—NJL

SOUND DOCTRINE

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

TRUE REPENTANCE (4)

*So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth,
but of God that sheweth mercy. —Romans 9:16*

Introduction

As seen in the previous articles in this series, true repentance cannot be of man.

No man can crucify himself. No man of himself can fully deny himself. No man can turn himself from his sinful ways, to which he is inclined with his whole heart. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6). "The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Rom. 8:7). "For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another" (Titus 3:3).

The Heidelberg Catechism, in Lord's Day 1, describes this condition of the natural man as his misery. The heart of this misery is man's way in his own nature, as he is

conceived and born in sin. He is prone by nature away from God and God's law. Instead of loving God and the neighbor, man is prone by nature to hate God and his neighbor (LD 2).

Such is the misery of man before God and before God's law.

But look around and observe the world. Look not at the many causes of false repentance on the world's part. Look not at the judgments of God that afflict the sons of men in myriad ways, from natural disasters to war to disease and famine to unrest and turmoil that affect safety and security. Look not at men who bewail themselves over their lamentable condition and try to figure out a way of escape. Look not for false repentance that has everything to do with the consequences of sin and

nothing to do with sin itself. But look at the world in its glee and merriment. Look at the world parading itself in self-indulgence and abominable iniquity. Look at the world joyfully trampling God's glory underfoot as it revels in revolt from him, from his law and his truth. Look at the world in its madness as it attempts to overthrow the most basic ordinances embedded in creation that testify of God's truth and wisdom.

Here is the world's misery at its very heart. That misery is its great joy and happiness. The world's delight is its own undoing. The people labor in the very fire (Hab. 2:13).

True repentance, true sorrow of heart that is God-directed and God-centered, is of God, not of man. The self-loathing and self-abhorrence of true repentance can only be from God alone, the God of all mercy and grace in Jesus Christ, the giver of every good and perfect gift.

God's Mercy Precedes

How wondrous is the mercy of God—mercy that precedes, is in, and follows true, spiritual, Godward repentance! How his gift of sovereign repentance glorifies him as the God who is so rich in mercy!

The mercy of God must be first. It is first because God is sovereign in all of salvation. He is the God who has mercy upon whom he will have mercy.

What is the mercy of God that is so powerfully shown in the true repentance of the sinner?

First, God's mercy that precedes is that virtue of God by which he looks on the elect sinner, who is impenitent and hard-hearted and continues in his wicked ways. No rebuke will turn him from his sin. No judgment sent upon him will turn him. No terror will break him from his perverse rebellion. He must only harden himself in the pursuit of his way of sin. He is worthy only of judgment. In his stubborn impenitence there is absolutely no difference between him and the world, which is steeped in iniquity and rushes headlong to destruction. Instead of letting the sinner continue in his way of sin to his own destruction, the Lord has compassion on him. Instead of judging him, the Lord takes pity upon him.

The mercy of the Lord is to break down the sinner thoroughly and completely. That mercy is to break his hardened heart and to give him a contrite and humble spirit. That mercy of God is to make the sinner see his deplorable condition, that he is a wretched sinner. In his sovereign mercy God gives the sinner a new heart, a new heart by whose power he will loathe himself in his own sight for his iniquities and his abominations (Ezek. 36:31). That mercy of God is to give the sinner the humble supplication of the publican, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Second, God's mercy that precedes is his sovereign declaration in the gospel to the elect sinner of God's mercy to forgive sins. God publishes those glad tidings in the gospel, declaring himself to be a merciful God and promising to forgive all those who call upon his name.

The divine publication of God's mercy to forgive sins is reflected beautifully in Psalm 51. In the first verse of this penitential psalm, David confessed his sole appeal. His reason for appealing to God to forgive him could not be in himself, the ungodly adulterer and murderer. His reason was not in his own confession of sin or in his own expression of sorrow over his sin. True repentance must forbid such things. He could not give to get. The preceding standard of David's request for pardon is wonderfully laid out: "According to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies."

So also is the preceding mercy of God reflected in the prayer of the publican in Jesus' parable: "O God, have mercy upon me, a sinner." The publican's appeal was only to God's mercy because the publican was a sinner without hope in himself. His appeal to God's mercy was because the mercy of God is for ungodly sinners as ungodly sinners.

Without that mercy there is no approach for the sinner to a holy and righteous God for forgiveness. There could be no approach for David, the adulterer and murderer. There could be no approach for the sinner, the publican.

The wonder of God's mercy is in his sovereign declaration of his mercy, mercy published in the gospel to sinners. The wonder of God's mercy goes beyond the mere external call of the gospel. Without the internal call, directed by the Holy Spirit to the heart of the ungodly sinner, that sinner could never come to God for his mercy. But the Spirit powerfully applies the truth of God's mercy proclaimed in the gospel, causing the elect sinner to know God's mercy for him. The gospel of God's mercy must be accompanied with the drawing power of God, according to divine election. In this same manner faith must apprehend the mercy of God in Jesus Christ in order for the sinner to come to God as a sinner, to plead the mercy of God for forgiveness.

So it must also be the mercy of God that follows to justify the ungodly sinner. Here too, mercy is the glorious wonder that glorifies God as the one true God. Here especially rings loudly and clearly the proclamation in Micah 7:18 of God's uniqueness: "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy."

What is the wonder of mercy in forgiveness?

Grace alone breaks the grip and power of sin's dominion over the hearts of God's elect.

There is an ungodly sinner standing before the presence of the infinitely righteous and holy God, the God who punishes sinners in his just judgment. Into God's presence this sinner has come. He has come to speak nothing good of himself. The sinner gives no reasons in himself that the living, holy God of heaven and earth should justify him. Exactly the opposite. Everything the sinner says about himself is cause for his condemnation and destruction. To all his wicked deeds, he lays exclusive claim. He says regarding them all, "They are mine, all of them and everything about them." All his wickedness, all his pollution, depravity, corruption, and guilt he imputes to himself. In the words of the publican, he is the sinner.

Nor does he justify himself. He does not claim any good of himself. No good works, no obedience, no keeping of God's law, however imperfectly. No faith, no repentance, no humility does he own before God. He does not thank God that he is not a sinner like other men.

God's mercy is that he justifies this ungodly sinner. As the Holy Spirit, God's mercy is that he enters into the entire nature of this ungodly sinner. God's mercy is that he tenderly and thoroughly washes the sinner's heart and soul, his lips and his hands with the holy and righteous blood of his Son, so that the sinner is now justified. God so mercifully separates that which the sinner has joined together in his confession: his person and his sins, that is, his confession of sin, his self-imputation. Before God's glorious, holy, all-seeing, and all-knowing presence, the sinner is cleansed of his sin and is acceptable and beloved. In his conscience the ungodly sinner is assured by faith of his thorough justification. According to God's word, God has shown himself merciful indeed, the God who is all-glorious in his forgiveness of sins.

God's Grace Precedes

Just as with the mercy of God, so also the grace of God precedes, is in, and follows his glorious gift of true, spiritual repentance.

Grace and mercy for the elect sinner's repentance belong together. They complement each other. While mercy has its distinct focus on the sinner as the sinner according to his dire need of repentance and forgiveness, grace has its focus on God, whose gift of mercy is wholly of himself. Grace is the good pleasure of God whereby he in himself in eternity determined unconditionally to bring his elect to himself in the deep way of sin and grace. Why did God determine to show his mercy to one sinner, dead in sins and trespasses, and not another? Because he determined wholly of himself. Why does God mercifully

work repentance in one and not in another? Because he decreed of his sovereign good pleasure alone.

Grace is also complementary to God's mercy because his merciful gift of repentance has its righteous basis in the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone and his meritorious cross. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). In his death on the cross, dying for elect sinners, Christ gave himself to that death for their repentance. As seen before,¹ their repentance is the necessary fruit of his death in their behalf. His death has become their death to sin in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is also true that Jesus' death on the cross is the gracious ground for the gift of their repentance. His blood is the ransom price of their redemption from sin. The result of his ransom is their redemption. Grace alone breaks the grip and power of sin's dominion over the hearts of God's elect. Grace irresistibly turns their impenitence into true repentance.

The grace of God is also the foundation for the gospel as the glad tidings of salvation. These are the glad tidings that proclaim God's gift of salvation in all its fullness, the proclamation of Christ as the complete savior, given by the grace of God alone. The gospel is the proclamation of Christ alone and his cross alone, that they give abundantly every blessing of salvation, including repentance (Acts 3:26).

According to the promise of the gospel, purchased and sealed in the blood of the gracious Son of God, God graciously works the fulfillment of his promise. He graciously turns so that the sinner turns (Jer. 31:18–19; Lam. 5:21).

What a wonder of grace is God's gift of repentance! Repentance is therefore a gracious death, a gracious sorrow, and a gracious grief. The ungodly sinner's self-exposure, to become in his own eyes a wretched, miserable sinner, is a most beautiful and glorious gift of God. In the sinner's brokenness and ruin is the almighty power of God's grace. In the sinner's repentance is the most wonderful power of God's grace. It divides the sinner against himself, causing him to abhor and loathe himself. Where before there was peace, there is now enmity—the new against the old, the spirit against the flesh.

It is also the grace of God that works so wondrously in the heart of the elect sinner to draw him into God's presence to confess his sins and to seek forgiveness from God's mercy. With the sinner's knowledge of his sins and the curse due to him for those sins, the reason he does not flee from God's holy presence can only be due to the working of God's grace in the sinner. That the ungodly sinner confesses his sins before the infinitely holy God, imputing them all to himself alone, can be only by God's grace working in the sinner.

¹ Martin VanderWal, "True Repentance," *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 1 (June 2022): 37; "True Repentance (2)," *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 2 (July 2022): 17–19.

For God's Glory

Because the mercy and grace of God alone are the causes of true repentance, true repentance must magnify and glorify God's mercy and grace. Repentance must be the humble acknowledgment of only sin and evil belonging to the sinner in the very crying out for God's mercy. In and from man there is nothing in which to glory, for the sake of God's glory alone. Repentance as the true power of complete self-denial must look to God's grace alone for all the sinner's justification. True repentance denies all good to self in order to look to God for all.

In this way of repentance, placed and walking in this way by grace alone, the ungodly sinner must know only one reason for his justification. That reason is not his repentance, though graciously wrought in his heart. Neither is that reason his faith, though graciously wrought in his heart. That reason is the mercy of God. According to the publican's prayer, God shows his mercy, declaring and sealing his pardon of sin. Faithful to his promise of mercy, he makes the penitent return to his house justified. So the forgiven, justified sinner glories in the God of mercy (Ps. 59:17).

That the mercy and grace of God precede, are in, and follow his work of repentance is also the preciousness of true repentance. So the Holy Spirit exalts true repentance in the wondrous words of Psalm 51:17: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." Also Psalm 34:18: "The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit." The sacrifices of a broken spirit are the sacrifices of God. He will never despise a broken and contrite heart because it is of him, of his mercy and grace. The Lord is nigh unto those who are of a broken heart because the broken heart is of his mercy and grace. He saves such as are of a contrite spirit because the contrite spirit is of his mercy and grace alone. He has respect not to men but to his own works. Such is the rule of John 1:16: "And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace."

How foolish then is the man who would interrupt this wondrous stream of God's mercy and grace to interpose himself, insisting that his repentance as well as his faith must have some affect on the mercy and grace of God! It is the most absurd folly to turn the glorious gospel of repentance and faith by the mercy and grace of God alone into a new law. God will be merciful to forgive, but man must first repent. God will give the grace of justification, but man must first believe. God

is willing to bestow grace—grace to forgive and grace to assure of forgiveness—but man must first repent and believe before God will bestow that grace. No mercy except for those who repent. No grace except for those who believe. Such folly cannot be undone by a mere concession that somehow, some way, it is still all by grace nonetheless. The damage is already done, not only to God's free, sovereign, irresistible grace but also to the assurance of God's mercy and grace. No longer is salvation grace for grace but grace for works, grace for man's activities, grace for man's doings.

Rather, salvation "is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy" (Rom. 9:16). As it is with salvation, so it is with every part of salvation. So it is with that part of salvation that is repentance. True repentance is not at all of man's willing or of man's running. Neither is it of man's willing or of man's running by grace or even by grace alone. It is only of God's mercy, the mercy that goes before, that gives, and that blesses the gift with grace for grace.

So it is ever by the mercy and grace of God that the Christian is at the same time the sinner and the justified,

righteous in his Lord Jesus Christ. So it is that he knows himself to be the most miserable sinner in and of himself and the most blessed saint in and of his blessed savior, Jesus Christ. So it

is that he knows what is necessary for him to know to live and die in the comfort of belonging to his faithful savior, Jesus Christ. So is his life in the words of the first thesis of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, a life of repentance according to the will of his Lord and Master. So it is true of him as Paul wrote in Romans 7:25: "So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin."

So it is with the life of the Christian as long as he lives in this world. As long as he is in the world, the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh, so that he cannot do the things that he would. So he looks for his entrance into glory, when he will no longer be both a sinner and justified but will be forever justified without sin. So he looks for the perfection of glory, when he will be no longer miserable but will be always and only blessed forever. So he hopes for the day when the battle between flesh and spirit will turn to complete triumph. So he anticipates the full glory of heaven, forever to praise the glory of the mercy and grace of his God.

—MVW

[God] has respect not to men
but to his own works.

REFORMED PRINCIPLES APPLIED IN THE CLASSROOM (1): THE NOTHINGNESS OF MAN

Many of us have become refamiliarized in the past year with verses such as “Train up a child in the way he should go...” (Prov. 22:6) and “Thou shalt teach them [God’s commands] diligently unto thy children” (Deut. 6:7). During the reformation the Lord has given, we have been struck by God’s word that reformation must influence all aspects of life: the church, our homes, and our schools. In a series of articles entitled “Reformed Principles Applied in the Classroom,” I will have particular interest in this third sphere of life. Specifically, I see a need in my own teaching and the teaching of our Christian schools at large to work to incorporate Reformed, biblical doctrine into the classroom in all subjects.

Of course, this is easier said than done. We may talk all day and discuss the importance of incorporating Reformed doctrine into the teaching of the school—how vital it is to have the doctrine of the school match the doctrine of the church and home, and how important it is to point our children to Jesus Christ in all things; but at the end of the discussion, we wonder how this is to be done. But this wondering is good; it will lead the child of God to the scriptures to search the depths of the truths therein for answers. What I hope to set forth in a series of articles is the teaching of scripture and the Reformed creeds on cherished doctrines of the Reformed faith and how specifically they can be brought into various subjects (social studies, mathematics, science, English, and others). This is intended for all Reformed believers, as I pray these principles and applications can extend to all spheres of life for our covenant children because of the foundation in God’s word of these principles and applications.

One of the most important principles of the Reformed faith, and therefore a principle that must be emphasized and applied in the Reformed classroom, is man’s utter nothingness. This truth is subject to the relentless attacks of the world, the false church, and our totally depraved natures. Our schools, as they are founded on the truth of the gospel, must defend against these attacks and develop the truth regarding this doctrine concerning man. Without a proper understanding of man’s nothingness, there

can be no proper understanding of the greatness of God and the glorious salvation we have in Jesus Christ! This truth regarding man must be fully integrated into the teaching in the schools, not just as an assumed truth or merely hinted at every once in a while, as I fear it often is in Christian classrooms.

What scripture really teaches about man is not a flattering picture. Psalm 103 speaks to us,

Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust. As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more. (vv. 13–16)

In Psalm 51 David confesses, “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (v. 5). We read in Job 25:4–6,

How then can man be justified with God? or how can he be clean that is born of a woman? Behold even to the moon, and it shineth not; yea, the stars are not pure in his sight. How much less man, that is a worm? And the son of man, which is a worm?

Galatians 6:3 teaches us, “For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself.”

In these verses and others, we find God’s teaching about man: man is dust and weak like grass and flowers; he is conceived and born dead in trespasses and sins; he cannot be justified in God’s sight by his working; he is a worm; and in his pride man thinks he is something when indeed he is nothing.

Yet the textbooks and curriculum we use in our classrooms often compromise this teaching or even directly contradict it. This is because the world’s doctrine of man, devoid of the light of the gospel, must be antithetical to scripture’s. The world must war against the sobering truth of man’s humility—it must, and it does. History textbooks go on for pages about a specific

man or woman from history and all the good his hands accomplished, all her magnificent achievements; and the textbooks vaunt this person as someone the students should aspire to be like. But the critical Reformed eye, fixed upon scripture, will see that this image falls miserably short of the only standard for good. I will enumerate a few examples so that we may look according to God's word and apply the word to well-known, well-loved men from history.

To begin, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were deists. These beloved "founding fathers" of the United States denied that God is triune and that God had any interest whatever in the creation, and believed instead that God let his creation run its course without interfering with it at all. They denied that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and therefore rejected the possibility of salvation through him. Yet these men dared to reference the Lord's name in the documents they authored and signed their names to that began this country. From thence the United States was deemed a nation founded on Christian principles. However, these men are not role models; these men should not be looked up to; these men lived wicked, Bible-denying and therefore God-hating lives. (Thomas Jefferson even had his own version of the Bible later named the "Jefferson Bible," in which he extracted some teachings of Jesus from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and cast aside everything else—including anything indicating Jesus' deity and work of redemption.)

History books and articles and websites abound with the supposed wisdom (which is no wisdom but foolishness [1 Cor. 3:19]) of these men. How many of us know "proverbs" such as "A penny saved is a penny earned" or "Early to bed, early to rise..." or "Nothing in life is certain except death and taxes," from the mind of Benjamin Franklin? Is this wisdom? Is this the truth? God tells us this wisdom of the world is foolishness before him because Jesus Christ is the wisdom of God, and God himself is truth. How could a man who denied the deity and salvatory work of our savior Jesus Christ have any true wisdom at all to share with us?

Another famous deist—one who openly called into question Christ's deity, promoted evolution, and believed a type of universal salvation; one whom the world loves to exalt to the peaks of morality—was Abraham Lincoln. From his leadership during the Civil War to his stance

against slavery to his thoughtful, heroic, and patriotic speeches, the country in which we live loves to extol Abraham Lincoln. But again, if we think according to the word of God, if Abraham Lincoln too denied the wisdom of the word of God, how can we behave as though he has wisdom to share with us? To do that would be to actively look away from Jesus Christ, the wisdom of God, and seek wisdom in the dark, depraved recesses of the heart of man.

And we could go on. There are abundant examples of men from history in whom the world delights and whom the world vaunts above the word of God because of their achievements, intelligence, insights, leadership, and other qualities. We could talk about the world's love of the military acumen of the hedonistic Alexander the Great. We could discuss other men of wicked, worldly wisdom, such as Gandhi, Confucius, and William Shakespeare. And textbooks explode with praise

for men such as Albert Einstein, Charles Darwin, John Locke, and Thomas Paine, who favored science and reason over Jehovah God. Let us not fall into the trap of the devil and fix our eyes upon these men as those who are good, wise, and worthy of imitation. Let us not teach as the world and exalt mere men, but instead let us extol the wisdom of our God, who would use such wicked and profane

men for the cause of the building of his church and the glory of his name!

I must confess that this was a grave weakness that I experienced in my schooling while growing up in the Protestant Reformed schools. Often when these historical figures were taught, the message was that they were great and quite something to behold and even that we should aspire to be like them. Look at how intelligent they were! Look at how they challenged the common ideas and practices of the day! Look at how hardworking they were! Look at their abilities to speak and write so eloquently! What needed to be said instead was that these men were nothing! God is great; God alone is great! Jesus Christ is someone to behold and follow! Follow not after the apparent wisdom of these men, who attempted to divorce wisdom from the source of truth. Seek the face of Jehovah!

I will also confess that the mentality so prevalent in the world has seeped into my own instruction. I remember, for example, making much of the genius of Carl Gauss, a famous mathematician who at the age of a young

Without a proper understanding of man's nothingness, there can be no proper understanding of the greatness of God and the glorious salvation we have in Jesus Christ!

elementary school child could add the digits 1 to 100 in the matter of a couple of minutes by using an invented formula. I made much of the intellect of this man, when instead I should have praised the God who gave Gauss his intelligence so that God might be glorified and who first established and maintained the laws that Gauss discovered only by God's sovereignty.

But what about instruction involving godly men, even ones who did much good for the cause of the gospel and reformed the church? Our temptation often is to exalt them in our teaching because of the good works they performed. This too is a grave mistake. While men such as Noah, Job, Paul, Augustine, John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Hendrik de Cock, and many others were given by God as good examples of life and doctrine and while their writings have been used by the church for many years, they too were men. Let us not forget that. They were men who had the same totally depraved natures we have and who desperately needed the saving work of Jesus Christ. Let us teach our students that God alone raised up these men in the church; God justified them before his sight; God gifted them with spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ; and God ordained the theology they would develop, the reformations they would bring, the deeds they would perform, and the very words they would speak and write. Truly, these men, just like all other men, were nothing of themselves.

God alone makes men what they are, and so we must apply that also to all prominent unbelieving men we teach our students. God gave these men their offices; God gave them their intellects; God set them in high places; God gave them loyal subjects, citizens, and soldiers; God led them to make discoveries and conclusions about his creation. And what did these unbelieving men do? All that they *could* do! They pressed these things from God into all manner of unrighteousness and with their wickedness led astray thousands and millions of people. These men were set up in these offices, with these gifts of earthly intelligence, insight, power, and the like, so that God might condemn them daily by their actions and cast them one day into the eternal judgment they deserve for raging against the very God who gave them those gifts. Let us teach about these men what God taught David in Psalm 73: "Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction. How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! they are utterly consumed with terrors" (vv. 18–19). Let us say to the world that will puff up these men and their external gifts

that we reject their wicked doctrine that makes something of man and nothing of God!

A final practice of applying the doctrine of man in the Reformed classroom will fit more in a science or mathematics classroom. When the students are taught about God's order instilled in the rules, formulas, and theorems of mathematics and science; when they are impressed with the infinity of God in numbers, sequences, and series and the vastness of space (which all only appear to be infinite, but God knows their end); when they behold the providence and sovereignty of God in upholding all of creation; when they see God's immutability in the unchangeable nature of the laws of math and the sciences, teach them to reflect on the vanity and emptiness of man.

Man is not orderly like God, but man will make rules and break them to serve his own purposes. Man is not infinite like God, but man is finite, so that he cannot even understand something as simple as the end of numbers or the deepness of space. Man cannot create laws of science and math but is merely allowed to uncover them; and even then, with his dark mind, he often cannot uncover them correctly, or he presses them into his God-hating agenda. For example, man used the laws God placed in his creation to dream up the theory of evolution, which militates against the whole revelation of scripture. Man is not unchangeable like God, but man changes on a whim in his thoughts, emotions, convictions, and beliefs. We exclaim with the psalmist in Psalm 8, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" (v. 4).

I encourage teachers to apply the Reformed doctrine of man in the education and upbringing of your students. Take this concept and develop it further for your own classes and your own instruction. There is much more to be said on this topic, and there are many more ways to apply this concept to our students! My goal really was only to explore some possibilities of showing man's nothingness in the subjects taught at our schools, and I doubt I even scratched that surface. God gives us a sober reminder in his words to Adam after his fall in the garden: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3:19). Let us remind ourselves of these words after every lesson that discusses man and his "wisdom," power, leadership, intelligence, inventions, and even good works in his laboring for the glory of God. And inevitably, the result will be that we make room to bring greater glory and honor to our God and to his Son Jesus Christ.

—Joel Langerak Jr.

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 (3): HIERARCHY: OPPRESSION AND DELIVERANCE

These words spake his parents, because they feared the Jews: for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue. Therefore said his parents, He is of age; ask him.—John 9:22–23

Oppression

The relationship between hierarchy and implicit faith was manifested in the miracle of Jesus' healing of the man who had been born blind (John 9). The Holy Spirit carefully related the manifestation of that relationship to the wonder of Jesus as the light of the world. In the chapter the Spirit set the bond of light between the Lord and the man born blind against two very different entities. The first, clearly on the foreground, was the company of the Pharisees. Their hierarchy was a hierarchy of darkness. Their power, both ecclesiastical and spiritual, they used in two ways to oppose Jesus, the light of the world. They contradicted Christ's teaching and sought to destroy the gospel by means of the law, specifically by their erroneous interpretation of the law for self-justification. They also used their spiritual and ecclesiastical authority to threaten the people. John 9:22 records the judgment of the Pharisees: if anyone should confess that Jesus was Christ, he was to be cast out of the synagogue.

The entire purpose of the Pharisees in their judgment was to oppose Christ by the abuse of their spiritual and ecclesiastical authority over the people. The Pharisees' determination, by every means at their disposal, was to keep the people from turning to Christ and following the light.

Why were the Pharisees so opposed to Christ? What threat did he represent to them?

The threat was the Light of the World against the darkness of the world. The darkness cannot comprehend the light. The darkness must seek to destroy the light because the light threatens to show the evil deeds of the darkness. The light condemns the darkness. Not only does the light manifest the evil deeds hidden in the darkness; but also the light must condemn the darkness itself as sinful, the sinful refusal of darkness

to come to the light. That darkness is unbelief and impenitence.

Thus the darkness itself is the power that threatens. It bullies and intimidates. The darkness itself is oppression. The darkness employed by the Pharisees had both perpetrators and victims. The perpetrators were those who held authority in the hierarchy. The victims were those who were under that hierarchy and were oppressed because of their implicit faith in that hierarchy.

So there is another entity that scripture places over against Jesus and the man born blind: the man's parents. The blind man's parents sided with the darkness over against Jesus and their very own son. Indeed, the parents were of a very different kind than the Pharisees, who carried the authority over the Jews. But the parents sided with the darkness. They allowed the darkness to dictate their speech. In their speech they enabled the continued opposition of the darkness against the light. The parents stood with the darkness, and they would see the darkness cast their own son out of the synagogue.

The blind man's parents thought and spoke as they did because of their fear of the Jews. When the Pharisees requested the parents to present their testimony concerning their son, they testified that, indeed, he was their son. They testified also that he had been born blind and that after being healed he could see. But at the very point that truly mattered, they failed. Though they understood so clearly that it was Jesus who had given their son sight—glorious wonder of light—they refused to testify. They declared only their ignorance: "By what means he now seeth, we know not; or who hath opened his eyes, we know not: he is of age; ask him: he shall speak for himself" (v. 21). The Spirit of light gave the reason for their proclaimed ignorance concerning Jesus: they feared the Jews. The Jews had issued their threat, the threat of their use of the keys of the kingdom. They

had made it clear to all the people: if anyone confessed that Jesus was the Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue (v. 22).

That was no empty threat. The Pharisees carried out their threat against the man born blind. He refused to follow his parents' example. He refused to bow to the threatened pressure. He confessed that Jesus had healed him of his blindness. He went even further to confess that Jesus had to be from God. Upon the man's confession the result followed. Reproached and reviled by the Pharisees, he was cast out of the synagogue (v. 34). Officially shunned and cast out of the fellowship for the sake of the light, he was cut off from his people and from salvation. He was declared an enemy of God and of God's word for confessing Christ as the light that came from God.

The weapon chosen and used by the darkness against the light was taken from the light. Hierarchy abuses the light and presses it into the service of darkness in order to suppress the light. The fellowship of salvation held, maintained, and promoted by the church institution was so twisted and distorted to become the tool of oppression. What had been given by the word of God to be an instrument of peace and health was turned into a device of cruelty and division, breaking bonds to God and his truth.

The parents' fear centered on their place in the synagogue. The Pharisees had complete control over membership in the synagogue. That control they exercised not in service of the truth but in service of their hierarchical authority. It mattered not whether Jesus was the Christ, the light of the world. It mattered not that Jesus, the light of the world, healed the man of the blindness with which he had been born. What mattered was what the Pharisees wanted. What mattered was that the Pharisees ruled. Membership in the synagogue was their wicked means of enforcing their rule, a rule that derived from the word of God but which they used against the Word become flesh. Therefore, the parents' fear was the dreadful consequence of their implicit faith in the Pharisees. The word of their spiritual leaders determined their place among the covenant people of God.

The word of God in John 9 requires that attention also be paid to another element that comes to the foreground. This element is the *necessity* of that oppression. The darkness that *must* oppress and persecute the light is the darkness of hierarchy. Hierarchy will not and cannot submit to the light, Jesus Christ. Hierarchy is the rule of

men who refuse to serve in behalf of Christ. Claiming his authority by ruling in his name, hierarchical men rebel against Christ and use his authority to destroy his light. Hierarchy cannot rest content to oppose Christ, who is the light, but hierarchy must work to destroy the manifestation of the light and stamp out every expression of that light. Hierarchy must not only cast Christ out of its synagogue but also everyone who confesses Jesus to be the Christ.

The character of the oppression of the darkness against the light is doctrinal. The darkness opposes the light by imposing a doctrinal determination. A doctrinal statement was at the heart of that oppressive force exercised by the Jews with the requirement of synagogue membership. Continuing membership in the synagogue depended on whether one would confess Jesus as the Christ. The parents could continue in the synagogue as members in good standing as long as they stood together with the hierarchy and its darkness. The parents did not need to deny that Jesus was the Christ. The hierarchy was content with the parents' silent acquiescence, which was all that was necessary for the hierarchy to maintain its darkness. In the parents' silence they would witness their son being cast out of the synagogue exactly for his confession of the truth that Jesus was sent by God.

What is the necessity of that oppression, which is doctrinal in character and is the action of church hierarchy against the light? It is the necessity of unbelief, unbelief that must drive out all truth while pretending to work in behalf of the truth. It is the necessity of unbelief that refuses trust in the light in every respect. Hierarchy must serve men instead of Christ, darkness instead of light. Hierarchy must serve the doctrines and teachings of men instead of the truth that leads only to Christ and the true freedom that he alone brings and gives. Simply put, hierarchy cannot abide the freedom of Christians to serve the Lord from their hearts. That freedom always spells the doom of all hierarchy. So also must be understood the fierce response of the Roman Catholic papacy to the gospel freedom trumpeted by the Protestant Reformation.

John 9 powerfully demonstrates the difference between the darkness and the light, between the darkness of hierarchy and implicit faith, on one side, and the light of Christ and faith in him alone, on the other side. Together on one side were the Pharisees and the parents of the blind man. Together on the other side were Jesus

The Light of the World gave freely all peace and comfort to him whom the hierarchy had cast out.

and the man born blind. One side was the darkness, and the other was the light.

Deliverance

But the true glory of John 9 is the light that overcame the darkness. John 9 also demonstrates the only deliverance from the darkness of hierarchy and implicit faith: the light of the world and the truth that alone sets men free and that gives light to the blind, Jesus Christ.

What was the power of that oppressive force of the Pharisees' hierarchy? What was that power to which the blind man's parents succumbed when they refused to testify how their son had received his sight? What was that power before the light? Could that power destroy the work of Christ? Could that power turn the light into darkness? Could that power reclaim the man whose sight Jesus had restored? Could that power still oppress the man who had confessed that Jesus was sent by God?

How blessed and tender is the record of scripture in John 9:35! "Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when he had found him..." The Light of the World heard. The Light of the World sought and found. The Light of the World gave freely all peace and comfort to him whom the hierarchy had cast out. The testimony regarding the Light of the World was made by him to whom that Light had given sight. The man born blind confessed and worshiped.

No matter the tyrannical oppression of the Pharisees. No matter the fear that they imposed on the people. No matter the fearful refusal of his parents to testify. The man born blind was truly set free by the Light of the World.

The Light of the World is the only power that can truly break the grip of hierarchical tyranny. Only the freedom of the Son of God makes the people of God truly free, breaking the blindness of darkness caused by the fear of men. Only the freedom of the Son of God living in the hearts of God's people by faith is the power to rescue them from implicit faith. That freedom alone can break the grip of fear instilled by the authoritarian hierarchy, by which the hierarchy binds the conscience.

What exactly is it about the light of the world, Jesus Christ, that brings this glorious deliverance from both hierarchical tyranny and the implicit faith that rests in that tyranny? It is that Jesus Christ alone is the fullness of the grace and favor of God that fills the heart of the

child of God with true, everlasting peace and joy. The fullness of that peace and joy brings about two important results for the sake of deliverance from hierarchical tyranny.

The first result is that all the authority of man becomes vain and empty, a mere exercise of show that carries no true meaning and significance. What before caused such fear and trembling now becomes laughable. In the light of God's favor, the disapproval of men means nothing. Let men judge. Let the Pharisees cast out of the synagogue. Let ecclesiastical power hurl its anathemas. Let the sentences of suspension, deposition, and excommunication pour out. If Christ has justified, who can possibly condemn?

The second result is that the child of God is free to enjoy and treasure new bonds that truly help him in his freedom from hierarchy and tyranny. He is free to join the company of those who together maintain the freedom they have in the gospel of the Son of God

that makes them free and keeps them in the freedom faithfully to serve their Lord. Together they are free to place themselves under the yoke of Christ as truly easy and to take upon their shoulders his burden as truly light. Together they are free to be members of a church institute that clearly manifests itself as an instrument of Christ alone, the only head and king of his church.

The man born blind, whom the Light of the World delivered from his blindness, was wondrously bound to his Lord by that deliverance. He was healed of his blindness not only to be a powerful rebuke of the Pharisees but also to confess Jesus as the Son of God and to worship him. But the blind man and his restoration to the light were also indicative of the manner in which the Light of the World gathers all those given to him by his Father in heaven. So the church is the company of those who are conceived and born in the blindness and darkness of sin and who are delivered into the light by the only Light of the whole world.

The freedom of the church of Jesus Christ is to have over it only one rule. Only one rule is to guard and keep her from the rule of men. Only one rule may be maintained to keep her from descending into the darkness of the hierarchy of men and implicit faith: the spiritual rule of the Son of God by his word and Holy Spirit.

In the service of this freedom—freedom from the hierarchy of the doctrines and commandments of men—was

The blind man and his restoration to the light were also indicative of the manner in which the Light of the World gathers all those given to him by his Father in heaven.

one of the chief principles of the Protestant Reformation. In the service of this freedom was the doctrine of justification by faith alone without works. This central doctrine of the Reformation was promoted over against the hierarchy of Rome not just because the Roman Catholic hierarchy taught the false doctrine of justification by faith and works. But the doctrine of justification by faith alone without works was also fundamental to the freedom of the Protestant Reformation because Rome's doctrine was the doctrine of men. That doctrine spelled only the dark bondage of enslavement to men. This false doctrine of Rome in particular makes the church the arbiter of salvation. Which works, what kind, and how many were to bring a man into God's favor is the doctrine that makes men slaves of other men and is the power of Rome's hierarchy. Then as well as now the doctrines and commandments of men enslave, but the gospel of salvation by grace alone brings true freedom.

Certainly, it is true that the Church Order of Dordt has been so badly abused as an instrument of hierarchy. It is true that the Church Order has been so perversely abused for the sake of demanding implicit faith. One need only see how the phrase "shall be considered settled and binding" in article 31 has been twisted to demand implicit faith to bind the consciences of God's people.

However, the Church Order of Dordt is in harmony with the truth of the Protestant Reformation. In fact, the very purpose of the Church Order, in the language of Belgic Confession 32, is "to keep all men in obedience to God" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 66).

One of the chief ways the Church Order of Dordt is meant to preserve the church of Christ in its freedom is its articles that deal with the relationship among office-bearers and ecclesiastical assemblies. Article 2 declares that there is to be no other office in the church than that which the word of God in Christ requires. Following articles establish by the word of God and insist on the regulation of these offices according to the men selected to occupy them, the manner of that selection, and the particular duties of their offices. Article 30 carefully limits the kinds of issues that the assemblies are to take up and also identifies the way they are to treat those issues: "in an ecclesiastical manner" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 389). At the end of the Church Order is the strict

prohibition of article 84, directed strictly against all hierarchy: "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).

Another chief way the Church Order of Dordt is meant to preserve the freedom of the church of Christ from hierarchy is article 31. Article 31 has two distinct points that together serve this freedom. The first is at the beginning, where "anyone" is declared to "have the right to appeal" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 390). Recognized in this connection must be the shameful attempt to limit this term "anyone." Indeed, persons and assemblies have taken it upon themselves tyrannically to limit or prohibit. Only men and not women. Only those whose appeals show just cause why they think they have been wronged. Only those who are members, in spite of the fact that the very decisions they are appealing caused their removal from membership in the church. Only those whose protests and appeals are an acceptable length. Only those whose appeals have an acceptable tone. Only those whose appeals show sufficient deference to assemblies' authority. In spite of all these limitations imposed by men, the word "anyone" has a powerful significance for the priesthood of every believer, which I will explore later.

The second distinct point of article 31 that stands against all hierarchy is the phrase "unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God." Just as with the first point, the second point has been attacked and distorted. Without going very far into the matter, it must be observed that the distortion and attack subject the word of God to church assemblies. The distortion is that the only way that what is agreed upon by majority vote would not "be considered settled and binding" is if the assemblies decide so. No believer in the church can so decide. No member is free to consider in the light of God's word that a decision is in conflict with the word of God. However, the point in the Church Order is clear: no decision may be in conflict with the word of God. The believer in the church must be absolutely free to decide to follow only his Lord, who has redeemed him with his blood, rather than follow the decisions of men.

—MVW

TRUST IN THE LORD—ALONE

*Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man,
in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth,
he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish.*
—Psalm 146:3–4

The church of Jesus Christ has been engaged in controversy for all of time. In the mother promise of Genesis 3:15, God established and promised this controversy—controversy and war between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, between the sufficiency of Christ and the pride of man. This all according to God’s perfect decree.

And so there is always war between the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and the false gospel of salvation by faith and by man’s obedience. Abel, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, David, Paul, Luther, and other saints of all time battled in this controversy. And we are called to battle in this war today. Always God uses this war to gather, bless, and keep his church. Always God teaches in this war that the church’s strength is not in herself, in any institution, or in any man but that the church’s hope is in the Lord Jehovah alone through Jesus Christ.

The PRC’s Controversy

The Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) were engulfed in this same war from 2015 through 2021.

At stake was the heart of the gospel, justification by faith alone. Is justification, including the experience of justification, by faith alone? Or is justification, including the experience of justification, by faith and the obedience of faith?

At stake was the doctrine of assurance. Is assurance to be found in Christ crucified alone received by faith alone? Or is assurance to be found in Christ crucified and in the workings and doings of man?

At stake was the doctrine of covenant fellowship. Do we have fellowship with God by means of faith alone? Or is fellowship with God by means of a sanctifying, obedient faith—by a faith that exercises itself in obedience?

At stake was the doctrine of faith. Is faith the gift of God whereby the child of God receives Christ and all his benefits by knowing, believing, trusting, and resting in Jesus Christ and his finished work? Or is faith an act of man that man must do in order to be saved?

At stake was the doctrine of the unconditional covenant. Is salvation in its entirety given unconditionally and without prerequisite doings of man? Or are there prerequisites that man must perform—by the grace of God, of course—before man can receive certain blessings of God?

At stake was nothing less than the glory of God, the sufficiency of Christ, and the peace and assurance of God’s people.

At stake *is* nothing less than the glory of God, the sufficiency of Christ, and the peace and assurance of God’s people.

It has often been said that the doctrinal troubles of the Protestant Reformed Churches are concentrated in Classis East. After all, the controversy came to a head in Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids and spread from there throughout Classis East. It has also been said that, while we have ministers with whom we don’t agree (for example, Reverend Koole and Professor Cammenga), there is a stable of faithful, reliable ministers, particularly in Classis West.

If you would have asked me in 2018–19, “Which ministers will you follow in this controversy?” Rev. Steven Key, Prof. David Engelsma, and Rev. Ronald Hanko would have been at the forefront of my mind. Across the church today you find trust in man. Why does a man stand here or there? Why do I stand here or there? So frequently the answer is, “Because this minister stands here, and I stand with him.”

While much has been written about Professor Engelsma, where do Reverend Key and Reverend Hanko stand today? Can they be followed for leadership in this controversy? Are they fighting against the doctrinal departures of the PRC? Are they merely complacent in it? Or could it be that they are advancing the doctrinal errors of the PRC?

Let’s examine the present teachings of Reverend Key and Reverend Hanko. The purpose is not to simply tear down men. Rather, the purpose is threefold. First, the purpose is to expose false teachings within the church,

so that God's people may discern the truth from the lie and so that God's people may rest in Christ and his perfect work alone and not in their own workings and doings. Second, the purpose is so that God's people may not be complacent in retaining membership in churches that openly deny the truth of *sola fide* and willfully teach assurance and blessing by man's works and doings. And third, the purpose is to remind us that we ought never to trust in men. We ought not follow a man for a man's sake. Men who once appeared to defend the truths of *sola fide* and assurance by faith alone now openly militate against those truths. And men who appear to defend the truth today will openly militate against it in the future.

Rev. Steven Key

On March 6, 2022, Reverend Key preached a sermon on 1 John 2:28.¹ In this sermon Reverend Key defined the call to “abide in Christ” as a call to three things: to hold steadfastly to the gospel, to live in complete dependence upon Christ in faith and hope, and to walk in faithful and loving obedience to God. This was his foundational definition of “abiding in Christ,” and it would continue to plague him in his preaching. In the same sermon Reverend Key went on to say that we have confidence in the last day by our abiding in Christ—which means that we have confidence at the day of judgment by our obedience.

Rev. Nathan Langerak, in his lecture given in Loveland, Colorado, on April 8, 2022, noted that Reverend Key was teaching that the call to “abide in Christ,” as given in 1 John 2 and John 15, was a call to obedient living. Reverend Langerak pointed out that Reverend Key taught that, while union with Christ makes possible a life of communion with God, communion with God is realized by man's obedience.²

Reverend Key, in his sermon of April 24, 2022, vehemently objected to what Reverend Langerak had said:

I have pointed out before, in connection with 1 John 2:28, that the idea of *abiding in* presupposes an existing relationship. I shouldn't have to expand upon that tonight, but it's necessary. It's necessary because my teaching in that sermon on

At stake was nothing less than the glory of God, the sufficiency of Christ, and the peace and assurance of God's people.

1 John 2:28 was slanderously misrepresented and falsified a couple weeks ago by Nathan Langerak, and many of you heard that. As I said in that sermon, our union with Christ is the possibility and certainty of our abiding in him. To portray me as teaching that your activity realizes the potentiality, the possibility, that the union with Christ has given you, is such a despicable lie concerning what I taught that God will judge it. As you well know, I've never taught that.³

Reverend Key continued,

But in 1 John 2:28, there is a clear distinction between our abiding *with* Christ, which is by faith alone, and our abiding *in* him. In order to abide in Christ, to *abide in* Christ, one must first be in him. To *abide in* has to do with a union, therefore, between us and Christ that has already been established by the power of God's grace and which cannot be dissolved. God has done that. God has established that union between us and Christ, unbreakable union. That unbreakable union is established by faith alone.

What is it now to live in that union? Abiding in Christ has to do with our conscious participation in that fellowship that is ours with him and therefore with God our Father. And that's evident from the fact that in chapter 2:28 the call to “abide in him”—that's an admonition or an exhortation—the call to “abide in him” is a verb form of a present *active* imperative. Yes, that call to “abide in him” is a call to activity—something which appears to be anathema to those who have left us. God by his Holy Spirit efficaciously calls us to the activity of faith and the fruits of faith—which not only keep us from wounding our own consciences and losing the sense of God's favor, but more positively, by which our faith is strengthened and confirmed by those fruits as—which show it's a genuine faith, so that we know the fullness of the joy that is ours living in God's fellowship.

1 Rev. Steven Key, “Abide in Him,” <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=3722110165571>.

2 Rev. Nathan Langerak, “The State of Theology,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FlSqcdDe6k8&t=1114s>.

3 Rev. Steven Key, “Abiding in the Sinless One,” <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=424222350486506>. All quotations of Reverend Key are from this sermon.

Let's set aside the incoherence of this "clear distinction" between our "abiding *with* Christ" and our "abiding *in* Christ." Let's set aside Reverend Key's open slander of us that we believe all calls to activity are "anathema."

Note well what Reverend Key taught in the sermon:

- The fruits of faith, which are good works, keep us from wounding our own consciences.
- The fruits of faith, which are good works, keep us from losing the sense of God's favor.
- The fruits of faith, which are good works, strengthen our faith.
- The fruits of faith, which are good works, confirm our faith so that we can know the fullness of joy.

Let's be clear on the truth of these matters:

- Good works do not keep us from wounding our own consciences. That is the role of faith—faith alone! (Belgic Confession 22; Heidelberg Catechism, LD 23)
- While our impenitent sins can remove us from the sense of God's favor, it is not our works that keep us from losing the sense of God's favor. That is the role of faith—faith alone! (Rom. 5:1)
- Good works do not strengthen our faith. That is the role of the Holy Spirit, who works and strengthens our faith by the preaching of the gospel. (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 25, Q&A 65)
- Good works do not confirm our faith so that we can know the fullness of joy. We have the fullness of joy by faith alone! By faith without works! (Rom. 5:11; 15:13)

Reverend Key continued:

As such, therefore, abiding in Christ—that is, conscious participation in his fellowship by faith—is to hold steadfastly to his gospel, to live in complete dependence upon him in faith and hope, and to walk in faithful and loving obedience to him. That's our life as Christians—as partakers of Christ and his benefits. And that's in harmony with the last part of James chapter 2. It is this abiding in Christ that establishes with certainty our being partakers of his grace, his strength, his life—the life of him in whom is no sin.

Reverend Key continued to insist that abiding in Christ is obedience, and in the above quotation he expounded that teaching:

- He taught that abiding in Christ (which is to walk in obedience) establishes with certainty our being partakers of his grace.
- He taught that abiding in Christ (which is to walk in obedience) establishes with certainty our being partakers of his strength.
- He taught that abiding in Christ (which is to walk in obedience) establishes with certainty our being partakers of Christ's life.

Reverend Key had said just six minutes earlier that God would judge Reverend Langerak for what he said in his lecture: that Reverend Key espoused a teaching that man's activities of faith and obedience realized the possibility that the union with Christ established. Yet Reverend Key, mere minutes later, precisely taught the theology for which Reverend Langerak called him out, and Reverend Key did so in explicit terms! What he taught in the sermon was the complete opposite of the truth, which is that Christ's grace, Christ's strength, and Christ's life establish with certainty our obedience.

Shockingly, it gets even worse. Reverend Key continued,

And so he calls us to "abide in Christ." And he shows us that abiding in Christ is the way in which we enjoy peace, the way of overcoming sin in this constant battle that is ours, so there is found in our lives the expression of thankfulness. Our expressed thankfulness is found in how we live. For we who are righteous do righteousness. One is righteous, of course, when he is found in Christ. That righteousness is imputed to us by God. That righteousness is our state of justification. But the text also speaks of doing righteousness. And moreover, it places that first in the wording of the text. We mustn't be afraid of that. That's because when God justifies us in Christ, he also makes us righteous as to our spiritual, ethical condition, as to the way we live. For only when we do righteousness can we know that our faith, the faith by which alone we are justified, is real. It's only in the way of holiness that we see God, that we enjoy his fellowship, that we know that we are righteous—and that not because of works but because of the evidence of the life of Christ coming to expression in our own walk of repentance and faith.

How does one know that he is righteous? The word of God and the Reformed faith shout, "By faith alone in Jesus Christ alone—apart from our works!" But Reverend Key answered differently: "Because of the evidence of the life of Christ coming to expression in our own walk of repentance and faith."

For justification, for righteousness, where should we look? The word of God and the Reformed faith shout, “To Jesus Christ alone, apart from any of our works!” But Reverend Key answered differently: for justification, to know that we are righteous before God, we should look down at ourselves and at our walk.

Further, for Reverend Key we can only know that we are righteous, we can only be justified, “when we do righteousness.” The Belgic Confession utterly condemns this theology of Reverend Key in article 24 when it states, “For it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even before we do good works” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 53).

Rev. Ronald Hanko

Reverend Hanko published a paper on April 18, 2022, in which he attempted to defend the PRC and the PRC’s use of the phrase *in the way of*. He defined his purpose:

My purpose in this paper is to discuss the whole idea of conditions, the phrase “in the way of,” and to write out what has helped me to a better understanding of the issues. I hope to show that the phrase, “in the way of” is not necessarily conditional and a denial of gracious salvation, but instead a proper and useful expression of the relation between works and grace. I want to show that the Protestant Reformed Churches have not become guilty of conditionalism in recent years. Especially I want to focus on the Reformed doctrine of means, which, I believe, provides clarity to the discussion, especially to the relationship between good works and grace.⁴

So here we have yet another article on the phrase *in the way of*, an article on *in the way of* that disagrees with so many of the other Protestant Reformed teachings on *in the way of*. In a recent *Sword and Shield*, Rev. Nathan Langerak described the use of the term *in the way of* by a Protestant Reformed professor this way: “*In the way of* rarely means *in the way of*. The phrase means *precedes, prior to, way unto, or simultaneous with*, depending on the context.”⁵ Yet Reverend Langerak missed a major meaning of the phrase, one that Reverend Hanko clearly defined. For Reverend Hanko what is a proper definition of *in the way of*? He stated,

Assurance does not follow upon holy living. Rather, assurance is the source of holy living.

My point, then, is (1) that the phrase “in the way of” has been, can be and ought to be used in terms of “means” and their importance in God’s dealings with us and in our relationship to Him; (2) that the use of the phrase “in the way of” and the use of language which says that God’s work in some respects follows upon and is a consequence of our actions is not in itself conditional; and, (3) that much of which has come under criticism and charges of heresy is to be explained by the Reformed and Biblical doctrine of means.

Reverend Hanko began his paper by stating,

There is a great deal of discussion concerning conditions and persistent accusations made of “conditional theology.” Much of this focuses on the phrase, “in the way of,” and on the relationship between obedience and blessing, especially the blessing of assurance.

So what is the subject at hand? *In the way of* and the relationship between obedience and blessing and especially the relationship between obedience and the blessing of assurance. How did Reverend Hanko explain these things?

Good works, holiness, piety, godliness, obedience are the means God uses to give assurance... God uses them [good works] to give assurance.

Here the Protestant Reformed Churches are seven years into a controversy largely about assurance of salvation and *in the way of*. And here comes the conclusion of the matter by a senior, leading minister of the PRC: assurance of salvation is by means of works. Thus the meaning of *in the way of*. Assurance by means of piety. Assurance by means of obedience. One might expect to read such things from Herman Witsius, Joel Beeke, and Mark Jones; but it is shocking to read this in the boldest form from Reverend Hanko.

He openly contradicts decisions of Synod 2018. For Synod 2018 stated,

If we are truly justified by faith in Christ alone, then true faith cannot look to its works to help find or maintain the assurance that is found in Christ alone. (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 69)

4 Ronald Hanko, “Conditions and Means,” April 18, 2022. All quotations of Reverend Hanko are from this paper.

5 Nathan J. Langerak, “Humpty Dumpty (2): Which Is Master,” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 1 (June 2022): 26.

The experience and assurance of justification in one's consciousness is justification, and justification is by faith alone in Christ alone (L.D. 23; B.C., Art. 23). Good works have a proper place and function in the Christian life but they do not function as helps for finding and maintaining assurance of our justification. (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 69)

In these statements [of Rev. David Overway, which were condemned by Synod 2018] good works are no longer fruits and are no longer the way of grateful conduct in the experience of fellowship with God, but good works are performed to obtain something, or good works function as an instrument/means for the reception of something, or good works become part of the way unto the experience of covenant fellowship. (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 75)

Synod 2018 stated that the function of good works is not to give assurance of salvation. Synod 2018 taught that good works may not function as a means for the reception of any of God's blessings. Reverend Hanko teaches the dead opposite.

Neither is this teaching the only troubling doctrinal issue in Reverend Hanko's paper. Here is another statement:

Nevertheless, it is not conditionalism or a denial of God's sovereignty in salvation to use the phrase, "in the way of," nor to teach that God's work of grace in some respects follows upon men's actions and is a consequence of those actions.

Note here his definition of *in the way of* is that God's work of grace "follows upon" and is "a consequence of" man's actions.

Here is another statement: "Assurance follows upon holiness and is 'in the way of holiness.'"

He even advocated that it can be acceptable to say, "The imputation of the righteousness of Christ, follows upon and is a consequence of believing."

Instead of those statements of false doctrine, here is the truth regarding these subjects:

- Assurance does not follow upon holy living. Rather, assurance is the source of holy living. (Eph. 2:8–10; Canons 5.12)
- God's work of grace is never a consequence of man's actions. God's work of grace never

follows upon man's actions. Rather, our actions are always the fruit of the work of God's grace in and through us. (John 15:1–5)

- The imputation of righteousness is not a consequence of believing. Rather, the imputation of righteousness (justification) is received by means of faith, that is, by the instrument of faith (believing). (Belgic Confession 22–23; Heidelberg Catechism, LD 23)

Trust Not in Men

Reverend Key and Reverend Hanko are openly militating against the word of God, the confessions, and Synod 2018. They teach that man receives some of the blessings of salvation experientially and subjectively by works. They teach that good works and obedience are the means God uses to give the fullness of joy, assurance, and peace with God. They teach that there is no full assurance, no fullness of joy, no perfect peace, and no full experience of salvation until man first obeys and works.

The truth is that we receive the entirety of salvation by faith in Christ alone and not by works. When it comes to our receiving from God, receiving Christ and every single benefit of salvation, it is by means of faith alone, by faith apart from works. Salvation is freely merited and accomplished by the finished work of Jesus Christ,

and salvation is freely given and applied to us subjectively and experientially by faith alone, apart from our works.

The Protestant Reformed Churches can no longer even attempt to claim with a straight face that they teach assurance by faith alone. Their senior, leading ministers deny and contradict that doctrine in the boldest forms. Reverend Hanko and Reverend Key make this plain. You cannot have assurance by faith alone and assurance by works. That is a blatant contradiction. And the ramification of their teachings is deadly serious. When men teach that assurance is by the obedience, good works, and doings of man, they are openly assaulting the doctrine of justification by faith alone. When congregations believe what the ministers preach—that assurance is by means of one's obedience, walk, and good works—then the congregation's peace and comfort and hope is not in Jesus Christ and his perfect work but in themselves and their own miserable and sinful works.

Reverend Key and Reverend Hanko are not to be followed in this controversy. They are teaching boldly the very worst of the doctrine of Reverend Overway and the

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authors of the heretical doctrinal statement of the special committee of Classis East,⁶ and they are doing this clearly and repeatedly. In fact, for ministers to preach and teach this way at this juncture in the controversy clearly demonstrates that the PRC are now running in the false doctrine and doctrinal errors that were condemned by Synod 2018.

Further, senior ministers now explain publicly and clearly that they believe that *in the way of obedience* refers to the teaching that obedience and good works are the means by which God blesses us with assurance and the fullness of joy. This is openly opposed to the teaching of the confessions and Synod 2018, and it is an open attack on justification by faith alone. This is yet another example of false doctrine and open assaults on justification by faith alone being cloaked under the guise of *in the way of*.

Let us not trust in any men for our guidance and direction in this controversy or in any other controversy. Our hope is not in men. Our hope is not in John Calvin, Martin Luther, or Herman Hoeksema. Our hope is certainly not in Reverends Langerak, Lanning, and VanderWal. Oh, how we love those who preach the gospel of peace! Oh, how we are thankful for men God gave to us to declare and defend his truth! Oh, how we pray for more men to preach to us the gospel of peace! But may our hope never be in men themselves, and may we never follow their mere persons.

Our hope is in the living God—the Lord Jehovah of hosts. Our hope is in the ascended Christ—the servant of the Lord, who fully accomplished our salvation.

Let us look to our God and his written word alone for our direction and strength in our controversies. For men fail. All men fade and die. Men succumb to false doctrine and sin. But the word of the Lord abides forever. The Lord keeps truth forever. Through the perfect work of his only begotten Son, the Lord established perfect righteousness for all those who hope in the Lord. Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help.

Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the LORD his God: which made heaven, and earth, the sea, and all that therein is: which keepeth truth for ever: which executeth judgment for the oppressed: which giveth food to the hungry. The LORD looseth the prisoners: the LORD openeth the eyes of the blind: the LORD raiseth them that are bowed down: the LORD loveth the righteous: the LORD preserveth the strangers; he relieveth the fatherless and widow: but the way of the wicked he turneth upside down.—Psalm 146:5–9

—Eric Solanyk

⁶ Garry Eriks, Carl Haak, James Slopsema, and Ronald Van Overloop, “Doctrinal Statement: RE: Experiencing Fellowship with the Father (November 21, 2017),” *Acts of Synod 2018*, 194–99.



Reformed Believers Publishing
325 84th St SW, Suite 102
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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL

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

*From henceforth let no man trouble me:
for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus. —Galatians 6:17*

All who confess the true doctrine of Christ will bear these marks. They are marks of the Lord Jesus. They are a brand of Christ Jesus to show his ownership of a person. There are many marks in many different forms. They scar the body of the believer, scar his mind, and scar his soul. In Paul's case the marks were physical, mental, and spiritual scars from being beaten, whipped, chained, and stoned and from other torments he endured. Those marks were inflicted on him because he carried into the world the gospel of Jesus Christ that a man is saved by faith alone and not by works at all. Paul preached the fulfillment of the promise in Jesus Christ and declared that all who are in Christ by faith are truly saved from all their sins and are heirs of eternal life wholly apart from their works. He declared that salvation is of the Lord through God's eternal choice. The apostle declared that the man whom God saves is ungodly and dead in trespasses and sins. He taught men to depart from iniquity not to merit salvation but to give thanks to God. All of these declarations of the gospel offended the devil, the world, and the false brethren. So the devil, the world, and the false brethren slandered and defamed the apostle, and they hounded and harried him all over the Roman Empire, and frequently they caught him.

What did Paul say? "Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwellingplace; and labour, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it: being defamed, we intreat: we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day" (1 Cor. 4:11–13). And he said, "Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness" (2 Cor. 11:23–27).

The false brethren teach assurance by obedience, justification by repentance, and fellowship by works "lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ." The false teacher well knows what the cross of Christ brings. The false teacher knows that the cross brings marks of Jesus Christ. The false teacher says that he is interested in holiness; he says that he is only being faithful to scripture; he says that he is teaching the truth; but he preaches righteousness by repentance because he will not suffer persecution. For so soon as he proclaims Christ crucified, he becomes the target of the world, the false church, and their leader the devil.

All these things are the glorious brands of Jesus Christ. He marks that he owns you and you are his. And so these marks must come to all who glory in nothing save the cross of Jesus Christ. Because you are Christ's, the world hates you. Because you speak Christ, the false brethren slander, accuse, ridicule, and despise you. And bearing these marks, you may say with the apostle, "Henceforth let no man trouble me. Show me your marks of Jesus Christ, and I will believe you that you are his."

—NJL