

The background features a stylized, orange-toned illustration. A sword is positioned diagonally from the top left towards the center. A shield is positioned in the lower left, partially overlapping the sword's hilt. The shield is decorated with several circular patterns. The overall style is clean and modern, using a monochromatic orange color scheme.

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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Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (touch not; taste not; handle not; which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh. — Colossians 2:20–23

Beloved brethren, you are dead with Christ! Yes, you are crucified, dead, and buried with him! Being dead in your trespasses and sins, you have been quickened together with Christ; you sit now in heavenly places; your conversation is in heaven; and your life is hid with him in heaven.

Gracious salvation! You are perfect in Christ, and in him you are already in heaven.

In Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. God is the only God. He is good and only good. In him is light and no darkness. There is no lie in him. There is no evil in him or associated with him, and no evil proceeds from him. As the only good God, he is absolutely consecrated to his glory as God. He is fullness itself. He is perfection, and he is the implication of all perfection. In himself his fullness consists in the fullness of his covenant life among the three persons of the Trinity. They are with one another, and they are in one another: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is the one true and living God.

To know God is life eternal and the purpose of all things. For this purpose he made all things: that he might be glorified as the living, covenant God in the revelation of his covenant with his people so that they taste, understand, know, and are conformed in their whole beings and lives to his covenant. To have him as your God is salvation and blessedness itself. To be his sons and daughters is to be heirs of the whole world and to have all things serve you, for all things serve God and the revelation of his glory in the covenant.

In Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge, and thus there is no wisdom and no knowledge apart from Christ. All man's wisdom outside of Christ is foolishness, indeed, earthly, sensual, and devilish. All man's knowledge outside of Christ is ignorance, indeed, damning ignorance. In Christ you know God, and that is eternal life. In Christ you apprehend God in his works and purposes and adapt yourselves to those purposes.

Especially this do you come to know and understand and conform yourselves to: in Christ is all the fullness of the salvation of God. Christ came from God as the revelation of God. Christ came from God to fulfill all of God's purpose for salvation. Christ came to fulfill the promise, to perfect God's covenant of grace, to satisfy the justice of

God, to fulfill all righteousness, and to glorify God in all things. On Christ alone rests the saving purpose of God. In Christ alone are all the blessings of God's covenant. Christ is, wonder of wonders, in his own person the fulfillment of God's covenant; for in his person—the person of the Son and Word of God—God and man are perfectly and permanently united. In Christ God and man are one, and in Christ then is the man who is perfectly consecrated to the glory of God.

And you are in Christ by faith. Rooted in him as a plant in the ground. Built up in him as a building upon the foundation. He is the tree, and you are the branches joined in him. He is the head, and you are the body. Eternally you are one with him. For he is the elect one, and you are chosen in him and for his sake. And you are joined to him by faith; so that by the operation of the Holy Spirit, you become one plant, building, body, and married couple.

You are complete in him! Overflowing grace!

You lack nothing in Christ Jesus. In Christ Jesus you are already perfect. You stand before God in heaven in the holy of holies without sin. You are heirs of eternal life and shall surely and without doubt enter into eternal life. You who are dead in trespasses and sins were raised with him. You died with Christ. When he was crucified, you were crucified. When he died, you died. When he was buried, you were buried. And so in Christ your sin-lives and all the handwriting of your debts and trespasses that were against you are finished. For dead men cannot be debtors, and in Christ's death you suffered the death that was due to you for your sins. And having died with Christ, you were also raised with him, raised to another and better life, a heavenly and immortal life. Dead with Christ, you have passed already into that immortal state in which you cannot die. You have a life that cannot die and in which there is no possibility of death. It is life with God. Life with God that begins now and life with God that will continue progressing ever deeper and ever higher into the blessed knowledge and understanding of the glory of God and of the wonders of his covenant, world without end in the new heavens and the new earth. It is life with God that now is through a glass darkly, but then that life will be face to face. Dead with Christ, you have passed beyond guilt and condemnation and thus also beyond the power

of sin and death, and you live with him. Nevermore can the law condemn you or demand of you that you must keep its precepts and commands in order to have fellowship with God or to enter into the enjoyment of his rest. Never again can you be brought under the power of sin and death. You have life. You have immortal, everlasting, blessed life with God. You have life in Christ and for his sake. In Christ you have God as your God. In Christ is all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. In Christ you come to God, know God, and live before God in the joyful freedom of conscience that all your sins are forgiven.

In Christ God forgave your sins. There is the ground of all blessedness. In his death Christ took away the cause of death, namely sin and guilt, and he earned for himself and for his people eternal life because of his perfect and divine righteousness. There is no righteousness like the righteousness of Jesus Christ. No man can keep the law as Christ did. No man can do as Christ did. He obeyed as the lawgiver who came under the law, as the righteous one who became a curse, as the just for the unjust, in perfect love for God and his neighbor, and under the terrible wrath of God, so that Christ loved God out of the depths of hell. Christ's righteousness is the righteousness of the obedience, holiness, suffering, and death of the Son of God. God forgave all your sins in Christ. He forgave those sins eternally, never beholding iniquity in his Jacob; for he saw Christ eternally crucified, and he saw you in him. Yes, God loves the righteous and blesses the righteous. Thus, as the beginning of all God's dealings with you, he forgave your sins in his counsel, not imputing your trespasses unto you. And at the cross he forgave. Oh, before you were, before you committed one sin, in order that you might be raised with Christ, God forgave all your sins. So the apostle says, "You...hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses" (v. 13). You are quickened with Christ because in Christ at his cross you were forgiven before you were, before you committed sin, and before you shed one tear for your sins.

And God forgave your sins because Christ blotted out the handwriting of ordinances that was against you, which handwriting was against you as a kind of record of all your guilt. That handwriting in the ordinances was, as it were, a debt sheet. God gave to Israel at Mount Sinai a list of ordinances. In those ordinances given to the Jews, the condition of the whole human race was illustrated and indeed written with crushing repetition. In those ordinances there was daily, moment by moment, a reminder of guilt, sin, pollution, and misery. In the ordinances was written that you are guilty in Adam; that,

being guilty in Adam, you are subject to death; that as dead sinners you are full of pollution, sin, and misery in your very natures; and that death, corruption, and evil are in all your ways. The laws of Israel that came from God did not make Israel holy. But the laws by vivid pictures and shadows constantly reminded the Israelites, and thus all mankind, of their sinful condition in Adam. And the laws thus made plain that the way to God was shut unless Israel's guilt was taken out of the way.

God quickened you because he forgave all your trespasses and sins. He took the handwriting of the ordinances that was against you and blotted it out and took it away, nailing it to Christ's cross, so that Christ was obligated to pay those debts and was cursed for those sins. Thus as the debtor's debt sheet is torn up and thrown away, so that he is no longer a debtor, so the handwriting of the ordinances was torn up, blotted out, and destroyed at the cross of Jesus Christ. In his wounds the guilt of all his people—the members of his body and branches of his tree—was taken away.

Then those ordinances too must go away. Christ is the body and substance of all of them. And he has come, and those ordinances must go away, so that the church is no longer subject to such ordinances and ceremonies. There is in Christ

To know God is life eternal and the purpose of all things.

no sin and no guilt. There cannot be any longer a requirement, a deed, an activity, an act, or a work that is necessary in order to come to God, to live, or to enjoy God as your God, for you are perfect in Christ. All that is necessary for life and salvation is in him, and you are in him now and forever. You have passed from death to life, from this world to heaven, from guilt to righteousness, from polluted to holy; and being far from God in the enmity of your minds, you have been brought near to God, and you stand before him in peace and may live joyfully before him without fear in Jesus Christ.

And being dead with Christ, you are dead from the elements of the world. Oh yes, if your lives are in the world, you are subject to ordinances. By "ordinances" the apostle means all the vain and worthless religion of man with all its ceremonies and inventions—but that vain and worthless religion of man as it is a testimony that man hates God, that man is far from God, and that man knows God but refuses to worship him as God. Thus the apostle also means that vain and worthless religion of man as it is a testimony that man lives under guilt. All the ceremonies and ordinances of the Old Testament law simply revealed what man is by nature: that he is subject to sin, that he is guilty, that he is subject to the crushing condemnation of the law, and thus that he is worthy of

eternal damnation. To be subject to ordinances is to have the testimony that you are guilty before God and that you do not have a way to him. Not having Christ and not having the testimony that you are complete in Christ and stand before God without sin, man must invent another way. Out of his own brain, he devises many ordinances, ceremonies, regulations, laws, commands, and liturgies so that by doing these things man comes to God; and thus these ordinances are the way in which he lives before God and through which then he will enter into heaven.

You are dead with Christ from the elements of the world. There is in Christ no testimony of condemnation but only the testimony of complete perfection, sinlessness, and worthiness of eternal life and fellowship with God. If you are dead with Christ, you are dead to the elements of the world too. Never can the law condemn you. Never is there any deed, work, activity, or ceremony that is necessary to come to God and to stand before him in peace and joy.

Beware lest any man plunder you through philosophy and vain deceit after the tradition of men and after the rudiments of the world and not after Christ. Beware of men who parade as spiritual and godly but whose doctrines are out of their own brains and whose religion is self-devised and self-serving. Beware of them because they come with deceptive doctrines that snake their way into your hearts and will rob you of your simplicity in Christ, will rob you of your joy and happiness in Christ, and will rob you of your inheritance. They are thieves, these men, with their philosophy. They come with the appearance of wisdom. They have arguments and passages from scripture and appear even to have history on their sides. But when you examine their doctrines, they do not harmonize with Christ and the perfection that is yours in Christ. Their doctrines do not harmonize with the truth that you are dead with him and complete in him but by their teaching make Christ but half a savior, an imperfect savior, a savior to whom you must add.

Their doctrines the apostle calls the “rudiments [elements] of the world” and “ordinances.” These are the same. And again he calls their teachings the “commandments and doctrines of men.” These things are of the world, of this side of the grave, and belong to the state of corruption; and they perish. They have nothing to do with the kingdom of God and of Christ. They are base and useless things. In comparison to Christ they are nothing. The form that they take is ordinances, or a host of ceremonies, commandments, strictures, regulations, and rules. In short, they are all the things that man must do in addition to what Christ has done. Even more sinister, they are all those things that man must do in order to have what Christ has done. These false teachers withhold Christ and the loveliness, joy, comfort, and assurance of Christ from

the believer until their commandments, strictures, regulations, and rules are performed. Thus also these deceivers come from the idea that holiness is found in an outward form, that righteousness is found in the outward deed, and that religion is a matter of do and do not do. Not satisfied with the earthly form in which Christ sanctifies his people and with his rule in their lives, so that their whole lives become holy and testimonies that they are of God, these religious philosophers and vain deceivers make holiness to consist in trifles and outward form. Then they also proceed from the viewpoint that Christ is not enough. Is that not why the apostle joins these two things—your being dead with Christ and your being dead from the elements of the world? If there is that which man must do to be saved, then Christ is an incomplete savior. Then you are not complete in him. Then he did not free you from guilt; and then, even though you possess Christ, you are yet far from God and from his fellowship and from eternal life with him until you do this and the other thing proposed by men. As with all the ordinances of the Old Testament that Christ abolished, so all the ordinances of men have in them only a reminder of guilt, of sin, and of pollution, and there is in them no peace but only a testimony of condemnation and damnation.

Why, if you are dead with Christ, would you be subject to ordinances? These false teachers come with their touch not, taste not, handle not; and you fall for their philosophy and vain deceit, their doctrines and commandments of men? You allow your peace, joy, and freedom in Christ to be disturbed by them? “Touch not,” they say, and you wonder in your minds if indeed you may not touch. “Taste not,” they thunder, and your consciences are disturbed whether indeed it is Christian and holy to taste. And because men know no end to their inventions of rules, regulations, commandments, and strictures, then after you have listened to and given place to these false teachers for a moment and they have beguiled you with their vain deceits, they also add rule upon rule and precept upon precept and command you, “Handle not!” And having given their doctrines a hearing and those doctrines having snaked their way into your minds, they plunder you of your joy, peace, comfort, hope, and freedom in Christ. And you too, like the false teachers, are subject to ordinances, and you live as those whose lives are in the world and who have not passed into heaven. Christ is erased from your very minds and thoughts, the perfection of Christ and your perfection in him fade from view, and all you can think about is men’s ordinances—what you must do and what you must not do.

But if you are dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though you have your lives in this world, would you be subject to ordinances? If even the

ordinances of divine origin have passed away, why would you be subject to the ordinances of men: touch not, taste not, handle not?

Do you not understand that all of these ordinances have men as their authors? Men—not being content with Christ, denying the fullness and perfection of Christ’s salvation, and denying the perfection of God’s church in Christ—invent these ordinances, rules, and regulations. They are the doctrines and commandments of men.

The ordinances are all the doctrines that men invent that condition salvation on the deeds of man. That you must first repent before you are forgiven is a doctrine of man. It does not have its origin in the word of God but in the faithless minds of men who distrust, hate, doubt, or are terrified of the gospel of the free forgiveness and pardon of sins apart from man’s doings. They distrust the lordship of Christ and the power of his Spirit to sanctify his people to repentance without their doctrine of repentance first. They will not have God as their lawgiver, who commands all men everywhere to forsake their deeds and to believe in Jesus Christ alone for salvation—stop doing for salvation and rest in Christ—and being disobedient to the gospel, they invent another gospel. And by their doctrines invented out of their own unbelieving brains, they rob you of your comfort and joy in Christ.

Or, hearing the gospel of your perfection in Christ without any of your deeds and noting your freedom in Christ from the elements of the world, these deceivers and false teachers immediately introduce their commandments. You cannot eat that food, you cannot smoke that cigarette, you cannot drink that wine, and you cannot engage in that activity. They lay hold on the peaceful worship of the church and disturb it with their rules. They say that you must have this regulation satisfied or that rule met before you can enjoy Christ in the gospel. These commandments of men are of the same species of ordinance as the false doctrines of men. These false teachers will not have God as their only lawgiver but add their commandments to his as the way of a holy life in the church. The origin of these commandments is not the word of God but the hearts of men who suppose that the gospel will make men careless and profane. They suppose that have no idols, do not make images, do not commit adultery, do not steal, and all of God’s other commandments are not enough in the church. They distrust the headship of Christ and suppose that Christ is not able to save and to sanctify his people to a godly use of things. They suppose that if the people of God are free from ordinances, they will rush to wickedness. Those commandments have unbelieving men as their authors.

Oh yes, whoever brings his ordinances into the church and comes with his touch not, taste not, handle not, in

whatever form that may come, manifests his unbelief. He shows that the gospel of fellowship with God and assurance of eternal life for Christ’s sake alone have nothing to say to him, find no resonance in his heart, and leave him in his unbelief. And having no comfort in the gospel, no assurance of his salvation through Christ alone, and no hope of eternal life to the exclusion of all his works, deeds, and efforts, he must invent another way to God and into heaven by his doing something, something doable.

Why would you who are dead with Christ from the elements of the world become subject to men and their doctrines and commandments?

The doctrines and commandments of men they are. That is all that they are. That is all they ever will be. Some are impious. Others are tyrannical and terrifying. Still others are silly and trifling! But of men, only of men, and not of God or out of his word.

And if you who are dead with Christ from the elements of the world would again be subject to ordinances, do you not know that the commandments and doctrines of men—not of God—that forbid you to touch, to taste, and to handle perish with the using? To perish with the using means to tend to corruption. That which they corrupt is all of religion. They corrupt the believer. They corrupt the church. They corrupt the truth. They corrupt faith. They corrupt peace, hope, and joy. They corrupt the idea of God. They corrupt Christ and his salvation. They corrupt absolutely because they lead all who follow them down into hell. The teachers of these doctrines and commandments of men insist so eagerly and vehemently upon them as if they were essential to salvation. But they do not bring salvation but corruption.

And that is because the things that these false teachers and vain deceivers teach are necessary for salvation are weak and frail things with no power in themselves and no power especially in comparison to the riches and power of Jesus Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge and in whom is all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

That you must repent first? You? You, a weak, feeble, and sinful human being whose very repentance is marred by sin? Christ is your salvation.

That you cannot receive the preaching on a screen? A screen? Your abstinence from a screen? That is what is necessary to receive Christ? Christ is your salvation, and he is powerful to communicate himself to his people by the preaching through many means.

That you cannot eat this food or drink that beverage? Food and drink and your abstinence from them are necessary for your salvation? You take in food and drink, and they go out into the dung hill.

All these things are weak.

Why would you who are dead with Christ from the elements of the world be subject to ordinances? Why would you let your consciences be troubled by the strictures, the rules, the laws, the carnal doctrines, the ceremonies, and the commandments of men? Why would you, who have passed already to the other side of death and whose life is now hid with Christ in heaven, be troubled by men's philosophy and their vain deceits as though your lives were still in this world and you have not come to God and you do not stand already in his presence?

These false teachers, religious philosophers, and vain deceivers make so many disciples and plunder many because they themselves and the things that they teach have a show. They have an appearance. They have an appearance in contrast to a reality. They are not real. They are not the truth. They are a lie. They are a deception, a phantasm, a legerdemain, and a conjurer's trick. They are not real but damnable, not good but tending to corruption.

Yet these false teachers always come with reasons, explanations, texts, logic, and arguments. Their show includes in it reasons and explanations, words about themselves. They come saying that their commandments are the truth and that they bring Christ, God, heaven, joy, assurance, and everything good. These false teachers have a show that they are wise and that thus only in the way of their doctrines and in the way of their commands are the knowledge of God and eternal life.

But their doctrines and commandments are nothing but will worship. They all come from men's fevered brains, their unbelieving minds, and their wicked hearts. They come in men's deliberate and conscious rebellion against the word and the will of God that Christ have the preeminence, that his people and all things be perfected in Christ. These deceivers have nothing in Christ, and so they seek to displace Christ with their doctrines, commandments, laws, rules, and regulations. But these have no basis in the word of God or in the will of God but in man's will, his self-serving and self-pleasing will.

And all the deceivers' show of humility is false. They do not wear certain clothes, and everyone accounts them such pious and humble persons. They abstain from some meat or drink, and many think them to be superior Christians. They come protesting that they are only interested in the Christian life and holiness in the church and that their great concern is for the glory of God. And they would foist on the church all their doctrines and commandments under the guise of admirable practices for the church, at the very least not objectionable, and even as better calculated to lead the church in the way of holiness and the antithetical life.

And especially do these pious puritans put out for the church's consideration and as a great way to holiness the neglect of the body. Yes, it is a very great thing to them for

the Christian not to eat, not to drink, and not to touch, taste, and handle many things. And once you listen to them and give in to them, their lists will grow; and there will be no end of outward things that you must do to show that you are a Christian, to have Jesus Christ, to be pleasing to God, and to enjoy the knowledge and assurance of your salvation.

But none of their doctrines and commandments are of any value to God. He says, "Not in any honour." The false teachers tell the church how pleasing to God she will be if she follows their doctrines and commandments. But none of them are of any value to God. They have no value for righteousness. The only thing that avails for righteousness before God is Christ. These doctrines and commandments of men have no value for holiness, for it is very wicked for you to repent in order to be forgiven by God, and it is a great evil to abstain from this food or that activity in order to be pleasing to God and in deliberate and conscious rejection of Jesus Christ. The doctrines and commandments of men, no matter what the standing of the man who introduces them and no matter how wise, pious, and humble he may seem, are absolutely worthless and without spiritual value whatsoever.

They do please the flesh, however. How strange is man? He flagellates himself with his doctrine of repentance first in order to be forgiven and will never with that doctrine enter into the peace, joy, and comfort of Christ. And that pleases his flesh. His flesh delights in his repentance as that which he does to be saved, though his repentance is abominable before God. Man neglects his body and kills himself with worry, grief, and abstinence and makes himself a laughingstock by his dowdy behavior and pious pretensions, and that pleases his flesh. He prides himself that he does not do this and he does not do that, which things so many others enjoy. It is a great thing to him, and he supposes that it is a great thing to God, that he does not eat this food, smoke that cigarette, drink that beer, or wear that article of clothing. Pride! That is it. Pride! Such things please the flesh because the flesh is full of pride. If the flesh could do anything for its salvation, even something so silly and trifling as not eating a piece of food, then the flesh would do that for salvation. And in that the flesh would be damned.

As those who are dead with Christ from the elements of the world, do not be subject to ordinances. Reject all the doctrines and commandments of men. Resist men's philosophy and expose their vain conceits. For being dead with Christ, you have been raised with him to immortality and life. You are not of the world, and your life is not in the world but is hid in heaven with Christ. And you are complete in him.

—NJL

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

In the controversy between the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC) and the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), there are a few articles of the Canons of Dordt to which the PRC regularly appeal. These articles are especially Canons 3–4.12, Canons 3–4.17, Canons 5.5, and Canons 5.7. In a brief series of editorials, I am explaining the doctrine of these articles, upon which doctrine the RPC squarely stand. I am also exposing the Protestant Reformed misuse of these articles, by which misuse the PRC condemn the gospel of grace and align themselves with the Remonstrants.

The editorial last month explained Canons 3–4.17, including its most famous line, “Grace is conferred by means of admonitions.”¹ This month we return to Canons 3–4.17 to see how entrenched the Protestant Reformed Churches are in their use—abuse—of this article.

A Review of 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)

The article teaches that God is pleased to use the gospel as the means of grace by which he saves his elect people. The gospel by which God confers the grace of salvation is proclaimed in the preaching, in the sacraments, and in the administration of Christian discipline. The gospel of Jesus Christ includes the call of the gospel, “Repent of your sins, and believe in Jesus Christ crucified and risen.” Because the gospel is God’s means of grace by which he saves, the office of minister is to preach the pure gospel, and the office of believer is to hear and believe the pure gospel. Neither the minister nor the believer may attempt to separate the gospel from salvation. The foolish charge of the Remonstrants was that the Reformed doctrine of salvation by sovereign, efficacious grace without the cooperation of the sinner meant that there was no point to preaching the gospel. The Reformed answer is that of course there is a point to preaching the gospel, for God is a God of means. Just as he is pleased to use the means of food and drink to support our natural life, so God is pleased to use the gospel—in preaching, in the sacraments, and in Christian discipline—as the sovereign means by which he saves his people.

From beginning to end Canons 3–4.17 is about the gospel as God’s means of grace. At no point does Canons 3–4.17 introduce God’s good and holy law as God’s means of grace. The Canons rules out the law as the means of grace already in Canons 3–4.5: “Man cannot by this law obtain saving grace” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 167). The Canons establishes the gospel alone as the means of grace already in Canons 3–4.6: “What therefore neither the light of nature nor the law could do, that God performs by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the Word or ministry of reconciliation, which is

¹ Andrew Lanning, “Canons 3–4.17: ‘Grace is Conferred by Means of Admonitions,’” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 4 (September 2022): 8–18.

the glad tidings concerning the Messiah” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 167). Canons 3–4.17 teaches the same doctrine as Canons 3–4.5–6. “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.” The gospel, not the law, is God’s means of grace and salvation.

When Canons 3–4.17 says, “Grace is conferred by means of admonitions,” it is still speaking about the gospel. The “admonitions” are the call of the gospel to repent and believe in Jesus Christ, which admonitions are the gospel. When Canons 3–4.17 says, “The more readily we perform our duty,” it is still speaking about the gospel. The “duty” is literally the “office” of the minister to preach and the believer to believe. Preach what and believe what? The gospel! Grace is conferred by means of the gospel. Let no one try to separate grace and the gospel.

From beginning to end Canons 3–4.17 is about the gospel as God’s means of grace and salvation. At no point does Canons 3–4.17 introduce the law as God’s means of grace and salvation.

The Protestant Reformed Churches on Canons 3–4.17

The Protestant Reformed Churches introduce God’s law into Canons 3–4.17 as the means by which God confers grace upon his people. The PRC interpret the word “admonitions” to mean *commandments* or *law*. The PRC believe that the doctrine of Canons 3–4.17 is that grace is conferred by means of the law.

This is the position of the present dogmatics professor in the Protestant Reformed seminary, Prof. Ronald Cammenga, as demonstrated in last month’s editorial. Professor Cammenga teaches about this article that it addresses

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.²

Presumably, Professor Cammenga teaches his theology to his students, which means that for the past fifteen or more years, Protestant Reformed seminary graduates have been sent into the pulpits of the PRC with the theology that salvation is by the law and that salvation by the law is the Reformed doctrine of Canons 3–4.17.

Rev. Martyn McGeown also introduces God’s law into Canons 3–4.17 as the means by which God confers grace. In a recent post on the RFPA blog, he explains the apostle Peter’s calling that we add to our faith virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity (2 Pet. 1:5–7). Reverend McGeown has many things to say about this passage, but the heart of his doctrine is this: “Our effort fits with God’s grace” as that by which we obtain these virtues. By our effort *and* by God’s grace, we obtain these virtues. By God’s grace *but also* by our effort, we obtain these virtues. My issue with Reverend McGeown’s doctrine is not that he teaches diligent human activity or that he calls men to diligent activity. “Add!” says the apostle, and add we must, and add we do. Rather, my issue with Reverend McGeown’s doctrine is that he makes man’s diligent effort stand alongside God’s grace. For Reverend McGeown and for the PRC, man does not obtain salvation until both God’s grace has operated and man’s effort has operated.

Reverend McGeown grounds his doctrine of “our effort fits with God’s grace” in the Protestant Reformed misuse of Canons 3–4.17. In his appeal to Canons 3–4.17, he makes “admonitions” to be commandments and “performing our duty” to be obedience to the law.

Canons 3:17 express it beautifully: “Grace is conferred by means of admonitions—such as this admonition in 2 Peter 1:5–7—and the more readily we perform our duty (the duty here of adding virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity to our faith), 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 their saving fruit and efficacy, is forever due.”

In this way, your life will be one grand choir or orchestra performed to the glory of God.³

2 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.

3 Martyn McGeown, “A Study in 2 Peter 1:5–11 (1b): Adding to Our Faith,” September 5, 2022, <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/a-study-in-2-peter-1-5-11-1b-adding-to-our-faith>.

What Reverend McGeown does to Canons 3–4.17 in his blog post he has done for several years already. In his 2018 commentary on the Canons of Dordt, Reverend McGeown makes Canons 3–4.17 teach the law as God’s means of grace and salvation.

The article ends with a beautiful explanation of the working of the grace of God. First, “grace is conferred by means of admonitions.” God gives power to obey (his grace) by the command itself (admonition). God works faith through the call to faith. God works repentance through the call to repentance. God works sorrow for sin through warnings against sin. God preserves his people in holiness through commands to be holy. God preserves his people through warnings and threatenings (1 Tim. 4:13–16).⁴

What Professor Cammenga and Reverend McGeown write about Canons 3–4.17 is the view of Protestant Reformed ministers and elders generally. This is evident, first, from the fact that no Protestant Reformed minister, professor, missionary, or consistory has risen up to condemn Professor Cammenga or Reverend McGeown for replacing the gospel with the law in Canons 3–4.17. If Protestant Reformed ministers or elders disagreed with the Protestant Reformed doctrine that the law is God’s means of grace, they would not be able to rest until they had driven that doctrine from their midst. The fact that no one in the PRC rises up is because the ministers and elders agree with Professor Cammenga and Reverend McGeown. They have made their peace with Cammenga’s and McGeown’s doctrine and in doing so have made it their own doctrine.

Second, that the introduction of the law into Canons 3–4.17 is the view of Protestant Reformed ministers and elders became evident at Synod 2018. There were several protests at that synod against Synod 2017’s confusion of the law and the gospel. Four delegates and a professor at Synod 2018—Elder Gary Kaptein, Rev. Rodney Kleyn, Rev. Bill Langerak, Elder Al Meurer, and Prof. Barry Gritters—were placed on committee three to bring advice regarding the protests. Committee three played games at Synod 2018, with the connivance and the support of the synod. The game that committee three played was to recommend sustaining some of the protests, which would make it look like synod maintained the confessional distinction between the law and the gospel, but at the very same time to maintain that the law is God’s means of grace

to save his elect people. By this advice, found on pages 87–98 of the 2018 *Acts of Synod*, the Protestant Reformed Churches and the protestants would be led to believe that the protestants’ doctrine was upheld. But by this very same advice, committee three would overthrow Reformed doctrine by introducing the law as the means of salvation.

Here is the doctrine of committee three: “All the ‘commands we preach’ from Scripture are also means of grace *in salvation* to the elect, *regenerated* child of God.”⁵ That is a naked statement of the law as a means of grace.

Committee three grounded its doctrine in the Protestant Reformed misuse of Canons 3–4.17.

1) Canons III/IV, 17 teaches that saving grace and the means of grace must never be separated, and these means of grace include admonitions:

a) Mr. Meyer is incorrect when he claims that these “admonitions” are not “addressing obedience (fruits of faith) to save.” The article explicitly states that these admonitions concern “the exercise of the Word...discipline” and the “performance of our duty.”

b) H.C. Hoeksema writes: “Admonitions of the Word...occupy a large place. How many an admonition is found in...Proverbs...in the prophets...various epistles...They occupy a strategic position in relation to the whole of the word of God. If the need and importance of admonitions are denied, and if even the possibility of admonitions is excluded, the effect is necessarily that the whole word of God is excluded as to its need and possibility...Who in the history of the Reformed churches has denied the necessity of the preaching of the word, of the whole counsel of God, including its admonitions?” (VOE, 558; 349–350).⁶

And what did Synod 2018 do with the advice of committee three? What did Synod 2018 pronounce regarding the doctrine of committee three? The delegates declined to judge that doctrine. Instead, they recommitted the advice to committee three. What came back from committee three was a purely formal and procedural recommendation. The false doctrine of committee three was allowed to slink back into the shadows with nary a challenge.

And why did Synod 2018 allow the doctrine that God’s law is the means by which he saves his people to slink away? Because the Protestant Reformed Churches believe

4 Martyn McGeown, *Grace and Assurance: The Message of the Canons of Dordt* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2018), 263–64.

5 *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America 2018*, 94, article 73 B.1.b.

6 *Acts of Synod 2018*, 94.

that doctrine. They believe that grace is conferred by means of the law and that the more readily we perform our duty of obeying the law, the more eminent is this grace of God working in us. They believe what Prof. R. Cammenga, Rev. M. McGeown, Rev. R. Kleyn, and Rev. B. Langerak have been teaching them: grace is conferred by means of the law. And the PRC do not believe what the RPC have been telling them, both while we were in the PRC and now that we are out: grace is conferred by means of the gospel.

And by the way, if anyone wonders about committee three's quote from Homer Hoeksema, committee three ignored the one line from Homer Hoeksema that settles the matter. The issue in the interpretation of Canons 3–4.17 is whether “admonitions” means law or gospel. The issue is not whether there are many admonitions in scripture, which Hoeksema says. The issue is not whether the admonitions are necessary, as Hoeksema also says. The issue is what those admonitions are. Are they the sacred admonitions of the law? Then grace is conferred by means of the law. Or are they the sacred admonitions of the gospel? Then grace is conferred by means of the gospel. Homer Hoeksema clearly identified those admonitions as the call of the gospel (which is the gospel) and not the commandments of the law. Here is the line from Hoeksema that settles it: “Always the admonition of the word of God, whether expressed or implied, is repent and believe.”⁷ There is Hoeksema's interpretation of “admonitions” in Canons 3–4.17: “Repent and believe!” Not the law: “Do this and live.” But the gospel: “Repent and believe in Jesus Christ.” When the present-day PRC introduce the law into Canons 3–4.17, they not only depart from the Canons, but they depart from their father and thus show that they are not his sons. When the Reformed Protestant Churches maintain the gospel in Canons 3–4.17, they not only uphold the Reformed faith by God's grace, but they also show that they are the true spiritual heirs of the old PRC.

Salvation by the Law Is Salvation by Man

The doctrine of salvation by the law is the doctrine of salvation by man. By their interpretation of Canons 3–4.17, the PRC reveal their doctrine of salvation. Their doctrine of salvation is that salvation is by the law. Their doctrine is that grace is conferred by the law. The PRC might also still teach that salvation is also by the gospel. This is not to the credit of the PRC, for any Protestant Reformed teaching

that salvation is by the gospel only serves to deceive the unwary and the simple. For the PRC the real power of salvation is God's law. For the PRC the real means of grace is God's commandments. Protestant Reformed preaching and writing press commandments upon the people for their salvation. The issue is not that the PRC preach commandments. The law is God's word and must be preached strictly. Rather, the issue is that the PRC preach the law *for salvation*. The PRC preach the law *for the blessings of salvation*. The PRC preach the law *for the experience and assurance of salvation*. The PRC preach the law *for justification in the sinner's experience of his forgiveness*. In the PRC salvation and all of its goodness come by the law.

This doctrine is everywhere one looks in the PRC today. The Protestant Reformed doctrine of salvation by the law is found wherever the PRC make man's doing the law to be that by which he is saved.

That the writers of the Canons insisted that the gospel preached was a necessary means of grace (cf. the opening sentence of Art. 17) means they confessed and taught that if a man with his household was to be saved and consciously enter into the kingdom, placing himself with his family under the rule of Christ as his Lord and Savior, he was called, he was required, to respond obediently to the call and command of the gospel—“Repent and believe, that thou mightiest (*sic*) be saved with thy house.”⁸

The Protestant Reformed doctrine of salvation by the law is found wherever the PRC make man's good works in obedience to the law to be the means of man's assurance.

Good works, holiness, piety, godliness, obedience are the means God uses to give the assurance of salvation...God uses them to give assurance.⁹

The Protestant Reformed doctrine of salvation by the law is found wherever the PRC make abiding in Christ, coming to Christ, eating Christ, drinking Christ, or any other description of faith in Christ to mean man's good works of obedience to God's law.

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.¹⁰

7 Homer C. Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1980), 349.

8 Kenneth Koole, “What Must I Do...?,” *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 1 (October 1, 2018): 8.

9 Ronald Hanko, “Conditions and Means,” April 18, 2022.

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

The Protestant Reformed doctrine of salvation by the law is the explicit doctrine of the Protestant Reformed dogmatics professor.

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. (Cammenga, 45)

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. (Cammenga, 46)

The dreadful error of preaching the law for salvation is that it makes man the savior. If your salvation comes by your obeying the law, then your salvation comes by you. This is true for both justification and sanctification. If your justification comes by your obeying the law, then your justification comes by you. If your sanctification comes by your obeying the law, then your sanctification comes by you. If the law is God's means of grace by which he confers salvation, then man's obedience to that law is his salvation, and obedient man is his own savior.

Salvation by man is indeed the doctrine of the PRC. The good things of salvation, especially the assurance of salvation, the experience of God's fellowship and friendship, and one's knowledge that his sins are forgiven, all depend upon man. This has been demonstrated on these pages with quotations, explanations, and polemics for more than two years now. Here is the doctrine of the PRC: if a man would be saved, there is that which he must do.

It is exactly to rule out salvation by man that God does not give salvation by the law but by the gospel. The gospel declares what Jesus Christ perfectly did (and what you did not do and could not do). The gospel declares Jesus' perfect satisfaction for sin (which you did not accomplish and could not accomplish). The gospel declares Jesus' perfect obedience (which you did not perform and could not perform). The gospel, not the law, is God's power of salvation, in order that salvation might be of God and not of man.

19. Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.
20. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

21. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets;
22. Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference. (Rom. 3:19–22)

The Doctrine of Rome

The Protestant Reformed doctrine of salvation by the law is the doctrine of Rome. When the Protestant Reformed Churches teach the law of God as the means of grace, they are teaching Rome's doctrine. When the Protestant Reformed Churches teach that salvation and its blessings come by obedience to the law, they are teaching Rome's doctrine.

The similarity between the Protestant Reformed Churches and Rome in their doctrine of the law is not an incidental similarity. A church might find incidental similarities with Rome, such as Rome's opposition to abortion. But Rome's doctrine of the law is fundamental. Rome's doctrine of the law is at the heart of Rome's heresies of human merit and justification by works. Rome's doctrine is that salvation is by the law. Because salvation is by the law, salvation is by the work and worth and merit of man in his obedience to the law.

According to Rome, what does the law do? The law itself confers upon a man grace and strength to obey the law.

[The law is called] a law of grace, because it confers the strength of grace to act, by means of faith and the sacraments.¹¹

Rome uses all of the terms that will make its doctrine sound Christian: "grace," "strength of grace," "faith." But Rome's doctrine is that the law confers grace. For Rome God says to a man, "Do this and live," and God's law to that man confers upon him the strength to do what he is commanded to do and thus to live. For Rome the law as the law confers this strength.

Rome's doctrine of the law as the means of grace is the Protestant Reformed doctrine of the law. Rather than teaching the Reformed doctrine that the strength to obey is from Christ and his gospel, with the law serving as the rule, standard, and guide of our thankful obedience, the PRC teach the doctrine of Rome that the law itself is the means of grace. From the law itself comes a man's strength to obey.

Here is Rome: "[The law is called] a law of grace, because it confers the strength of grace to act, by means of faith and the sacraments."

¹¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1972, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P6W.HTM.

And here is the PRC: “It is clear...that preaching commands, admonitions, prohibitions, warnings, and rebukes is a positive means of grace in the lives of God’s people” (Cammenga, 45).

And here is the PRC: “God is pleased to use the preaching of the commands of His Word in order to accomplish the obedience that He commands” (Cammenga, 53).

But now, according to Rome, that is not all that the law does. According to Rome, the law also brings people into the conscious experience of fellowship with God. Rome’s doctrine of the law is a doctrine of covenant fellowship and friendship. How does this work in Rome’s teaching? Rome teaches that the law enables us to do good works of love. By doing those good works of love by the power of the law, a man enters into the experience of friendship with God. By the law a man is empowered to obey, and by his obedience he enjoys God’s friendship.

Here is Rome:

[The law is called] a law of freedom, because it sets us free from the ritual and juridical observances of the Old Law, inclines us to act spontaneously by the prompting of charity and, finally, lets us pass from the condition of a servant who “does not know what his master is doing” to that of a friend of Christ—“For all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you”—or even to the status of son and heir.¹²

That is astonishing! Rome’s doctrine of the law is that the law empowers us or “inclines us” to love and that the law by which we love then lets us pass into the condition of a friend of Christ. This is conditional covenant experience, and it is exactly the doctrine of the Protestant Reformed Churches today.

If a man with his household was to be saved and consciously enter into the kingdom, placing himself with his family under the rule of Christ as his Lord and Savior, he was called, he was required, to respond obediently to the call and command of the gospel—“Repent and believe, that thou mightiest (*sic*) be saved with thy house.”

The effect of this doctrine is that men cannot and will not seek their salvation in Christ, but they seek their salvation in the law. Men cannot and will not seek the power to believe and obey in Christ, but they seek the power to believe and obey in the law. Men cannot and will not seek their covenant fellowship with God in the finished work of Christ, but they seek their covenant fellowship in their own obedience.

No wonder the Reformed faith so clearly rejected the doctrine that the law is God’s means of grace! No wonder the Canons so strongly insisted that God by the gospel gives the salvation that man by the law could never have. Grace is conferred by means of the gospel.

The Doctrine of the Federal Vision

The Protestant Reformed doctrine that the law is the means of grace is also the doctrine of the federal vision. When the PRC teach that the law is good news for the believer as a positive means of grace in his justification and sanctification, they are teaching federal vision theology.

The federal vision is well known for its rejection of the Reformed distinction between the law and the gospel. The Reformed distinction is that the law is one kind of word of God, and the gospel is another kind of word of God. Both law and gospel are the word of God. Both law and gospel are inspired and infallible. Both law and gospel must be preached. Both law and gospel are good. But law and gospel are distinct words of God that each have its own specific use.

The law is the word of God that tells us what we are to do. The law says, “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not.” The use of the law is to expose our sin. The use of the law is also to be the rule, guide, and standard of our grateful lives. The use of the law is not to save. The use of the law is not to tell us what a good job we are doing in obeying the law. The use of the law is not to empower us in any sense in our salvation. The law cannot do these things because the law does not tell us about Christ. The law only tells us about ourselves: *thou shalt, thou shalt not.*

The gospel is the word of God that tells us what Christ has done according to the good pleasure of God. The gospel says, “It is finished.” The gospel is glad tidings of what another has done that I could not do. The gospel does not announce us, but it announces Christ’s free and gracious salvation.

In this distinction the law is not good news for the believer. Oh, yes, the believer loves the law. He delights in the law. He meditates upon the law. He will not tolerate any belittling of the law. It is the law of his God! But the law does not announce the believer’s salvation. Only the gospel tells the believer that God has reconciled his fallen people unto himself through Jesus Christ. That gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news.

The federal vision rejects this distinction between the law and the gospel and teaches instead that the law also is good news for the believer. The men of the federal vision stated their objection to the law and gospel distinction

¹² Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1972.

in their 2007 document entitled *A Joint Federal Vision Profession*.

We deny that law and gospel should be considered as hermeneutics, or treated as such. We believe that any passage, whether indicative or imperative, can be heard by the faithful as good news, and that any passage, whether containing gospel promises or not, will be heard by the rebellious as intolerable demand. The fundamental division is not in the text, but rather in the human heart.¹³

The federal vision makes the law to be good news. As long as a person is “faithful,” which is federal-vision-speak for “keeping oneself in God’s covenant favor by one’s faithful obedience to the law,” the law is good news. This is the doctrine of the Protestant Reformed Churches. The law comes to the PRC as a means of grace. It comes as that by which God confers grace and salvation upon them. The law comes to them as that by which they are justified—good news! And the law comes to them as that by which they are sanctified—good news! This is how Protestant Reformed people are taught to seek their welfare and their salvation. Do you want to prosper more in the great blessings of the covenant? Obey the law more! Do you want to obtain the forgiveness of sins? Obey the law by forgiving your neighbor! The law is held before the PRC as good news, by the keeping of which they may obtain the good things of their salvation.

But according to the Reformed confessions, we have all the good things of our salvation by Christ and Christ alone, through faith and faith alone, that it might be by grace and grace alone. The glad tidings of our salvation are not the law but the gospel of Jesus Christ. “The Word or ministry of reconciliation... 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).

Who Stands with the Canons?

The Protestant Reformed Churches have labored to convince men that the Reformed Protestant Churches are dissatisfied with the Canons of Dordt and that the RPC will likely discard certain articles of the Canons. This is a particularly clever tactic of the PRC because it teaches men to think the opposite of reality. If there is anything that the RPC have stood for, it is salvation by grace—exactly the doctrine of the Canons. If there is anything that the RPC have condemned, it is salvation by the will and work of man—exactly what the Canons condemn.

Isn’t this what the Reformed Protestant denomination is known for, even by her opponents? Making “too much” of grace? Making “too little” of man? But that is exactly the Canons! The Canons makes everything of grace for man’s salvation, and the Canons makes nothing of man for man’s salvation. The RPC stand doctrine for doctrine and article for article with the Canons of Dordt.

But the PRC have cleverly attempted to sever the RPC from the Canons in the minds of men. The PRC persuade the public that the RPC are dissatisfied with the Canons and that they are busy opposing the Canons. They persuade the public that the Reformed Protestant doctrines of eternal justification, passive faith, justification by faith alone without prerequisite repentance, and salvation by the gospel and not by the law are all departures from the Canons. The public is taught that just as the RPC have left the PRC, so the RPC have left the Canons of Dordt.

Well, it is true that the RPC left the PRC. But it is not true that the RPC left the Canons. In fact, the RPC left the PRC in order to maintain the Canons’ doctrine of salvation by grace alone. That doctrine was being picked at and pecked at for many years, and we did not know it. Now the PRC are swallowed up in their denial of salvation by grace alone. They bring the law into Canons 3–4.17, which is a terrible twisting of Canons 3–4.17. Teaching that the law is God’s means of grace to save is a denial of the Reformed faith as taught in the Canons of Dordt. And yet the PRC brazenly claim that it is the RPC who are dissatisfied with the Canons!

One startling evidence that the RPC stand doctrine for doctrine with the Canons of Dordt is that the RPC bear charge for charge the accusations of the calumniators against the doctrine of the Canons. The opponents of the Canons tried to

persuade the public: that [the Reformed doctrine of salvation by grace alone proceeding from God’s eternal predestination]...renders men carnally secure, since they are persuaded by it that nothing can hinder the salvation of the elect, let them live as they please; and, therefore, that they may safely perpetrate every species of the most atrocious crimes. (Conclusion of the Canons, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 179)

When the Canons taught predestination as the salvation of man without his works, the enemies slanderously accused the Canons of teaching “Perpetrate every atrocious crime!” When the RPC teach the very same gospel of eternal forgiveness without man’s works, our

¹³ <https://rscottclark.org/a-joint-federal-vision-profession-2007/>.

enemies slanderously accuse us of teaching “Sin freely!”¹⁴ Our opponents are hell-bent on persuading the public that our doctrine of eternal forgiveness means that men should sin as they please. So much do they wish to persuade the public of this that in the very same breath as they acknowledge that we do not explicitly teach men to sin, they insist that our doctrine of eternal forgiveness must make men sin as they please.

Although it is true that the RPs have not gone so far as to teach that believers need not confess their sins or pray for forgiveness, this is the necessary implication of their teaching that forgiveness precedes repentance. Forgiven sin is no sin, and if there is no sin, then sin as you please because your sin has already been pardoned eternally.¹⁵

It is striking that our opponents make this charge against our *doctrine*. They “persuade the public” that our doctrine of salvation by grace alone encourages men to sin freely. This is exactly the charge against the Canons’ doctrine of predestination. The calumny of the enemies was that this doctrine “by its own genius and necessary tendency, leads off the minds of men from all piety and religion” (Conclusion of the Canons, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 179). Though I tremble for those who make this charge, for they are enemies of the gospel, I rejoice that the RPC may so closely stand with the Canons of Dordt. Doctrine for doctrine, right down to the very accusations of our opponents, the RPC stand with the Canons.

It is not the RPC who have left the Canons of Dordt but the PRC. The Protestant Reformed Churches’ appeal to the Canons is superficial and deceitful. The PRC obscure the meaning of the Canons by their appeal to a word or a phrase here and there. But the Canons does not teach what the PRC say that it teaches. The doctrine of the Canons could be summarized this way: salvation is of God alone. The doctrine could be summarized this way: salvation is by grace alone. The Canons is at pains to declare that salvation is not of man or man’s doing but only of God and his grace. Pick any article in the Canons, and you will find God and his gracious work, not man and any kind of cooperating work.

However, when the PRC search the Canons, they can only find man, man’s doing, man’s contribution, and man’s honor. They can hardly find God, except in passing, and then only as a foil for the real hero of the Canons: man. The PRC in the year 2022 are insane for

man. Man is the fever in the Protestant Reformed brain. Man is the dream of the Protestant Reformed soul. In fact, the PRC are being trained to read scripture and the confessions with an eye out for man. If you want to see this present-day Protestant Reformed training in action, take a look at the September 1, 2022, issue of the *Standard Bearer*. Professor Cammenga’s article is a master class in teaching people to read the confessions to find man’s doing. The articles from the confessions that Professor Cammenga cites all teach God and his grace. But Professor Cammenga trains a compliant readership to find man and man’s activity in those articles, in the service of teaching the people that man’s activity precedes God’s activity in justification.

This method of reading the Canons is the deceptive method known as “proof-texting.” In proof-texting one does not come to the Canons to learn the doctrine that the Canons actually teaches. Instead, one comes to the Canons knowing what doctrine he wants the Canons to teach and then twisting the Canons to agree with him. When he lands on a word or a phrase in the Canons that sounds something like what he wants, he cites that phrase as a proof text for his position. This method of proof-texting makes it possible for anyone to find anything in scripture or the confessions. With this method of proof-texting, every heretic can have his text.

This method of proof-texting can be exposed by stepping back to view the doctrine of the Canons as a whole. The doctrine of the Canons can be compared to a mighty, rushing river. That river flows without diversion in one direction only. The doctrine of the Canons is the gracious salvation of God. That salvation flows inexorably from God as its source and flows inexorably to God for his glory. That this is the doctrine of the Canons is evident from the “five articles which have been controverted” (Conclusion of the Canons, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 179) that make up the Canons: TULIP—or ULTIP, in the order of the Canons—unconditional election, limited atonement, total depravity, irresistible grace, and preservation of the saints. Those five articles are the doctrines of grace. The doctrines of *grace!* Not the doctrines of man. Not the doctrines of man’s doing. Not the doctrines of man’s contribution. Not the doctrines of man’s glory. But the doctrines of God’s grace! Nothing in the Canons flows contrary to that river of grace. There is no little eddy here and there flowing backward to the glory of man. From beginning to end the Canons are the doctrines of God’s sovereign, irresistible, saving grace that delivers elect and fallen man from his sin and death

14 Andrew Lanning, “The Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC): Free Forgiveness!,” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 3 (August 2022): 7–13.

15 Ronald Cammenga, “Antinomians? Without a Doubt,” *Standard Bearer* 98, no. 20 (September 1, 2022): 470.

through Jesus Christ according to God's eternal good pleasure and decree.

Now, in such a confession, does anyone imagine that he will find the following teachings? If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do. Or: in a vital sense in man's salvation, man's activity precedes God's activity, and God's activity follows man's activity. Or: justification in man's conscious experience is by means of repentance (not faith alone). Or: faith is man's activity and not God's activity. Or: God uses the commands of his law to justify his people. Or: the Reformed faith safeguards God's sovereignty in salvation by trumpeting as loudly as possible the activity of man.

When the PRC teach all these things, they are swimming in a different river than the Canons. It is the river of Man. When the PRC from their opposite-flowing river reach over into the Canons to pluck out the phrase "grace is conferred by means of admonitions," they are only proof-texting. They are not dealing with the actual doctrinal flow and substance and meaning of the Canons.

Here is the Canons: salvation by grace.

Here is Canons 3–4.17: grace is conferred by means of the gospel.

May God preserve that precious gospel among us.

—AL

FROM THE EDITOR

October is here and with it the Reformed Believers Publishing (RBP) annual meeting. Please join us on Thursday, October 20, at 7:30 p.m. at the Wonderland Tire shop in Byron Center, MI (1 84th Street SW, Byron Center, MI 49315). (Note the correct date is October 20, not October 22, as reported last month.) 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. The meeting will be live-streamed for those who cannot make it to the tire shop.

The board of RBP, the members of the association, and the editors of *Sword and Shield* also cordially invite all Reformed believers to join Reformed Believers Publishing. The cause of Reformed Believers Publishing is the glorious Reformed faith. The platform by which RBP witnesses to that cause is a magazine that can go anywhere from Kalamazoo to Timbuktu. *Sword and Shield* has been spotted around campfires in the summer, in school classrooms in the fall, with hot chocolate stains in the winter, and at condos on spring break. *Sword and Shield* has been involved in the great theological battles of the day. Though men may laugh at the magazine (nervously), curse the magazine (guiltily), ignore the magazine (after just one more article), or burn the magazine (to sear their consciences), *Sword and Shield* has been the foe of the lie and the friend of the truth. Or, rather, the Truth has been the friend of *Sword and Shield*. Our magazine could have no place except that the Lord has given it. *Sword and Shield* has gained no land by the edge of the sword, and *Sword and Shield's* own arm could to us no safety afford. The Captain of our salvation has fought all of our battles. Who would not want to be a member

of Reformed Believers Publishing to take up the sword in this greatest of battles for the cause of the Reformed faith, in which the victory is already won?

Reformed believers who would like to join may apply for membership through the website (reformedbelievers.org) or use the other information on the masthead of the magazine. New members will be received by vote of the current RBP members at the annual meeting in October, so do not delay!

This issue of *Sword and Shield* features the first installment of Mr. Luke Bomers' dogmatics paper from last semester. Mr. Bomers wrote the paper for Rev. Nathan Langerak's dogmatics class, which covered the locus of eschatology. Luke's paper advances our understanding of the reward of grace, explaining the reward from the point of view of election theology. The rest of the installments will follow in subsequent months, the Lord willing.

Also included in this issue is Mr. Luke Bomers' English translation of a Latin theological treatise written in 1605 by Franciscus Gomarus regarding the merit of Christ. The document is published as a companion piece to the first installment of Mr. Bomers' paper.

Mr. Joel Langerak Jr. continues his profitable series on Reformed education in the classroom.

And be sure to spend a little time with the beautiful poem by Mrs. Connie Meyer.

We also have enough material for a Letters Edition, which we are planning to publish around November 15. This will be a special issue, as in the past, and will not interrupt the regular November and December issues. All of this, God willing.

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 (2): AFRAID OF THE DECREE

Left with Deception and Deceivers

14. And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God;
15. I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot.
16. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.
17. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:
18. I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eye-salve, that thou mayest see.
19. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.
20. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.
21. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.
22. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches. (Revelation 3:14–22)

This word of Christ came to the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) for five years. It came in sermons, blog posts, protests, appeals, private meetings, conversations, and other ways that I do not know, but God does. Jesus Christ diligently came to the Protestant Reformed Churches with the word “You are lukewarm.” These churches were not refreshing like a cold beer on a hot day. And they were not soothing like a warm cup of chicken

soup on a cold day. They were disgustingly lukewarm like the coffee that sits on your desk all day, and the smell of it allures you to take a sip; and when you do, you spew it out of your mouth as unpleasant and gross. With their doctrine of man, the Protestant Reformed Churches were gross to God.

The Protestant Reformed Churches became lukewarm over a period of decades, and that lukewarmness culminated in a doctrinal controversy over justification by faith alone and the unconditional covenant. What made them lukewarm was the same doctrine as Laodicea’s. The Laodiceans thought they were something; and being something in their own eyes, they did not buy of the Lord his riches to be justified before God. Everything that is not Christ is disgusting to God, and Laodicea did not have Christ and thus was disgusting to God. The Laodiceans did not have Christ because their justification was found in something other than in Christ alone.

Everyone must remember that where justification by faith alone is taught, there the unconditional covenant must be taught. And wherever the unconditional covenant is taught, there justification by faith alone must be taught. To corrupt one or the other is to corrupt both. The Protestant Reformed Churches trumpet the fact that they teach the unconditional covenant. They tell everyone who will listen and even those who will not that the PRC, of all churches and peoples and nations and tongues upon the earth, teach the unconditional covenant. But the PRC have corrupted the truth of justification by faith alone. They have corrupted that truth by a man-first, repentance-first, obedience-first doctrine. Thus they have also corrupted the unconditional covenant. This doctrine is a dead letter in those churches.

The leading theologian in the Protestant Reformed Churches—and he may have one foot in the grave, but he is still head and shoulders above the rest—teaches the doctrine of Rev. Hubert De Wolf that in a certain sense in God’s drawing near to man, man is first. De Wolf was rejected in 1953, but his doctrine stayed, and it is now the doctrine of the PRC. Man must first draw near to God. Before God forgives man that man must first repent for his forgiveness. The leading theologian of the PRC

supposes that he saves himself and his doctrine from the charge of corrupting justification by faith alone by saying that the things that man must do first he does by the grace of God, but that has been the refuge of heretics and false teachers down through the ages, and it is the refuge of Protestant Reformed heretics and false teachers too. The Protestant Reformed Churches shout and cheer whenever their champion comes forward to blaspheme, so they are one with him in his doctrine. He with the rest in the PRC suppose that they save themselves from the charge of Arminianism by saying that this doctrine of theirs is true for the experience of salvation. But over against this I say that at the vital point of the elect child of God's experience, knowledge, and assurance of his salvation, and thus also at the vital point of his enjoyment of that salvation in time and in eternity, his salvation has prerequisites and conditions and is dependent and contingent on and in the way of what he does, however that doing may be described.

This doctrine of man first has affected the Protestant Reformed explanation of every other area of the truth of salvation: a man is assured by his obedience; total depravity in its vital application to the regenerated believer is denied; good works are conditions to experience God's favor and fellowship; a holy life of obedience is necessary to fellowship with God; men approach the Lord's table and thus approach unto fellowship with their God with a righteousness of true obedience to the law. I have detailed and enumerated these departures in my previous article.¹ None of these false doctrines have been repudiated, but all are received and trumpeted as the gospel, indeed, as the purest form of the gospel.

All of these corruptions touch the vital doctrine of justification by faith alone. That doctrine teaches me that without any works, deeds, activities, or obedience, I am declared by God to be righteous, that I am an heir to all the promises of God, that I receive the Spirit of grace and reconciliation, that I have peace with God, that I stand in his presence in grace, that I am received of God in mercy whenever I go to him and despite all of my sins and wickedness, and that without any doubt I will go to heaven. The elect child of God's peace, joy, happiness, liberty, comfort, fellowship with God, and entrance into eternal life are sealed with his justification. He is justified by faith and not by works. He is justified by doing

nothing because he is justified by Christ alone. Christ is his righteousness, obedience, holiness, and acceptance before God. The child of God can no more be condemned than Christ can be condemned, and he can no more be rejected of God or cast out of his presence than Christ could be. The child of God is righteous by faith in Christ because by faith he is one with Christ, a member of his corporation, and thus a partaker of Christ and of all his riches and gifts. The child of God is righteous and justified in his conscience and experience daily without works of obedience, and he will be justified in the same way in heaven.

The Protestant Reformed Churches have corrupted the truth of justification by faith alone. They teach justification by faith and works done by grace, or just plainly they teach justification by faith and works. They move seamlessly between describing obedience as necessary to enjoy fellowship with God and describing that a man must first repent before God justifies him. Both of these

errors are the same. They both deny justification by faith alone and teach justification by faith and works. Teaching this, the Protestant Reformed Churches also teach a conditional covenant, whatever protests they might make to the contrary and regardless of their deception of using the words *unconditional* and *gracious*. *Unconditional*—

wink, wink—in the Protestant Reformed Churches and on the lips of their ministers means condition, contingency, and prerequisite because under the guise of that word *unconditional* they teach that before God justifies a man, that man must first repent; and thus in order to enjoy God as his God, to enjoy the favor of God, and to enjoy the knowledge of his forgiveness, a man must first do something. That is a prerequisite, a contingency, and a condition—first before God does one thing, man must do another—no matter how many times one mentions *grace*, and no matter how many *God-workeds* and *God-givens* are added to the formulation, and no matter how many appeals are made to the *orderly way*. That is all subterfuge to deceive the simple and to keep men in bondage to error and in the power of the false teacher.

Thus it is true of the Protestant Reformed Churches that they were lukewarm, as it was true of Laodicea, because the PRC did not know who they were. Protestant Reformed ministers routinely denied who they were, and they taught the people to deny who they were too.

Already generally skittish
about the decree, in the case of
eternal justification Reverend
McGeown is as nervous as a cat
in a room with a rocking chair.

1 Nathan J. Langerak, "Slithering Around Again (1): A Review," *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 4 (September 2022): 19–23.

The ministers taught the people that they were not totally depraved, and they taught them on that basis to reject every word brought to them about who they were and every rebuke that included a description of who they were. As in Laodicea the PRC forgot that they were wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked. Only to the sinner who has nothing and is in his own eyes an ungodly person is the doctrine of justification by faith alone the sweetest heavenly music. To those who are something and suppose that they are rich, increased with goods, and have need of nothing, the doctrine of justification by faith alone is like nails on a chalkboard because that doctrine takes away all of their self-righteous works and deeds, of which they are very proud and by which they distinguish themselves from others and in which they suppose that they approach unto God.

The Lord warned the Protestant Reformed Churches of this reality, but she did not buy of the Lord his treasures:

I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eye-salve, that thou mayest see.

The Lord warned because there were still those in the PRC whom he loved. And we heard his call and came out to him. The Lord was not going into those churches because they had displaced him and cast him out. And so we went out to him to eat with him and to fellowship with him in the truth of the gospel of the free and gracious pardon of sins without works and by faith alone. And the Protestant Reformed Churches are rushing as fast as they can down the road to Rome. If there are any left whom the Lord loves, who have ears to hear, come out too. Perhaps you have slept through the whole controversy. Perhaps you were blinded until now. Perhaps you believed the deceptions and lies and fake narratives that were fed to you. Whatever the reason, if you are stirred to recognize the error and false doctrine of the PRC, then come out. The Lord stands outside and knocks. Go out to him! In part, the reason I write is that perhaps, the Lord being gracious, there may be some yet in the PRC who hear.

Casting out Christ, the Protestant Reformed Churches are left with their deception that they are rich, increased with goods, and have need of nothing. They are deaf and blind to all of the Lord's terrible judgments. They lament vainly for their troubles, as though the Lord is chastising them, and they do not understand that he is destroying them. None of the Protestant Reformed prophets will tell

the church members of the judgment that is upon them. The prophets only prophesy of peace and use smooth words. Denying justification by faith alone is the mark of a dead church, the false church, and the church under the wrath and judgment of God. The Protestant Reformed Churches deny justification by faith alone. They deny that they did this in their synodical decisions and in their writings. But now it is evermore increasingly clear that this is the heart of their doctrinal error: they will not be justified by faith in Christ alone, but they will add to Christ some deed, work, or activity of man. They won't have Christ's white raiment, but they put on the deeds of man.

Cementing in the consciousness of the members of the PRC the deception that all is well are the writings of the ministers, among which Rev. Martyn McGeown's are to be included. If we were not dealing with so many serious issues involving so many souls, but more importantly involving the great name of God and the honor of Jesus Christ, one would be tempted to laugh at the transparent stupidity, the triteness, and the patent falsehood of the writings. A people must be blind indeed to read and nod their heads in agreement. I think many people do not read these writings though. I think many people do not read the *Standard Bearer*. That has been true for years in the PRC. The Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA) would publish figures about how many subscriptions it had to the *Standard Bearer*, but never once did the RFPA ask the simple and obvious question, who actually reads the *Standard Bearer*? For many the magazine was a coffee-table decoration for the benefit of the elders who came for family visitation. And the same holds true for the blog of the RFPA: a great deal of effort goes into producing it, but what it produces is not worth the effort. It is not worth the effort because, as the *Standard Bearer*, it is not the gospel. The RFPA has as its purpose the denial of the gospel and the promotion of the lie. I think that in order to stay in the PRC many have simply stopped reading altogether. Maybe by the providence of God, something will find its way before their eyes to wake them, and they will hear the Lord say, "Tolle lege!"

Terrified of the Decree

In his blog series "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness," with which I am concerned, Reverend McGeown tells us that he is going to teach about repentance and faith.² You can go read it on the RFPA blog, if you can find it underneath the pile of dung that has come after it. To point out all of Reverend McGeown's false doctrine would be a full-time job. So let it suffice that if he

2 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>).

is proven to be a false teacher on justification, then all the rest that he writes is worthless and merely serves the confirmation of his false gospel.

His doctrine of justification is that in a man's mind and conscience he is not justified until he repents. McGeown's doctrine is the same as Professor Engelsma's doctrine. It is a repentance-first-and-then-remission doctrine; or it is a repentance-first-and-then-justification doctrine. Or, better, McGeown's doctrine is justification by faith and by repentance. I will prove that in time. For him man must first repent, and then and only then will God forgive him. God may not and God does not forgive unless man repents. This doctrine of repentance first and then remission is a corruption of the doctrine of justification by faith alone and is the teaching of justification by faith and works.

Reverend McGeown's doctrine that he teaches the churches, that he teaches his church, and that he promotes on the blog of the RFPA is a doctrine of justification that is the same in essence as Rome's doctrine. The Christian Reformed Church in 1924 by the doctrine of common grace broke down the antithesis between the church and the world and so became the world. The Protestant Reformed Churches by their doctrine of repentance first and then remission have broken down the antithesis between the Reformation and Rome, and the PRC have become Rome.

True to nature, Reverend McGeown is slippery in his teaching of justification by faith and works. He makes statements of the truth and then casts doubt on them. Yea, hath God said! He introduces so many distinctions in this series that it is hard to keep them all straight. There is a distinction between faith and repentance, between repentance and conversion, between repentance and works, and between justification and forgiveness. Then when he should make a distinction—between faith and repentance—he mashes them together into a single entity. There may be more distinctions in his blog series, but I lost count. He also is adept at quoting—but not explaining—scriptural passages that he uses, as though they so obviously support his position that he is not obligated or will not condescend to explain the passages to the reader and to show how they support his doctrine or his distinctions.

In his series he is supposedly explaining Christ's words in Luke 24:44–49. I quote the passage in its entirety:

44. And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which

were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.

45. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures,

46. And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day:

47. And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

48. And ye are witnesses of these things.

49. And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.

In light of what Reverend McGeown writes later, it is important to note his brief analysis of this passage. He writes,

The content of the message that the apostles were called to preach was this: repentance and remission of sins. "Preach," says Jesus "the necessity of my sufferings, death, and resurrection; and preach repentance and the remission of sins."³

What is utterly lacking in this brief analysis of the passage is the source of Christ's coming, his suffering, his death, and his resurrection, as well as the source of the message of repentance and remission that goes to every nation; and that source is God's decree. Reverend McGeown could perhaps be excused for this on account of the brevity of his summary. But this lack manifested in his summary carries through his entire series. He does not trace all of his theology back to the decree of God. He does not do decretal theology.

Decretal theology is theology that traces all back to God's decree and explains all out of that decree. Decretal theology is God-first theology. The necessity of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection was not so that repentance and remission could be preached; the necessity of his suffering and death was not even primarily sin. The necessity of Christ's coming and death was the eternal decree and will of God. In that decree God appointed some to salvation and others to damnation. Indeed, even more specifically, the source of Christ's suffering and death and the necessity of those events was that God appointed Christ to glory and his church to salvation through death and resurrection, sin and grace, the fall and redemption. The *must* of the passage is God and his eternal will for the glory of Christ and the salvation of his church. For that reason God spoke by Moses and the prophets and

3 Martyn McGeown, "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (1): Repentance," April 27, 2022, <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-1-repentance>.

revealed what had been hidden, what eye had not seen, and all that the wisdom of man could not conceive concerning God's will in Christ. And that *must* of the decree of God carries through all of history, all of salvation, and all of the application of salvation. Christ must die because God willed it. The elect must repent and believe and must be forgiven because God willed it. Thus also the gospel *must* go out into the world that God's people be brought according to his decree to the knowledge of their salvation by the remission of their sins and that they be manifested as God's children in the world by repentance. Starting with his summary of the passage and following through the entire series, Reverend McGeown does not do decretal—that is to say, Reformed—theology. It is inconceivable that a truly Reformed man, or a man who claims Herman Hoeksema as his supporter, would say the things that Reverend McGeown says about the decree, repentance, faith, and justification.

Understand that it is not that he does not say *election* or *elect* or *decree*, and he even managed in the 7,500 words about preaching repentance and remission to make a single reference to the *reprobate*. But he simply does not do theology from the viewpoint of predestination and the decree. The decree is there. He must acknowledge it, but it plays no controlling role in his development of repentance and remission. This is because the decree leaves no room for a man-first, repentance-first, obedience-first theology. And Reverend McGeown, if he makes anything clear in this series at all, makes clear that he is very much about man, man's works, man's repentance, and man's deeds. He is skittish about the decree, and he wants his readers to be too.

Beware Eternal Justification

Already generally skittish about the decree, in the case of eternal justification Reverend McGeown is as nervous as a cat in a room with a rocking chair. Of course, in a series of articles on remission of sins, he must mention eternal justification. And he does mention it. Yet he mentions it, as he does other important truths about salvation, in order to cast doubt on it and ultimately to have eternal justification regarded as a dangerous doctrine.

When he mentions eternal justification, he is in the process of distinguishing between justification and forgiveness, and he must then speak of eternal justification, “which is the teaching that because God eternally views his people in Christ they are eternally righteous before him.”⁴

The reality of eternal justification means that in the counsel of election God eternally beheld his people in

Christ and thus that God knew them in Christ as justified from all eternity. Or you can say that eternal justification means that there is an eternal decree of God justifying his people for Christ's sake, since Christ's cross is also eternal. They are justified from all eternity, and God never beholds iniquity in Jacob.

One could be forgiven for thinking that in exegeting the passage from Luke 24 about preaching repentance and remission (justification) in the whole world, one would trumpet the doctrine of eternal justification as the eternal reality of what takes place through the preaching of the gospel. Reverend McGeown does not. He warns with emphasis that the doctrine has no “*explicit* biblical support” and that it is not mentioned in the creeds. He weakens the doctrine by a quotation from the Westminster Confession 11.4:

God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect; and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise against for their justification: nevertheless they are not justified, *until* the Holy Spirit doth in due time actually apply Christ unto them.

Reverend McGeown emphasizes the word *until* because it reflects his own doubt about the doctrine. For him justification in eternity is not a reality for the elect sinner. The real justification is the forgiveness of the sinner's sin by faith and repentance. But I might as well note also that what the Westminster says is most definitely not what is meant by eternal justification. In fact, the whole article of the Westminster in this regard is weak. There were men at the Westminster Assembly who were scared of the decree too, and they were worried about emphasizing it too much. And over against the Westminster, we say that God did not merely decree *to* justify at some point, but he justified his people eternally.

In his raising doubts about the doctrine of eternal justification, Reverend McGeown also puts a quote in the mouth of Rev. Herman Hoeksema, as though Hoeksema was skittish about the doctrine and held the same viewpoint of it as does Reverend McGeown:

It must be maintained with equal firmness [as we maintain that Christ eternally took our guilt on himself, and you can say eternally justified us as the Lamb slain] that we personally become partakers of this benefit only by a sincere faith.

He makes it seem as though Hoeksema said that, but what McGeown quotes as from Hoeksema is in fact not

⁴ Martyn McGeown, “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (5): Forgiveness and Justification Distinguished,” May 16, 2022, <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-5-forgiveness-and-justification-distinguished>. Subsequent quotations of Reverend McGeown are from this article.

from Hoeksema but from the Conclusions of Utrecht, in which the synod acknowledged that eternal justification is taught in scripture. Reverend Hoeksema in his explanation and defense of the doctrine was stronger than the Conclusions of Utrecht and the Westminster Confession. And he disagreed with both in their insistence that we are not justified until we have faith. Reverend Hoeksema was not skittish about the doctrine of eternal justification, and he said in connection with the doctrine,

Evidently afraid to over-emphasize the counsel of God, some maintained that one could speak only of justification by faith. They denied eternal justification. But it is very clear that this is not correct...

The elect do not become righteous before God in time by faith, but they are righteous in the tribunal of God from before the foundation of the earth. God beholds them in eternity not as sinners, but as perfectly righteous, as redeemed, as justified in Christ.⁵

If those in the PRC could conjure Hoeksema from the grave, then he would say to them, “The elect do not become righteous before God in time by faith,” and the whole lot of them would choke and scream, “Antinomian? Without a doubt!” Professor Engelsma would blast off another email about the damnable doctrine of the Reformed Protestant Churches that denies the Reformed faith and is contrary to the creeds, if not to all of Christianity. Professor Engelsma would write about the doctrine of the Reformed Protestant Churches because the only place in the world that Hoeksema’s statement could be made without his being stoned to death or suspended or deposed would be a Reformed Protestant pulpit. Professor Cammenga would run to his study and furiously attack his keyboard to pound out yet another series of articles in the *Standard Bearer* to add to his already large collection of writings against antinomianism. Reverend McGeown would slither back to the RFPA blog to hiss out a blog post about the distinction between forgiveness and justification and to warn everyone about the dangers of emphasizing the decree too much. Undoubtedly, he would twist a scripture passage

Because the decree does not have any controlling place in his theology, McGeown careens off the Reformed path and goes crashing into an Arminian thorn bush.

or two in the service of his warning. Perhaps Professor Gritters would even get in on the game and write another lying lament about how far those schismatics that left the PRC have fallen from the truth. Professor Griess surely would join in and write an article saying that now, having denied the very doctrine of justification, the Reformed Protestant Churches are surely fools who are not to be answered.

Protestant Reformed writers are very fond of sprinkling Hoeksema quotations in their writings in a similar way that the Pharisees garnished the tombs of the prophets, while offering prayers of thanksgiving that they were dead. And on this point about eternal justification, Hoeksema had nothing in common with Reverend McGeown. Hoeksema loved eternal justification and taught it repeatedly and often, and he did not see that it conflicted at all with justification in man’s conscience any more than God’s decree ever conflicts with the explanation of salvation in time. Rather, Hoeksema understood that eternity is the reality, source, explanation, and *necessity* of what occurs in time. Time is but the unfolding and revelation of what was with God eternally as the way he would glorify himself in Christ and in the perfection of his covenant in Christ.

Hoeksema taught that the elect are justified in eternity and do not become righteous in time by faith. He grounded that statement on what—contrary to Reverend McGeown—is *explicit* biblical proof of the doctrine of eternal justification: “He [God] hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel (Num. 23:21).”⁶ God had his people always before him, graven on the very palms of his hands; and always he beheld them as righteous, and never did he see iniquity in them. As Hoeksema so provocatively wrote, “The elect do not become righteous before God in time...but they are righteous...from before the foundation of the earth.”

It is this very thought that McGeown rejects when, having mentioned eternal justification, he wants to destroy any confidence in the doctrine in the mind of the reader:

One of the problems with an emphasis upon eternal justification is that justification by faith becomes simply *a realization that we were always*

5 Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd edition (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association), 2:95.

6 Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:95.

justified, not an actual point in time when our legal status changed and we were declared righteous. This leads to the extreme view that we were always saved, never lost. (The emphasis is McGeown's.)

Making Us Aware of Our Eternal Salvation

What does the decree mean if it does not mean that we were always saved? What is the gospel except the declaration of the truth that we were always saved? That sentiment of Reverend McGeown sells out Reformed theology in its entirety and really is in principle a rejection of the whole idea of the decree of God and of God himself. What else did God mean when he stated in Luke 1:77 that the task of John the Baptist, and thus the task of every preacher of the gospel, was “to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins”? The Herald of the Dawn was to preach Christ, or, if you want, to preach repentance and remission. That preaching gave to God's people the knowledge of their salvation. They sat far from God in their darkness, sin, and guilt. But they were God's people. They were always his people and were ever before him in their righteousness in Christ. God said that *explicitly* “unto his people.” They were always and eternally his people. They did not know it, but in actual fact they were. Through the preaching of Christ—or repentance and remission—John was to give the knowledge of their salvation. God did not say that John was to save them by his preaching but to give them the knowledge of their salvation. That was to become aware of the eternal and objective fact of their salvation and to rejoice in that fact and reality. Salvation is to have God as your God and to be the people of the Lord. That is an eternal reality. We become aware of that eternal fact and reality with the knowledge of our salvation. It is exactly that point—that we become aware of this—that is the point of the passage. We become aware—receive the knowledge—that God is and ever was our God and that we are and ever were the people of the Lord. And you can also include in that knowledge the experience of salvation. Knowledge is always intimate knowledge and experiential knowledge. John was to preach Christ—or repentance and remission—so that those who sat in darkness would taste, enjoy, be assured of, experience, and be comforted in their salvation, that God was their God eternally!

The passage also says how God gives the knowledge, experience, and enjoyment of their salvation. He gives them the knowledge of their salvation by giving them the knowledge of the forgiveness of their sins, or what Luke 1:77 calls “remission.” That is, God makes them aware of their salvation, causes them to know that

salvation, and thus also makes them to rejoice and be glad in that salvation—to experience that salvation—by justifying them. That is because salvation consists in the remission of sins. God causes his people to know, experience, rejoice, and be glad in their salvation without any works and in spite of their sins and ungodliness, for it is exactly the sinner, the ungodly, the unrighteous, and the wicked whom God saves. God gives them the knowledge of their salvation by their doing nothing! God gives the knowledge of their salvation by giving them the knowledge of Christ and his remission. God gives them the knowledge of their salvation as sinners and as those who have no works. The specific awareness that John was to give them, the specific piece of knowledge and the specific experience that they were to receive, which gave to them the knowledge of their salvation, was the forgiveness of their sins.

And I want to add that John was to preach remission to the people and make them aware before Christ ever died. They already had their sins remitted. They had that eternally as God's people, and they had that by a promise that is sure because it was made by the unchanging God. So the emphasis of the passage is exactly what Reverend McGeown warns against as a problem. He says that it is a real and terrible danger that we make the preaching of forgiveness merely to be God's making us aware that we are always saved. It is not a problem for God, the Holy Ghost, Zacharias, or John. God said that he sends the gospel of Jesus Christ—preaching repentance and remission—into the world for that very purpose. It is not a problem either for every child of God, but he rejoices in knowing—becoming aware—of his salvation.

Reverend McGeown simply makes up problems with decretal theology because he does not do theology that way and he is afraid of decretal theology. He is interested in man and what man must do—especially is McGeown interested in man's repentance preceding his justification, so that repentance becomes a condition unto justification. The decree has no real and controlling place in his explanation of the preaching of repentance and remission. And because the decree does not have any controlling place in his theology, he careens off the Reformed path and goes crashing into an Arminian thorn bush.

I will examine his theology of the decree more next time. It goes a long way to explaining his doctrine of justification by faith and repentance. Then I will examine his doctrine of justification by faith and repentance and all of the distinctions that he must make to teach that abominable doctrine.

—NJL

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

IMPLICIT FAITH (4)

If the son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.—John 8:36

The previous three articles in this rubric were concerned with the matters of hierarchy and implicit faith. It has been noted how these two cooperate with each other for mutual advancement and support and how they lead further and further away from Christ, the only head and king of his church. It has also been made evident that together they push out the truth of the gospel and introduce in the place of the truth the doctrines and commandments of men.

It becomes evident then that an important part of the work of church reformation is to break completely this cycle of hierarchy and implicit faith. To break this cycle requires the work of the Holy Spirit through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Only that gospel, applied graciously to the hearts of God's people, brings freedom both from the tyranny of hierarchy and from implicit faith's reliance on that hierarchy. "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

The gospel itself is indeed the proclamation of freedom. That this is the character of the gospel of Jesus Christ is clear from the words by which the Lord proclaimed himself at the very beginning of his earthly ministry:

18. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,
19. To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18–19)

This gospel, publicly and promiscuously declared by our Lord, is also itself a stumbling block. The reaction of the assembly in the synagogue was deep offense. They drove Christ out of the synagogue and attempted to throw him to his death. When and where he proclaimed himself to be the only savior, the only life in the midst of death, the true bread of God from heaven, he caused similar stumbling and offense. He was contradicted. He was slandered. He was forsaken by the multitudes who

had previously followed him for the sake of his miracles. Finally it was this offense and scandal that aroused such hatred that he was crucified. The tyranny of the leaders of the people hatefully labored to this end. The implicit faith of the people cooperated to cry out for his death. "Let him be crucified! His blood be on us and on our children!"

Such continues to be the reaction of hierarchy and implicit faith against the truth as it is in Christ Jesus. The false charge of antinomianism is brought against the gospel of salvation by grace alone without works. Those who labor to bring the correction of the truth and to restore the freedom of the gospel are falsely charged with slander and schism, disrupting the peace and unity of the church.

"If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

Only the Son can bring freedom indeed. Only the Son liberates. The preaching of the gospel of freedom, even as Christ himself preached it, brings true freedom by his gift of the Spirit into the hearts of those for whom he died. Only for some is the gospel the savor of life unto life, while for others it is a savor of death unto death (2 Cor. 2:16). Not all have ears to hear (Luke 8:8). Not all have hearts to understand (Deut. 29:4). The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:14).

The truth about the gospel, that it is a savor both of life unto life and of death unto death, is what makes the work of church reformation so painful and difficult. The freedom it establishes is contrary to the flesh. The flesh prefers bondage: bondage to sin and Satan; bondage to men, no matter how oppressive or abusive they may be. The flesh finds in all of them a perverse refuge from the freedom of the gospel. Confronted with the gospel of freedom in Christ, the flesh fears that freedom greatly. In the gospel the citadel of human pride faces its complete destruction. The flesh contrives to drive out that freedom of the gospel by many means. It compromises the gospel by means of introducing elements of law. The flesh will claim that the law is necessary as a safeguard to keep grace from becoming licentious. The flesh will introduce

conditional theology to maintain the relevance and value of human work and effort. The flesh will maintain that conditional theology is necessary lest the doctrines of grace alone make the church one-sided or imbalanced in preaching and life.

In the above manner the work of church reformation faces many impediments. As church reformation involves a remnant that follows the gospel (Rom. 9:27–29; 11:1–6), the majority can be expected to cling to the church’s compromise of that gospel and vigorously defend that compromise as the truth. It makes no difference how much the majority experiences oppressive and abusive circumstances: the lie of oppressive hierarchy is preferred to the truth that brings freedom. Compromise is not only maintained but also developed further in the way of apostasy. That apostasy is further justified by majority vote and rule, no matter how far the departure is from the truth of the gospel. The majority will bring its pressure to bear on the minority. The majority will always raise the questions of how so many could be wrong and so few right.

How encouraging and comforting it is for those following the truth to see their place according to the word of God in Romans 9 and 10. Their position of laboring for the cause of the purity of the truth in the church of Jesus Christ is by grace alone. They, according to their love for the truth, have their places in that remnant by grace alone. Their devotion to the truth is the work of God according to his word. The work of church reformation is the divine demonstration that salvation is not by works (represented by the majority) but by grace alone!

But the work of church reformation is deeper and far more difficult than a faithful minority’s separating from a compromising majority. The flesh is not only the majority that is characterized by compromise and apostasy from the truth, but the flesh is also the corruption of total depravity that lives in the remnant as well as in the majority. This totally corrupt flesh carries in its bosom the pride that seeks to destroy the rule of Christ by substituting the rules of men. This totally corrupt flesh also cherishes rebellion against the rule of Christ by following the rules of men. The flesh will seize the work of church reformation in order to impose a new hierarchy with a new implicit faith. Those who stood courageously against the hierarchy and implicit faith will face the temptation to build anew for their own sakes. Those who benefitted from their leadership will be tempted to trust in them

rather than in the only king and head of the church, Jesus Christ.

In light of the above, there is only one power that avails to keep all hierarchy at bay. There is only one weapon that has the power to keep pride from dominating in the church. Likewise, this same weapon has the power to break implicit faith. That power is the gospel of full salvation by the grace of God in Christ, the only head and king of the church.

The gospel is this power because it brings about a freedom that is as powerful as it is precious. It gives freedom from the power and condemnation of sin. It brings the freedom of the kingdom of God, making servants of God those who formerly were the servants of Satan. It brings joy and peace to the hearts of God’s people, giving them delight in their hearts to serve their blessed redeemer. So precious is the joy and peace of this freedom that God’s people must abhor anything that endangers it. The liberty

of the gospel has such value to them that they must stand fast in it, refusing to be entangled in any yoke of bondage (Gal. 5:1).

That gospel brings about the one fundamental office in the church of Jesus Christ. That one office, when properly held and regarded, stands against the encroachment of hierarchy. The very exercise of that one office

is in sharp contrast to the implicit faith which complies with hierarchy. That office is the office of every believer. To use the language of the Heidelberg Catechism, it is the office of Christian (LD 12). To use the language of the Protestant Reformation, it is the priesthood of every believer. How can there be hierarchy when every member, by faith in Jesus Christ, possesses full salvation in him alone? How can there be hierarchy when the Christian has the foundation of the kingdom in his heart, the righteousness of Christ with its results of true peace and everlasting joy (Rom. 14:17)?

Against all hierarchy and lording is also the truth of the church according to its spiritual character. Under the eternal government of God, the church is the company of the predestinated, so that no man or assembly can change its number. It is the glorious body of Christ, the church that he builds so that the gates of hell cannot prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). The church is the gathering of believers and their spiritual seed, those gathered by Christ into his hand so that no man can pluck them out (John 10:28–29).

The implications of this nature of the church are powerful. The hierarchical exercise of tyranny means

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that men must oppose Christ and God. Every attempt they make to rule and control the flock of Christ by their government puts them in conflict with the only king and Lord of his church. How loathsome it appears to the flock when men would substitute themselves for their Lord, who has purchased them with his own blood, who has loved them to the end, and who loved them even when they were enemies. It is also for these reasons that the scriptures that enjoin elders to care for the flock remind them that those over whom they have rule are the flock of God, purchased with his own blood (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2).

In the above are two important matters for office-bearers to remember, to help them against all hierarchical abuse of their authority. The first is that their offices depend upon the office of every believer. Officebearers are themselves members of the flock of Christ. Their fundamental place in the church is not that of minister of the word or of elder or of deacon. It is that of believer, alongside their fellow saints and alongside their brothers and sisters in the Lord. As the office-bearers receive and carry on in that office of every believer through faith alone in their head, Jesus Christ, so they must receive and carry on in their special offices. Their offices exist only because of the church that is beloved of and cared for by Jesus Christ her head. The special offices are for the spiritual care and maintenance of the flock of Christ, as appointed by the head. The labor of their offices is not in their own behalf but in behalf of the church. They cannot be lords who are servants appointed by the Lord of the church. They cannot exercise their own minds or wills toward the flock but only the mind and will of the one who has called them.

For the prevention of hierarchy in the church, there is also only one means to be used in all the work of the special offices of the church: the word of God.

It is noteworthy that the Protestant Reformation was governed by two important principles. Both of these principles worked together to overthrow the hierarchy of the papacy. The formal principle, the doctrine of justification by faith alone, not only brought to the church her proper freedom, the freedom of the gospel. It also brought to the church her freedom from the enslaving doctrine of merit. The Romish doctrine of merit kept the church in bondage to fear, a fear that kept the people in dependence upon the teachings of the church. The church held the treasury of merit. The church determined who was and who was

not to receive grace. The doctrine of justification by faith alone, without works, brought assurance and peace from the gospel of the righteousness of Christ alone.

The other principle of the Protestant Reformation, the formal principle, more directly addressed itself to the hierarchy of the papacy. The papacy had a basis for the doctrine of justification by faith and works. That basis was not the word of God but the papacy's own authority. The Roman Catholic Church had taken to herself the authority to determine the doctrine taught in the church. What was true in the church was true because the church declared it to be so. Even more, the papal church taught that the reason the Bible had any authority at all was because the church authoritatively declared so.

The formal principle was scripture alone. There was to be only one authority operating in the church: holy scripture. There was only one authority for believers for faith and for life. There was one authority for them to read, to know, to understand, and to obey. The preaching of the gospel, freed from its Romish interpretations and applications, brought freedom from the hierarchy of the papacy.

What was so powerful in the Protestant Reformation must be as powerful in the church at present for proper reformation: the sole authority of scripture. Such is the requirement of proper Reformed church government, according to article 32 of the Belgic Confession. The Reformation principle of scripture alone is referenced with the following words from the article: "Yet they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, hath instituted." The deliberate rejection follows, presenting a confessional boundary for Reformed churches: "And therefore, we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 66).

What does all of the above mean practically? What does it mean for believers in the church? What does it mean for those called by God to the special offices?

It means that believers must obligate themselves to the truth of scripture alone. They must recognize only one authority to operate in the church: the Bible. They must expect and demand to hear only one thing presented to them in the preaching they hear from Sunday to Sunday: the word of God. They must expect that when they must hear words from those appointed by God to care for them personally and individually, they will hear those words

The liberty of the gospel has such value to them that they must stand fast in it, refusing to be entangled in any yoke of bondage (Gal. 5:1).

coming from the word of God. Whether it is the work of the deacons, the work of the elders in family visitation, or the work of Christian discipline, the people of God must hear and know that always what is brought to them is the word of God.

That obligation of believers also means that they bring their officebearers often before God in their prayers, that he will keep them faithful to his word alone. Believers pray that their pastor, elders, and deacons may not succumb to the temptations to be tyrannical, to rule by the wisdom or power of men, or to rule by fear of man or respect of persons.

Believers' obligation to scripture alone must be so strong that they find every effort to rule by other means troublesome and alarming. They must know their obligation immediately to labor for reform. If reform becomes impossible, they must flee from all tyranny as the calling to flee from the false church.

The same obligation falls on those in the special offices of the church. Called by God to these special offices, the servants of God must know their callings to carry out the duties of their offices by means of the word of God alone. Their care must be to see that the scriptures are prominent and clearly set forward in all their work. They must not expect those they serve to follow long and complicated arguments that sound more like the confusion of men than the wisdom of God. They must be careful to rule not

by the power of their personality; by manipulation; or by intimidation, bullying, or other tactics of man's wisdom. Where they find members trusting in them, they must carefully labor to turn that trust to God's word alone.

While the above efforts have their importance in the efforts of officebearers individually in their callings, special attention must be paid to deliberative assemblies. Proper deliberation in assemblies does not mean getting fellow officebearers to agree with this or that officebearer, who can easily dominate a meeting. Nor does it mean simply deliberating until there is unanimity or a strong majority to vote. True deliberation is to ensure that the word of God is the clear ground for any decision taken in behalf of the church. Through good deliberations, the opinions and judgments of men must all fall away, together with all the good ideas, as good as they are. The efforts for peace and unity as ends and goals must fall away until left standing is the word of God alone, the only foundation for the church's peace and unity.

All in all, the church of Jesus Christ thrives only in the freedom of her gracious inheritance in the gospel. The word of God alone is the power to keep her in that blessed freedom. Delivered from the tyranny of men and from the bondage of implicit faith, may the church of Christ continue to cherish and protect her freedom by holding high the word of God alone!

—MVW

CONTRIBUTION

REFORMED PRINCIPLES APPLIED IN THE CLASSROOM (2): FALL AND CURSE OF THE CREATION

There are few doctrines of the Reformed faith that are more beautiful, more comforting, more central to God's glory, more governing in God's counsel, and more far-reaching in implications than the doctrine of God's covenant. We are absolutely privileged to have been given such an understanding of God's covenant within himself and applied to his elect people in Jesus Christ. We stand in awe of a God who has such perfect fellowship among his three persons and are unable to comprehend such selfless love within the Trinity. We delight in

the truth that God has extended that covenant fellowship to us and our children, who of ourselves have no right to know such a righteous and holy God.

But an oft-forgotten and glorious aspect of God's covenant is his covenant with the creation. Scripture speaks of a real covenant between God and the creation he originally formed "good" in the beginning. This covenant is everlasting and involves the promise of redemption when Jesus Christ comes again. Even now, Jesus Christ is the head of this covenant and rules the creation in this

covenant for his glory and works all things for the saving of the subjects in this covenant.

I give a few passages from scripture that speak of the covenant of God with the creation. Genesis 9:9–10 says,

9. And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you;
10. And with every living creature that is with you, of the fowl, of the cattle, and of every beast of the earth with you; from all that go out of the ark, to every beast of the earth.

Hosea 2:18 also speaks of this covenant: “In that day will I make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field and with the fowls of heaven, and with the creeping things of the ground: and I will break the bow and the sword and the battle out of the earth, and will make them to lie down safely.”

One last passage I give now is Colossians 1:19–20:

19. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell;
20. And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

Since God’s creation is often at the center of what we teach, we have a great opportunity for developing the truth of God’s covenant with his creation. We teach God’s order and immutability in the creation as we instruct regarding the laws and processes of math. We teach God’s rule and providence in the creation in biology, chemistry, physics, geology, and astronomy. We teach God’s loveliness and glory in the creation when we teach art and music. We teach all aspects of God’s creation as we read about it in literature and as we learn language. We teach God’s sovereignty over and care for the creation in geography, history, and current events. Much of the education of our children involves looking upon the “most elegant book” of the creation through the eyes of scripture (see Belgic Confession 2 in *Confessions and Church Order*, 24).

The world would oppose this and teach about the creation from man’s perspective: what he perceives and what he finds with blind eyes. Inevitably, he will lie about the creation and lie about the God of the creation. He will not teach God as the God of the creation, and he will not teach Christ as the ruler and head of the creation. We who have been given eyes to see, freely of God’s grace, must teach the truth of God’s creation. Because of the power of the Holy Spirit in and through us, we must use scripture’s teaching about the creation before we begin diving into its study. And what we see from God’s word is that the creation that declares the glory of his almighty

name and shouts God’s glory throughout all of history is sick with a dreadful disease.

This sickness of the creation is seen everywhere we look; we cannot avoid it. Even as we search the highest mountains and the lowest valleys, the largest celestial bodies and the smallest molecules and microorganisms, the sickness is there. In fact, this sickness is so obvious that even natural, unbelieving man can see it. God makes sure that all men see this sickness. Unbelieving man, due to his insatiable pride, believes that he can fix it. Man actually thinks he can remove the sickness of God’s creation by spending millions of dollars in conservation efforts, forcing his hands into dying populations of animals and “saving” them, being more cautious with the use of nonrenewable resources, leaving alone giant areas of land so they cannot be ruined by man’s industrialism, pumping less CO₂ into the creation, and a myriad of other efforts.

Now I will say what unbelieving man will not hear, indeed, what man will hate. These efforts will not work. They cannot work. They may make the earth more aesthetically pleasing to man’s eyes, but all that these efforts will accomplish is a mere cosmetic makeover. Man cannot save the creation, just as man cannot save himself. Man’s chance of saving this creation is as great as man’s chance of rescuing himself of his own sin and sinful nature: zero. The man who claims he can save himself by his own work and his own efforts puts himself on an absolutely hopeless excursion. So it is with the man or group of men who claim that by their own work and efforts the creation can be saved. It is futile and foolish and unimaginably proud. We ought not instruct our children that these efforts will save the creation or fix its problems; we ought to point out the world’s folly and pride in all of these efforts. Must we then abandon our care of the creation and abuse it to fulfill all our sinful lusts? God forbid! God has a covenant with this creation! We must only recognize the utter foolishness of believing that man has any chance of saving this creation that is so dreadfully sick.

Man cannot save the creation because he cannot deal with the root of creation’s sickness. The creation is not simply sick; it is cursed. The creation that God created good and perfect fell under the curse of God. This curse of the creation occurred at the fall of man in the garden as Adam rebelled against the one who had given him perfection, the only good God of heaven and earth, the one with whom Adam had beautiful fellowship every day. Adam knew the consequences for this sin, and he sinned anyway. He died, and the rest of the human race died with him, just as God had promised. But man was not by himself in having to suffer the dreadful effects of the fall. The entire creation God had made fell with

man. The creation fell far from its former glory, just as man did.

Think about how far man fell by remembering his former glory before the fall. Man was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27) and therefore had perfect knowledge of God, perfect righteousness, and perfect holiness. Adam enjoyed perfect communion with his creator and with his wife, Eve, whom God had made from Adam's rib. Adam loved God as God loved himself, knew God like God knew himself, thought God's thoughts after him, and functioned perfectly in the work God had given him to do. Man knew exactly how to care for the creation as God himself would care for it. Man knew the names of every animal (2:19). This does not mean that whatever Adam called the animal, God let the name stick. No, this means that Adam knew God so well that when Adam named each animal, Adam knew the mind of God about that specific creature. He knew the exact purpose of that creature in the creation, the function it would have, and the way in which God would be glorified by it. And out of that knowledge Adam named the animals.

Man went from this high and glorious position to being completely stripped of the image of God. This means that in himself man could have no true knowledge of God, no righteousness, and no holiness. Man's relationships were filled with sin: man had no love for God, no communion with God, no joy in the work given to him by God. Man could look around the creation all he wanted, and he could never see anything beyond what his senses told him. He saw no greater purpose in the things of creation beyond what utility they provided for him. God was so far from his thoughts that where man once knew the names that God himself spoke about the creatures, after the fall man imagined names for the creatures based upon what he alone could see. Yes, even the naming system man has invented for animals, plants, rocks, stars, etc. is a direct result of man's rebellion and total rejection of God! Let us remind our children of that as they learn the names and how to name these things. How far man has fallen from his created state!

This fall of man is comparable to the fall suffered by the creation. Perhaps we do not dwell on that too often. I certainly did not before giving it some serious thought. Yes, the creation is beautiful! The creation declares God's glory and shows his power, order, sovereignty, justice, and faithfulness and the headship of Jesus Christ! The creation is a magnificent work of God, created by the Word, Jesus Christ, for Jesus Christ. The creation shows man his own nothingness as he looks upon creation's detail, vastness, strength, and diversity. Let us thank and praise God for this creation as we gaze and meditate upon his wondrous works! But even this beautiful creation we live in now is

a fallen, cursed image of the creation originally made by God. The fall was absolutely devastating on the creation. And the Bible gives us hints as to what exactly this fall of the creation involved.

The prophets in the Old Testament often used the state of the creation in the garden of Eden to contrast what the creation would look like after some terrible judgment of God. In Joel 2:3 we read, "A fire devoureth before them; and behind them a flame burneth: the land is as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness." This picture is also used in the prophets to show how the creation would look after God restored the land of Israel. In Ezekiel 36:35 we read, "They shall say, This land that was desolate is become like the garden of Eden." We read a similar pattern in Isaiah 51:3: "The LORD shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD." From these passages we can surmise that all barrenness, droughts, famines, and other such plagues are part of the curse on the creation.

We also know from scripture that there was no death before the fall. Man's sin brought not only spiritual death to all mankind but physical death into all the world. God told Adam after the fall, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3:19). In that same curse God proclaimed about the ground that "thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee" (v. 18), resulting in the choking out and, ultimately, the death of plants. Before the fall all beasts, fowl, and creeping things would eat "every green herb for meat" (1:30) and would not consume one another. They would be free to eat without inflicting death. Now death is a prominent part of the curse of the creation. However, death is not natural, as unbelieving scientists would suppose; death is a most unnatural part of the creation. God created the creation lively with all sorts of life, and now every living thing is dying and must end its life in death.

We read more about the state of the creation after the fall in Genesis 6:11–13, when God pronounced his righteous judgment before sending the flood. In verse 12 we read, "God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt." What a contrast from when God looked upon the earth in Genesis 1 and saw that the creation was good! Now the creation is corrupt. Surely, this judgment involves wicked men and women, for by that point in history God only had eight elect souls in Jesus Christ to save from the judgment of the flood. But remember that God destroyed the whole earth with the flood, not simply all men. God said in Genesis 6:13, "The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth." God would destroy the earth in the flood!

And in verse 7, “I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them.” Again, the entire creation would fall under this righteous judgment of God. From the reference to violence in verses 11–12, I conclude that all causes of death, destruction, and violence came into the creation as a result of the fall.

The curse upon the creation is quite a substantial curse. Really, it is shocking how vastly different the world of today is from the world before the fall. Everything that brings death, violence, disease, and suffering into the creation entered the creation after the fall. The death of animals and plants from diseases, sickness, and old age came into the creation only after the fall. Animals’ attacking and viciously butchering other animals, even on microscopic scales, came only after the fall. The most brutal and terrifying creatures we now know on land and in the sea once lived peaceably with all living things. Organisms that once had no desire to eat flesh now are what we call parasites that slowly eat away their hosts. Creeping things and birds that once fed on the fruits of plants now scavenge and feast upon the dead bodies of animals. Viruses and bacteria that bring disease and death to millions of organisms entered the world after the fall. Horrible birth defects and mutations in species of animals are further results of the curse after the fall.

All that the world calls “natural disasters” that bring death and destruction are part of the curse of God upon the creation. Since the fall the creation is full of volcanic eruptions that melt and burn miles of land and cover hundreds of miles in suffocating ash. There are hurricanes that ravage ocean life and life on land, causing billions of dollars in damages and killing creatures of all types and sizes. We see tornadoes that cut down mighty trees and destroy habitations of animals. We feel earthquakes that rip open chasms in the earth and shake the foundations of tectonic plates. Fires devour once lush, green forests and leave them barren and charred. Droughts and famines bring extreme hunger and thirst to entire countries, drying up and killing all plant life and forcing animals to face either extinction or mass migration.

Even as the search of the elegant book takes us into outer space, we see clearly the effects of the curse upon outer space. Comets and asteroids torpedo toward moons and planets, peppering their surfaces and bringing the devastation of the outer layers. Stars die violently by collapsing in on themselves or by exploding into supernovas. Black holes devour entire planets and stars, growing larger and more ominous. Celestial bodies collide into one another in spectacular bursts of light and energy. Even in

the hidden corners of the universe, unbeknownst to feeble-minded man, the curse due for man’s sin is present.

We are given the awesome calling to teach these aspects of the creation diligently to our children. Let us pay careful attention to the word *diligently*. What is not diligent is teaching these results of God’s curse upon the creation as the world would teach them. The world would say that these are natural laws that are simply part of nature, as they always have been. They are a normal part of this universe, as “all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation,” 2 Peter 3:4 says, explaining man’s ignorance concerning these things. The world would claim that man certainly is not at fault for these accidents and random encounters. Man attempts to fool himself and God.

Antithetically to this, we teach that these events—famines, diseases, fires, earthquakes, death, violence and butchering, eating of flesh, and all the rest—are sovereignly controlled by God. And God not only controls them all, but he also shows us over and over again by the devastation, havoc, stirring up, and indiscriminate death that they bring that the creation is cursed. This is not how God originally made all things; and man is responsible for all of these events by his wicked rebellion against the all-good creator. Man is reminded time and time again of his own fall into sin, and of his continuing sin, for which God cursed all things that he may reconcile them to himself in Jesus Christ.

Let us point to the curse as we study the creation. This is not pleasing to our natures. We want to fix on the positive, and we do this to avoid putting the blame on mankind for the suffering under which the creation constantly groans and travails (Rom. 8:22). But it is necessary to point to the curse. Remember, God made a covenant with the creation, as he did with us. God will redeem this present world (after it is purged with fire [2 Pet. 3:7]). God will keep his promises to his creation, originally made good. And pointing to the curse that the creation bears, we point our students to the only hope of redeeming the creation. This hope is not man, no matter how sophisticated the efforts man puts forth. Man is not the hope of the creation; man has really become the bane of the creation as he bears the blame for its suffering. No, the creation’s only hope is the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, by which he reconciled to himself all things in heaven and earth (Col. 1:20). The creation’s only hope is our only hope, and that is glorious! Just as God will fulfill his promises to his creation in Jesus Christ, so God fulfills his promises to all of his elect sheep by their great shepherd.

—Joel Langerak Jr.

A REEVALUATION OF THE REWARD OF GRACE (1)

Introduction

In Reformed systematic theology the reward of grace is often discussed in connection with justification. This is where John Calvin treated it in his *Institutes*, where the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism treated it, and where it may be found in many tomes of Reformed dogmatics. Why? Because of the calumnies of the false church. When the reformers recovered the truth of justification by faith alone, Rome gasped, “What! Do not our good works merit, which yet God will reward in this and in a future life?” Rome insisted that justification cannot be by faith alone because scripture speaks of a reward. This reward, said Rome, precludes any possibility that one’s righteousness is by faith only, apart from works. Over against Rome the reformers declared, “This reward is not of merit, but of grace.” Thus the traditional place of treating the reward of grace in systematic theology.

Yet the reward of grace may also be granted development in connection with eschatology.¹ The eschatological significance of the reward is clear by what Christ speaks to his church in the last few verses of the Bible. He announces in Revelation 22:12, “Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be.” Jesus Christ promises to bring a reward at his coming. It is a marvelous reward. This reward is cause for praising God, for the glorified saints in heaven sing, “We give thee thanks, O Lord God Almighty...that thou shouldest give reward unto thy servants the prophets, and to the saints, and them that fear thy name, small and great” (11:17–18).

These texts from Revelation are just two of the many passages of scripture that speak about the reward. Anyone who reads the Bible will come across this reward. The minister who practices series preaching will inevitably preach about this reward. The Reformed minister who preaches from the Catechism will encounter this reward every time he preaches on Lord’s Day 24. How shall the Reformed minister teach God’s people about this reward, rightly dividing the word of truth?

This question is occasioned by a sermon that was preached in Hope Protestant Reformed Church on December 23, 2018—the infamous “Reward of Grace” sermon.² This sermon did not expound the doctrine of the reward correctly. This sermon taught false doctrine concerning the reward. While the sermon repeatedly stated that the reward is of grace, it implicitly taught that good works merit the reward. This sermon was protested and condemned by the broader ecclesiastical assemblies in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Yet this sermon was actually the culmination of years of bad preaching, preaching that displaced the perfect work of Jesus Christ and gave a place to good works that was out of harmony with scripture and the Reformed confessions.³ The truths of good works and of the reward were perverted. Rather than serving as a rod and a staff, these sermons served as a whip and a bludgeon to beat “good” works out of the sheep. Over the years these sermons abused the flock, such that if the word *reward* was even mentioned, the sheep would shudder.

But this was never the purpose of our tender Lord and shepherd. He brought the doctrine of the reward to console his flock, who must fill up his sufferings on this earth and become nothing among the wicked world.

11. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.
12. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven. (Matt. 5:11–12)

And so the purpose of this paper is to explore the practical significance of the eschatological reward in light of the “Reward of Grace” sermon, which sermon was in part—if not entirely—the occasion for writing this paper. To this end the paper will first set forth a definition of the reward and then develop each aspect of this definition.

A Definition

It is important to begin with a clear and concise definition of what the reward is. The “Reward of Grace”

1 This article was originally submitted as a seminary term paper in connection with the study of eschatology.

2 Rev. David Overway, “The Reward of Grace,” sermon transcript, in *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America 2020*, 107–17.

3 *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America 2018*, 70, 79–80.

sermon failed at this basic point. As Classis East stated in 2020, “The sermon failed to clearly define the ‘reward of grace,’” which caused “confusion.”⁴

To begin I note briefly that both scripture and the creeds speak of a reward and particularly of a reward that will come at the end of this present age. The biblical words *שָׂרָף* and *μισθός*, together with their derivatives, are commonly translated as “reward” in the King James Version. An example from the Old Testament is found in Jeremiah 31:16: “Thus saith the LORD; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded [*שָׂרָף*], saith the LORD.” From the New Testament there is Matthew 5:11–12: “Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward [*μισθός*] in heaven.” The Heidelberg Catechism speaks of the reward in Lord’s Day 24 when it defends justification by faith alone against the merit of good works. Belgic Confession article 24 affirms the existence of a reward in connection with its denial of merit in salvation. The Canons also speak of the reward in its rejection of errors.⁵

For a proper definition it must be acknowledged that scripture does not always speak of the reward *of grace* when it speaks of a reward. The wicked have a reward: “When thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward” (Matt. 6:2). This reward of the wicked differs substantially from the reward of grace. Furthermore, Jesus Christ has a reward: “The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands hath he recompensed me” (2 Sam. 22:21; Ps. 18:20). The reward of grace is intimately related to this reward of Jesus Christ, but there are important differences. A proper definition must reflect all these things.

If one were to find a genus–species definition for the reward of grace in the fields of Reformed literature, he would have a pearl of great price. Without any other definition to cite, I offer my own. The reward of grace is the wages of Jesus Christ, which is freely bestowed by God in election and which superabundantly replaces all that the children of God lose in this life as they follow after Christ.

Wages of Jesus Christ

First of all, the reward of grace is “the wages of Jesus Christ.” That the reward may be called “wages” is derived from the meanings of both *שָׂרָף* and *μισθός*. The King James Version translates these words as “wages” in some instances. For example, Exodus 2:9: “Pharaoh’s daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages [*שָׂרָף*].” Also John 4:36: “He that reapeth receiveth wages (*μισθός*), and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.”

That the reward of grace is the wages of Jesus Christ means that the reward belongs to him. The reward is *his* reward. He says, “Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be” (Rev. 22:12). *My* reward. “Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him” (Isa. 40:10; cf. 62:11). *His* reward. That the reward of grace is Christ’s wages is also evident by what the lord speaks to his faithful servants in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. To each of them he says, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant... enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (vv. 21–23). The joy is the joy *of the lord*. Grammatically, the relationship of lord to joy is that of the subjective genitive.⁶ The joy of the lord is the joy that Christ experiences himself and subsequently shares with his servants.

Moreover, that the reward of grace is the wages of Jesus Christ means that Christ obtained this reward. He testifies in Psalm 18:20–24,

20. The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands hath he recompensed me.
21. For I have kept the ways of the LORD, and have not wickedly departed from my God.
22. For all his judgments were before me, and I did not put away his statutes from me.
23. I was also upright before him, and I kept myself from mine iniquity.
24. Therefore hath the LORD recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his eyesight.

Whose cleanness of hands and whose righteousness did Jehovah God recompense with a reward? Christ

⁴ *Acts of Synod 2020*, 137.

⁵ Canons of Dordt 1, error 3; Canons of Dordt 2, error 4, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 160, 165.

⁶ Herman Hoeksema, *Chapel Talks on the Parables in Matthew* (Wyoming, MI: Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, 1972), 122.

Jesus'. He worked, and for his work he was recompensed with the reward.

The work of Christ is summarized marvelously in Philippians 2:6–8:

6. Who [Christ Jesus], being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:
7. But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:
8. And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

The work of Jesus Christ was the wonder of his incarnation and humiliation and his lifelong obedience to God, which culminated in his death on the cross. By this work Christ fulfilled all righteousness, every jot and tittle of the law. By his work Christ conquered death and the grave by taking upon himself the curse due for sin. For his work Jesus Christ was rewarded by God.⁷

That Jesus Christ was able to obtain wages from God is due to his person. He is “one who is a true and sinless man” and “one who is at the same time true God.”⁸ A man cannot earn wages from God. Man is the servant of the Most High. A servant can only ever say when he has done all that is required of him that he is unprofitable and has done his duty (Luke 17:10). But Christ can earn wages from God because he is the Son of God who assumed human flesh in the unity of person. Because the fullness of the Godhead dwells in him bodily, the worthiness and merit of what he accomplished is beyond measure.⁹

That the reward of grace is the wages of Jesus Christ implies that nothing more is needed above the work of Christ to receive the reward. Nothing more is needed, for the reward is freely bestowed by God in grace: “Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began” (2 Tim. 1:9).

That the reward of grace is the wages of Jesus Christ

implies that believers cannot work for this reward but can only receive it freely by faith. “Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt” (Rom. 4:4). Those who receive a reward have not worked for it, but Christ freely bestows it upon them. This is why the reward is often spoken of in terms of an inheritance. For example, 1 Peter 1:3–4:

3. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
4. To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you.

“It is characteristic of an inheritance that it is free and freely bestowed.”¹⁰ This truth absolutely precludes all merit by the good works of men.

That the reward of grace is the wages of Jesus Christ is denied by the false church. The false church claims that the basis for the reward in some measure includes the righteousness and good works of the child of God. The false church teaches a reward of merit *by the child of God*, and the false church curses those who teach otherwise, just as the Council of Trent did:

If any one saith, that the good works of one that is justified are in such manner the gifts of God, that they are not also the good merits of him that is justified; or, that the said justified, by the good works which he performs through the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ, whose living member he is, does not truly merit increase of grace, eternal life, and the attainment of that eternal life,—if so be, however, that he depart [i.e., dies] in grace,—and also an increase of glory: let him be anathema.¹¹

Rome insisted that good works *performed through grace and Christ's merits* must merit more reward. Rome imprecated anyone who taught otherwise.

7 Thus the reward of grace is intimately connected to the doctrine of Christ's satisfaction. See Franciscus Gomarus, Jacob Arminius, and Lucas Trelocatius, Jr., *Syntagma Disputationum Theologicarum in Academia Lugduno-Batava* (Rotterdam: Joannis Leonardi à Berewout, 1615), 234, <https://books.google.com/books?id=yGWXkd1mSQcC>; Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, trans. G. T. Thomson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 473; Henk van den Belt, ed., *Synopsis of a Purer Theology*, vol. 2, *Disputations 24–42* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 183.

8 Heidelberg Catechism, A 15, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., vol. 3, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 312.

9 Van den Belt, *Synopsis of a Purer Theology*, 91; Gomarus, et al., *Syntagma Disputationum Theologicarum*, 234–35.

10 Herman Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 682.

11 The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, sixth session, “Decree on Justification,” chapter 16, canon 32, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 2, *The Greek and Latin Creeds*, 117–18.

As with essentially all of Rome's doctrine, the reward of merit was well developed by Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas recognized that the term *reward* implied merit since "a reward means something given anyone in return for work or toil, as a price for it."¹² The issue with Aquinas is not that he saw merit in the term *reward*, but the issue is that he taught that man by his good works can merit with God above and beyond the meritorious work of Jesus Christ.

Aquinas described man's future reward in terms of happiness.¹³ The basic principle regarding this reward was that happiness can be obtained by deeds of love.¹⁴ Did not the apostle write in John 13:17, "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them"? Those who do good works are happy because those works dispose them to enjoy God. Those who do more good works are happier people because their wills are more rightly ordered toward God.¹⁵ When a child of God meets a merrier apostle Peter in heaven and asks why he is so happy, Peter responds, "Because I did more than you."

Aquinas gave two reasons that good works can merit a reward. First, God ordained that good works should be worthy of a reward. By this ordinance God did not make himself a debtor to man but to himself.¹⁶ Second, God ascribes good works to man because of man's free will. Man must move his own will and choose to do good. Since man must move his will, a good work becomes *man's* act. Of course, God by his grace is the first cause of man's act and the primary mover of man's will, yet man must cooperate with grace by his free will. Thus man makes himself worthy of a reward, and God is obligated of himself to recompense man.¹⁷ In other words, man's good works can merit above and beyond Christ's merits because God obligated himself to reward man's actions, which actions are God-wrought and God-worked activities of man that are not God's acts.

A Reformed believer unconditionally rejects Aquinas' doctrine of merit, and Rome's anathema is nothing but the hiss of a cockroach to him. To teach that the righteousness of the believer increases the reward is to teach that Christ's work was not enough. This doctrine undermines the perfect work of Jesus Christ. It undermines the sufficiency of his obedience and redemption through his blood. Anyone who teaches a reward by the merit of good works speaks like the serpent.

Instead, a Reformed believer approves of what the Heidelberg Catechism teaches: "This reward comes not of merit, but of grace."¹⁸ The reward is *of grace*. What does "of grace" actually mean? This is not a stupid question. It is vital. As Martin Luther warned, we must absolutely distinguish between merit and grace. We must not "throw the two into the same pot, nor make merit out of what God gives...in Christ through Baptism and the Gospel."¹⁹

Luther's warning is made weighty in light of the "Reward of Grace" sermon. This sermon threw merit and grace into the same pot. On the one hand, the sermon spoke of grace. The word *grace* was spoken over fifty times. And the sermon said about the reward, "Every part of it from beginning to end is of grace."²⁰ On the other hand, the sermon implicitly taught merit when the minister asserted, "Not are we rewarded according to perfect obedience but imperfect obedience...God is pleased to display his grace by rewarding imperfect good works."²¹ The sermon contradicted the truth that God gives this reward on the basis of perfect obedience—the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ.

The matter of whether or not good works can merit the reward ought to be put to rest by the plain and simple testimony of Luke 17:10: "So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done

12 Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920), II-I.114.1, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.

13 "True happiness consists in seeing God, who is pure truth," Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-I.5.1. "Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence," Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-I.3.8. Rome often refers to this happiness as the "beatific vision."

14 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-I.5.7.

15 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Suppl. 93.3.

16 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-I.114.1; cf. Rom. 11:35.

17 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-I.114.4; cf. II-I.21.4.

18 Heidelberg Catechism, A 63, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:327.

19 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol 21, *The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 293.

20 Overway, "Reward of Grace," in *Acts of Synod 2020*, 116.

21 Overway, "Reward of Grace," in *Acts of Synod 2020*, 113. Notice how close the language of the Westminster Confession comes to these statements in the sermon: "Yet notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblameable and unreprovable in God's sight; but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections" (Westminster Confession of Faith, 16.6, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:635).

that which was our duty to do.” Here all claims to a reward based on the believer’s good works are rebuffed as radically as possible.

But I wish to belabor this point.

There is an excellent rebuttal of merit that is found in a rather unexpected source: the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT). When treating the word μισθός, the author explained how scripture rejects any notion that the reward is according to man’s achievement. I provide several of his outstanding arguments below.

First, there is Jesus’ parable in Matthew 20:1–16 about the laborers who enter a vineyard at different hours of the day to work. Some commentators have said that the main point of this parable is that there is a reward for all who enter the service of Christ’s kingdom, some from their early childhood and some in their last few years on earth.²²

But this is not the main point. Rather, the main point of this parable stands in connection with the preceding chapter, where Christ responded to a question asked by Peter. Peter asked Jesus what he would receive for following Jesus: “Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?” (Matt. 19:27). Christ did not deny that Peter would have a reward, but Jesus did respond by saying, “Many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first” (v. 30). Christ also concluded the parable of the laborers with these same words, adding, “For many be called, but few chosen” (20:16). What Christ taught by this parable was that the reward is not according to man’s reckoning of things.²³

About this parable, the author in TDNT wrote,

Achievement and reward stand in a mutual relation which is incomprehensible to those who think in terms of a correct schema of merit and reward, and who thus regard God’s relation to man as that of a precisely calculated employer to his employees. The parable radically discards all thought of merit...So great is this love of God that those who think in correct human terms, and for whom God is simply King and Judge, cannot understand it, and are confused by the mystery of the glad tidings.²⁴

Those who worked the whole day and complained when they received their penny function as a foil in the parable. Those laborers only serve to emphasize the fact that man cannot understand the grace and gift of God. Or, in the words of the author, “Human righteousness simply cannot understand the divine generosity.”²⁵

Second, the author appealed to the fact that Christ promises the kingdom to *children* and to the *poor*. Who are children? They are “those who act in a way which is natural and uncalculating.”²⁶ Those who enter the kingdom do not spend their days scheming about how to get a position of honor. Who are the poor? They are “those in inner need...[and] those who are poor even inwardly in the struggle for the necessities of life.”²⁷ Poor people have nothing to offer in exchange for a reward.

Finally, the author appealed to God’s own being. God alone is good and the overflowing fountain of all good. “There is none good but one, that is, God” (Mark 10:18). And God alone is absolutely sovereign. “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things” (Isa. 45:7). On the basis of God’s own good and sovereign being, the author asserted that

because God is understood quite absolutely in the greatness of his being and the incomparability of His generous love, because He is in no way dependent on or conditioned by human action, the idea of merit is left behind and in no human action is there any place for counting on divine or human reward.²⁸

Why then, the same author asked, do Christ and the rest of scripture speak of a reward at all if no human achievement can gain it? I like this question. This question is reminiscent of the question that is asked in Lord’s Day 24: “But does not this doctrine make men careless and profane?”²⁹ Such a question arises only when merit and the worthiness of man’s works are obliterated. Such a question proves that we are on the right track. The author suggested the following:

There can be no doubt that [Jesus] found the term (i.e., “reward”) in the world around Him,

22 C. H. Spurgeon, *The New Library of Spurgeon’s Sermons*, vol. 2, *Sermon on the Parables*, ed. Chas. T. Cook (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958), 45–53.

23 Herman Hanko, *The Mysteries of the Kingdom: An Exposition of Jesus’ Parables*, 2nd ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), 305; Hoeksema, *Chapel Talks on the Parables in Matthew*, 102.

24 TDNT, 4:717.

25 TDNT, 4:717.

26 TDNT, 4:718.

27 TDNT, 4:718.

28 TDNT, 4:719.

29 Heidelberg Catechism, Q 64, in *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:328.

that He retained it, but that He did so only at the same time to transcend it. In fact, Jesus freed Himself radically from the Jewish concept of merit. He also rejected quite unconditionally any speculation concerning our reward with God or men.³⁰

Elsewhere the author also added that scripture uses the term *reward* in order to emphasize the moral relation that man has to God and the obedience that he owes to his king, excluding all merit, of course.³¹

Here I disagree with the author. Jesus did not merely adopt the term and transcend it. If Jesus were looking for a way to free himself from the concept of merit, he could have very well used the term *inheritance* or *free gift*. Nor am I convinced that the term *reward* stands merely to convey the moral obligation that man has before God.

Rather, the term *reward* conveys two important truths. First, this term emphasizes the perfect justice according to which the believer receives the reward of

grace as the wages of Jesus Christ. What is this justice? Just as an employer is wicked when he withholds wages from the working man (James 5:1–4), so God would be wicked if he were to withhold the reward from his people in Christ. Christ earned every last bit of the reward. If they do not already now have this reward, then God must put Jesus Christ back in the grave. But Christ has earned it, and already now his people possess the reward by faith in God's promise. Second, the term *reward* is a stumbling block for those who are proud and enamored of their works. Those who like what they do think that they can contribute to the earning of this reward. They stumble at the term and at the free gift that is in Jesus Christ.

Having established that the wages of Jesus Christ exclude all merit, we will turn next time to the wages themselves. What are the wages of Christ? What did Christ earn for himself and for his people?

—Luke Bomers

*Disputation 22: On the Merit of Christ and His Efficacy*³²

Translated by Luke Bomers

President: Dr. Franciscus Gomarus

Respondent: Alardus de Vries

December 10, 1605

Thus far concerning the person and office of Christ the mediator. It follows that his merit has been sufficiently obtained for the offending party, so let us consider that it has been efficaciously applied only to the elect.

Thesis 1

The word *merit*, in regard to its meaning, is taken loosely or strictly according to the difference of its usage. When referring to a freely-given reward (without completion of a condition from the

party that promises the gift), merit refers to the fulfillment, taken figuratively or loosely. Improperly (*catachresis*), it is also used for the punishment that someone incurs for violating justice. But its meaning par excellence (κατ' ἐξοχήν) is of merits taken in the first way. Such merit is marked out for us in Abraham, the father of the faithful, and consequently in all the faithful when God promises, that *He will be for him a great reward* (Gen. 15). But merit is properly predicated of Christ, who is the head of the faithful, when, from the necessity (*hypothesis*) of the divine will and by the perfect discharge of the office of mediator—without any omission of a condition required in

³⁰ TDNT, 4:719.

³¹ TDNT, 4:716.

³² Franciscus Gomarus, Jacob Arminius, and Lucas Trelcatius, Jr., *Syntagma Disputationum Theologicarum in Academia Lugduno-Batava* (Rotterdam: Joannis Leonardi à Berewout, 1615), 230–37, <https://books.google.com/books?id=yGWXkd1mSQcC>.

him³³—he acquired for himself the right of eternal lordship.

Thesis 2

But in order that the truth of this postulated thesis may be more clearly established, we will set forth four essential marks of merit, according to which we will examine this merit of Christ. 1. That, for a man who labors, a deed becomes meritorious out of his own virtue and power. 2. That a man should perform the deed out of free will and good pleasure and not only out of obligation. For when he does what he was bound to do, he pays no more than what he ought to have done, and the reckoning of merit ceases. 3. The work must be such that it is done for the good pleasure and favor of the one to whom the work is presented, who is also obliged to compensate him. 4. It is necessary that the reward should be in proportion to the meritorious work.

Thesis 3

Regarding the first mark, we say that Christ had this ability to merit out of his strength and power. For as the first Adam was able to accomplish the act of disobedience out of his natural power and ability—from which all men are destined to eternal death (Rom. 5:12)—so Christ the second Adam merited by his own obedience, sufficiently paying the price of redemption for all (albeit in a different way, since not all who are lost naturally through Adam are saved supernaturally through Christ). “Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him.” (Heb. 5:8–9)

Thesis 4

The second mark is equally relevant to him: “For no man taketh his life from him. I lay it down (he says), that I might take it again” (John 10:17–18). “Lo, I come, my God, to do thy will” (Ps. 40:7; Heb. 10:7). But if he had performed this filial obedience out of absolute demand (*jus*), having been merely compelled by the duty of a bondsman—that is, as the servant to the Lord and not also as the Son to the Father—he would

have merited a name not so much as *Priest* but as *Sacrifice dragged to the offering*. However, because he died personally and performed the offices of a suffering sacrifice and a freely acting priest, he had to obtain this merit by this voluntary and economic offering of himself, which merit is on behalf of the evil merits and sins of mankind.

Thesis 5

We see the third mark in that solemn testimony of the Father concerning the Son, who was appointed to the office of mediator, openly exhibited in heaven according to Matthew 15:5. Here he teaches that *this is his Son in whom he is well pleased*, and he commands that *we hear him*. In accordance with this declaration, it is the Son who offered himself as a sacrifice of good fragrance to the Father, to please the Father in such a way that no one without him can please the Father or hope for any communion of his benefits in this or the future life. For in that manner that he is pleasing to the Father, so we are pleasing to the Father through him. Who, “according to his good pleasure, predestined us in his beloved unto the adoption of children of God” (Eph. 1:5–6). Therefore, when our priest pours himself out for us for a sweet-smelling savor (Eph. 5:2), offering up the body—which the Father had given and adapted for him—as if to return it, we deduce that the Father, from the free determination of his will, obliged himself to compensate the service of his Son by mutual beneficence. That he, who had previously “been made a little lower than the angels because of his sufferings, is crowned with glory and honor” (Heb. 2:7, 9). And “he hath given him a name above every name” (Phil. 2:9), in which respect he is called King (1 Tim. 1:17), Prince (Heb. 12:2), and Head of the Church (Col. 2:18).

Thesis 6

The fourth mark is rightly suited to this merit. Since divine justice was infinitely injured and God the highest good was offended by it, the penalty to obtain reconciliation—out of the dignity of the person and of suffering from a weight of infinite value—was to be accomplished by death. This guarantor (*fidejussor*) and mediator, taking the

33 Translator’s note: When the author says that Christ did not omit any condition required of him, I understand him to be referring to the counsel of peace, which is the good pleasure of the triune God to reveal his own glorious covenant life outside of himself through Jesus Christ. The beginning of this counsel is found in God’s ordinance of Jesus Christ as the firstborn from the dead, from which follows everything that God ordained for Christ to do. See Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), 1:471–76. I would refrain from using the word *conditio* since all aspects of the covenant are absolutely unconditional.

place of the offending party, enduring such tortures as all men could not endure for eternity, and “offering himself to God through the eternal Spirit, acquired an eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:14–15). Therefore, whether we compare thing with thing or compare person with person, from either aspect we see the most exact proportion to exist—a proportion of right equality (*aequalitas jus*)—between the merit and the reward promised to him by the Father. “After his soul has labored, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days.” (Isa. 53:10)

Thesis 7

The impelling cause (*caussa impulsiva*) is the most perfect justice of God, with which he sees the iniquity in the human race that a just judge cannot let go unpunished. Next, it is mercy—tempering this justice with gratuitous love—by which he did not wish to destroy what are his own among us. Therefore, according to his incomprehensible wisdom is this mystery (1 Tim. 3:16), he devised (*invenire*) the revelation of his justice and mercy in Christ, “whom he made sin, that we who were sin might be made the righteousness of God in him.” (2 Cor. 5:21)

Thesis 9³⁴

The efficient and material cause is Christ himself, “who purchased the church for himself with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Through his merit he replaces our threefold misery with a threefold remedy: for our transgressions, the perfect fulfillment of the law (1 Pet. 3:18); for our guilt, absolution from it (Matt. 20:28); the payment of the penalty by being opposed for it.

Thesis 10

The form consists in the voluntary and perfect payment of our debt that was undertaken by him out of the ordinance of God (Isa. 53:4). The end is to appease God—to whom we were all loathsome on account of our sins—by his obedience and the ransom of his precious blood as a propitiatory sacrifice for those who believe in him (Rom. 3:25).

Thesis 11

The subject of this merit is not the divine nature of Christ considered separately; for it could not merit anything since it was lord of all. Neither did it suffer by itself nor in itself. Nor also is the

subject the human nature, which by itself was anhypostatic and was assumed by the Word to be his instrument. Therefore, just as the flesh subsists through the Word, having been united to him personally, so the flesh was exalted not because of the works of the human nature but through the Word. For what did the human nature do to subsist in the Word? Or rather, what did the Word not do by his humbling of himself, to exalt the human nature also, receiving the glory that was, as it were, laid aside by dispensation (Heb. 1:3; Eph. 1:20–22). Therefore, in the same way actions are to be considered as with a view not to natures but to the person, so also the merit that flows from actions is to be considered with a view to the subject (*suppositum*).

Thesis 12

The indefinite and universal object is all men, without exception of nation, status, or sex; that is, the common sort of the individual cases (*genera singulorum*), not the individual cases of the sort (*singula generum*). “For he died for every man” (Heb. 2:9), and “he has become the reconciliation for the trespasses of the whole world” (2 Cor. 5:19). Specific and definite are the elect, for whom not only this right and power of redemption and reconciliation has been obtained, but also whom—having been given real and actual remission of sins and reconciliation—the Holy Spirit illumines by particular grace, working effectively within them. Consequently, he does not so much affect these elect in common by a generic love through the offering of the Word and the external calling, but the incorruptible seed of the Word—impressed upon their hearts by the Holy Spirit by a particular affection—produces mature fruit, so that they experience not only the sufficiency but also the living efficacy of his merits (Col. 1:29; Eph. 1:19).

Thesis 13

Therefore, we conclude that the efficacy of this merit does not apply to the whole body of men, but only to that mystical body of the faithful. These, as members of their head, remain united to Christ through prevenient grace of the Holy Spirit that also accompanies them in all life (John 15:4). And through persevering grace, they who are in this communion of Christ’s benefits (Heb. 13:21)

³⁴ There is no Thesis 8.

efficaciously live and die happily. Although this sense of Christ's merits is actively applied in the saints, it is often interrupted on account of the sins of the faithful, so that the distinction between the elect and the reprobate is not conspicuous. Nevertheless, the seed of faith remains in them, and the root lives, although the fruits are sometimes hidden—as in David and Peter. For “the firm foundation of God standeth; he knoweth them that are his” (2 Tim. 2:19). And “whose sheep are plucked out of his hand by no man.” (John 10:28)

Thesis 14

Moreover, the cause whence this administration of Christ's merit differs, and why it is not conferred upon all men by the act itself, is the divine will, which can administer of its own as it pleases according to its most free good pleasure. It owes these things to none, but all are debtors to it. The proximate cause is also all those who, by their guilt and unbelief, stumble at this rock of offense (Rom. 9:32) because they love darkness more than light—“those who afflict the Holy Spirit with grief” (Eph. 4:30) “and deny him who bought them with his own blood” (2 Pet. 2:1) “declare themselves unworthy of eternal life.” (Acts 13:46)

Thesis 15

But as many as have been saved from the beginning of the world, they have all been saved by the merit of this Lamb slain from the beginning of the world, through faith and the Spirit efficaciously applying this effectual ransom (λυτρω ἐνέργειαν) to them (Heb. 13:8). Therefore, “when Abraham saw the day of Christ, he rejoiced” (John 8:56; 2 Cor. 3:18). Granted, at that time they saw through the mists and veil that the Messiah promised to them was coming; who now was sent to us and presented “with a veil taken away. And with an open face beholding the Glory, as if looking in a mirror, we are transformed into the same image, from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

Quotation from Cusanus:

You will note that Christ's death alone could merit eternal life; that perfect (*consummatus*) death merits immortal life. All other martyrs do not deserve eternal life from their own death, because every other death of anyone is less than the greatest and infinitely distant from a perfect death. It alone is meritorious of the greatest life, namely, eternal.

The end.

PLEASANT PRAISES

Praise ye the LORD: for it is good to sing praises unto our God; for it is pleasant; and praise is comely.
—Psalm 147:1

I THIRST

“If any man thirst,
let him come unto me,
and drink.”
Thus said the Man
who fills up the seas,
sends forth the rivers,
and showers the trees.
The geysers shall burst
inside him who thirsts
for this pure and living water.

How can this be?
He who gives drink to me
and all of his own
first
hung on a tree
and said,
“I thirst.”

—Connie L. Meyer



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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

*I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins:
for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins. — John 8:24*

If you believe not that Jesus of Nazareth is I AM, you shall die in your sins. But whosoever believes in him shall not be ashamed. Then you will continue in his words, and you shall be his disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free! Then you know assuredly that God loved you and had mercy on you from before the foundation of the world.

But if you believe not that Jesus is I AM, you shall without doubt perish everlastingly, and the wrath of God abides on you. The wrath of God does not come on you at the moment when you do not believe, but your unbelief is the revelation that the I AM did not love you, did not choose you, and did not come in Jesus Christ to save you from your sins. Oh, where he is, you cannot come! For he has gone to the Father and returned whence he came.

He is the one who forgives sins. He has power on earth to forgive sins. When he says to you that he does not condemn you, then the divine and eternal sentence of God sounds in your consciences, you are saved, and you come to the Father. He is the light of the world. In him is no darkness, and he has no fellowship with darkness. Outside of him there is only darkness: the darkness of sin, guilt, and enmity against God, and the outer darkness of hell. In communion with him there is only light, the bright and glorious light of life with God.

It is necessary for salvation not to work, obey, strive, and labor for God's fellowship but to believe that Jesus is I AM. It is necessary then that you become nothing and that all your works, deeds, obedience, and activities become nothing and that you rest in Jesus Christ and his perfect work as your salvation, your righteousness, your holiness, and your peace with God.

It is necessary for salvation that you believe that Jesus is I AM; that you believe that the one who was born of the virgin is God; that you believe that the one who was swaddled by Mary swaddled the world in its creation; that the one who was born under the law is the lawgiver and only judge of all men, angels, and devils; that the one who became a servant is the absolutely sovereign Lord of all, on whose decree depend the eternal destinies of men; that the one who became the least of all men is the one who thought it not robbery to be equal with God; that the one who was nailed to a tree, cursed, and cast into the most terrible agonies and torments of hell is the only good and ever blessed God.

To believe that Jesus is I AM is to believe that salvation absolutely is of Jehovah, the I AM THAT I AM. It is to believe that there is no work, obedience, deed, or activity of man that is necessary for salvation. It is to believe that salvation is of God and through God and to God, to whom be glory forever.

But then if you add any work of man to Christ's work—if you displace Christ; if you claim faith as your act; if you claim repentance as your work; if you teach that you must precede God; if you teach that a holy life of obedience is necessary for fellowship with God—you deny that Jesus Christ is I AM. Then also you will die in your sins, for you do not have the I AM as your savior, but you have yourself and your own arm of flesh.

But whosoever believes that Jesus is I AM, he lives and shall never die.

—NJL