



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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Who giveth food to all flesh: for his mercy endureth for ever. — Psalm 136:25

Jehovah is good. He is only good. He is always good. He is good in himself as the perfect God in whom there is no shadow due to turning. He is good as the infinitely perfect, true, and living God. He is wholly good. In all God's being there is only goodness, perfect goodness, ethical perfection. There is no evil and no possibility of evil in God. He alone is good. He is good absolutely.

Then he is good in his deeds too. He is good in his counsel in every single act and decision. He cannot do evil. He decrees that evil happen and incorporates it into his eternal counsel as that for which he has a good purpose and through which he will be glorified as the only good God. For this cause did he raise up Pharaoh—and all his evil—that God might show his power and get himself glory on Pharaoh. Israel came into Egypt, and God turned the hearts of the Egyptians to deal subtly with them, and the Israelites came into bondage in order that he deliver his people and destroy Egypt. Nothing—also nothing evil—happens outside of the decree of the one true and only good God.

Thus in all that he does in the world, Jehovah is good, only good, and never evil. He is good in his wonders. He was good when he made the heavens and stretched out the earth and made great lights. Jehovah was good when he smote the firstborn of Egypt. He was good in that he brought out Israel and good when he made Israel pass through the sea. Good in that he overthrew Pharaoh, good when he slew famous kings and cast out the Canaanites and gave their land to Israel for a heritage and type of an eternal home in the new heaven and new earth. Good is Jehovah, only and ever good.

He is good who gives food to all flesh.

Yet one more example of his goodness. One more good deed proceeding from his good counsel is that Jehovah gives food to all flesh.

To flesh!

The angels are spirits. They are sustained by the inexhaustible fountain of all strength in God by his Spirit. Their meat is to do the will of their God day and night. They are creatures too who are dependent upon God for their strength. In him they live and move and have their being. Yet they need no food.

But flesh! Flesh is that which is of the earth earthy. Its form and substance is for this earth. Flesh refers to the animate and sentient creatures that inhabit the earth: the birds that fly in the heaven, the animals upon the land,

the fish of the sea, and the myriad creeping and crawling things in all their untold variety.

But flesh refers especially to man. Flesh describes man as he came forth from the dust of the ground and from the hands of God. Flesh is skin, bones, and blood to touch, taste, and handle. Flesh stands for all of man's wisdom, man's strength, man's ingenuity, man's intelligence, man's plans, and man's works.

Flesh, whether of man or beast, needs food, some food, to sustain his life. That was true of Adam in the beginning and in his state of perfection. God made the trees of the garden for food for flesh. Preeminent among the trees God made the tree of life. The need for food is true of man after the fall too. His fleeting existence is sustained by food. Take away his food, and he dies.

Jehovah gives food to all flesh! He gives food to beasts, birds, fish, and creeping things. The scriptures speak eloquently of his giving food to all flesh. He daily listens as the lions roar, and he hunts their prey for them and satisfies the appetites of the young lions. He causes the eagles to mount up on their wings to hunt for food. Leviathan plays before him, and behemoth stalks the hills in his sight. These all look to Jehovah for their food. He opens his hand, and they are satisfied; he hides his face, and they are troubled.

He gives food to man. He says food not because this is the extent of his provision but because this is the most basic need of flesh. Food then is simply the most conspicuous example of his gifts and the most outstanding example of the minuteness of his provision. If he gives food to all flesh, he gives all things necessary for sustaining the earthly life of the creature, whether man or beast.

That Jehovah gives food to all flesh means too that he upholds and sustains that man in his existence, with all his talents and powers, and makes that food sustain that man's life and by means of that food gives to that man his life. And that Jehovah gives food to all flesh means also that he gives man his riches and honor and glory and all his might and all his talents and abilities. Jehovah gives wine to make man's heart glad, and he gives oil to make his face shine. God gives man his work, and man goes out in the morning to his work and to his labor until the evening. There is nothing that man possesses that God did not give.

Flesh describes man not only in his weakness and his limitation, as wholly dependent upon God, but also flesh describes his existence as fleeting. Like the grass that

flourishes and fades, that grows and is quickly burnt, so man arises and as quickly passes away. His glory is as the flower of the field, so that almost as soon as it is sprung up its beauty is dying. His breath is in his nostrils and like a wind that passes away and never returns. So when the text declares that Jehovah gives food to all flesh, it makes flesh utterly dependent upon God. In him all flesh lives and moves and has its being.

Flesh stands in the text in contrast to deity. Jehovah gives to all flesh food because all is his. He declares that the silver is mine, the gold is mine, the food is mine, the grass is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills is mine, and man is mine. I am the potter, man is the clay. God is God and the God who gives to all flesh food.

Regardless of the ways and means that God uses, he alone gives food, and he gives that food to all flesh. He gives food to some as he did in the wilderness by food from heaven. To others he gives food by care and industry. By all sorts of ways and means, it is God who gives food.

And because it is God, the good God, who gives food to all flesh, he does so according to his own determination as to when and how much. When he gives food to the lions, he snuffs out the life of a zebra; or when he gives food to sharks, he must destroy the life of a seal pup. When he gives food to men, he gives some much food and to others food for the day. There is no flesh on the entire earth that has not for that day and according to his measure and by his exact distribution received his food from God. Every day and every week for all the thousands of days and years since he made the world, he gives life, food for life, and thus also all men's powers, talents, and gifts; and he upholds them by that food in their existence.

Good is Jehovah who gives food to all flesh. His goodness does not depend upon his giving the food to all flesh; so that if he does not give food to some flesh, he becomes evil. He is good who does not give food to some flesh, whether beast or bird or man. He hides his face, and they are troubled, they fail, and they die. He gives food to all flesh, and they live and move; he withholds food, and they die; good is Jehovah who gives or who withholds.

Jehovah God is good, and that goodness reveals itself in this: he gives food to all flesh; so that out of the perfect moral purity and overflowing fountain of the goodness of his perfect being, he gives food to all flesh.

For his mercy endures forever! The goodness of that activity is to be explained by the consideration that he

gives food to all flesh because his mercy endures forever. The goodness of a deed is to be understood by what motivates that deed. There is an objective standard of good. That is true. But take two similar acts of giving food, and examine those acts by what motivates them. So a farmer's feeding his children is to be understood as good because he loves them and desires that they be fed and clothed and enjoy such comforts as he gives them. He may say no to them from time to time to teach them, but that is to be viewed in light of his overall purpose to bless his children. But that same farmer gives food to his steers to make them fat that he might slaughter them in order to feed his children with good beef. Both are good.

So Jehovah God is good who gives food to all flesh, for his mercy endures forever. The giving of the food to all flesh proceeds from and is motivated by Jehovah's enduring mercy, his steadfast covenant love.

At the heart of mercy is the will to bless. In God mercy is his intense and perfect desire for his own glory and blessedness. He delights in himself as the only good. Everywhere God looks in his being and in all his works and ways and in all his decrees, there is eternal, spotless, and glorious goodness; and he delights in that and wills that he be blessed.

His mercy toward the creature then is his deep and tender pity upon them and the will to bless them by fellowship with him, the only good. Mercy describes the whole purpose of God for the revelation of his own glorious, blessed, and good being.

At the heart of mercy is Jesus Christ, in whom God wills his own glory and whom God wills to crown with glory and honor. That mercy, of course, extends to the entire creation, so that the creation as one whole is destined to be lifted from its sin-cursed misery into the heights of heaven. Thus his mercy toward his people is his eternal and unchanging pity on them in their woe, the woe of their sin and even the limitation of their fleshliness, and his will to deliver them by Christ Jesus from their guilt and bondage to sin and to incorporate them into his blessed fellowship and friendship that they might taste that the Lord is good.

It is his will to establish with them a covenant of friendship in which he is wholly responsible for them, in which they are wholly his, in which he does all for their advantage and salvation, and in which they are his people, called to love and serve him. It is his will to give the world to them as the eternal habitation of Jesus Christ

He is good because when he gives food to Israel his chosen, it serves—all of it, every morsel—their salvation and glorification to the praise of his goodness.

and all his brethren chosen in him and made perfect and to lift them up along with the entire creation into the perfection of God's eternal covenant of grace.

At the same time and according to the same purpose—his glory—to make vessels to dishonor and unto damnation that the wicked be damned so that God be praised. Speaking of his mercy, the prophets and the apostles said that God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardens. He is the potter, men are the clay. He makes one vessel to honor and another unto dishonor.

He is good who gives food to all flesh because his mercy endures forever. Giving food to all flesh proceeds from and is motivated by his enduring mercy in the same way that making the heaven and earth proceeded from his mercy. Because he would have heaven and earth be the grand stage for the revelation of his goodness and mercy in the salvation of his people and the punishment of the wicked. He made the heaven and earth and great lights because his mercy endures forever. So also he gives food to all flesh. He sustains his people for the purpose of their blessedness in him. He sustains the wicked for the purpose of his glory in their judgment.

Giving food to all flesh proceeds from his mercy in the same way as dividing the sea and causing Israel to pass through on dry ground and overthrowing Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea proceeded from his enduring mercy. Jehovah performed the miracle of the Red Sea for the salvation of Israel in his mercy and in that same act destroyed Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea. So also because his mercy endures forever, he gives food to all flesh.

It is that mercy according to which in every act of God—from the creation of the world to the deliverance through the Red Sea to giving food to all flesh—there is such a work of God that every act serves the salvation of his people and the condemnation of the reprobate and the advancement of God's whole glorious purpose for the revelation of himself as the only good and ever-blessed covenant God. He gives food to all flesh out of the same purpose and out of the same goodness as he destroyed Egypt and saved Israel.

It is as foolish to say that God gives food to the wicked in his love for them as it is to say that God overthrew Egypt in the Red Sea; drowned Pharaoh and his hosts; and destroyed Og, king of Bashan, and Sihon, king of the Amorites, in his favor toward them. God overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea, and he gives the wicked millions of dollars and a comfortable life in the world. These are one and the same kind of act. In his giving food to the wicked, not only has God no attitude of mercy toward them, but also he is overthrowing them. So in his distribution of food, he is good not because he is gracious

to all or merciful to all in that distribution; but he is good because, as when he destroyed Pharaoh, so also when he gives food he fulfills his own eternal purpose with all men and the whole world.

He is good in his giving of food to the wicked because that food serves to work out the eternal counsel of God for their destruction by setting them in slippery places in order to cast them down to destruction, while at the same time sustaining them even in their hatred and opposition against him, in order that his people have a world to live in. He is good when he gives food to all because he gives food to all according to the need of Israel his chosen. They stand at the heart of all his works and mighty deeds in the world and are his concern when he gives to this or that one this or that thing. He wills that there be a world yet in which his Israel can live and move and serve him, and so he gives food to all because his mercy endures forever. He wills that this world continue so that he might gather his Israel yet out of Egypt and into his fellowship, and so he gives food to all because his mercy endures forever.

He gives food to all flesh of beasts and birds because he wills that this creation be sustained until it is redeemed in the regeneration of all things when Christ comes again, and God does not forsake his creation and leave things to fortune or chance but has regard to all things and the food and needs of all creatures.

He is good in this especially, that to his Israel he gives food for their good in his deep and tender pity for them and the will to save them. He gives because he redeemed them. He gives them their food because his mercy endures forever, in which mercy he forgave their sins and atoned for their iniquities. He is good because when he gives food to Israel his chosen, it serves—all of it, every morsel—their salvation and glorification to the praise of his goodness.

Give thanks to God, thanks because he is good. The thanks of the believer is never dependent on the earthly thing itself; the thanks of the believer always is dependent on God himself and his character and activity in the world. The believer gives thanks then, whether in riches or poverty. He gives thanks because Jehovah is good when he gives food to all—or withholds from some—because his mercy endures forever.

That thanksgiving is a gift of the mercy of God when he gives earthly things to his people. Thus when we give thanks for earthly gifts, that we give thanks at all is because in the giving of those gifts the mercy of the Lord endures forever. No man gives thanks for earthly things unless with those things he also receives the blessing of the Lord. The world cannot give thanks. The unbeliever cannot give thanks. It is not merely that he gives thanks

wrongly, but he cannot give thanks because thanksgiving is impossible where covetousness and thievery reign and where there is no blessing but a curse with the earthly gift.

Give thanks to the God of heaven, the God of gods, and the Lord of lords, Jehovah is his name, because he gives food to all flesh, in which activity his mercy endures forever.

Thanksgiving is not merely words; it is not merely an activity; it certainly is not limited to a day. Thanksgiving is an entire way of life in the world by those whom God in his mercy has redeemed and to whom he gives in mercy. It is the way of life of the redeemed believer in the world in the heritage and in the portion of the world that God gave to him. As he redeemed Israel and cast out the Canaanites and gave to his people their land, so the Lord has redeemed us from sin and bondage and given to us a portion of the world.

Thanksgiving is the way of life in that portion and with that portion. Thanksgiving is the way that we view earthly things; it is the position that they hold in our lives; it is the way that we live with them; it is the way that we acquire them; the way also that we use those earthly things.

Thanksgiving means that we seek forgiveness for all our sins with earthly things:

That we were so foolish as to suppose in our distresses that one whose hand gives food to beasts and to wicked men had forgotten us whom he redeemed with the blood of his Son...

That we were often so foolish as to envy the ungodly with all their abundance while we were chastened by the Lord...

That we were often this year anxious with respect to earthly things, whether we had much or little...

That we were sorely tempted—if we indeed did not frequently fall into temptation—to sin; so that when we had much, we forgot God; and when we had little, we stole in some way...

That we sought those things as god and did not seek God as God...

That often we were thankful for the abundance but not because Jehovah is good...

That often with our lips we said thanks to God, but with our minds we coveted after earthly things, served

them, were anxious for them, or hoarded them instead of using them...

That we often with those earthly things sought our own pleasure and not God's glory and that we withheld them from his service because we reserved them for ourselves...

That we abused and wasted of his gifts.

We must be sorry for all our sins with earthly things and be thankful for the righteousness of Christ that God imputes to those who believe in him in his mercy, so that we could even receive these things with his blessing.

Oh, thank the Lord that he redeemed us and let us live in his earth again with a free and good conscience.

Oh, thank him that he forgives our sins and all our covetousness and accounts us righteous on account of the perfect obedience of Christ, whose meat his whole life was to do God's will.

Oh, give thanks that God with the gift to us of earthly things preserved us by his mercy from rushing headlong after those things as our god, so that in the mad pursuit of them we forsake all and follow mammon. If he did not preserve us this year by his mercy, we all would perish in the mad pursuit of mammon or in an equally miserable and wicked miserliness.

Oh, give thanks that you might thank him!

In the same way that he gave food to Egypt so that Israel would have a place to dwell during the famine, so God gave Egypt for his people so that the whole world serves the people of God and their lives in the world. We give thanks that our God reigns in the heavens over the unrighteousness and ungodliness of men so that all the world's markets and economies and indeed every event in the world serve the purpose of his gracious salvation and care of his people.

With thanksgiving we must be resolved to receive such things as he gives us with the confession that he is good, for his mercy endures forever, so that all that he does in the world and in the lives of his people is calculated for their spiritual profit and advantage.

With thanksgiving let us receive and use gratefully what he gave to us, sanctifying it with prayer.

Give thanks to the Lord who gives food to all, for his mercy endures forever!

—NJL

Thanksgiving is an entire way of life in the world by those whom God in his mercy has redeemed and to whom he gives in mercy.

HERMAN HOEKSEMA'S FIRST DOCTRINAL CONTROVERSY

Introduction

Herman Hoeksema fought his first great doctrinal controversy between the years 1914 and 1920 in Holland, Michigan. The doctrinal issue in that controversy was the Christian school.

That first controversy in Herman Hoeksema's ministry is largely forgotten, even by the two denominations that can trace their history directly to him. Ask anyone in the Protestant Reformed Churches or in the Reformed Protestant Churches what Hoeksema's first doctrinal controversy was, and they will likely tell you it was about common grace in 1924. Hoeksema battled against the three points of common grace adopted by his own Christian Reformed Church's synod in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Hoeksema's battle in 1924 is memorable. It gave rise to the *Standard Bearer*, which for many years was a powerful, compelling, and beloved witness to God's sovereign, particular grace. Hoeksema's battle in 1924 led to his unjust deposition from the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). Hoeksema's battle in 1924 led to the formation of the Protestant Reformed Churches, which for many years maintained the pure Reformed doctrines of grace over against the Arminianism and worldliness of the theory of common grace. Yes, 1924 is memorable indeed. The controversy in 1924 is one of the ancient landmarks of the church that marks a great battlefield in which God preserved his truth. And right in the middle of the battle in 1924 was Herman Hoeksema. Hoeksema was and is known for 1924.

But the common grace issue in 1924 was not Herman Hoeksema's first doctrinal controversy. Hoeksema's first great doctrinal controversy was the Christian school issue in the years 1914–20.

“Not Delivering Our Children to the Gates of Hell”

Herman Hoeksema's controversy regarding the Christian school began already when he was a student in the Christian Reformed Church's theological school, Calvin seminary. In those days there was a Christian Reformed day

school in Holland, Michigan: Holland Christian School. But there were at least two Christian Reformed congregations in Holland that opposed Holland Christian School: Fourteenth Street CRC and Fourteenth Street's daughter congregation, Maple Avenue CRC. The opposition of these two churches to Holland Christian School consisted of their failure to support the school and their failure to use the school. The children of the congregations went to the local public school. Hoeksema estimated that a full 90 ninety percent of Fourteenth Street's members were lukewarm at best to the school.

Even as a seminary student, Hoeksema “insisted that it was consistent with lives dedicated to the service of God that covenant children receive distinctive covenant training.”¹ The children were covenant children. Their rearing must be covenant rearing. A failure to use and support the Christian school was covenant failure. Christian Reformed parents who did not use the Christian Reformed school were delivering their covenant children to the gates of hell.

Herman Hoeksema fired the first shot in the school controversy in Holland as a seminary student. Maple Avenue CRC was vacant in 1914–15, so seminary students often took turns supplying its pulpit. Hoeksema took his turns, and he quickly became uncomfortable with the praise that the congregation lavished upon him for his sermons. He knew that he and Maple Avenue disagreed on the issue of the Christian school. Therefore, he resolved that he would be clear-cut regarding the congregation's sin of not using Holland Christian School. During the congregational prayer one evening service, “he made a statement about ‘not delivering our children to the gates of hell.’”²

The reaction of the congregation against Hoeksema was swift. His hosts for the weekend from Maple Avenue CRC suddenly disappeared from their own house and would not cross paths with Hoeksema while he ate and stayed in their home. The consistory of Maple Avenue complained to the seminary. And the consistory requested that from then on any student but Hoeksema supply its

1 Gertrude Hoeksema, *Therefore Have I Spoken: A Biography of Herman Hoeksema* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1969), 64. I highly recommend to the interested reader all of chapter 4, where this history is related.

2 Hoeksema, *Therefore Have I Spoken*, 64.

vacant pulpit. After more wrangling the consistory of Maple Avenue called student Hoeksema in for a meeting. When Hoeksema saw through some initial funny business on the part of the clerk and called him out on it, “the members of the consistory began to damn the Christian school and to rant in confusion. Herman stared at them astounded, then said good-bye, turned, and left.”³

“Do You Mean You Want a Fight?”

Herman Hoeksema continued to pursue the Christian school controversy in Holland, Michigan, after he had graduated from seminary and had received the call to Fourteenth Street CRC, Maple Avenue’s mother congregation. Hoeksema was popular with the Fourteenth Street congregation, even though many disagreed with his stance on the Christian school. Knowing that Fourteenth Street’s disagreement with him was essentially the same as her daughter’s, Maple Avenue, and weighed down by the call that they had extended to him, Hoeksema asked for a congregational meeting at which he could address the congregation regarding its call. Gertrude Hoeksema, Herman Hoeksema’s daughter-in-law, relates the spell-binding events of that congregational meeting.

At the meeting, he found the whole congregation present to listen to him. He told them about his firm stand in the Reformed truth and his intention to preach forthright, exegetical, Scriptural sermons. And he told them about themselves. He scolded them about their wrong views of Christian education. He told them that they were not Reformed in doctrine and in practice. He told them that they almost killed their former minister. He promised them that they would hear the Christian school issue from the pulpit; furthermore, the congregation might never dictate to him what he should preach.

“Now,” he concluded, “if you still want me to come, shake hands with me after the meeting.”

Almost everyone came up to him and said, “We aren’t as bad as you think we are, *Dominee*.”⁴

Herman Hoeksema took the call to Fourteenth Street, and it quickly became evident that there were men in the congregation who were every bit as opposed to the

Christian school as Hoeksema suspected them to be. On family visiting in one home, Hoeksema mentioned the Christian school. Again, Gertrude Hoeksema relates the jaw-dropping events.

He faced more open opposition at some of the households he visited, when the Christian schools were discussed. At one home, very shortly after the visit had begun, and Christian instruction was mentioned, the head of the home raised his voice and said, “Look out, *Dominee*, I’m short!”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you’d better look out, *Dominee*. I’m short.”

Rev. Hoeksema stood up, took off his suit-coat, exposed his powerful physique, and asked, “Do you mean you want a fight?”

The thoroughly frightened man ran right out of his own house, shouting, “You can talk to my wife! You can talk to my wife!”⁵

Hoeksema and his parishioner did not come to physical blows that night, which is just as well, but Hoeksema and many of his parishioners came to spiritual blows month after month

over the issue of the Christian school. Whatever power Hoeksema may have had in his physique, his true power was the gospel of Jesus Christ. Hoeksema took to the pulpit and preached the gospel.

After one particularly tense episode in the election of an elder in Fourteenth Street CRC, which resulted in widespread division and bitterness in the congregation, Hoeksema preached a preparatory sermon for the Lord’s supper on Galatians 5:7–10. He rebuked the members of the congregation for their division against the truth and against each other. And he concluded the sermon with this clarion call, once again as related by Gertrude Hoeksema:

Three things I have to say, and I hope to be so plain that misunderstanding is impossible. In the first place, to the troublers, and by them I mean those that oppose the official truth of their own church, and those that have gone to the length of working for another congregation, while still belonging to the church, I have this word. This

3 Hoeksema, *Therefore Have I Spoken*, 66.

4 Hoeksema, *Therefore Have I Spoken*, 67.

5 Hoeksema, *Therefore Have I Spoken*, 70.

week you stand before two alternatives: Repent and submit and come to the Supper of the Lord. That is your duty. Even now I maintain that the Supper must remain the standard in the congregation. Or, if this is impossible, there is but one thing left: Leave the church, for your own sake, and for the sake of the congregation, as soon as possible, for the church stands or falls not with number, but with the truth of the Word of God. In the second place, to the congregation as a whole, this warning: Be not led astray by troublemakers, whoever they be. The Lord shall judge them. And finally, let the coming Supper be the means to remove all the envy and the hatred from your hearts, so that again we may manifest our unity in Christ Jesus to His glory on the basis of the truth. That truth shall stand; that truth shall conquer. And all else, all personal pride and vain glory the Lord shall judge. Standing on that truth you may be of good cheer, for the everlasting Lord of His church has promised us the victory. Amen.⁶

In the sermon Hoeksema contended for sound Reformed doctrine, including the doctrine of the Christian school, which sound Reformed doctrine he referred to as “the official truth” of the church. He told those who contended against the official truth of their church to leave if they would not repent. The result of that sermon was a split in the congregation.

After the service, Mr. M____, the liberal member who was not elected elder, came up to the pastor and said, “That’s enough, *Dominee*.”

“That’s what I intended it to be,” was his pastor’s brief reply.⁷

That very week many members left for other denominations. Although the group that left was not as large as some had anticipated, it was still a considerable church split.

One historian briefly relates the whole history of the Christian school split in Fourteenth Street this way:

Moreover, a vocal minority opposed strong doctrinal preaching of such cardinal truths as predestination. The irenic [Rev. Peter] Hoekstra had

held the divided flock together, but when he left, its reputation was so bad that three ministers in a row declined calls. The fourth call was to the militant Hoeksema, who brought the disagreements to a head by pushing Christian education and doctrinal orthodoxy until a number of families transferred to local Presbyterian and Reformed churches.⁸

Another historian related the split this way:

The militant Hoeksema came to Fourteenth Street Church right out of seminary, after three ordained ministers had declined the call. Rev. Hoeksema claimed that “under his predecessor some 90 percent of the families in the congregation opposed Christian education and were very lukewarm in their support of Holland Christian School,” which had been established the same year as Fourteenth Street Church. Rev. Hoeksema “brought the disagreements to a head by pushing Christian education and doctrinal orthodoxy.” The membership of the congregation declined considerably between 1917 and 1918, because his approach alienated a number of the families, with the result that “there was a grand exodus... mostly to Trinity RCA, and primarily over the issue of the Christian school.” By the time that he left in 1920, however, the membership had rebounded to slightly more than it was when he arrived.⁹

A Few Observations

Permit me a few observations on Herman Hoeksema’s first doctrinal controversy. First, Herman Hoeksema was a thoroughly covenantal theologian. In fact, Herman Hoeksema is *the* theologian of the covenant. Hoeksema did not become a covenantal theologian in 1953 in response to Klaas Schilder’s conditional covenant. Rather, Hoeksema left seminary as a covenantal theologian.

The evidence that Hoeksema was a covenantal theologian from the beginning is that his first doctrinal controversy was over the Christian school. The doctrine of God’s covenant and the Christian school are intimately related. The Christian school *is* the doctrine of the covenant. It is the doctrine of God’s covenant with believers

6 Hoeksema, *Therefore Have I Spoken*, 76–77.

7 Hoeksema, *Therefore Have I Spoken*, 77.

8 Robert P. Swierenga, “Family Histories: The Anne (Andrew) Hoekstra Family,” https://www.swierenga.com/Hoekstra_history1.html, revised 2/2013, in the section, “Life in the Parsonages—Holland, Paterson, Grand Rapids, Cicero, and Hanford.”

9 Jacob E. Nyenhuis, ed., *A Goodly Heritage: Essays in Honor of the Reverend Dr. Elton J. Bruins at Eighty* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 187. Nyenhuis quotes from Robert P. Swierenga, “The Anne (Andrew) Hoekstra Family,” (working paper, Van Raalte Institute, January 2003), 10; and references an interview he did “with two nonagenarian members of Fourteenth Street Church, Kathryn Fredricks and Elizabeth Stenberg, 2002.”

and their seed. It is the doctrine of God's covenant as God's covenant unites members with one another. The Reformed confessions and the Reformed Church Order express this relationship between God's covenant and the Christian school by teaching that the Christian school is the demand and requirement of the covenant. For more on this doctrine, see the speech printed elsewhere in this issue.

This also indicates that Hoeksema's controversy in Fourteenth Street CRC was not merely about public *education* versus Christian *education*. The issue was not merely whether the children should go to a public school or to a Christian school. Rather, the issue was God's covenant. Wherever the issue is the Christian school, there you have the issue of God's covenant.

In today's terms this means that wherever you find opposition to the good Christian school by a homeschool movement, there you find opposition to God's covenant. God's covenant does not only concern the *content* of the covenant child's education, but it also determines the *togetherness* of the covenant child's education with other covenant children.

Second, Herman Hoeksema considered the Christian school to be an issue worth splitting the church over. From day one in Fourteenth Street CRC, Hoeksema intended that the medicine of God's word regarding the Christian school do its work of purging out of the church any opposition to the Christian school. When unrest was at its height in the congregation due to those who opposed his Reformed preaching, he even counseled a troubled member that such preaching must increase rather than decrease. When the member reported to Hoeksema that "the liberal element were actively conniving with the Presbyterian Church and were working to leave the denomination and to take the property with them," this was Hoeksema's response:

"Mr. H____," he said to his worried parishioner, "you are like the doctor who gives his patient a dose of castor oil and then gets scared when it begins to work. Now a *good* doctor will give him one more dose. That's what the congregation will get next Sunday morning."¹⁰

Today then too, let the Reformed Protestant Churches consider the matter of the Christian school

to be worth splitting over. To those who believe the Reformed doctrine that the Christian school is founded upon the covenant and is a demand of gratitude in God's covenant, stand fast. You stand upon the doctrine of the Reformed confessions and therefore upon the doctrine of scripture.

To those who erroneously think that making the school to be a demand of the covenant is to entangle yourselves in a yoke of bondage, either repent or leave the denomination. The Reformed Protestant Churches stand upon the Reformed confessions. From the very first day in First Reformed Protestant Church's Act of Separation, the foundation of the churches has been the Reformed confessions. From the very first moment of the Reformed Protestant Churches' federation in the Act of Federation, the foundation of the denomination has been the Reformed confessions. The

Reformed confessions are clear regarding the Christian schools as a demand of the covenant. Lord's 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism teaches that God requires that "the schools be maintained" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 128). This is not something hidden or new for the Reformed Protestant Churches. Not only is this the official doctrinal position of the Reformed Protestant Churches

in their confessions, but this has also been the position taught to the denomination in *Sword and Shield*.

If there is a congregation that does not want the schools to be a demand of the covenant, that congregation does not have to be Reformed Protestant. That congregation is autonomous and is free to leave the federation. If there is an individual who does not want the schools to be a demand of the covenant, that individual does not have to be Reformed Protestant. That individual's membership is his own, and he must either find or form a true church where he can be a member. I maintain to that congregation and that individual that your duty is to repent and to live up to the Reformed confessions. You belong in the Reformed Protestant Churches by your confession. But if you cannot agree with the Reformed confessions that the Christian school is required as a demand of God's covenant, then leave the Reformed Protestant Churches as soon as possible. The Reformed Protestant Churches are Reformed. The Reformed Protestant Churches believe the doctrine of

God's covenant does not only concern the *content* of the covenant child's education, but it also determines the *togetherness* of the covenant child's education with other covenant children.

¹⁰ Hoeksema, *Therefore Have I Spoken*, 73.

the scriptures according to the conception of that doctrine in the Reformed confessions. If you are not of us, then go out from us. This ought not be a dismaying thought for the churches, for the blessing of the church is not measured by the pound but by the truth.

To all of those in the Reformed Protestant Churches who are being led to believe that this whole issue is a matter of procedure or what may be treated by classis or hierarchy or the will of man or any other side matter, do not be deceived. The issue is God's covenant. The Christian school is God's covenant as that covenant comes to expression in the lives of God's people with one another and with the covenant seed. Stand fast on the doctrine of the covenant, which includes the Christian school as the demand of the covenant. Do not get excited by every other issue that men try to set before you. Stick to the doctrinal point of God's covenant, for there alone is peace.

Finally, permit me this third observation. Herman Hoeksema's ministry was characterized by doctrinal controversy. He is known to history in this incident as "the militant Hoeksema." Perhaps historians intend that description to be a criticism of Hoeksema. Doctrinal controversy has never been fashionable in the church. It is not fashionable today, and it was not fashionable in Hoeksema's day. In fact, from the moment that God pursued doctrinal controversy with Cain regarding justification by faith alone in Christ alone, Cain's countenance fell. From that moment until this in the history of God's church, the countenance of every Cain falls when the word of God pursues doctrinal controversy with him. Men want peace, or at least man's version of peace. Men want their ministers to cry, "Peace, peace!" to them, even when there is no peace. When God does raise up a militant man who makes war on behalf of the gospel, all men are critical of him, and all men fight him. Many people will come to a militant man and read 2 Timothy 2:24 to him as if it were the only verse in the Bible and as if it condemned militancy on behalf of the truth. In Hoeksema's day men praised ministers who were irenic, peaceful, and forward-looking. But Hoeksema was something else. He was controversial. He made war against the lie. He was "the militant Hoeksema."

Herman Hoeksema was right to be militant. God had set him as a watchman on the walls of Zion, a militant position if ever there was one. God had made him mighty

in the scriptures, arming him with the sword of the Spirit, and Hoeksema was not to return to the Lord with his sword clean but bloody. Hoeksema was to stand fast on the Lord's battlefield and acquit himself as a man of God. While all the troops of light, silly, nice men in the church were busy making the enemy comfortable and chiding all the soldiers of the Lord to speak with a civil tone and friendly language, Hoeksema stood up and killed the enemy.

What is especially striking about Hoeksema's doctrinal controversies is that he fought them *against his own church and his own denomination*. When he was a Christian Reformed minister, he fought the Christian Reformed Church and split her for the sake of the truth. When he was a Protestant Reformed minister, he fought the Protestant Reformed Churches and split them for the sake of the truth. He was a watchman on the walls of Zion, indeed. There are men in the ministry in Reformed churches who have banged their swords on their shields for their entire ministries in order to alert everyone that they are mighty champions of God's truth. But those men spend their entire ministries condemning the doctrinal errors of every denomination except their own. They somehow never get around to condemning the false doctrine and to slaying the carnal seed within their own walls. When that carnal seed becomes the majority in the denomination and the denomination apostatizes from the truth, those men who banged their shields all their lives still will not rise to defend God's truth but participate in the perishing of their churches. Herman Hoeksema was not such a man. He rose to the theological battles in his own churches and was willing for the sake of the truth to see the churches split, knowing that such splits were the preservation of the churches in the truth, though he knew very keenly and personally all of the pain and suffering that inevitably accompanies such splits.

Yes, "the militant Hoeksema" has a nice ring to it. And remember that the militant Hoeksema's first great doctrinal controversy and first church split was over the Christian school. Let us not go backward in the matter of the Christian school but forward. And how can we do otherwise, for our gracious God has made his covenant with us and our seed.

—AL

The end of the calendar year is almost upon us, which means that the holiday season is nearly here. We are planning four issues of *Sword and Shield* during November and December to keep our readers well-stocked through the holidays. Stack up some logs next to your fireplace, stack up some donuts next to your apple cider, and stack up some *Sword and Shields* next to your favorite chair. It's time to read!

This issue of the magazine is the regular November issue. Mr. Luke Bomers submits another installment of his term paper from last semester on the reward of grace. Also in this issue is the transcript of a speech given at First Reformed Protestant Church to explain some of the decisions of the Reformed Protestant classis in September. The speech has been very lightly edited for publication. The rest of the articles and authors are probably self-explanatory to our readership by now.

We are planning a Letters Edition this month, so

keep an eye out toward the last part of November for a blue cover in your mailbox. The Letters Editions continue to be the most highly-anticipated issues of *Sword and Shield*. We are grateful to our contributors for their submissions, and we invite others to write in as well. Whether you agree with the magazine or not, your letter will be welcome.

December 1 will be the regular December issue with the regular rubrics. Sometime around mid-December we plan to publish the speeches and other material from the annual Reformed Believers Publishing meeting. By the time you read this, that October meeting will have come and gone. But we can still profit from it by the publication of the speeches.

So grab a donut, have a seat, and read on. 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 (3): NOTWITHSTANDING

Terrified of the Decree

Rev. Martyn McGeown is terrified of the decree. He is terrified of it because he hates it. Fear and hatred go together, just as perfect love casts out all fear. If he loved the decree, then he would not be so intent on undermining it in the minds of his readers. In the previous article we saw his fear of the decree in his assault on eternal justification.¹ He actually wrote that the danger of the doctrine of eternal justification is the “extreme view that we were always saved.”² If that is a danger with regard to eternal justification, then that is a danger with regard to the whole truth

of God's decree. So now there is a Reformed minister—I use the term in the loosest possible sense—in the Protestant Reformed Churches of Herman Hoeksema who actually writes that we should not regard the truth of the decree as teaching that “we were always saved,” and he wants to be taken seriously. The appalling thing is that he is taken seriously by many in the Protestant Reformed Churches. He obviously is taken seriously by the light and un-Reformed men of the board of the Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA) who gave him the position of editor of the RFPA blog, and he now defiles it

¹ Nathan J. Langerak, “Slithering Around Again (2): Afraid of the Decree,” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 5 (October 2022): 17–23.

² 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.

with his theological pontificating. That is how far that organization and the churches that the organization represents have fallen from the truth. I say to the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches: remember and let it sink in that your ministers, elders, professors, and deacons actually think that it is an extreme view that the decree of God means that “we were always saved.” This is shocking. This is a wholesale assault not only on the doctrine of eternal justification but also on the very concept of the decree of God as a whole and on the doctrine of God, who declares the end from the beginning. I am as saved in God’s decree as I will be in my possession of salvation in everlasting life, and so are all God’s people. This terrifies Reverend McGeown. He does not want any professing Christians to think that. The reason is that he does not want them to think that they do not have to do something for their salvation. And so he goes to work to undermine the very idea of the decree.

Specifically in his series on justification, he goes to work on the doctrine of eternal justification.³ In a series of articles on justification, it is obvious that he has to mention eternal justification, but he undermines that doctrine in the mind of his audience and in so doing undermines the idea of the decree generally. Reverend McGeown does not dwell on the glory and comfort of the doctrine of eternal justification for the believer that God never beheld iniquity in him—that the believer was always saved!—and that his salvation is absolutely certain from all eternity, but Reverend McGeown spends most of his treatment of the doctrine writing about how important time is, as though anybody denied the importance of time. His opponent throughout this series is simply a figment of his imagination, one sucked out of his thumb, created out of whole cloth, an invention, a fiction, or whatever else one wants to call it. He creates this opponent out of straw and clothes it in a scarecrow’s rags in order to hide behind the mask of a valiant defender of the truth, all the while he attacks the truth and sows doubt about it in the minds of his readers.

It is really slippery. Slippery McGeown slithering around again.

Reverend McGeown bolsters his undermining of the doctrine of eternal justification—and of the whole

decree of God—by trying to make it seem as though Herman Hoeksema was afraid of the doctrine too. McGeown inserts a quote from another document into the mouth of Hoeksema, as though in Hoeksema’s treatment of the doctrine he held the same view as McGeown and cautioned against overemphasizing the doctrine or somehow placing the decree of justification over against the temporal act of justification. So McGeown writes, “It must be maintained with equal firmness that we personally become partakers of this benefit only by a sincere faith.” But that quote is simply part of the Conclusions of Utrecht that Herman Hoeksema quoted. He did not single that out for emphasis, but Reverend McGeown did and tried to make it look like Herman Hoeksema singled it out too. But that is not at all the emphasis of his treatment of the doctrine. Herman Hoeksema was not afraid of the decree or of eternal justification. A truly Reformed man cannot be

afraid of the doctrine of eternal justification any more than he can be afraid of God’s decree generally. If the decree of justification in eternity is open to the charge of being antinomian and is made out to be a dangerous doctrine that makes men careless and profane, then God’s decree generally is open to that same charge. Thus in

one’s attack on the doctrine of eternal justification on those grounds, he also in principle attacks the whole concept of the decree of God and shows what he thinks of decretal theology. The truly Reformed man trumpets the decree and seeks to comfort God’s people with the truth of the eternal and unchanging love of God toward them, out of which he determined their salvation. The truly Reformed man seeks to comfort God’s people with the reality of that decree that they were saved, perfectly and absolutely saved, eternally and that all of their salvation is the gift of God to them in his love for them and his will for their salvation.

Thus Reverend McGeown is not only slippery, but he is also not Reformed. He certainly is not Protestant Reformed according to its historic conception of the truth. He is Arminian. He is not honestly Arminian, but he is Arminian nevertheless. Whoever attacks the decree in such a fashion as Reverend McGeown does reveals that he is Arminian, and all his other words are by that measure deception and misdirection.

Reverend McGeown does not want that rocking chair of God’s decree to pinch his tail of man’s works that he keeps flicking around.

3 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>).

His attack on the decree of God in the mind of his audience serves the purpose of his teaching justification by faith and works. Indeed, his whole series “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness” has as its purpose to teach justification by faith and works. The specific work by which a man is justified is repentance. Reverend McGeown is really teaching justification by repentance. Remember that if one is going to hinge man’s salvation on his deeds and activities, then he needs to get rid of the decree in some shape, form, or fashion. Making the decree suspect in the minds of his readers is as good as denying it outright. The tactic here is simply to relegate the decree to irrelevancy in man’s reception and enjoyment of his salvation. And then the works of man can be introduced and made that on which the knowledge of salvation and thus the work of salvation depend. The attitude is that God always does what God does, and we cannot do anything about that: now let’s talk about what man needs to do.

Notwithstanding God’s Decree

I said in my last article that I would treat further Reverend McGeown’s view of the decree. And I begin there in this article. In his effort to undermine the doctrine of eternal justification in the mind of his audience, he lets slip his own view of the decree generally. He writes,

In this regard it is important to distinguish between time and eternity. In eternity God determined what would happen, what he would do, in time.

Now, why it would be important to distinguish something so obviously different as time and eternity is anyone’s guess. I suspect that he is glancing nervously at the decree like the cat does the rocking chair. Reverend McGeown does not want that rocking chair of God’s decree to pinch his tail of man’s works that he keeps flicking around. He is not so much interested in distinguishing time and eternity—what fool would confuse them—as in giving a certain view of the relationship between time and eternity and of asserting the decisive character of what happens in time. I think it can be fairly stated that his view is that time makes the decree of eternity real.

In this connection he writes,

To speak as a fool, if Jesus had not died, notwithstanding God’s decree that he should die, we could not be saved.

Reverend McGeown does indeed speak as a fool. No Reformed man could even conceive of this idea of time nor of God’s decree. In these words McGeown shows that he views the relationship between time and eternity as

adversative, really time being the contingency of all that was decreed. He brings this out in two ways.

1 Peter 1:19–20

First, he bolsters his view of time as the contingency of eternity by quoting 1 Peter 1:19–20. This passage reads,

19. But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot:
20. Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.

Reverend McGeown supposes that he has hit upon a passage that so clearly teaches his view—that notwithstanding God’s decree, if Jesus had not died, then we could not be saved—that he does not even bother to explain the passage.

So I will explain it. In the passage there is what is called in Greek a *men-de* construction. This construction means that the relationship between the foreordination of Jesus Christ and his manifestation in time is not an adversative *but*, as McGeown wants to maintain, but a correlative; so that it is as though the apostle had said, “On the one hand, Christ was foreordained; and on the other hand, he was manifested.” And that relationship could be even more sharply stated as “because Christ was foreordained, he was also manifested for you.” In these verses there is no disjuncture between time and eternity, as though time is the *but* to eternity. Rather, time is the unfolding of what God decreed in eternity.

Furthermore, in his thorough abuse of the passage to serve his foolish statement about God’s decree, Reverend McGeown does not do justice either to the word “foreordained” or to the word “manifested” used by the Spirit in these verses. The word “foreordained” in verse 20 means that Jesus Christ and the cross of Jesus Christ and the perfect and complete salvation of God’s people existed before the foundation of the world. Because they existed before the foundation of the world, Peter did not say that these things happened for you or that these things then were made real in time. It is true that they happened. Jesus Christ was incarnated, he suffered, he died, and he accomplished full and complete salvation. That all happened in time and history. But Peter wrote “manifested.” “Manifested” is the disclosure of what already is or the appearance of what already is or even the making public of what was before hidden. So, for instance, the sun shines, but it is behind a cloud, and so it is obscured. When the cloud is removed, the shining sun is manifested. So is Jesus Christ and his salvation. He was manifested. He and with him his salvation were already *foreordained* and existed in eternity; and because Christ

and salvation were *foreordained*, they were manifested. So far are Peter and the Holy Spirit from teaching the foolish thought of Reverend McGeown—that notwithstanding God’s decree, if Jesus had not died, then we could not be saved—that the Holy Ghost through Peter was emphasizing the decree and the reality of the decree in the salvation of God’s people and that what happened in time was the manifestation of what was in eternity.

In the same vein and perhaps even stronger is John in Revelation 13:8. This passage reads, “And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him [the beast], whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” Here John not only said that God decreed that the cross would happen, but he also said that Jesus Christ, the Lamb, was actually slain from the foundation of the world. Golgotha and all that was associated with it and all that happened at Golgotha—the agony of Christ in the garden, the fleeing of the disciples, the wicked trial of Christ before the Sanhedrin, Peter’s denial of Jesus, the condemnation of Christ before Pilate, and the crucifixion of Christ on the cross—were already in eternity. The happening, the event, and all the benefits of the cross were already from the foundation of the world. Time is the revelation, the manifestation, and the unfolding of that eternal reality.

2 Timothy 1:9–10

To confirm his idea of the relationship between eternity and time expressed in his foolish statement—“To speak as a fool, if Jesus had not died, notwithstanding God’s decree that he should die, we could not be saved”—Reverend McGeown also quotes 2 Timothy 1:9–10. This passage reads,

9. 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,
10. But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

His explanation of the passage is again that time is an adversative or a contingency of eternity. He writes,

The decree is as real and eternal as God himself. He always had his people, the world, and indeed the end and consummation of all things with him from before the foundation of the world.

God decreed that Jesus should suffer and die for his elect people, and therefore the cross was certain, as certain as God’s decree is certain. However, it was still necessary for Jesus actually to die...It is still necessary that the Holy Spirit should apply the benefits of Christ’s atonement.

Here again is his “However,” which is nothing more than a different way of saying *But*. He relegates the decree to irrelevancy and gives to time its own importance, as though the point of the Spirit in the passage is to make sure the church does not think that time is unimportant. Reverend McGeown is constantly seizing on the word *But*. He does this especially with the decree. He mentions some true things about the decree and then erases them all with a *But*. Here too, he seizes on the word *But*: “but—again, Paul writes ‘*but*,’ the Holy Spirit inspired ‘*but*!’” So his interpretation: time and what happens in time are the *but* to what was decreed in eternity. Thus the

meaning of the Holy Spirit here for Reverend McGeown is that God decreed these things, but they were not really real until they happened in time. Time made the blueprint of God’s counsel real. I think that is a good way to describe Reverend McGeown’s view of the decree. The decree is God’s divine blueprint. McGeown will say that the blueprint is certain because, of course, he has to. It is, after all, God’s blueprint. But as every builder knows, the blueprint is

not the house. The house is the thing. The house does not have an existence or any reality apart from being built. The house in the blueprint is simply a conception.

But that is not God’s decree at all, a divine blueprint. The decree is God’s eternal and living will. By his Word God brings that will to pass and unfolds the counsel of his sovereign will. The relationship between eternity and time is not that one is real and another is not real; the relationship is not, as is so foolishly expressed by Reverend McGeown, that “to speak as a fool, if Jesus had not died, notwithstanding God’s decree that he should die, we could not be saved.” This means that God could have decreed all he wanted, but the event had to happen. And that thought demands that that event in time has its own and independent necessity outside of the decree. I simply do not see how anyone who has even a modicum of understanding about God and his decree could say that.

Now, Reverend McGeown supposes that he has found this idea of the relationship between eternity and time in

2 Timothy 1:9–10. “The Holy Spirit inspired ‘*but!*’ we are told and told with emphasis. The Holy Spirit apparently inspired that word so that we would believe that notwithstanding God’s decree, if Jesus had not died, we could not be saved.

It is evident then that Reverend McGeown takes the word “But” in verse 10 in its adversative force. He should know that there is a Greek word *alla* and that if the Holy Spirit wanted to emphasize the adversative sense, as Reverend McGeown does, the Spirit could have used it. I still maintain that even if *alla* were used, the passage would not be teaching the idea of the decree in relationship to time that Reverend McGeown imputes to the passage. His concept of the relationship between the decree and time is foreign to the entire scripture, and it is foreign to this passage. The word “But” that he gleefully holds aloft for all to see is in fact the word *de* in the Greek. There is a distinction being made in these verses, but it is not what Reverend McGeown explains. First, in the passage the apostle said that God saved us and called us according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began. Grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the world began. It is not that God purposed that he would give us grace but that we still had to receive that grace in time. God purposed and gave grace to us before the world began. “Grace” in verse 9 means not only the favor of God but also the gifts of salvation defined in verse 10 as “life and immortality.” You could say without any injustice or violence to the text that God gave us life and immortality in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world. The reality of his eternal will and counsel is such that we had the grace already before the world began, or eternally.

Then the apostle wrote in verse 10, “But is now made manifest.”

Reverend McGeown, in his insistence that notwithstanding (in spite of) God’s decree, if Jesus Christ had not died, we could not be saved, falters yet again on the word “manifest.” He does not know what the word “manifest” means. He ignores it here, as he did in 1 Peter 1:19–20. Here his lapse is doubly inexcusable because the apostle explained exactly what he meant when he wrote “manifest.” He wrote “and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” “Manifest” means to bring to light. That manifestation happened in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and his atoning death, and he makes that public and publishes it throughout the world by the gospel of the perfection of Christ’s death and eternal life that is found in his name alone. “Manifest” is to illuminate or to bring to light what had previously been hidden. Life and immortality in his case did not begin to be at the

moment of the event of the cross, and neither are they brought into existence through the preaching of the gospel and thus only become real in the possession of those things by the child of God. But life and immortality have their origin and existence in the eternal purpose of God. They were given to us in Christ before the foundation of the world. God’s purpose is not made real in time but is made public in time.

There is no contrast in the text between time and eternity, as though the Holy Ghost was guarding against the idea that we might think too much of God’s decree, and we might then slight time. That is impossible. Rather, the Spirit is teaching that what is made public and disclosed in time was already in eternity.

Applied to the Possession of Salvation

I have said before that if you read Protestant Reformed ministers, be careful that you do not lose your faith. In this case be careful that you do not lose your faith in the decree and suppose that the scriptures and thus the Reformed faith are wary of the decree and are constantly guarding against the exaltation of the decree at the expense of time. I do not believe anyone does that. I do not believe that anyone in history has exalted the decree too much. I do not believe that is even possible. I do believe that the proper view of the decree and the only proper understanding of time is that time is the revelation, the manifestation, and the unfolding of the decree. The decree of God is not a would or a could. The decree is as real and eternal as God himself. He always had his people, the world, and indeed the end and consummation of all things with him from before the foundation of the world. He makes this manifest, and he unfolds as his living will in time what he before decreed.

Reverend McGeown thinks that notwithstanding God’s decree, events must happen in time. Apply that—and this is Reverend McGeown’s goal, after all—to faith and to repentance. Notwithstanding God’s decree to give faith and repentance, if you do not believe and you do not repent, then you cannot be saved. If Reverend McGeown says what he does about the cross of Christ, he must say that about everything in history. And he must say that also about faith and repentance: notwithstanding God’s decree to give faith and repentance, you must also do faith and repentance. That gives to faith and to repentance a necessity outside of God’s decree. And it is a convenient way and a slippery way to dispose of the decree as the eternal necessity of Christ and all of salvation and every gift of salvation.

Reverend McGeown’s view of the relationship between the decree and time—which he expresses in his phrase “to speak as a fool, if Jesus had not died, notwithstanding

God's decree that he should die, we could not be saved"—he then applies not only to the cross but also to the application of the salvation of the cross to hearts and lives. And here he shows what he is really after. He writes,

It is also true that in 2 Corinthians 5:20 "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them." In Christ the righteous basis for our pardon has been secured, and—may I even say 'but?—we come into the conscious possession of that pardon *when we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus Christ*. That is why [in order that we come into conscious possession of our pardon] in the next verse Paul urges his readers, who are Christians, "Be ye reconciled to God" (v. 21).

Slippery McGeown.

He also mutilates the text. And with this he adds to his folly. His exegesis of the verse means this: notwithstanding the decree of God and notwithstanding the cross of Christ, we do not come into the conscious possession

of pardon until we repent and believe. Or, to phrase it another way, God decreed our salvation and Christ accomplished our salvation, but that is not enough. We do not come into conscious possession of that pardon until we repent and believe. In this exegesis our repenting and believing do not flow out of the decree and are not the fruits of the cross of Jesus Christ. They are the *but* of the decree and of the cross. They are the contingency not only of the decree but also of the cross. This is very strange theology, indeed.

His interpretation is simply an imposition on the text and is entirely foreign to the meaning of the passage. The reconciliation of the people of God to God is not "notwithstanding" the decree and the cross but because of the decree and the cross. Reverend McGeown will go on to apply this thought of God's decree being the "notwithstanding" of time to repentance and faith in connection with justification. I will look more closely at his theology of repenting and believing and his doctrine of justification by repenting and believing next time.

—NJL

SOUND DOCTRINE

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

TRUE REPENTANCE (5): REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins,
and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. —1 John 1:9*

A Concerning Phrase

In a certain sense...

This phrase, when heard or read in any conversation, ought to raise concern in the mind of the discerning hearer or reader. How much more concern when this phrase is brought up in a sermon or lecture that purports to teach the truth of God's word. How much more concern when this phrase is brought up in connection with a controversial subject.

How much concern?

So much concern as to create a burden in the heart and mind of the hearer or reader. So much a burden that resolution becomes an absolute necessity.

This necessity is imposed on the speaker or writer who used this phrase. That speaker or writer's authority cannot suffice to have the audience accept this phrase. *Because I said so* must only increase the burden. The burden becomes an important demand. This phrase demands a clear, distinct answer. *In a certain sense* must be resolved. It can only be resolved with an explanation.

The phrase only gives birth to the question, "In what sense?"

Think about the back-and-forth of a conversation. When one says to another, while introducing a statement of fact, "In a certain sense," the speaker can only expect the question to follow, "In what sense?" In addition, the

question is of such importance that, unless it is answered by an explanation of the “sense,” any further conversation is useless. Unless there is a satisfactory explanation given of the “sense,” only confusion and suspicion will result.

“In a certain sense we must believe in order to be saved.”

“In a certain sense our repentance precedes God’s forgiveness.”

“In a certain sense God’s forgiveness of us depends on our forgiveness of our neighbors.”

Taking away the beginning phrase of each of these statements results in the following: “We must believe in order to be saved.” “Our repentance precedes God’s forgiveness.” “God’s forgiveness of us depends on our forgiveness of our neighbors.” What is remarkable about these statements is that they all are formulations of conditional, Arminian theology.

What is even more remarkable is that a man who claims to be Reformed would suppose that such statements become acceptable and orthodox in Reformed circles when the phrase *in a certain sense* is prefixed to them. He supposes that these are four words that magically turn heresy into orthodoxy. Can these four words have their effect because they are spoken by a Reformed man, even an officebearer with certain credentials? Can these four words have this effect because they are spoken by a leader with decades of experience and approval? Because these four words are spoken by a leader with proper seminary training who passed every examination and is a pastor of a church or denomination known for its orthodoxy?

Exactly the opposite.

The phrase *in a certain sense* establishes a certain debt. That debt is in no way the hearer’s or the reader’s. He is not obligated to acknowledge as true what follows this phrase. That debt is the speaker’s or the writer’s. The phrase demands a further explanation. This debt can only be discharged when the speaker or writer clearly explains that *certain sense*. Used rhetorically, that debt is freely acknowledged by the individual who uses the phrase. The speaker or writer understands that the phrase represents a promise. He binds himself by the use of this phrase to a proper explanation of what he means. With the use of this phrase, he is also accountable to his audience to explain it, and he should acknowledge that his audience has every right to reject what he stated if he does not explain.

As weighty as this debt is when this phrase is used generally in discussions and teaching, this debt is much more weighty for one who represents the truth of God’s word. The truth of God’s holy word, when communicated to

God’s people, must be presented with all the clarity that God’s word represents. There is no room for ambiguity or confusion.

Repentance and Forgiveness

What is the meaning of the phrase *in a certain sense*? What does it truly mean that in a certain sense repentance precedes forgiveness?

In the certain, definite sense that God hears and answers the prayers of his people. In the certain definite sense of David’s record of God’s mercy shown when God heard and answered David’s penitential prayer in grace. “I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin” (Ps. 32:5). As this manner of God’s mercy to his servant is declared in this inspired songbook of the people of God, so are they taught to praise God’s mercy to them, that he freely pardons them when they confess their sins to him. So are they also assured that this will be their blessed experience of God’s mercy, that he will graciously pardon all their sins when they come to him in sorrow over them. As stated in a former article in this series, God’s people flee to their gracious covenant God with the burden of their sin and their guilt.¹ Their repentance before God means that in deep sorrow and humility before God, they confess with shame their wicked deeds, the evil that corrupts even their best works, and their total depravity. They join their evil to themselves, declaring their wretchedness and their misery before God. They do not blame others. They do not blame God but justify him (Ps. 51:4). They blame themselves, holding themselves responsible and accountable for their sins. Their requests for forgiveness mean that they ask God to put asunder what they have joined together. Speaking nothing of themselves, their sole appeal is to God’s mercy (v. 1), that for the sake of Christ’s blood (Lord’s Day 51) God will remit their debts. What follows is the testimony of the gospel to their hearts, the testimony of joy and gladness that all their sins are forgiven. God shows himself faithful to his word of promise in 1 John 1:9.

Indeed, in that sense. That is, in the sense of their conscious experience.

How much there is to be made of this sense of the believer’s conscious experience!

This is the joy and gladness of salvation. It is the blessedness of salvation, the blessedness that results in the praise and adoration of the mercy and grace of God in Jesus Christ. It is what brings about the song of the glorified saints in heaven recorded in Revelation 5:9–10. Burdened with their sin and guilt, the judgment of the

1 Martin VanderWal, “True Repentance (4),” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 4 (September 2022): 25.

law hanging over their heads, they have received from the Lamb slain for their sins blessed freedom from that heavy burden. They have come to their savior, who has called them to himself. Before his cross they have lain down their weariness and their heavy load. They have received graciously from him the promise of his rest, his easy yoke and his light burden. From their graciously relieved hearts, they offer themselves to him a living sacrifice of thanksgiving (Rom. 12:1).

How utterly perverse then to take this blessed sense of man's experience and to use it to destroy God's wonderful grace! How utterly perverse to twist this wonder of grace and to make it into a law!

In a certain sense.

This sense: that this repentance must be man's act that he must do or perform; and that only when he has done or performed his act, then God will be merciful and declare him forgiven or assure him of forgiveness.

Let the reader understand what has been done with this *certain sense*. Not only does this other *certain sense* tear the above wonder of grace out of its context of proper experience in order to turn it into a doctrine of works, thus destroying it altogether; but it also pits scripture against itself, destroying the unity of God's word and its truth. Grace simply cannot be forged into a new law. The freedom of God's sovereign grace cannot be made obligatory upon the actions or deeds of men. The attempt to salvage something of grace out of this shipwreck is vain. To follow *in a certain sense* with *all by grace* recovers nothing at all.

All of the *experience* of the child of God in all his salvation from beginning to end is by grace alone. There are no gaps in the truth of Ephesians 2:8–10. There is nothing left out for man to fill by any of his ways or manners, behaviors or attitudes, actions or deeds. There is nothing for him to boast of, as if he did not receive it (1 Cor. 4:7).

This is why salvation is all by grace through faith. Why repentance, the broken heart and contrite spirit, is by grace and why God will not despise repentance (Ps. 51:17). Why repentance itself is through faith, through faith in so many ways.

Why John Calvin had the following to say in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

Then, according to the passage in the Psalms, "There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest

be feared" (Ps 103:4), no man will ever reverence God who does not trust that God is propitious to him, no man will ever willingly set himself to observe the Law who is not persuaded that his services are pleasing to God. The indulgence of God in tolerating and pardoning our iniquities is a sign of paternal favour.²

Indeed, why the gospel precedes repentance, why God's effectual calling precedes repentance, why regeneration precedes repentance, why faith precedes repentance, why grace precedes repentance, and why forgiveness precedes repentance.

To be most clear and to describe the exact sense: also God's forgiveness of all and every sin committed by his children must precede all their repentance of every sin that they commit. Let the point be very particular and pointed, not general and ambiguous.

The Christian prays, as taught by his Lord, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). In doing so, the Christian passes over the course of the day in his mind and heart. He recounts a particular sin that he has committed. Bearing that sin on his heart before the Lord, he confesses it. He trusts in the promise of God's word of forgiveness for that sin by the blood of his savior's cross. By faith in that promise of God, he receives assurance from the working of the Holy Spirit in his heart that this particular sin is indeed forgiven him. He is indeed washed in the blood of Christ from that sin. He is freed from its condemnation as well as its shame before God.

How did this Christian get there? How did he get from being the Christian who committed the sin to being the Christian forgiven of that sin?

It was by grace alone. It was by grace alone operating thoroughly in him. It was the grace of God alone that gave him his repentance over that particular sin. If this living, holy, and righteous God had dealt with the sinner according to that sin that he had committed, he could not have repented over it. He would never have repented over it. He would only have defended it. He would only have hardened himself in it. In this very sense, regarding this particular repentance over this particular sin, God's forgiveness precedes the sinner's repentance.

As this particular sin is repented of by grace alone,

The truth of God's holy word, when communicated to God's people, must be presented with all the clarity that God's word represents.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.), 3.3.2:387.

so it is repented of by faith alone. Following the above testimony of John Calvin, it is important to understand exactly what is meant by “faith alone.”

Certainly this faith that precedes the sinner’s repentance over his particular sin is that bond worked by the Holy Spirit in his heart, by which he is engrafted into Christ his Lord. He has been incorporated into Christ, so that he is one with Christ, flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. Governed by the Spirit of Christ in him, his repentance is necessary. The death of Christ on the cross must bear this particular fruit in him. Without the operation of that death of Christ in him, no repentance of any kind is possible.

But what must be exactly understood of this faith that brings about this particular repentance is the sinner’s conscious, confident assurance that God’s mercy is upon him for the particular sin that he will bring before his God in heartfelt confession. He is assured that God’s promises are true with respect to all his sins. He is assured that the blood of Christ is of infinite value to wash away all his sins. He has the Spirit-wrought confidence that his baptism does seal to him the benefits of God’s everlasting covenant of grace, among which is the washing away of all his sins. He is confident of having been forever received into God’s mercy and forever a partaker of God’s salvation.

From the viewpoint of God’s sovereign, irresistible grace, this wonder of faith preceding repentance becomes all the more clear. Every prayer of repentance, with its own shame and sorrow and with its own humble, sin-owning confession, is the product of sovereign, irresistible grace. It is the result of the effectual call of the gospel. That the sinner comes to his God is only because God irresistibly and effectually calls him, giving to him from his storehouse of abundant grace the sacrifice of God, the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart.

Truly, what a cause for thanksgiving to God for his gift of true repentance! What an incentive to deep humility before God in the deep sorrow of true repentance!

How blessed also to understand that all the Christian’s various prayers of repentance are not simply scattered evidences and tokens of the working of God’s almighty grace but that they are representations of his entire life’s way before his God. Repentance is truly the entire life of the believer. Repentance is truly the entire life of the believer lived by faith, as led by the grace of God. It is wrought by the Holy Spirit in the depths of his heart, whence all the issues of life flow outward. From his heart of flesh given him by the Spirit, he repents, seeking the remission of all his sins from his faithful, covenant God. From that same heart he

walks in repentance, fighting and struggling against the power of sin, his total depravity. In the power of the new man, which is Christ in him, the hope of glory, the Christian puts off the old man with his deeds (Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9–10).

Blessed Freedom

In light of the above, the Christian has blessed freedom fully and completely to repent of his sins before God. Without the truth that repentance is the gift of God’s grace, worked by the Holy Spirit of Christ in his heart, the Christian can only entertain fierce doubt about the forgiveness of his sins. If his repentance must be his activity that he must perform before God will grant him pardon, he can only wonder whether his sins will be pardoned. What doubts and fears must crowd into his mind and creep into his heart! Such a vast and enormous result as his acceptance with the living and holy God hinges on his action. The forgiveness of his sins is his deliverance from God’s condemnation and the hinge upon which the Christian’s fellowship with the living God depends. Is his repentance thorough enough? Is it sufficiently humble? Does it have enough shame and sorrow? Is the heart broken enough, the spirit contrite enough? Will it be pleasing enough to God? Has he sufficiently repented of all his sins? Is there one, several, or a multitude of sins that he has wholly overlooked, so that there is no repentance, let alone sufficient repentance?

Set over against the holiness and righteousness of God, the repentance of man cannot be sufficient. Set over against the glory of the sacrifice of the Son of God on the cross of Calvary, it cannot be enough. Not only is the very point of repentance the unworthiness of the sinner of God’s acceptance and forgiveness, but also repentance has as its subject the pride of the sinner. Repentance must say that it is not good enough, that as the activity or deed of man, man’s repentance gives God every reason not to forgive. If repentance is the activity of man that he must do to obtain forgiveness, there is no repentance that could be brought before God. Repentance must only obtain condemnation.

But as true repentance is the work and gift of God, it is not of man. As the fruit of the cross of God’s Son and as the result of the operation of the Holy Spirit, it is a pleasing sacrifice of God unto God. As he has so graciously and mercifully wrought this gift in the hearts of his children, so is he pleased to perform what he has promised. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

—MVW

THE DEMAND OF THE COVENANT AT CLASSIS

Classis September 2022

The issue at Classis September 2022 was God's covenant: God's covenant of grace with believers and their seed in Jesus Christ.¹

It is striking that the issue was God's covenant because God's covenant was not on the agenda of classis. Classis had prepared a lengthy agenda. Classis had documented all of the protests and appeals and an overture. Classis had received all of the reports of its committees. And in that entire agenda, God's covenant did not appear. But God came to classis, and God came to classis with his own agenda. And on that agenda he had this *one* item for the Reformed Protestant Churches: his covenant! And God made the covenant the agenda not only in a single point of classis, but he also made his covenant pervade the classis, so that the covenant came up in decisions where it had not been expected to come up. God did that. God came to classis with his own agenda, and he made the covenant classis' agenda.

When God came to classis with his agenda of his covenant, he did not come to destroy the Reformed Protestant Churches. He could have. We deserved it. Everything was in place for the Reformed Protestant Churches to be destroyed, to be undone. The Reformed Protestant Churches have been ungrateful to God in the matter of his covenant, especially as that covenant applies to the Christian school. God could have come to classis and scattered us. He could have come and given us the desire of our hearts—our own way and our own will—and we would have been destroyed.

In fact, all of the material for our destruction was in the classical agenda. There was an overture to the classis to remove article 21 of the Church Order. The overture to remove article 21 was an attack on the Christian school. The overture was aimed at the teaching of article 21 that the school is a demand of the covenant. The overture never mentioned the covenant. The overture never mentioned the demand of the covenant. But that's what the overture aimed at. I maintain that. And I maintain that because there were also at classis on Thursday morning

the results of a great groundswell in the Reformed Protestant Churches that supported removing article 21. I think many men can attest to the groundswell that they heard in the churches—whether that's our own congregation in First or in the denomination—that was very, very interested in the overture to remove article 21 because there was opposition, open hostility even, to the Christian school's being the demand of the covenant, which article 21 clearly teaches.

God could have left us on Thursday morning at classis to have the will of our hearts. He could have given a boost to that groundswell with lying spirits to plague classis, so that the Reformed Protestant Churches would throw out on pretend grounds the article of the Church Order that most clearly teaches the school as a demand of the covenant. When God came to classis with his agenda, he did not leave us to our own devices. He came in mercy. He came in grace. He came in his covenant, his covenant love, and he saved the Reformed Protestant Churches. He delivered to us his covenant of grace and that covenant's application in the good Christian school.

God did that. God made the agenda the covenant. No man did that, whether deacon from a Reformed Protestant church or minister or elder in the Reformed Protestant Churches—God did it. And God did it in such a way that he made us nothing. He made us men nothing, and he made himself everything.

How did God come to classis with his agenda? What was it in the providence of God that brought his agenda of the covenant to the floor of the classis? It was two things, both of which are the folly of men. It was, first, an elder in one of the Reformed Protestant Churches who attacked the covenant foundation of the school; an elder who not seventeen minutes before classis but who for weeks and months before classis attacked the covenant foundation of the school. The issue that plagued Sovereign Reformed Protestant Church was not the question of whether this man or that man had done enough to get a Christian school started. That has been presented as the issue. That was not the issue. The issue that plagued Sovereign also was not whether everyone with one voice

¹ This is a copyedited transcript of a speech given September 28, 2022, in First Reformed Protestant Church, which can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpuYC7Git0o>.

professed a desire for the school. That too has been presented as the issue: “We all want a school.” That wasn’t the issue. The issue was that Sovereign was divided, and it was divided along this line: men who said, “The Christian school is a *may*. It’s permissible” and, on the other side, men who said, “The Christian school is a *must*. It’s a demand of the covenant.” That’s what divided Sovereign. That division is the folly of men. And God used that folly of men to bring to classis his agenda: his covenant.

The second way that God brought his agenda of the covenant to classis was through an overture to remove article 21 of the Church Order. Although that overture did not mention the covenant; although none of its grounds said, “The school is not a demand of the covenant”; that was behind the overture. And I maintain that on the basis of language in the overture. The overture argued, by its description of other denominations who respect the decision of parents to homeschool, for homeschooling over against the school. And God used that overture, which is the folly of men, to bring his agenda of the covenant to classis.

When God did that, he made us men nothing—all of us men. None of us men were anything at classis. None of us in the Reformed Protestant Churches are anything. We came within a hairsbreadth of throwing out the Christian school. But *God* came to classis, and God made himself everything when he brought his agenda of his covenant to classis.

In fact, God changed the churches in the two days of classis. The churches are different today—they were different Friday night already—than they were Thursday morning. When we came to classis Thursday morning, we came with a pitchfork in one hand and a torch in the other so that we could burn down the Christian school. There was a groundswell of that. And article 21 of the Church Order would have been the first torch thrown into the pile. We came ready to burn down the Christian school—bit by bit, year by year, but burn it down nevertheless. In the meeting of classis, God did not send an evil spirit but the Spirit of Christ to blow through that classis with his covenant, to change our hearts and to give us a conviction together of the school as the demand of the covenant and of the covenant of God as that covenant is lived in the lives of the members. God came and gave that, so that whereas we came to classis Thursday morning with a pitchfork and a torch, God took those out of our hands and sent us away Friday night with a trowel in one hand and the call, “Now, go build a school. Go build a school in First. Go build a school in Second. Go build a school in Sovereign. Go build a school in Zion. Go build a school in Loveland. Go build a school in Wisconsin. Go build a school in Cornerstone. Go build a school in

Edmonton. Go build a school in Singapore.” He sent us with trowels in our hands to build a school! And in the other hand he gave us a sword to kill anyone who stands in the way of the school, to kill anyone who stands in the way of God’s covenant and the expression of that covenant in the school—because that too happened at classis. A man was put to death, or the advice to put him to death was given: suspend him from his office of elder. God took away our pitchfork and our torch, by which we in our folly would have destroyed the school, and he gave us a trowel and a sword to build and defend the school. That’s remarkable! That’s his grace. That’s his mercy. That’s the God who is our God: a God of mercy, a God of pity. God came to Classis September 2022 and delivered the Reformed Protestant Churches.

How did God bring the issue of the covenant to classis? God brought the issue of the covenant to classis by means of the Christian school. There is such a close connection between God’s covenant and the Christian school that when the Christian school comes up, the covenant comes up. Even if we don’t write it in our agenda, when the Christian school comes up, the covenant comes up. The connection between the covenant of grace and the Christian school is this: that the Christian school is the demand of the covenant. Or you could say it this way, which is the same thing: the Christian school is the requirement of the covenant. The covenant of God requires the Christian school. That’s how God brought the covenant to classis.

God’s Covenant and the Christian School as Fruit of the Covenant

What does it mean that the Christian school is the demand of the covenant? Let’s begin with that idea of the covenant. God’s covenant is his relationship of friendship that he establishes between himself and his people in Jesus Christ. In that covenant of friendship, God is their God, and they are his people. In that covenant of grace, God takes his people to himself and brings them into his own covenant life, so that God, who himself is a covenant God—he’s the living God as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—brings us into that very covenant life through Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity come in our flesh. And the Spirit of Jesus Christ, whom he pours out upon us, knits us to Christ and, uniting us to Christ, brings us into the very fellowship and communion of Jehovah God. That’s the glorious doctrine of the covenant.

In that covenant fellowship God unites his people together as members of one body. We are united to the head, Jesus Christ. In fact, we are united to him so closely that we are bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. That’s why you eat the Lord’s supper. That’s the body and blood

of Christ. When you eat the Lord's supper, God testifies to you by that supper, "You are one flesh and one bone with Jesus Christ. You are united to him as one organism, so that he is the head and you are a member of his body." And when God unites me to Christ as a member of Christ's body and unites you to Christ as a member of Christ's body by that very same Spirit, he unites us together as one; so that God's people are one body, and the church may be described as the body of Christ. These are the ABCs of covenant doctrine. These are the ABCs of 1 Corinthians 12:12–27, for example. God has made us many members of one body and yet one body in Christ.

In that covenant fellowship with Christ and with one another, God sheds abroad his love in our hearts. He sheds that love abroad in such a way that we know his love, we experience his love, and we are comforted by that love and saved by that love. And God, who sheds that love abroad in our hearts by his Spirit, gives to us as his sons and his daughters *love*. He gives us love for him; he gives us love one for another. And that love that God gives us for him and for one another inevitably, certainly, comes to expression in the lives of the children of God. That's why you come to church. You love God. God is here in church. You don't come to church because you draw yourself here; God does that by his love. He loves you, and that love of him takes you here. And you come to church to sing and praise and pray and worship that God in love. That's the expression of our love for him.

And in this covenant the love that we have one for another is also expressed, and it is expressed this way: that no man says that ought that he has is his own, but we have all things in common. The meaning of that love for each other is this: that Christ had this mind in him, that he humbled himself to be my servant, to serve me with salvation; and that mind of Christ he puts in his people, so that the mind of his people is that they become the servants one of another, and no man looks on his own things but on the things of one another.

That covenant, with regard to the seed of the covenant, is that I do not say about the rearing of my covenant children that their rearing is *first*. But I say that the rearing of *your* covenant children is first for me, before my own; so that the covenant people of God in that love one for another, with the love of God shed abroad in their hearts, form a school for the rearing of the covenant seed. That's what the school is: it's the love of God's people for each other and their banding together in that covenant for the rearing of the children of the covenant.

The attitude among God's covenant people is the attitude of Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of

Manasseh before they crossed the Jordan. Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh, who had flocks, would stay on the east side of Jordan because it was a land for flocks. But the men of those tribes said, "We will build houses here for our families, and then we will go in front of the army over the Jordan River, and we will fight at the front of the army until all our brethren have been given their places; and we won't rest until our brethren have their places. And only when our brethren have their places—with us at the front, bearing the greatest casualties—only then will we go back to our homes, where our wives and children live." That's the attitude of the covenant people: "I will go before you. I will be the casualty. I will suffer whatever must be suffered that your seed may inherit the covenant, that your seed may have a covenant rearing." And that's a school. That's the school that rises out of, is founded upon, and is the fruit of the covenant.

The opposite of that mentality is independentism. And *independentism* is a fancy word for *hatred of your neighbor*. Independentism says, "Me and mine." Independentism does not say, "You and yours." Oh, independentism will wish you well. "Oh, yeah, I hope you get a school, and I can see that you would need that. I hope you get a school." But independentism hates the neighbor. Independentism says, "I will get mine; what is best for me and mine I will do; and as for you, may you profit or may you perish as you are able." That's hatred of the neighbor. That's not the covenant. That's not the covenant that God establishes with his people! That's not the one body that he makes as the body of the head Jesus Christ! That's hatred of the neighbor. The homeschooling movement is hatred of the neighbor. The movement is hatred of the neighbor because the homeschooling movement says, "Me and mine first, and you and yours maybe."

The covenant of God with believers and their seed builds a school. It does.

The Christian School as the Demand of the Covenant

That's the Christian school as the fruit of the covenant. But what about the Christian school as the *demand* of the covenant?—because that's the connection between the Christian school and the covenant. The Christian school is the demand of the covenant. It is the requirement.

In order to understand that, we have to go back to the very basics of a demand. There are demands in God's covenant. There are no conditions, but there are demands. Our baptism form says so. "In all covenants there are contained two parts," and in the covenant our part is that we are "*obliged* unto new obedience" (Form for the Administration of Baptism, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 258;

emphasis added). That's a requirement. That's a demand. That's an obligation. Now, the way that demand works in the covenant comes down to the question *why*. That's all-important: the question *why*? *Why* must you do this thing? And if that *why* is taught as that by means of this obedience and obligation we *obtain* our salvation or *obtain* our covenant life or *obtain* covenant fellowship, then that obligation has been taught as a condition, and it's damned. Then it's bondage. There's no freedom and liberty in that *why* of the demand.

That's our whole problem with our mother. Our problem is not that mother says, "You must." Our problem is with *why* she says you must. You must in order that you may enjoy. You must in order that you may go to heaven. You must in order that you may have forgiveness of your sins. That *must* is bondage. That *must* is accursed. The question is, *why*? And the answer to the obligations and demands of the covenant is not *so that* you may have but *because* you have. You *have* salvation; you *have* forgiveness; you *have* eternal life. You have it all in Christ. Now *because* you have it all, obey him. That's what we mean by gratitude: because you have it, obey him.

And now you can run right down the line of any command you can think of. Love God. Why? So that he will love you? That's bondage. Love God. Why? Because he has loved you. That's freedom. That's liberty.

Love your neighbor. Why? So that you may have forgiveness? That's bondage. Love your neighbor. Why? Because God has given you and your brethren salvation in Christ. That's freedom.

And that's the way the school as a demand of the covenant works. *Maintain a school!* is the requirement. Why? Because salvation depends upon it? That's bondage. Maintain a school. Why? Because God has made his covenant with you and your children. He's made his covenant with you and the children of your brother. That's liberty. That's freedom.

The Christian school is the demand of liberty in the covenant. It's *not bondage* to be told, "Go have a school. Go start one; go maintain one." That's your liberty. You've been delivered unto it by God's covenant of grace.

The Old Paths

That doctrine of the schools—and it is a doctrine of the schools; it's a doctrine of the school as a demand of the covenant—is the old paths. This doctrine of the schools, with the schools as a demand of the covenant, is not a new thing. It's not new even in your lifetime or mine. This demand of the covenant is the old paths in your lifetime! And it's the old paths for the whole history of the Reformed church. This doctrine of the

Christian school as a demand of the covenant is the old paths of the confessions. And because it's the old paths of the confessions, this means that it's the old paths of the scriptures. Do not be deceived by those who would tell you today, "We're developing something new." No, we're not! Not even in our own lifetimes are we developing something new! This is the old paths, this doctrine of the Christian school.

This is the doctrine of Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism—Lord's Day 38, which explains the fourth commandment. The fourth commandment of God's law is "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God" (Ex. 20:8–10) and then the requirements about not laboring that follow it. The fourth commandment is the commandment about the Sabbath. The old path of Reformed doctrine regarding the Sabbath is this: "What doth God require in the fourth commandment? First, that the ministry of the gospel *and the schools* be maintained" and that I go to church (*Confessions and Church Order*, 128). Before I go to church, the requirement of the fourth commandment on the Sabbath is "Maintain the ministry"—God requires that of you—and the requirement is "Maintain the schools"—God requires that of you.

It is striking that that demand comes up in the fourth commandment because the fourth commandment is the covenant commandment. The Sabbath *is* the covenant. The Sabbath is rest. It is God's rest in himself, his delight in himself as the overflowing fountain of all good. That's rest for God. That's covenant life for God. And God says to you, "Now you rest. I gave you a day of rest. You delight in me, the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ and my finished work." That's the covenant for you. That's rest for you. In the commandment on the *covenant*, the Reformed old path says, "Schools. Schools are required as your grateful life for God's rest that he has given you. Schools are required for your children that they may be instructed in all things." This means that lackadaisical behavior or opposition to the Christian school or the promoting of a homeschool movement is ingratitude. That's the way the demands work, remember. Demands are gratitude. Any pushing of anything other than the Christian school is ingratitude to God for his covenant. That's why I say that God could have come to classis and destroyed us for our thankless ingratitude. He didn't. He came and he saved us.

There is a tactic that has been used for years to gut Lord's Day 38. The tactic is this: to define the school as whatever you happen to be doing, to define the school

any way you want to, so that the word “schools” in Lord’s Day 38 is up for grabs. That tactic was used at classis. When a man was being given his Formula of Subscription exam and the question was put to him, “Do you believe that the good Christian school institution is a requirement according to Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 38?” his answer was “Yes, that’s my conviction. The school is required.” And when he was pressed on that, he gave this description of the school: “It’s my home. My home is a school.” That’s the tactic.

That tactic is being applied today to Lord’s Day 38 to define “schools” there as seminaries. There are all kinds of reasons, so the argument goes, that “schools” must refer to seminaries. “Look. This is about going to church. Of course it’s about seminaries.” “Look, this Lord’s Day is about the ministry of gospel. Of course it’s about seminaries. The ministry of the gospel and the seminaries in which the ministers are trained must be maintained.” And I say that’s a tactic to gut the meaning of “schools.” The meaning of “schools” is not up for grabs. It is not up for grabs in Lord’s Day 38, nor is it up for grabs in Church Order article 21 or any other place that the Church Order refers to schools. The meaning of “schools” is one thing. It is not the home. The home is a good Christian home, for which we thank God. “Schools” is not the seminary. A seminary is a good gift of God, for which we thank him. The “schools” are the Christian day schools. They are the schools where the youth of the church are instructed. They are the schools where all the works of God that he has made are taught in the curriculum. The schools are schools.

That can be demonstrated by the preface to the Heidelberg Catechism that Elector Frederick III wrote. When the Heidelberg Catechism was written and first published in January of 1563, Elector Frederick, who had commissioned the writing of the Catechism, wrote a preface to it. He had a title page to his preface and to the whole Catechism, and in the preface he explained his purpose in having the Catechism written. In his preface Elector Frederick showed that he meant one thing by *schools*. *Schools* was not a term up for grabs for Elector Frederick, and it was not for Zacharias Ursinus or Caspar Olevianus or any of the other men in the Palatinate, in the region that is Germany today. None of the men in that region would have known anything else by the word *schools* except schools for children, for the instruction of the youth together.

From the title page of the Heidelberg Catechism

as first published in 1563: “Catechism or Christian Instruction as This Is Carried on in Churches *and Schools* of the Electoral Palatinate.”² On the very title page, the word “schools” appears because everybody knew what a school was.

In the preface Frederick refers several times to schoolmasters—teachers in the schools—and the schools. On the very first page of his preface he greets the “Pastors, Preachers, Officers of the Church, and *Schoolmasters*, throughout our Electorate of the Rhenish Palatinate” (183). Later on, when he is describing his purpose in commissioning the Heidelberg Catechism, he says, “Therefore we also have ascertained that by no means the least defect of our system is found in the fact, that our blooming youth is disposed to be careless in respect to Christian doctrine, both in the *schools* and churches of our principality” (189). The youth in the schools were negligent in doctrine, and therefore the Catechism was intended to correct that. “Schools” meant something.

And now, whereas both temporal and spiritual offices, government and family discipline, cannot otherwise be maintained—and in order that discipline and obedience to authority and all other virtues (*sic*) may increase and be multiplied among subjects—it is essential that our *youth* be trained in early life, and above all, in the pure and consistent doctrine of the holy Gospel, and be well exercised in the proper and true knowledge of God. (192–93)

Later yet: “...in order not only that the youth in churches *and schools* may be piously instructed in such Christian doctrine...but also that the Pastors *and Schoolmasters* themselves may be provided with a fixed form and model...” (195). And then later yet: “To the youth in our schools” (197). How many references is that in one brief preface to the Heidelberg Catechism. If Frederick III would somehow be resurrected today, he would be mystified by the churches’ inability to know what a school is. The “schools” meant something, *obviously* meant something, so that when “schools” comes up in Lord’s Day 38, that word is not up for grabs. That word means exactly what Frederick meant by it in his preface. Lord’s Day 38 says with regard to the fourth commandment, “Maintain schools. That’s my covenant, my sabbath rest.” Ursinus may have had his own reason or at least one expressed reason to have those schools—so that the men who had been

2 “Catechism or Christian Instruction as This Is Carried on in Churches and Schools of the Electoral Palatinate,” reproduced from George W. Richards, *The Heidelberg Catechism: Historical and Doctrinal Studies* (Publication Board of the RCUS, 1913), 181. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this book are given in text. All emphasis is added.

trained in those schools all their lives would be prepared to argue with false teachers—but what is meant there is not seminaries and not homes. It is schools where there were schoolmasters.

Let that be the end of the tactic that has plagued us in mother and now in our own churches to redefine the school as something other than a school. It's a school! That's the Reformed faith: maintain a school! That's the covenant: maintain a school! The "schools" in Lord's Day 38 mean schools. And that settles the matter as far as the Reformed Protestant Churches are concerned.

Have you noticed that the battleground has shifted? It's a wonderful thing. The battleground used to be Church Order article 21. Two weeks ago the battleground was the Church Order. I love the Church Order. I love what the Church Order says about the schools. But what glory that the battleground may be in the Catechism! That's where the battle has shifted. That's where you find the tactic to redefine the school now, in Lord's Day 38. What glory for the Reformed church that this battle may be fought in the confessions!

The confessions are what we hold when we make confession of our faith: the articles of the Christian faith and the doctrine taught here in this Christian church, I believe to be the true and perfect doctrine of salvation. Those are the creeds. The officebearers make a vow regarding the creeds. The vow they make is this: I believe that *every point of doctrine* in the confessions—including the point of doctrine about the schools and their requirement—is in harmony with the word of God, and I will not privately or publicly militate against those doctrines. This is where the battle needs to be fought because this divides out the Reformed from the un-Reformed and the anti-Reformed. The creeds settle this issue for us. It's not a hard issue when you take hold of the creeds. This is the gold lying on the surface of the ground. You don't even have to dig for it. You come to Lord's Day 38, and it says, "Schools required," and that's the end of the debate. Let this be the end of the debate and the settling of the matter for the Reformed Protestant Churches. Lord's Day 38, the confessions, says "schools," and schools are required in God's covenant.

This is the old paths, then, with regard to all of the creeds. And you can start going through the creeds. I won't do that now; I had some listed; but you can go through the creeds, and you can find the covenant woven throughout the creeds. And as you start digging—you've taken the gold that's on the surface—as you start digging into the doctrines of the confessions, you start seeing the schools everywhere in the confessions too. Though they're listed once by name, the schools are everywhere in the confessions. The old paths are that the schools are a

demand of the covenant. That's nothing new for you even in your lifetime.

Old Paths of Herman Hoeksema

This is the old paths also with regard to our own church history. Herman Hoeksema was involved in three—not two but three—church splits in his life. And now when I talk about church splits, I'm not talking about the Janssen case in 1922; I'm not talking about the Danhof departure in 1925; I'm talking about controversies in which Herman Hoeksema by his doctrine caused splits in the churches. And that's not a bad thing, that he caused splits. He called for a split in certain instances. Herman Hoeksema went through three church splits. We usually think of the first as 1924 over common grace and then the formation of the PRC, and the second as 1953 and the unconditional covenant and the departure of De Wolf and others. Before any of that Herman Hoeksema was involved in a church split in his own congregation of Fourteenth Street Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in Holland, Michigan.

In the year 1917 his church split, and the issue that the church split over was Hoeksema's insistence on the Christian school! As a seminary student even, before he was called to Fourteenth Street, he prayed in such a way that there were prominent men angry with him in his insistence on the Christian school. In 1917, when he was minister of Fourteenth Street CRC, he preached the school and taught the school until many members left. And they not only left Fourteenth Street CRC for another Christian Reformed church; they left the Christian Reformed Churches altogether. And the issue was the school.

Here is one author's description of it, who may or may not be sympathetic to Hoeksema by his description of him:

The militant Hoeksema came to Fourteenth Street Church right out of seminary, after three ordained ministers had declined the call. Rev. Hoeksema claimed that "under his predecessor some 90 percent of the families in the congregation opposed Christian education and were very lukewarm in their support of Holland Christian School," which had been established the same year as Fourteenth Street Church. Rev. Hoeksema "brought the disagreements to a head by pushing Christian education and doctrinal orthodoxy." The membership of the congregation declined considerably between 1917 and 1918, because his approach alienated a number of the families, with the result that "there was a grand exodus...mostly to Trinity RCA,

and primarily over the issue of the Christian School.”³

Herman Hoeksema had his very first church split in his very first congregation, and the issue was the Christian school. Do you see what that marks Hoeksema as? A covenantal theologian! The issue that carried Hoeksema through every church split was the covenant! It was the issue in 1917 in Fourteenth Street; it was the issue in 1924 with regard to the conditional well-meant offer of the gospel; and it was the issue in 1953 over against Klaas Schilder and Hubert De Wolf. Hoeksema was a covenantal theologian, and the church split around him again and again and again over that issue.

That’s your forefather! That’s mine. That’s the old paths of Herman Hoeksema for the Reformed Protestant Churches.

The Claim of the Covenant

Also God brought the covenant to classis with regard to the claim of the covenant. The first topic of the covenant was the demand of the covenant. The second topic that God brought to classis was the claim of the covenant.

What we mean by the *claim of the covenant* is this: when God establishes his covenant with his people, he claims them. He says to them, “You are mine. You and your children are mine, as many as I have called, all my elect among them.” That’s a claim. We are not our own in the covenant but belong to God through our faithful savior Jesus Christ. That’s the claim of the covenant.

That issue of the claim of the covenant is as big as, and maybe will yet prove to be bigger than, the issue of the demand of the covenant because in the Reformed Protestant Churches there was and is a mindset that no one may tell me as a parent how to raise my children. “I have the final say with regard to their covenant rearing, with regard to their schooling and how I’m going to teach them. No elder may come to me and say, ‘That’s wrong!’ No minister may preach to me that my decision is wrong. My decision is inviolable as a parent. Why? Because those are my children. God gave them to me.” The claim of the covenant destroys that. As parents we do not have the last say on the rearing of our children. The covenant does! Which is only to say, God does. God may come to you and say, “What you are doing is wrong.” And he may say that because those children are not your children! They’re God’s children! They’re the

heritage of the Lord (Ps. 127:3). God has made you a steward of those children, so that—not to be too crass about it—you say the same thing with regard to your possessions that you say with regard to your children. “That money isn’t mine. It’s God’s. He gave it to me, and he made me a steward of it. And so also those children aren’t mine; they’re God’s. He made me the steward of them, but they’re God’s children.” God has the last say on our children. The mentality that is found throughout the Reformed Protestant Churches, that the children are mine, is a denial of the covenant of grace with believers and their seed. It’s a denial of the claim of the covenant.

Classis said, because God’s Spirit said, no. And when an overture came that had in its grounds this statement, that the keys of the kingdom—preaching and discipline—may not be exercised *in a family* with regard to the family’s decision of the rearing of their seed, classis said, “No, the keys *may* be exercised there.” And that too is the ABCs of the covenant. When you have your child baptized, why in the world do you stand up here and say, “I promise to bring my children up in the aforesaid doctrine,” if you have the last word on it? The very fact of that baptism vow means that God has the last word on it. And this means that when God came to Classis September 2022, he also restored the office of elder and the office of minister to their places in the oversight of the family. An elder may come into your home and say, “No, you mayn’t do that.” That elder brings the word of God. That elder must bring the confessions. That elder may say, “No, you mayn’t do that—not because I say so; because God does, and he claims your children.” And the minister may preach and say, “This is wrong, if you make this decision, and this is right, if you make this decision.” He brings the word of God, and he brings the confessions in that; but he may say that, not because his word means anything but because God says so. God wrought that victory in our midst at classis as well.

What happened in September 2022 is that God came to classis—which means he came to you—and he came with his own agenda, which agenda is his covenant of grace. Thank God that he came with that agenda, because that agenda is a foundation you can stand on in your generations until the Lord Jesus Christ returns: God’s covenant with believers and their seed.

—AL

3 Jacob E. Nyenhuis, ed., *A Goodly Heritage: Essays in Honor of the Reverend Dr. Elton J. Bruins at Eighty* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 187. Nyenhuis quotes from Robert P. Swierenga, “The Anne (Andrew) Hoekstra Family,” (working paper, Van Raalte Institute, January 2003), 10; and references an interview he did “with two nonagenarian members of Fourteenth Street Church, Kathryn Fredricks and Elizabeth Sterenberg, 2002.”

The following is an English translation of Frederick's preface to the Heidelberg Catechism.¹ Frederick wrote this preface in 1563, the year of the Catechism's publication. The preface demonstrates that the definition of the word *schools* is not malleable, obscure, or open to various interpretations. In Frederick's day the schools were a known and clearly understood institution, just as they are today. When Lord's Day 38 says "schools," it means what Frederick meant when he said "schools" in his preface. The

preface, then, demonstrates that the Reformed view of the Christian day school is that it is a requirement of God's Sabbath and therefore a demand of God's covenant. This exposes that it is deceitful to attempt to redefine "schools" in Lord's Day 38 as seminaries or as homeschools. The attempt to redefine "schools" today is not an innocent attempt to exegete Lord's Day 38 but is an attack on the Reformed doctrine of schools as that doctrine is found in the Heidelberg Catechism.

This English translation was printed in 1913.

Catechism or Christian Instruction as This is Carried on in Churches and Schools of the Electoral Palatinate

Printed in the Electoral City of Heidelberg by John Mayer 1563

We, Frederic, Archcarver and Elector of the Holy Roman Empire, Duke in Bavaria, by the grace of God, Elector Palatine on the Rhine, &c., present to all and each of our Superintendents, Pastors, Preachers, Officers of the Church, and Schoolmasters, throughout our Electorate of the Rhenish Palatinate, our grace and greeting, and do them, herewith, to wit:

Inasmuch as we acknowledge that we are bound by the admonition of the Divine word, and also by natural duty and relation, and have finally determined to order and administer our office, calling, and government, not only for the promotion and maintenance of quiet and peaceable living, and for the support of upright and virtuous walk and conversation among our subjects, but also and above all, constantly to admonish and lead them to devout knowledge and fear of the Almighty and His holy word of salvation, as the only foundation of all virtue and obedience, and to spare no pains, so far as in us lies, with all sincerity to promote their temporal and eternal welfare, and to contribute to the defence and maintenance of the same:

And, although apprised on entering upon our government, how our dear cousins and predecessors, Counts

Palatine, Electors, &c., of noble and blessed memory, have instituted and proposed divers Christian and profitable measures and appliances for the furtherance of the glory of God and the upholding of civil discipline and order:

Notwithstanding this purpose was not in every respect prosecuted with the appropriate zeal, and the expected and desired fruit did not accrue therefrom—we are now induced not only to renew the same, but also, as the exigencies of the times demand, to improve, reform, and further to establish them. Therefore we also have ascertained that by no means the least defect of our system is found in the fact, that our blooming youth is disposed to be careless in respect to Christian doctrine, both in the schools and churches of our principality—some, indeed, being entirely without Christian instruction, others being unsystematically taught, without any established, certain, and clear catechism, but merely according to individual plan or judgment; from which, among other great defects, the consequence has ensued, that they have, in too many instances, grown up without the fear of God and the knowledge of His word, having enjoyed no profitable instruction, or otherwise have been perplexed with

1 "Catechism or Christian Instruction as This Is Carried on in Churches and Schools of the Electoral Palatinate," reproduced from George W. Richards, *The Heidelberg Catechism: Historical and Doctrinal Studies* (Publication Board of the RCUS, 1913), 182–99.

irrelevant and needless questions, and at times have been burdened with unsound doctrines.

And now, whereas both temporal and spiritual offices, government and family discipline, cannot otherwise be maintained—and in order that discipline and obedience to authority and all other virtues (*sic*) may increase and be multiplied among subjects—it is essential that our youth be trained in early life, and above all, in the pure and consistent doctrine of the holy Gospel, and be well exercised in the proper and true knowledge of God:

Therefore, we have regarded it as a high obligation, and as the most important duty of our government, to give attention to this matter, to do away with this defect, and to introduce the needful improvements:

And accordingly, with the advice and cooperation of our entire theological faculty in this place, and of all Superintendents and distinguished servants of the Church, we have secured the preparation of a summary course of instruction or catechism of our Christian Religion, according to the word of God, in the German and Latin languages; in order not only that the youth in churches and schools may be piously instructed in such Christian doctrine, and be thoroughly trained therein,

but also that the Pastors and Schoolmasters themselves may be provided with a fixed form and model, by which to regulate the instruction of youth, and not, at their option, adopt daily changes, or introduce erroneous doctrine:

We do herewith affectionately admonish and enjoin upon every one of you, that you do, for the honour of God and our subjects, and also for the sake of your own soul's profit and welfare, thankfully accept this proffered Catechism or course of instruction, and that you do diligently and faithfully represent and explain the same according to its true import, to the youth in our schools and churches, and also from the pulpit to the common people, that you teach, and act, and live in accordance with it, in the assured hope, that if our youth in early life are earnestly instructed and educated in the word of God, it will please Almighty God also to grant reformation of public and private morals, and temporal and eternal welfare. Desiring, as above said, that all this may be accomplished, we have made this provision.

“Given at Heidelberg, Tuesday, the nineteenth of January, in the year 1563 after the birth of Christ, our dear Lord and Saviour.”

FAITH AND LIFE

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

IDEALISM (1)

*Who have said, With our tongue will we prevail;
our lips are our own: who is lord over us?
—Psalm 12:4*

Evil Words of Men

This word of God declares the blasphemous height of the vain speech of the wicked. These wicked have persecuted the poor and needy. They have oppressed the poor. They have caused the needy to sigh. Why oppress the poor and needy? What do the poor and needy have that can increase the wealth of the wicked?

The reason is the God of the poor and needy. God has promised to be their helper. By his promise God has made the cause of the poor and needy his own. God is the

reason that the wicked take a special delight in oppressing the poor. The wicked set their words against the word of God. Their desire is to ask the question, “Who is lord over us?” To that question they desire to give the resounding answer, “No lord is over us!” Not even the living God of heaven and earth.

These wicked point to the instrument of their triumph. Their triumph is not by physical force, by extortion as the threat of force, by bullying, or by deceitful manipulation and trickery. These indeed are instruments the

wicked have used against the poor and needy. The wicked have indeed killed and beaten. They have twisted law and order to favor themselves in their wickedness. They have bullied and threatened others into compliance with their unjust actions. But the real point is their warfare against God. They have boasted before the Lord of their cruel evil. They have boasted against him of their wicked gain. He has not stopped them. He has not destroyed them. So they speak against him. They exalt their tongues against his. They boast of the possession of their own lips. So they speak, and so they talk. Feeling free both of God's judgments against them and of his sovereignty over them, they ask the question, "Who is lord over us?"

It is one thing to be presented with such words in scripture as spoken by the heathen. The nations that rage against the Lord and his Christ speak similar words: "Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us" (Ps. 2:3). Similar are the words that Pilate spoke to him who is the way, the truth, and the life: "What is truth?" (John 18:38).

But the words of the wicked expressed in Psalm 12:4 are not from the heathen. They are spoken by members of the house of Israel. They speak against God as he has revealed himself in his holy word, the testimony of the scriptures. They speak against him who has declared himself to be the sovereign of heaven and earth, sovereign over all the tongues of men. They speak against him who has promised to be the helper of the poor, the fatherless, and the widow. They speak against him who has threatened his just judgment against the workers of iniquity.

This great wickedness of men in the church is by no means limited to sacred history. Psalm 12:4 is a powerful reminder of what recurs time and again in church history. One of the most notable expressions of this great evil happened at the time of the Protestant Reformation. The truth of God's word was bitterly and viciously opposed by the papacy. The papacy employed the power of its hierarchical tyranny against the truth of scripture. God's people were not to live freely by the word of God, justified by faith alone. Although confronted with the clear testimony of God's word, the Romish papacy used its own words against God's word. Issuing so many papal bulls and culminating in the Council of Trent, the antichristian papacy worked to destroy the truth in order to maintain its oppression of the church of Jesus Christ. Claiming with so many words that the authority of Christ had been conferred on the papacy alone, it

The words of the wicked expressed in Psalm 12:4 are not from the heathen. They are spoken by members of the house of Israel.

turned aside the authority of God's word and invoked its own authority to destroy all who bore testimony to the divine word.

Sadly, the great wickedness of Psalm 12:4 carried through into Protestantism. Still the tongue of the wicked sought to prevail apart from papal tyranny. Still men thought their lips were their own. Refusing submission to the word of God, men spoke their own words against the word of God. Joining together in their rebellion, they worked to drive out the testimony of God's word by dominating the institutions of church and state. They focused on those standing for the truth of God's word. They used their lips and tongues to accuse the orthodox of being unloving and intolerant, of laboring for the destruction of the church's peace and unity. They turned heresy into orthodoxy. They turned faithfulness into perfidy. They turned unrighteousness into righteousness, wrong into right, disorder into order. All with their words.

Decisions for Deposition

The grievous wickedness of Psalm 12:4 became evident in the deliberative assemblies of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Preaching against the truth of justification by grace alone without works and against the unconditional covenant was declared by men to be orthodox. When

that declaration failed, such preaching was declared to be merely confusing. Those who protested against that preaching were vilified as troublemakers and radicals. They were threatened with church discipline. When leaders of these churches agitated against the decisions of Synod 2018 in their public writings and teachings, they were not declared to be schismatic but were declared orthodox. When some in these churches continued to point out obvious failures to conform to the truth of God's word, including failure to repent of the false teachings condemned by Synod 2018, they faced discipline for schism and slander.

The history of the recent controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches is replete with the twisting of the word of God by the words of men. Through it all the words of Psalm 12:4 must be heard: "With our tongue will we prevail; our lips are our own: who is lord over us?"

How did this grievous wickedness of Psalm 12:4 happen?

How did this wickedness happen when the beginning of the Protestant Reformed denomination involved the same use of wicked words? How did this happen when

that wickedness was so apparent in 1924? How did such wickedness happen though many books had been written and published on the history of the beginning of the Protestant Reformed denomination? How did this wickedness happen again in spite of so much instruction in this history?

Why was this so apparent in the history of 1924?

In this history the leadership of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) had banded together with their words. Their cause of common grace signified a broad-mindedness and a movement toward finding acceptance and approval among other institutions. The world envisioned by Abraham Kuyper's *gemeene gratie* was a world the leadership in the CRC wanted to move into and help develop. The opposition of Herman Hoeksema, Henry Danhof, and George Ophoff they found intolerable. They knew the weapon they would use, the weapon that had been put to use so often before in church history: the weapon of words.

With their words they laid hold on the creeds and on the writings of men about those creeds. With their words they persuaded the synod of 1924 to authoritatively declare the three points of common grace to be the teaching of scripture and the Reformed creeds. A quote from the first point of common grace is clear:

This ["a certain favor or grace of God which He shows to His creatures in general"] is evident from the Scripture passages that were quoted and from the Canons of Dordt, II, 5 and III, IV, 8, 9, where the general offer of the gospel is set forth; while it also is evident from the citations made from the Reformed writers belonging to the most flourishing period of Reformed theology that our fathers from of old maintained this view.¹

It mattered not that it was not "evident." It mattered not that Abraham Kuyper identified himself as or was acknowledged by others to be the author of this new doctrine. What mattered was that synod could write the words and have them passed by majority vote, accomplished by words.

With words the force of the words of Synod 1924 carried through with the additional words of Classis Grand Rapids East and Classis Grand Rapids West. Based on

The voices of men who exercise their responsibility to maintain and defend the truth of God's word against the false doctrines of men must be excluded.

the work of that synod, these classes of the CRC deposed the three ministers with their consistories. Again, the autonomy of the local congregations as ruled by elders in their locales according to the word of God did not matter. What mattered were the words of these assemblies. What mattered were the words that explained that such urgent and decisive action was necessary and so important for the peace and unity of the churches.

What words! Words that the synod read into the confessions and "citations made from the Reformed writers belonging to the most flourishing period of Reformed theology." Words that synod used authoritatively to declare it to be so. Words that followed through, to break through lines of Reformed church polity, for putting out of office men whom God had placed there for the maintenance of the truth.

Words of men were used not only by the CRC Synod of 1924 and carried through by the CRC classes of Grand Rapids East and Grand Rapids West, but words were

also used by Synod 1945 of the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN)* for the deposition of Klass Schilder from the office of professor of theology. The same tactics used against Hoeksema, Danhof, and Ophoff were employed against Schilder and the ministers standing with him. The synod of the *GKN* insisted that conditions of unrest and

turmoil required that the assembly continue over the space of three years. Over that time Schilder remained in hiding from the Nazis and could not appear publicly to defend himself. Synod took advantage of his absence to issue ruling after ruling to build up opposition against Schilder. Deliberations of that assembly focused on controlling all information about the denomination in order to build up and maintain the impression that Schilder's teachings threatened the welfare of the denomination. Having driven that impression deeply throughout the denomination, the assembly then moved against the professor. With the sentence of his deposition, the synod of the *GKN* hoped to intimidate all who would dare to stand with Schilder. It was their hope that all support for Schilder would evaporate, leaving the professor all alone, an outcast of the *GKN*.

The manner and end of Schilder's ouster from the *GKN* was similar to that of Hoeksema, Danhof, and Ophoff from the CRC. But what was more clear about

1 Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 423.

Schilder's case was that it had much to do with the professor's opposition to the dominance of Kuyperian thought in the *GKN*. Schilder decried the abstract, speculative nature of Kuyper's teachings in favor of preaching and teaching that centered on the text of scripture. Schilder shared the focus of the *Afscheiding*, the care of God's people in the churches. He eschewed the focus of Kuyper's *Doleantie* on the institutions of the day, denomination and state, which he saw compromised by allegiance to the Nazi party.

The Threat of God's Word

There are significant reasons that the doctrines of Abraham Kuyper were involved in the actions taken by the deliberative assemblies of both the CRC and the *GKN*.

The first reason is the simplest. The doctrines of men are not the doctrines of the word of God. The doctrines of men need support that the doctrines of God's word do not need. They need the support of the authority of men. They need to have the deliberative assemblies of the churches under the control of men rather than under the control of the scriptures. The doctrines of men simply cannot stand against the scriptures. Therefore, the testimony of holy scripture cannot be allowed any place in the deliberative assemblies of the churches. The voices of men who exercise their responsibility to maintain and defend the truth of God's word against the false doctrines of men must be excluded. Because the doctrines favored are the doctrines of men, church authority must be exercised against the word of God.

The second reason goes deeper than the first and provides the spiritual explanation for such actions of these broader assemblies and their misuse of ecclesiastical authority. It is that the truth is narrow and antithetical, while the lie is broad and tolerant. Institutional pride is concerned with appearances and numbers. Institutional pride wants representation of its institution either in Christendom or more broadly in the world. Institutional pride must know that its institution has an impact in the realm of denominations or public life. Institutional pride has little use for the ordinary member of the church and the care of his soul by the word of God proclaimed to him Sunday after Sunday. In a similar fashion institutional pride seeks to maintain itself as the means of grace. Grace is not to be controlled by the eternal election of God or by the cross of Christ. Grace is not to be applied by the Holy Spirit to the hearts of God's elect

by the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Instead, grace is tied to the institution and bare membership in the institution. Stumbling at sovereign, gracious election and stumbling at the cross of Christ, emphasis is placed on an outward institution and its appearance before all. Institutional membership must indicate and control the boundaries of grace. On the other hand, sovereign, particular grace does not concern itself with external appearances, numbers, or the praise of men. It does not seek out the wise and the strong but the foolish, the weak, and the despised (1 Cor. 1:26–29). Therefore, institutional pride cannot tolerate the simple, powerful rebuke of the grace of God that prefers the younger to the elder, the humble to the proud, and the weak to the strong.

The third reason is the point of these articles: the determination of men to forsake the humble, earthy moorings of the word of God in favor of the lofty, speculative heights of abstract reasoning. How easy it is for men to turn away from the word of God that constantly humbles and abases them and denies them every corner of their pride! How easy it is for men to devote themselves to the contrivances of their own imaginations! How easy it is for men also to imagine a basis for their vanities in God's word.

These contrivances must not be limited to the error of common grace. It is tempting to do so. It is a simple thing to point to Kuyper's three-volume work on the subject. It is a simple thing to point out a clear rationale for the effort: the ascendance of the Anti-Revolutionary Party and Kuyper's departure from the gospel ministry to attain the political office of prime minister of the Netherlands. There are also Kuyper's efforts at maintaining the truth of God's word in the churches of Holland, his role in the *Doleantie* as true church reformation, and his stand against liberalizing elements in the state church of the Netherlands. There is indeed much to agree with in Kuyper's work. There is his book *That God's Grace is Particular*. There is much good found in his work on the Holy Spirit. But the fact remains that Kuyper's work on common grace is not an error that stands by itself. His teaching on presupposed regeneration is not merely another example of error. His errors are not aberrations, accidental departures that somehow happened along the way. They belong to what is known as Kuyperianism and also belong to the child known as Neo-Kuyperianism.

Kuyperianism and Neo-Kuyperianism are theological

Institutional pride has little use for the ordinary member of the church and the care of his soul by the word of God proclaimed to him Sunday after Sunday.

movements that steer into abstract, philosophical reasoning in order to build up doctrinal systems independent of scripture. Then these theological movements work to bring these doctrinal systems back down as ideals, to carry their weight and influence into the world. These ideals have two characteristics. First, they attempt to control institutions to subordinate them to expressed ideals rather than to the word of God. Second, they are preoccupied with human reasoning to the neglect of the true knowledge of God in his word. Kuyperianism and Neo-Kuyperianism build castles in the sky and then demand that Reformed people live in them. There is a utopian aspect of these movements, built on the doctrine of common grace, that seeks the kingdom of God on the earth. It is not content with the Christian life as a life of struggle and pilgrimage. It wants triumph and an earthly home. It rejects a theology of suffering for the sake of a theology of glory.

What is the threat of Kuyperianism and Neo-Kuyperianism? How are these movements directly related to Psalm 12:4?

Most directly, they build up and maintain their systems by the words of men. Though these movements are claimed to be built up out of the word of God, the claims are false. These movements are the words of men that take attention away from the word of God. They raise up systems and doctrines that rely solely on man's authority, which must by that very fact be opposed to the word of God. This opposition becomes evident in two striking ways. The first way is that Kuyperianism is opposed to the doctrine of total depravity. The second way is that Kuyperianism is opposed to understanding grace as limited to the redemption of the elect in Christ alone. Its claim to doctrinal faithfulness to limited atonement is belied by its focus on the institutions of men. Kuyper's famous claim in his Stone Lectures of "every square inch" is no mere assertion of God's providential government according to his sovereignty. Kuyper intended his claim to be the basis for a movement of men that was meant to be exactly the redemption of everything in society and culture to the cause of Christ.

The threat of Kuyperianism made itself evident in the weakening of Reformed and even Presbyterian

denominations, which made for easy entrance of the heresy of the federal vision. The federal vision certainly exploited the weakness present in Reformed and Presbyterian churches by the error of the conditional covenant. But an additional weakness was present in these churches with the influence of Kuyperianism. Speculative theology loosens the grip of churches on the truth of scripture, making it easy for error to enter. But more to the point, works-theology is certain to enter where the doctrine of total depravity has been compromised and where man is exalted as the agent of redemption, whether his own personal redemption or his redemption of worldly institutions.

But the greatest threat of Kuyperianism is that it offers a deadly substitute: words for truth, dead ideas of man's vain imagination for the living word of God.

This deadly substitution is found in what was addressed before in this magazine under the rubric of doctrine, on the subjects of repentance and faith. It is

the substitution of the doctrine of repentance for repentance itself. It is the substitution of the doctrine of faith for faith itself. Repentance becomes having an idea about it. One becomes a master of the doctrine of repentance. He knows thoroughly the doctrine of repentance. He knows thoroughly the true doctrine of repentance. But he

supposes that his knowledge signifies that he is truly repentant. The true gift of God's grace is displaced by a mere idea. The same effort is undertaken with respect to faith. But the fatal flaw becomes apparent. Left with only the idea, repentance is made into the good thing that is done in order to receive forgiveness. Faith is made into the activity of man that he does in order to receive salvation, whether in part or in whole. So it must also follow that good works do have standing before God to obtain following blessings and benefits. With their words men build their castles in the sky for imagined dwelling places of grace. But their castles are far away from the word of God that reveals true grace alone in the cross of Christ.

Next, Lord willing, I will treat the underpinnings of idealism and the need of God's word for the glorious, true salvation of God's people from sin.

—MVW

There is a utopian aspect of these movements, built on the doctrine of common grace, that seeks the kingdom of God on the earth.

A REEVALUATION OF THE REWARD OF GRACE (2)

In my last article I proposed a definition for the reward of grace: namely, that it 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.¹

Thus far, we have considered that the reward of grace is the wages of Christ. That this reward is the wages of Christ means that the reward belongs to him, for he merited it according to his person and by his own arduous toil. Since the covenant head did all the work for this reward in the place of his people, they need nothing more than his perfect work to receive it. God freely bestows the reward of Christ upon all of his people by grace. And if by grace, then it is no more of works. To think that our works determine the reward—in whatever way we could conceive—is wicked unbelief in the perfect work of Christ.

Now we move on to the wages themselves. What did Christ earn for himself and for his people?

Eternal Life

The apostle Paul, after speaking of Christ's humiliation in Philippians 2, goes on in verses 9–11 to speak about what Christ's wages are:

9. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:
10. That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;
11. And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.²

God rewards Christ with a name and place above all men so that he may be worshiped and highly exalted.

Yet there is more to this reward, as was foretold in Isaiah 53:10–12:

10. Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.
11. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.
12. Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

In addition to receiving a name and place above all men, Christ received “a portion with the great”—that is, a kingdom—together with power and authority to execute God's counsel. He also received posterity—“his seed”—and eternal life—“prolong his days.”

This eternal life is that which Christ bestows upon his posterity, who are the covenant children of God. Thus the reward of grace is nothing less than eternal life.³

Both scripture and the creeds identify the reward this way. The Canons speaks of “the reward of eternal life.”⁴ From scripture, Matthew 19:29: “Every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.”⁵ Romans 6:23: “The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Also James 1:12: “Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall

1 Luke Bomers, “A Reevaluation of the Reward of Grace (1),” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 5 (October 2022): 31–36. These articles were originally submitted as a seminary term paper in connection with the study of eschatology.

2 See also Ephesians 1:9–11, Hebrews 1, Hebrews 2:6–17.

3 Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), 2:115; cf. 207. Hoeksema wrote, “The reward for the righteous is eternal life, nothing less than the eternal, glorious inheritance.”

4 Canons of Dordt 1, error 3; Canons of Dordt 2, error 4, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 160, 165.

5 See also Mark 10:17, Luke 10:25, Luke 18:29–30. “True believers for themselves may and do obtain assurance according to the measure of their faith, whereby they arrive at the certain persuasion, that they...will at last inherit eternal life” (Canons of Dordt 5.9, in *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:594).

receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.”

What is this eternal life? Bucan’s definition in Heppe is excellent:

Life eternal is the glorious state in which the elect, united most fully with Christ their Head, are to know God in heaven along with the angels, to enjoy His presence and to celebrate it eternally, to obtain the highest good acquired for us by Christ, to be conformed in body and soul to His image, so far as he is man.⁶

The essence of eternal life is “to know God in heaven.” God gives *himself* as the reward of grace. That the reward is God himself is God’s own testimony to Abram in Canaan: “Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward” (Gen. 15:1). When one has God and knows God, he has life because God is life. As Christ prayed in John 17:3, “This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God.”

The book of Revelation uses wonderful figures to depict the truth that eternal life is to know God in heaven. Revelation 22:4 teaches that the saints shall see the face of God, “and his name shall be in their foreheads.” God reveals himself by his name, and for him to place his name in the foreheads of his saints means that his saints will be given the knowledge of God in their minds and hearts.⁷

Furthermore, in heaven the saints will know God *immediately*. They “shall see the face of God.” They will know him even as they are known. This is also what scripture means when it says that there is no night in New Jerusalem. Revelation 22:5: “There shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light.” Just as the medium of earthly light-bearers provides the possibility of seeing and knowing in this life, so God causes himself to be known truly without medium in life eternal. *He* is the light. God gives light to his saints and causes them to perfectly receive him.⁸ And God gives his light through Jesus Christ. Revelation 21:23: “The city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.” The Lamb is the light. Through him alone is the

knowledge of God, for he is the Son—the brightness of God’s glory and the express image of his person.

That the saints might know God, they are “united most fully with Christ their Head.” It is through Christ that there is unity of life between God and his church. “I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one” (John 17:23). Through the wonder of grace wherein the Son of God took upon himself human flesh, suffered and died, arose from the dead, and ascended into heaven, Christ is become the life-source of the church. He is her “hidden manna,” as Revelation 2:17 calls him. Just as material manna sustained the life of the Israelite pilgrims through the waste-howling wilderness, so Christ is the hidden manna that nourishes all his people unto eternal life. He is for them wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. *He* is what eternally satisfies their souls.⁹

Christ is the life of his saints in and through his Spirit. The Spirit is depicted in Revelation 21:6 and 22:1 as the water that proceeds from the throne of God and the Lamb. The Spirit is the living water that flows out of God, through Christ, and into the belly of the church. The Spirit imparts the very life of God into the glorified church, so that the church has one life with God in Christ. Just as water sustains earthly life, so the Spirit sustains the heavenly life of the saints by imparting the fullness of Christ to them. The Holy Spirit realizes all the blessings that Christ earned by his perfect obedience. And the Holy Spirit is an ever-flowing stream of life that eternally satisfies all who drink of him.¹⁰

Being made partakers of Christ, the saints “obtain the highest good acquired for [them] by Christ, to be conformed in body and soul to His image.” They will be made like God to the highest possible degree. The saints will bear the image of God in its highest possible development. This is what Christ means when he promises to the church in Philadelphia, “I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem...and I will write upon him my new name” (Rev. 3:12). The saints will be *like God*, being recreated in Christ Jesus his Son. They will be clothed with the white robes of Christ’s righteousness. And being like God, true and perfect communion is possible.¹¹

6 Quoted in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, trans. G. T. Thomson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 707.

7 Herman Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 727–28.

8 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 728.

9 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 95.

10 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 724.

11 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 139.

Being united to God and made like him through Christ, the saints shall “enjoy His presence” and “celebrate it.” In this connection it is clear that eternal life is the culmination and perfection of the covenant of grace. That eternal life is the culmination and perfection of the covenant of grace is the doctrine of Psalm 25. Verse 13 speaks about the God-fearing man who enters the new creation: “His soul shall dwell in ease; and his seed shall inherit the earth.” Then verse 14: “The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant.” In the culmination and perfection of the covenant of grace, God and his people enjoy each other’s presence as friends.

Such is taught in Revelation by the symbolism of the saints’ eating of the tree of life in the midst of the paradise of God (Rev. 2:7; 22:2). In Eden the tree of life was a symbol of the everlasting covenant with God. About this tree Herman Hoeksema said,

It had a certain sacramental character. It was a sign and seal of God’s favor, an emblem of God’s covenant. It was a visible and tangible sign of that higher aspect of Adam’s life which consisted in the knowledge of and fellowship with God...It was the tree of *life*...Even though Adam’s life was earthy, nevertheless life also for Adam implied the favor and fellowship of God, his Creator-Lord. And if in this connection we bear in mind that the tree of life was in the midst of the garden, in the very heart of Paradise the First, we may say that according to the analogy of the temple, the tree of life constituted the most holy place. There, in the midst of the garden, where the tree of life was, dwelt God...To approach the tree of life...before the fall, was to approach God.¹²

In heaven there shall not merely be the sign of God’s favor and friendship, but the saints shall enjoy the ever-present reality of this favor and friendship. They shall ever be in God’s presence, knowing and speaking and tasting his goodness in Jesus Christ.

That the culmination and perfection of the covenant are realized in eternal life is also the significance of the proclamation from heaven in Revelation 21:3: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.” In New Jerusalem the entire city shall be the tabernacle of God. God’s abode will be with his people perfectly and completely. He will take up his abode in them and fill them. They will be

bound to one another in the unbreakable bonds of everlasting friendship.¹³

The saints shall know, enjoy, and celebrate God “eternally.” As Christ promises in Revelation 3:12, he will make each of his saints “a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out.” If the temple is the symbol of God’s dwelling place among men, then to be a pillar in his temple is to enter into everlasting communion with God.¹⁴

This eternal life will be possessed by the saints without interruption. Absolutely nothing will deter or reduce their life with God. It will be life to the fullest. Such is the promise of Psalm 103:2–5:

2. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits;
3. Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases;
4. Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies;
5. Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle’s.

This fullness of life is also the symbolism of the tree of life that gives forth its leaves for the healing of the nations. Sickness of whatever form is forever excluded from the new creation because of the life-giving presence of the Spirit.¹⁵

The reward of grace that is promised in scripture is, very simply, eternal life.

A Name and Place

Yet there is another important aspect to the reward of grace.

More specifically, the promised reward as the wages of Jesus Christ is the *name* and *place* that each elect child of God possesses in the everlasting covenant and eternal kingdom of God. That each saint has a *place* in heaven is implied by the very essence of the covenant and the kingdom.

By virtue of his peculiar creation, man was formed to stand in a covenant relationship with Jehovah God. Man was made a covenant being, bearing the image of God and possessing the capability to have a relationship of friendship with God. And standing in this particular relationship to God, man was given a very special place. He was made to reign over the works of God in order to direct them unto God’s glory.

According to the infinite wisdom of God, man’s place of honor in creation was lost and forfeited in Adam in order to

12 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 725.

13 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 688.

14 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 138–39.

15 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 726.

be regained and raised to the greatest plane of glory in the kingdom of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ The culmination and final manifestation of the covenant of grace is the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Now that Christ has accomplished the forgiveness of sins through his blood and fulfilled all righteousness, his people have a name and place in this new kingdom.

The prominent characteristic of a kingdom is its rule. Christ rules. He rules by the decree of God, which he declares in Psalm 2. God shall give Christ absolute dominion over all nations in the way of smashing all hostile powers to pieces with his rod of iron. And he shall reign for ever and ever.

This rule Christ shares with his people, who have been perfectly united to him and who live one life with him. He promises to the church, “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” (Rev. 3:21). Every child of God shall have a glorious place of power and rule in the new creation, given to him by Christ the king. And together the saints will be a royal priesthood. They will use their position of rule to direct all of creation to the service and glory of God. They will do this forever without any possibility of erring.¹⁷

That the reward of grace implies a specific name and place for every saint is further underscored by the fact that the kingdom is called New Jerusalem. Eternal life in heaven is described as a city, a society. It is the perfect community. All the citizens share one life and principle and purpose as they live together in social intercourse. Yet as citizens they each have a unique name and occupy a specific place within that community.¹⁸

There are several examples from scripture to demonstrate this truth. First of all, there is the great type of Christ’s heavenly reign in the kingdom of Israel under Solomon, which was characterized by its prosperity and dominion and peace. In this kingdom there were nobles, priests, singers, players of instruments, porters, officers, judges, governors of the sanctuary, scribes, the royal entourage of Cherethites and Pelethites, laborers in the fields and cellars, rulers over the vineyards and oil production, rulers over the treasuries and storehouses, keepers of the flocks and herds and camels, counselors, captains over hundreds, captains over thousands, table servants, cupbearers, and those who sought out

the exotic and precious objects from the surrounding nations. Each position had its unique activity with definite tasks and services, which served for the glory of God and his anointed king.

Second, that each saint has a unique name and place in the kingdom of God is illustrated by Jesus’ parable of the talents, recorded in Matthew 25:14–30. The “talents” of the parable refer specifically to that unique name and place that every person in the church has on earth and subsequently in heaven. As Herman Hanko wrote,

The new heavens and the new earth are their possession. They are given the care of that new and glorious and heavenly creation, for in it and into all eternity they have their assignment and work. There they will labor diligently and faithfully in their calling before the face of God in perfection. There they will labor forever for the glory of God and the praise and honor of Jesus Christ, their Master and Lord.¹⁹

Finally, Christ himself promises to the church this unique name and place in his kingdom when he says, “To him that overcometh will I give...a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it” (Rev. 2:17). The stone, inasmuch as it is a white stone, is a symbol of the verdict of righteousness that the saints shall receive in the day of the Lord. Yet there is more to this stone than its color. Each saint will be given a unique stone with a new name written in it. The name will express his individual personality that he will possess through the perfect renewal of his being. The saints will not share identities. They will not be replicated like clones. Rather, they will all be unique. Personality will reach its highest degree in the New Jerusalem, since only he who receives a stone knows his name.²⁰

The saints will all contribute in a special way to the glory of the whole redeemed church. Hoeksema said that “each particular child of God shall...manifest his own peculiar shade of God’s image.”²¹ Such is illustrated by the description of New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 as it descends from God out of heaven. The glory of God permeates and fills the city with brilliant light “like a jasper stone, clear as crystal” (v. 11). God’s knowledge is

16 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 152–53.

17 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 728.

18 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 710–11.

19 Herman Hanko, *The Mysteries of the Kingdom: An Exposition of Jesus’ Parables*, 2nd ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), 393; see also Herman Hoeksema, *Chapel Talks on the Parables in Matthew* (Wyoming, MI: Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, 1972), 123.

20 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 96.

21 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 96–97.

imparted to the whole glorified church. And the church manifests God's glory in manifold beauty, for the city's foundation is garnished with twelve layers of colorful precious stones. The glory of God radiates from Christ through the body, and the body—fearfully and wonderfully fashioned together—radiates in perfect harmony the fullness and beauty of the divine image unto the glory of God, all the while maintaining the individuality and personality of the saints.²²

Thus the reward of grace as the wages of Jesus Christ includes the name and place of each child of God in the new heavens and earth. They shall live before God in their own unique places that he has determined for them according to his eternal love for them. And they shall possess such a glory that has never entered into the heart of man to conceive.

Therefore, we expect the coming of the great day of the Lord with a most ardent desire, to the end that we may fully enjoy the promises of God that are yes and amen in Jesus Christ our Lord, unto the glory of God by us!

Gradus Gloriam?

In Reformed dogmatics there is a lot of buzz about degrees of glory in heaven. Are there degrees of glory in heaven among the saints? If there are degrees of glory, how is everyone perfectly blessed by God in heaven? Is there correspondence between degrees of glory and good works? If good works in some sense correspond with the glory of the reward, how does this reconcile with the fact that the reward is of grace?

In addition to its implicit teaching of merit, the “Reward of Grace” sermon also occasioned discussion about degrees of glory in heaven.²³ The sermon explicitly taught degrees of reward, which the consistory of Hope Protestant Reformed Church defended on the basis that scripture teaches degrees of glory in heaven.²⁴ Classis East in January 2020, in dealing with a protest about this sermon, concurred with Hope's consistory that there are degrees of glory.²⁵

That there are degrees of glory in heaven is an inference from corroborating passages in scripture. There is the analogy of the glory of the saints to the shining of

the stars in the night sky, which stars differ in brightness from one another (Dan. 12:3; 1 Cor. 15:41–42). Christ uses superlative language when speaking about the citizens of the kingdom: “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is *greatest* in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:4). And then there is the parable of the pounds in Luke 19, wherein the two faithful servants who exercised the lord's pounds each received a different number of cities to rule, one ten and the other five.

Degrees of glory could also be inferred from the fact that the final manifestation of the everlasting covenant is the kingdom of Christ. Since all kingdoms have rank and gradation that serve for the ordering of that kingdom, Christ's kingdom must also have rank and gradation. At the head of the kingdom is the Lord Jesus Christ in greatest glory and honor, and from him there are subsequent degrees of glory.²⁶

Whenever the doctrine of degrees is taught, it is usually conditioned by the statement that each saint shall have a “cup” of glory, and this cup of glory shall be full.²⁷ The analogy of cups is an allusion to Isaiah 22:24, which says, “They shall hang upon him all the glory of his father's house, the offspring and the issue, all vessels of small quantity, from the vessels of cups, even to all the vessels of flagons.” Some cups are smaller. Some cups are bigger. But every cup will be full. As Hoeksema said, “All the saints will be completely filled with blessing, but some will have a greater capacity for blessing and glory than others.”²⁸

Many who speak of the degrees of glory in heaven teach that these degrees are proportional to works in this life. Again, this was the doctrine of the “Reward of Grace” sermon:

There is a correlation [between good works and the reward], so that we understand the less of a good work, or the less good that a good work is, the less or smaller the reward. The less number of works, the less of a reward one receives. So too with regard to the more. The more that one walks in good works, the more of a reward is received.²⁹

22 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 139.

23 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.

24 *Acts of Synod 2020*, 129.

25 *Acts of Synod 2020*, 138.

26 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 204.

27 Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, ed. Edward Hickman (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997), 902, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works2/>; Spurgeon, *New Library of Spurgeon's Sermons* 2:241; Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 112; Cornelis P. Venema, *The Promise of the Future* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2000), 418–19.

28 Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:115.

29 *Acts of Synod 2020*, 114.

Although I doubt that any would be so bold as to say what was quoted above, the Reformed theologians and church fathers who taught the essence of this quote are legion.³⁰ But let this quotation by Hanko in connection with Luke 19 suffice:

The measure of faithfulness here below will be proportionately rewarded above. The diligence with which we labor in the kingdom, the earnestness with which we make use of the Word of God, the single-heartedness of purpose with which we pursue our heavenly calling—all will be proportionately blessed.³¹

That the reward of grace corresponds to good works may appear to be what Belgic Confession article 24 teaches as well: “We do not deny that God rewards good works, but it is through his grace that he crowns his gifts.”³² When it speaks of crowning his gifts, the Confession draws its language from Augustine, who wrote on this matter, “So when God crowns your merits, he is not crowning anything but his own gifts.”³³ What could be inferred by the Confession is that more good works earn a greater degree of glory.

In all my research for this article, I am surprised that Caleb’s inheritance in Canaan is not used by those who teach that the reward is proportional to good works. It would be one of the strongest arguments. One might say that Caleb was the greatest warrior in the church during his age—perhaps even in the whole old dispensation. Against the overwhelming majority of spies who gave an evil report about the land of Canaan, Caleb defended God’s name and promise. At the ripe age of eighty-five, he battled three giants to take possession of his inheritance (Josh. 15:14). And this faithful servant of Jehovah received a special inheritance of unusual size (14:6–15). It included two cities, and the region was so large that at the time of David

it was simply called “Caleb” (1 Sam. 30:14). Since the land of Canaan was a type of the heavenly inheritance,³⁴ Caleb’s inheritance appears to be indisputable proof that one receives a reward according to his works.

That the reward is according to works has been commonly taught in connection with suffering and persecution.³⁵ In a postscript after his series on the sermon on the mount, Luther took up the issue of the reward and said about the saints,

If they suffer much and labor much, He [Christ] will adorn them specially on the Last Day, more and more gloriously than the others, as special stars that are greater than others. So St. Paul will be more brilliant, more bright and clear than others. This does not refer to the forgiveness of sins nor to meriting heaven, but to a recompense of greater glory for greater suffering. . . . There will be a distinction in the glory with which we shall be adorned, and in the brightness with which we shall shine. In this life there is a distinction among gifts, and one labors and suffers more than another. But in that life it will all be revealed, for the whole world to see what each one has done from the degree of glory he has; and the whole heavenly host will rejoice. Let this be sufficient on the matter.³⁶

Shall we admit of degrees of glory that correspond to our works in this life and have it be taught this way to the flock?

I contend that it is improper—even detrimental—to teach that the reward of grace is according to good works. Instead, I contend that the only way to speak about the reward of grace is in connection with our election in Jesus Christ. This is the election theology of the reward. But this will have to wait until next time.

—Luke Bomers

30 G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith & Justification*, trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954), 121–22; David J. Engelsma, *The Belgic Confession: A Commentary*, vol. 2 (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2019), 361; Anthony A. Hoekema, *Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 263–64; Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 81, 680, 715; Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21, *The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 293–94; Venema, *The Promise of the Future*, 405–19.

31 Hanko, *The Mysteries of the Kingdom*, 329.

32 Belgic Confession 24, 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), 3:412.

33 Augustine, *Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, part 3, vol. 9, *Sermons on the Saints*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1994), 201; cf. Augustine, “On Grace and Free Will,” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ser. 1, vol. 5, *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, rev. trans. Benjamin B. Warfield (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 452, 464. Though absolutely impermissible today, I note that the word *merit* had not been rooted out of the vocabulary of the church at this time. Even Luther was comfortable with the word “if properly understood” (Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 21:291).

34 Homer C. Hoeksema, *Unfolding Covenant History*, vol. 4, *Through the Wilderness into Canaan*, ed. Mark H. Hoeksema (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2003), 358.

35 See Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh!*, 81, 510–11, 531; Engelsma, *The Belgic Confession: A Commentary*, 2:361.

36 Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 21:293–94.



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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 am for peace: but when I speak, they are for war.—Psalm 120:7

Christ speaks in the psalm. He says, “I am peace.” He is peace. He is God’s peace. God gave Christ for a covenant of the people. In his own person God and man are Christ. In him, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. In him God reconciled his people and established peace. In him God reconciled the Jews and the Gentiles and out of twain made one.

Outside him there is only warfare and strife. There is warfare of man with man but more terribly, warfare of man with God. That warfare of man with God is on account of man’s sin. But God in his eternal good pleasure willed peace for his people, to take away their sins and to reconcile them to himself. His thoughts toward his people were ever of peace. And he gave Jesus Christ as their peace. In him is peace that passes all understanding.

And of that peace Christ speaks in the world through the word of the gospel. He ever declares that God is the God of all peace. Christ declares that God has established this peace in the cross of Jesus Christ. He says that God reconciled his people to himself. And he irresistibly calls his people to peace, draws them into that peace, and establishes them in that peace. Peace with the living God through Jesus Christ by the forgiveness of our sins. Oh, sweetest fellowship with God!

And in that very word, he also declares that there is no peace to the wicked. As soon as that word comes into the world, it stirs up a terrible opposition and hatred. Whenever and wherever that word comes, they are for war, for they hate peace. They hate peace as they hate God.

Those of Mesech and Kedar! Oh Mesech, the land of Noah’s apostate generations. Oh Kedar, the territory of the carnal children of Ishmael. To dwell among them was dangerous. So the psalmist means that the speaking of the word of God stirred up the implacable hatred and fierce opposition of perfidious and false Israelites. They hated the very existence of David among them; and when David spoke of God, the promise of God, and the peace of God, they rose up against David with their lying lips and their false tongues.

And such was also the experience of the Son of Man in his sojourn on the earth. His appearance stirred up the reprobate in the sphere of the covenant, Herod; the apostates to works-righteousness, the Pharisees; and the apostates to carnal worldliness, the Sadducees; and they all attacked and lied against the Word, and through their lies they crucified him.

And so also all those who are Christ’s must expect the very same experiences among those of Mesech and Kedar. Are we not for peace? Do we not desire the blessed gospel of peace to be heard in the whole world? Do we not desire that the sinner who is mired in his sin know the peace of forgiveness, and so we rebuke him? Do we not desire that those who labor under the heavy yoke of works-righteousness exchange that yoke for the yoke of Christ, which is easy, and whose burden is light? When you speak—when you speak the word of God that alone gives peace—then they will raise against you their lying lips and their false tongues. Because they are for war, and they hate peace. Deliver us, O Jehovah, from those lying lips and from deceitful tongues!

—NJL