



SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Letters Edition

*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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CONTENTS

3

FROM THE EDITOR

Rev. Andrew W. Lanning

3

LETTER: SWORD AND SHIELD

Agatha Lubbers

5

LETTERS: REPENTANCE

Jacob Moore

Sara Doezema

Christopher Miersma

26

LETTERS: CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

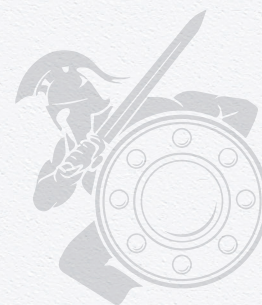
Art Tolsma

Sara Doezema

36

FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL!

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak



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The editors and board of Reformed Believers Publishing are pleased to present to our readers another Letters Edition of *Sword and Shield*.

We recognize that our correspondents have many options for writing their views today, including social media posts and comments on blogs. Those forums are able to accommodate correspondence in real time, while it takes some time for letters to be compiled and published in the print format of a magazine. We appreciate our correspondents' willingness to put in the effort of writing a letter and then their patience as they wait for it to be published.

One advantage of having one's letter published in *Sword and Shield* may be that a magazine tends to preserve material well. Some years or even decades from now it may be difficult to lay one's hand on that one particular

social media exchange, but one can still pull the magazine off the shelf. So keep the letters coming. The Lord continues to lay many issues before his people for us to understand and judge from his word, which issues have been debated before in the history of the church and will undoubtedly be debated again. Your letter may profit not only this generation but also generations to come.

We continue to hear from our readers that Letters Editions are among the most anticipated issues of *Sword and Shield*. We trust that this issue will also be of interest to our readers, dealing as it does with vital matters of the Reformed faith.

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

—AL

LETTER: SWORD AND SHIELD

Revs. Andrew Lanning, Nathan Langerak, and Martin Vander Wal:

August 10, 2022

Dear Editors of the *SWORD* and *SHIELD*:

Being conscious of the reality that writing is a very risky activity, I write nevertheless with confidence and Godly, Christian concern. I request the publication of the letter in its entirety in the next *Sword and Shield*.

Lying on my desk is a copy of the letter of June 4, 2020 I sent for publication in the July 2020 issue of the *SWORD* and *SHIELD*. More than two years have passed since the initial publication of the SS. I have read it immediately, faithfully, critically and with discernment. Two years means that 24+ editions of the periodical have found their way into the hands of many who are members of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC).

"FROM EDITOR LANNING" was posted in each issue of S and S. The post ended with hope of the Editor that the *SWORD* and *SHIELD* would speed into the hands of the readers. It did. Thanks for the periodical sent me without payment.

I have discarded most of the 24+ issues of the *SWORD* and *SHIELD*. If I had kept the two years, the 24+ issues of the *SWORD* and *SHIELD*, with the intention of

binding them, it would be a 8.5 x 11 inch 700 page book. Astounding!

I found the content and subjects to be repetitious. I also found much of the polemic to be hateful, and filled with manufactured and unnecessary name-calling. The slanderous and libelous nature of the articles would not continue to be of interest to me in the continuing history of the PRC and other ecclesiastical or cultic organizations.

It is obvious to all that the SS is a periodical that has simulated unmitigated antagonism and hatred. The writing is a form of hateful criticism. I believe that my warning in my letter of June 4, 2020, against a polemic aimed at persons and not at the theology of writers and opponents has not been heeded. The diatribes by certain writers in many issues of the SS are so obvious that readers of the SS must agree.

It is obvious that the warlike style and approach promised by Editor Lanning in the June 4, 2020 *SWORD* and *SHIELD* is the outstanding characteristic of each issue and in many ways a dishonorable aspect of the writing.

The editorializing of Editor Lanning and Associate Editor Nathan Langerak is evidence of their vengeance. The disagreement of AL and NL is vengeful and not the Godly critique expected and required of Reformed and

Christian theologians who differ in Theology and Biblical Dogmatics.

The Apostle Paul was a vigorous and godly apologist saved by his Lord Christ on the road to Damascus. The converted and eternally saved Apostle Paul warred unswervingly, diligently and faithfully against the errant theology of the Judaists, the enemies of Christ. I refer especially to the dispute and the instruction by the Apostle Paul in chapters 1-3 of the Epistle to the Galatians. The instruction by Apostle Paul was orthodox but was rejected by the Galatians; Paul was not vengeful because of the unfaithfulness of the Galatian proselytes. The Apostle Paul overflowed with love for fellow believers in Christ who had fallen from the truth. Paul was not angry when he said “O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you...Galatians3:1”. Paul teaches, “...let us by love serve one another...” Galatians :13.” Simple and powerful instruction.

In Romans 12:19 the Apostle Paul says, “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.” (Cf. Deuteronomy 32:35, Hebrews 10:30)

The sacred precept and admonition of Jesus recorded by Luke speaks unconditionally and lovingly to every one of the children of Christ. “...as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them like wise. Luke 6: 31.”

We should cease using our pens for angry name calling and instead turn our eyes upon Jesus and pray for each other.

“...bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. Matthew 5: 44”

By the mercy of Jesus Christ,
Agatha Lubbers

REPLY

Miss Lubbers, I am happy to see your letter. You were the first reader ever to send a letter to *Sword and Shield* for publication. The first issue of the magazine was published June 1, 2020, and your letter was dated June 10, 2020. Yours was also the first letter to be published in *Sword and Shield* (see volume 1, issue 3).

I am even more happy that you have faithfully and discerningly read every issue of *Sword and Shield* since then. May your tribe increase.

Having read the magazine faithfully since its beginning, you offer your evaluation of the writing in *Sword and Shield*: repetitious, hateful, slanderous, libelous, hateful criticism, polemics aimed at persons, diatribes, warlike, dishonorable. I know that many share your assessment.

Readers, you have heard the evaluation of one faithful reader. Now I say, “Let the other readers also judge.” *Sword and Shield* is readily and freely available to everyone in print and online. I would suggest that the reader might first read Jeremiah 5 and Matthew 23 before he reads *Sword and Shield*. The discerning reader will then undoubtedly write a letter to the editor asking why our magazine is so tame and soft-spoken.

Miss Lubbers, you also offer your judgment of the persons of Rev. Nathan Langerak and me: personally vengeful, whose critique of the PRC is ungodly, un-Reformed, and un-Christian. To that I say, “Let God judge.”

Friend or foe, we are happy that you are reading.

—AL

Hello *Sword and Shield* Editors,

I compose this letter to you regarding our recent controversy about the relationship between repentance and forgiveness. I will also briefly discuss the other closely related topic of God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of the neighbor.

I write this letter for two reasons. First, I have heard many sermons and read many of the recent *Sword and Shield* articles relating to this issue, and I still am not certain that the teaching of the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC) on this issue is entirely correct. This doubt is accentuated by my recent readings of renowned theologians, such as Calvin, Ursinus, and Herman Hoeksema, which seem to suggest that they held to a different position. Second, I have also researched this issue extensively by looking at Bible passages that directly talk about repentance and forgiveness, and I was surprised by some of my findings.

So, I have decided to share my thoughts on these issues. I will be dividing the paper into two parts. In Part One, we will look at some Bible passages that discuss repentance and forgiveness. In Part Two, we will examine the writings of some of our Reformed fathers about these issues.¹

Part One:

God's Word on Repentance and Forgiveness

Forgiveness of Sins: Definition and Ground

So that we both have a clear understanding of my position on forgiveness and repentance, I will begin by defining the term under dispute, i.e., the forgiveness of sins. The gospel according to Luke is very helpful in this regard. In Luke 1:76-77 we read, "And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission [forgiveness] of their sins." This passage speaks of John the Baptist, who was Christ's forerunner. As Christ's forerunner, he would prophesy to the Israelites of the remission (forgiveness) of their sins in the coming and death of Christ.

This passage, therefore, teaches us that forgiveness refers to the knowledge of salvation. It refers to our conscious possession of our salvation (the experience and joy of salvation, our fellowship with God). Thus, we know of our salvation when God forgives us of our sins.

Also, Ephesians 1:7 and Colossians 1:14 teach us that the forgiveness of sins can be thought of as our redemption.

However, it does not refer merely to the abstract reality that God has blotted out all the sins of his people for Christ's sake. Rather, as we learned in Luke 1:77, forgiveness refers to our knowledge of our salvation. Thus, it is the application of that redemption to each child of God. It is the knowledge that Christ died not only for his people, but for me.

Ephesians 1:7 and Colossians 1:14 (along with other passages, such as Romans 5:1), also teach us the sole grounds of forgiveness. Nothing that the sinner does (whether that be his repentance, believing, or obedience) is ever the cause or grounds of his forgiveness. Rather, God eternally willed that he would forgive us our sins in Christ, and he merited this blessing in time by his Son's death on the cross. It is by this redemption on the cross that God's people also know of their salvation when God works faith in their hearts.

Forgiveness of Sins and Repentance: The RPC's Teaching

Now, I will describe how repentance relates to forgiveness. It is in this concept that I differ from the current teaching of the RPC. The RPC teach us that we have forgiveness without repenting. On page 43 in the March 15, 2022, issue of the *Sword and Shield*, Reverend Langerak quotes from Professor Engelsma: "In fact, the implication of the theology of the editor of 'S&S' is that the sinner has forgiveness without repenting. This, apparently, is now the gospel-message of the Reformed Protestant Church' (Ignorant, Lying, or Merely Mistaken)."

Reverend Langerak replies to Professor Engelsma, "Yes, indeed. That is what we teach. We teach that there is forgiveness without repenting. We teach that repentance follows forgiveness."

Forgiveness of Sins and Repentance: I Kings 8

I diligently searched the Scriptures, and I have concluded that the Scriptures may teach something different than the current RP position. Some of these Bible passages have been used before in this argument about forgiveness and repentance, but I want to shed some new light on these texts.

First, I will examine a passage found in the historical books of the Old Testament: I Kings 8 (parallel passage in II Chronicles 7). In this text, the temple has just been completed, and now the nation of Israel is dedicating the

¹ Part two of the letter was merely many, many pages of quotations from the Reformed fathers. In Reverend Langerak's response he explains in general why this kind of quotation cannot establish the writer's point. The letter writer's theology and argument are fully contained in part one of his letter, which is printed in its entirety. Therefore, the editors have not published part two.—AL

temple. Solomon, as king of Israel, prays to God that he may be pleased to dwell in the temple and to hear his prayer for Israel. He brings several petitions to God in his prayer, several of which deal directly with the issue of repentance and forgiveness.

I will give one example. In I Kings 8:33-34, we read, "When thy people Israel be smitten down before the enemy, because they have sinned against thee, and shall turn again to thee, and confess thy name, and pray, and make supplication unto thee in this house: then hear thou in heaven, and forgive the sin of thy people Israel, and bring them again unto the land which thou gavest unto their fathers."

I want to point out several ideas from this passage. First, Solomon testifies what would happen to the nation of Israel if they departed from God and walked impenitently in sin: they would provoke God to anger. In the Old Testament, God showed this anger by physical, visible signs that caused great harm for his people. In this case, God would cause Israel's enemies to defeat them in battle and capture portions of the land of Israel. For the true believers in Israel, this punishment was God's chastisement of them. For the reprobate in Israel, God used this punishment to harden them in their sin.

Second, Solomon contrasts God's anger with his forgiveness of Israel. This forgiveness of Israel as a nation also would be accompanied by external signs. In the passage that I am discussing, God would again restore the lands that God had given to Israel's enemies in his anger.

Third, and this is the crucial point, Solomon teaches Israel what they are called to do when God is angry with them: to confess their sin and repent in dust and ashes. Only when God caused Israel to repent would he forgive them of their sins and show His favor to them once again.

So, I believe that this passage teaches us that repentance is necessary for forgiveness, so that God does not show his favor toward his people while they walk impenitently in sin. However, this repentance is not the cause or the reason that God would forgive his people. Rather, Solomon gives the one ground of forgiveness at the close of his prayer in I Kings 8:51-53: "For they be thy people, and thine inheritance, which thou broughtest forth out of Egypt, from the midst of the furnace of iron: that thine eyes may be open unto the supplication of thy servant, and unto the supplication of thy people Israel, to hearken unto them in all that they call for unto thee. For thou didst separate them from among all the people of the earth, to be thine inheritance, as thou spakest by the hand of Moses thy servant, when thou broughtest our fathers out of Egypt, O Lord GOD."

Thus, Solomon says that God will hear the prayers of his people only for the sake of his covenant that God

established with them. God is not a reactionary God who has to plead and beg with his people and who must wait upon his people to repent. Rather, he is the God who is eternally faithful to his covenant. Since he is our God, he also wills that his people know his love for them. Though for a time God may sovereignly will that his people walk in sin, he will infallibly cause them to see their sin, to repent of their ways, and be forgiven by him.

This ground of forgiveness would be clearly seen by the Israelites as they offered sacrifices in the temple. All these sacrifices pointed to the one sacrifice of Christ in whom there is forgiveness of sins. The Israelites would know that God would hear and answer all their prayers not because of anything in themselves, but only for the sake of Christ, who is the head of God's covenant.

Forgiveness of Sins and Repentance: Jeremiah 36:1-3

I will briefly mention another passage from an Old Testament prophet. In Jeremiah 36:1-3, God commands Jeremiah to write a word of rebuke against Judah on a roll of a book. Jeremiah is to write in this roll of their impending destruction at the hands of the Babylonians.

I bring this passage up because of what God says in verse 3: "It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the evil which I purpose to do unto them; that they may return every man from his evil way; that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin." Notice here especially that God says he may forgive Judah their sins.

Considering the many corruptions of this text and similar ones, we must state that this promise was a particular promise. God here is not desiring that all members of Judah, head for head, repent and be forgiven by him. Rather, this promise is for the elect in Judah alone. For the elect alone, God would infallibly cause them to truly repent of their sins and have a renewed sense of his favor because that was his eternal will for them. For the reprobate in Judah, God hated them with an eternal hatred. God would use Jeremiah's warning of their impending destruction at the hands of the Babylonians to harden them in their sins.

So, the phrase "I may forgive them" was God's word of hope for the elect in Judah. This "may" does not indicate that God's forgiveness was uncertain, as if God didn't know whether he would decide to forgive Judah or not. It certainly does not mean that God's forgiveness depended on Judah's repentance. Instead, it is a promise to God's people that when they heard Jeremiah's warning and by that message were made truly sorry for their sins, that God would certainly forgive them. When God's people were brought to repentance, they could freely ask God for forgiveness being fully confident of his mercy.

God also through the mouth of Jeremiah teaches that God does not forgive his people while they walk impenitently in sin. Rather, God chastises His people. God's

whole purpose in repentance is so that every day the child of God looks to him alone for all blessings, but especially for the forgiveness of his sins (and thus, his assurance of his salvation). Thus, it is only when we live a life out of repentance that we can know God's favor.

Forgiveness of Sins and Repentance: Psalm 51

In the ancient heading attached to this psalm, we learn that it was likely composed by David after he had committed fornication with Bathsheba and God had sent Nathan the prophet to rebuke him. After hearing the rebuke of Nathan, David realized that he had sinned against God, and now in this psalm, he prays that God will forgive him.

Throughout the psalm, David uses many different expressions whereby he asks God to forgive him his sins. I want to focus on two of these expressions. First, in Psalm 51:8, David implores that God would "make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice." Second, in close connection with the previous expression, in verse 12, David asks that God would "restore unto me the joy of my salvation."

So, what does David mean by the breaking of his bones? Certainly, it doesn't refer to a literal breaking of his physical bones by God. Rather, it refers to a spiritual breaking of his bones. David felt this breaking of his bones as God was chastising him for his sin with Bathsheba and after he was rebuked by Nathan the prophet. This expression shows the tremendous grief and anguish he felt after God caused him to see how wicked his sin truly was. He realized that his sin was so great that his soul was in danger of hell if he continued impenitently in his sin.

Seeing how his sin had robbed him of all his joy and brought upon him God's heavy hand of chastisement, he prays that God will restore this joy of his salvation by forgiving his sin. David teaches God's people that by a fall into sin, we grievously wound our consciences, and for a time may even completely lose the sense of God's favor. This joy of our salvation can only be restored when God causes us to see how he is chastising us for our impenitent walk of life and makes us repent in dust and ashes.

However, once again, I want to reiterate that repentance is never the cause or the reason that God forgives us. David himself confesses this in the psalm. He does not pray that God will forgive him because of something that he has done. Rather, in Psalm 51:1, he prays that God will forgive him "according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies."

Thus, every child of God prays along with David that God forgive us our sins because he is our covenant God. God wills that we know his favor and infallibly works a sense of this favor in our hearts. So, to assure us of our salvation, he cuts down all our pride and impenitence. He causes us to see how much he hated our sin by crucifying his own Son

on the cross. There at the cross God also shows how much he loved us by sending his own Son to die in our place. And so, with the eye of faith, we also rejoice, knowing that in Christ alone all our sins are forgiven.

God's Forgiveness of Us and our Forgiveness of the Neighbor: Matthew 6:14-15

Now, I will move on and talk about another closely related topic: the relationship between God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of the neighbor. One of the clearest passages on this relationship is given in Matthew 6:14-15. Here, Christ says, "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

One position on this text is that it refers to both the child of God and the reprobate. As the fruit of God's forgiveness, the child of God will inevitably forgive his neighbor. For the reprobate, God has eternally willed his destruction, and so He does not forgive him. As evidence of his reprobation, the unbeliever refuses to forgive his neighbor when they sin against him.

However, I believe that Christ was teaching something more than this, though the above idea is certainly true. The reason for this is the context in which Christ makes these statements. Immediately preceding our passage, Christ recited the Lord's Prayer. Christ taught us how we must begin our prayer: "Our Father which art in heaven."

We must ask, who can pray to God as their Father in heaven? The answer to this question is crucial in determining what Christ means in verses 14 and 15 of this chapter. My answer is that only God's people can pray to God as Father.

By virtue of his being made in God's image, Adam was the son of God. However, by his fall, Adam rebelled against God and corrupted his whole nature. Since Adam was the head of humanity, all men by nature became children of the devil, and so are no longer children of God (see John 8:44, Ephesians 2:2, 3). Thus, they have no right to pray to God as their Father because he is not their Father.

However, God for Christ's sake has adopted us unto sonship, so that we are again the children of the Highest. Now, we can truly pray to God as our Father in Christ and be fully persuaded that he will hear all that we ask of him in true faith. Thus, it is the child of God that Christ is talking about in verses 14 and 15.

Christ instructs us in these verses of the attitude we must have for God to hear our prayer. We must not hold any malice, hatred, or anger against the neighbor. Instead, we are called by God to always desire the neighbor's salvation and to forgive them when they repent of their sins.

So, does this mean that God does not forgive us our sins when we walk in sin by holding anger or malice against the

neighbor? Yes, I believe that is exactly what Christ means. However, when God causes us to repent of our sin and to again desire to forgive the neighbor, that is not the reason or grounds of God's renewed forgiveness of us. Rather, by bringing us to repent of that sin, God forgives us. And as the inevitable fruit of God forgiving us, we have the renewed desire to forgive the neighbor.

God's Purpose in Sanctification: Ephesians 2:10

We must ask, why does God not assure us of our salvation (forgive us) while we walk impenitently in sin? The answer can be found in Ephesians 2:10. In this verse we read, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." In the previous two verses, the apostle Paul had developed the wonderful truth of justification by faith alone. He showed that we are not saved by works, but we are saved by faith alone.

In this verse, the apostle Paul shows us the proper place of good works in the child of God's life. We are not saved by good works. Rather, we are "created in Christ Jesus unto good works". This word "unto" indicates a purpose. That purpose is God's eternal will for our sanctification. As we read in this verse, God has "before ordained that we should walk in good works." In other words, God saves us in order that we may glorify his name by walking in all good works. By this walk, we show ourselves to be God's children and we are a good witness to the world (see I Peter 3:14-16).

So, when we walk impenitently in sin, we rebel against God's will for our lives as his people. We show our hatred of God and the neighbor, and we grieve the Holy Spirit (see Ephesians 4:30). Thus, the testimony of the Holy Spirit that we are sons of God only arises as we walk in thankfulness before God, and not while we walk impenitently in sin.

However, I also want to emphasize that sanctification is not something that we do, but rather it is the work of the Spirit alone. He is the one who causes us to walk in all good works. It is also the Holy Spirit who, when we walk in sin, causes us to repent and to again live rightly before God. All glory must go to God in our sanctification.

Conclusion

In this letter, I have stated my ideas on what the Scripture teaches about forgiveness and repentance, both negatively and positively. Negatively, God's Word teaches us that God does not forgive us because we repent or that he waits on us to repent. Rather, God wills our repentance, and so he also infallibly works this repentance in our hearts. It is by that repentance that we look away from ourselves and we find all our salvation in Christ alone.

I also deny that God forgives us because we forgive the neighbor. Instead, we can forgive the neighbor only when we know in our hearts that God has forgiven us.

Positively, I have attempted to prove the following three ideas from God's Word: (1) that repentance is necessary for forgiveness, (2) that a sanctified life of repentance is necessary to experience God's favor and (3) that God only forgives us as we forgive the neighbor. I have tried to show that these ideas are not conditional, and they do not rob God of his glory. Rather, these beliefs give all glory to God alone as he works in us by the Spirit.

I am concerned that the RPC may deny these ideas. For, as I showed at the beginning of this letter, I believe that forgiveness refers to the assurance of our salvation. So, this whole debate boils down to one simple question: do I have the assurance of my salvation while walking impenitently in sin? The answer is no. That is why David prays to God that he would restore unto him the joy of his salvation.

The necessary implication of teaching that we have forgiveness without repenting, therefore, is that we do have the assurance of our salvation, even while walking impenitently in sin. And I believe that idea is contrary to the teachings of our Reformed fathers and to the Word of God itself.

I pray that God will use this letter to further develop his truth on these issues. And if I am in the wrong, I pray that God will cause me to repent of my false beliefs.

Yours in Christ,

Jacob Moore, member of Second RPC

REPLY

I do not agree with the theology of the letter. The theology of the letter did not come from my preaching and writing. Neither did it come from an independent study of scripture, the creeds, and the Reformed fathers. The theology came from the Protestant Reformed Churches.

The theology of the letter is the theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches' doctrinal statement that was adopted by Classis East. The writers of the doctrinal statement were never examined for the conditional theology that they espoused, and they were never disciplined for that

conditional theology. The theology of the doctrinal statement is that to have fellowship with God, two things are necessary: God's grace and man's obedience.

I rejected that theology before I was suspended from Crete Protestant Reformed Church. I preached against it and wrote against it until the elders threw me out and, in the process, lied and bore false witness against me.

The doctrine written in the letter in its main contentions is the doctrine that is the antithesis of what I believe the Reformed creeds and faith and thus also scripture teach. The doctrine is the antithesis of what I preach and, I would maintain, what I have preached for my entire ministry in the main points of my doctrine. It is because of the clash between the truth of the gospel and the false doctrine espoused in this letter that a reformation has taken place. The letter brings up and espouses the points of doctrine that were the cause of the reformation.

The writer says, "I compose this letter to you regarding our recent controversy about the relationship between repentance and forgiveness." But I remind him that he is a member of the Reformed Protestant Churches. There was no controversy in the Reformed Protestant Churches about these things. We were contentedly eating and drinking the gospel and busy rejecting the lie taught by the letter. With the letter there is now a controversy about the very issues over which we separated from the Protestant Reformed Churches. These points of doctrine are not issues that came up later through the writings of the Reformed Protestant Churches, as though we had a reformation and then some new points of doctrine were brought out. The points of doctrine rejected by the letter were fundamental to the reformation of the church of Jesus Christ that resulted in the formation of the Reformed Protestant denomination. This denomination has been in existence since 2021. The writings of members and the writings and preaching of the ministers of the Reformed Protestant denomination have been voluminous and clear on the issues that are raised by the letter, and they have with one voice rejected the theology espoused by the letter. We had a controversy with the Protestant Reformed Churches but not among ourselves.

With this letter we now do have a controversy in the Reformed Protestant Churches. The letter is a rejection of the doctrinal reformation of the Reformed Protestant denomination and all her theological convictions, as those are expressed by the writings and preaching of the members and ministers. At the heart of the matter is *contingency in justification and thus also in the covenant of grace*. Or to state the matter a different way: the heart of the matter has been *contingency in the forgiveness of sins and the believer's assurance of his salvation*. The letter is virtually a lengthy statement of current Protestant Reformed

dogma. That current Protestant Reformed dogma teaches that there are activities of man that precede the blessings of God. That current Protestant Reformed dogma denigrates—is terrified of—the decree and the reality of salvation at the cross. That current Protestant Reformed dogma teaches that there is not salvation until man performs his part. The letter brings in again all the Protestant Reformed arguments, all its talking points, and the letter quotes against us many of the same quotations that we have already dealt with and answered in our controversy with the Protestant Reformed Churches while we were still members and afterward when we were evicted.

The letter is the equivalent of a member of the Protestant Reformed Churches writing in to the *Standard Bearer* today and saying, "I wonder if the Protestant Reformed Churches might deny the historical Reformed faith that justification is by faith alone and that the assurance of our salvation is likewise by faith alone." The Protestant Reformed Churches with malice aforethought, repeatedly and forcefully, have denied these things and have taught that a holy life of obedience is necessary to experience the covenant of grace, that faith is assured by its works, and that repentance is necessary unto the forgiveness of sins. A response of the editors of that magazine, if they actually would publish the letter, might be, "Where have you been, and why did you not leave with the rest of them? This battle has been fought. Do you not know that we believe that there are activities of man that precede the blessings of God?"

Or the letter is the equivalent of a member of the Protestant Reformed Churches in 1926 writing in to the *Standard Bearer* and suggesting to the editors that perhaps the Protestant Reformed Churches might deny the historic Reformed faith that there is something called common grace and then going about to prove that there is common grace. The response of Herman Hoeksema could have been, "Where were you for the last couple of years?"

Or perhaps the letter can be likened to a letter written to Herman Hoeksema in 1955, suggesting that maybe the Protestant Reformed Churches denied conditions in the covenant and then setting about to demonstrate that the Reformed fathers, scripture, and the confessions do teach that there are conditions in the covenant. The response could be, "What?"

The letter is nothing but a grief to me. Do we now have to go through this all again and with our own people and so soon? Why are we so scared of the gospel? Why do we want to go back to the rotten theology that we left that made salvation in all its joys contingent on what man does? We would be as dogs returned to their vomit and pigs to their wallowing.

The letter says the issue is *whether one has assurance while walking in impenitent sin*. But this is not the issue. The issue is whether by holiness of life, including the act of repentance, one has the assurance of salvation. The issue is whether forgiveness of sins waits on the believer's acts of repentance, love, and obedience. This is the issue. The issue is contingency in salvation; and because we are in the realm of assurance and experience, the issue is contingency in the matter of justification and contingency in the covenant of grace.

The Protestant Reformed synod of 2020 set down the Protestant Reformed dogma of salvation when it said that there are activities of man that precede the blessings of God.¹ The ministers and theologians of the Protestant Reformed Churches add all kinds of qualifications and denials to camouflage the nakedly Pelagian theology of the statement in order to deceive the simple, but the raw statement in all its ugliness stands. There are activities of man that precede the blessings of God. God may not forgive me until I repent. God will not forgive me unless I forgive my neighbor. A holy life of obedience is necessary to experience the favor of a reconciled God. All of these teach contingency. The ministers and theologians do not use the word *contingency*, but they should. Repentance, faith, forgiveness, and love all function as contingencies in these statements. And I find nothing really all that different in this letter. An offensive word perhaps is elided or changed, but the theology is the same.

I will respond to the letter at length, even though I could simply say, "Where have you been? Of course we deny the things that you set out to prove. A new denomination was brought into existence by Christ over these very issues. The issue is not whether repentance is necessary. That is a red herring. There are many things that are necessary. Repentance is necessary, good works are necessary, faith is necessary, the glory of God and the honor of Jesus Christ are necessary, division in the church is necessary, and false teachers and heresies also must come. It is how one defines the necessity that is the issue. Necessity must be described in light of God's sovereignty, predestination, the irresistible power of the grace and will of God, the will and work of the Holy Spirit, and the perfect salvation of the elect church and the judgment of the world at the cross. If one believes that the decree of God is merely an eternal blueprint of that which will be built and made real in time, and if one believes that the cross of Jesus Christ merely provided the objective basis for salvation that will be made real in its application to the elect, then that person will never understand Reformed theology. Election is salvation in eternity, so that I was

always saved. The cross is my salvation, so that I was saved at the cross. All that happens in time is the revelation and outworking of those two realities of my salvation before I was born, thought one thought, or performed one activity. So I say again, the issue is not whether faith, repentance, and good works are necessary. The issue is whether repentance is necessary *as a contingency* in the experience of justification. This is what Professor Engelsma, Reverend McGeown, Professor Cammenga, Reverend Koole, and Reverend Overway made the issue. We repent unto our justification, and without repentance God may not forgive us, and with repentance God may forgive us. This is the theology that we reject. And if the Reformed Protestant Churches do not, then why did any of us leave?"

I will respond to the letter, not with joy or relish but with great sadness of heart. I hate the theology now taught in the Protestant Reformed Churches. I am set against it. I hate that theology when it rears its head in the Reformed Protestant Churches. I am set against it and if necessary will lose my place in these churches in opposition to that theology.

In my response I do not intend to answer all the quotations that are given from the Reformed fathers. Giving long lists of quotations is a tactic that has been used against us before. Against that tactic I say that we can quote back and forth until the cows come home or Jesus Christ returns. I respect, I agree with, and I learn from the Reformed fathers. I would say about the particular quotations that are included in this letter that I agree with most of their words. But the Reformed fathers did not face the issues and men that we now face. The lie has advanced in its subtlety, and it is that subtlety that we oppose. Calvin used the word *condition*. That was found to be unsatisfactory, and the term was rejected as implying Arminianism. It is illegitimate for a proponent of Arminianism to dredge up out of Calvin all his uses of the word *condition* as supposed proof that he taught conditions. Calvin hated conditions in salvation. Likewise, Hoeksema used the phrase *in the way of*, but whatever he meant by it was not how the men today are using the phrase. It is completely illegitimate for men to dredge up quotations from Hoeksema as though he supported this wicked theology of contingency. The Protestant Reformed Churches when they use the phrase *in the way of* mean contingency—that without which another thing does not come—and Hoeksema absolutely rejected that thought. He said, and I paraphrase, that if he ever thought that God forgives sins because a man repents—that he repents unto his forgiveness, to use the language of today—then the man had better not repent. That is because Hoeksema did face in

¹ *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America 2020*, 78–82.

one form the very theology that we are facing today. It is the theology that in a certain and vital sense man is first in the matter of repentance. Rev. Hubert De Wolf said that in defense of his false doctrine in his Formula of Subscription examination before the consistory of First Church in the early 1950s. The Protestant Reformed Churches at one time in their history hated contingency and rejected it in one specific form. They rejected in that the idea that in a certain and vital sense man is first. Prof. David Engelsma has revived that theology; and following his lead and using his language, the whole Protestant Reformed clergy is unable and unwilling to teach anything else but that there are activities of man that precede the blessings of God. It is this theology that the letter also espouses and, I might add, ably attempts to defend.

The letter writer says,

Also, Ephesians 1:7 and Colossians 1:14 teach us that the forgiveness of sins can be thought of as our redemption. However, it does not refer merely to the abstract reality that God has blotted out all the sins of his people for Christ's sake. Rather...forgiveness refers to our knowledge of our salvation.

The writer is in the process of teaching that the forgiveness of sins "refers to our conscious possession of our salvation (the experience and joy of salvation, our fellowship with God)." With this understanding of forgiveness, I agree. Forgiveness of sins is that by which we have joy, peace, happiness, blessedness, covenant fellowship with God, assurance, and hope in eternal life. What I disagree with is that in that context one would call the power of the death of Christ to blot out our sins "merely...the abstract reality."

First, the experience of salvation cannot be opposed to the death of Christ by "Rather." The death of Jesus Christ was the blotting out of sins. The death of Jesus Christ accomplished salvation. The death of Jesus Christ was not abstract in any sense at all. *Abstract* means an idea, quality, or state as opposed to what is concrete. The death of Jesus Christ was concrete. I absolutely reject in any sense that the death of Jesus Christ was abstract. It was more real and concrete than you are today. In this description of the death of Christ, I find the Protestant Reformed idea that the death of Christ did not actually save. The Protestant Reformed Churches teach this in their insistence that the death of Jesus Christ provided the objective basis of salvation but did not actually save us at the cross. Salvation is still at that point an abstraction until it comes into the sinner's possession. But the question is, did Christ save us at the cross? Was I saved at the cross, so that I am more saved there than I am saved

now, since my salvation there was a concrete and perfect reality? The answer is yes. Christ said that it is finished. I was saved at the cross. I was justified and made perfect there at the cross.

And along with that, I find in the statement what I also regard as a Protestant Reformed distinctive that salvation exclusively means the experience of it. The decree is a blueprint. The cross is an objective basis. Perhaps the Protestant Reformed will go on to say that we are united to Christ as an objective reality. But to know and experience salvation, to have and to enjoy salvation, you must do something—repent, believe with an active faith, and obey God.

I do not know any other way that someone could say that the cross of Jesus Christ is "the abstract reality." I find the very words offensive in connection with the cross of Christ. You cannot extol that cross too much. And calling it an "abstract reality" denigrates the cross. The apostle Paul's attitude toward the cross is stated in 1 Corinthians 2:2: "I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified." There is nothing worth knowing, and all wisdom and knowledge are nothing but foolishness, apart from the knowledge of Jesus Christ and him crucified. I regret daily that I do not know and extol highly enough Jesus Christ and him crucified. Galatians 6:14 also speaks of the apostle's glorying in the salvation—the actual salvation—of the child of God at the cross: "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."

The correspondent goes on to write, "Rather, God eternally willed that he would forgive us our sins in Christ, and he merited this blessing in time by his Son's death on the cross." Herein perhaps lies the crux of the matter. The writer throughout does not seem to acknowledge any other sense of forgiveness than the forgiveness in our consciences. That forgiveness he makes contingent on repenting. God may not and God does not forgive apart from our act of repenting. But God did not only eternally will that he would forgive, but he also did forgive. He forgave perfectly and completely all my sins before the world was. He did so for Christ's sake, who was with God as the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world. Revelation 13:8: "All that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." Jesus Christ was actually slain before the foundation of the world. The cross was already in the decree as that cross perfectly accomplished salvation. And God did not only merit the blessing of forgiveness at the cross, but he also forgave our sins at the cross, when the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world was crucified

on Calvary and raised again the third day because of our justification. So the apostle wrote in Romans 4:24–25:

24. But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead;
25. Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.

The imputation of Christ's perfect righteousness to us and thus also the forgiveness of all our sins are based on the forgiveness of sins at the cross. We are forgiven of God at the cross of Christ. We are perfectly forgiven at the cross. Our forgiveness in eternity and our forgiveness at the cross are perfect, whereas in our consciences doubts arise and our justification is imperfect on account of the flesh and the imperfection of our faith. It is because of this forgiveness eternally and at the cross that messengers are sent into the world to declare these glad tidings. The forgiveness that comes to us in the gospel and gives to us the knowledge of our salvation cannot have any different explanation than the forgiveness in eternity and at the cross. There is one forgiveness. What is ours in eternity and at the cross comes to us and becomes ours without works at all, including works of obedience and repentance.

And I further see in this language of the letter the attempt, although not explicit, to distinguish between justification and forgiveness. It is as though justification is something that is without works; but forgiveness is experienced and so is with works or, as they say, in the way of faith and repentance. Justification and forgiveness are not to be distinguished. The Protestant Reformed theologians—I use the term loosely—and ministers teach this stupid distinction. Especially Reverend McGeown is fond of it and preens himself on having made it. But forgiveness is simply one part of justification. Sometimes scripture says justification, and sometimes scripture speaks of a part of justification—forgiveness—for the whole truth of justification. Sometimes scripture speaks of not imputing, again using a part for the whole. But whether we speak of forgiveness, not imputing, or justifying, we are talking about the same doctrine: justification. That justification is by faith alone and absolutely without works.

Now, insert the word *justification* everywhere the letter speaks of forgiveness. For instance, that repentance is necessary for/unto our justification before God. Now you have Roman Catholic doctrine. Forgiveness is apart from works, as is justification. Scripture makes plain that these are one and the same doctrine. In Psalm 32 David spoke of the blessedness of the man whose sin the Lord forgives:

1. Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

2. Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile.

This is a clear statement of forgiveness: transgression is forgiven, and iniquity is not imputed. The apostle Paul said in Romans 4:6–7 that this passage proves his doctrine of justification:

6. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works,
7. Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.

This is a statement of justification, the imputation of positive righteousness, and the apostle proves it by reference to a passage that speaks only of forgiveness. Justification and forgiveness are the same doctrine. They are both absolutely without works.

In this same light the author of the letter points to my quote “We teach that there is forgiveness without repenting.” He ignores the scriptural texts on which that statement is based. Chief among them is 2 Corinthians 5:18–19:

18. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation;
19. To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.

All things are of God. The apostle meant by that eternally, from God's decree. All things are of him. God and the decree of God are the necessity of all things, and the unfolding of that decree is the explanation of all things. And then the apostle applied that to reconciliation. God reconciled the world to himself. That reconciliation happened because God was not imputing their trespasses unto them. So we can say that this reconciliation is because of the forgiveness of sins. God forgave all their sins at the cross of Jesus Christ and so reconciled them to himself before they were born or heard a syllable of the gospel or repented or believed. They really, truly, actually had that forgiveness. That word that they have really, truly, and actually the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God is the word of the gospel. The word of the gospel is not that God forgives your sins if you repent and if you believe. The word of the gospel is that God reconciled his people to himself and forgave all their sins; now repent and believe. Repentance is indeed necessary but not for forgiveness, and that holds true for our knowledge of forgiveness or for the forgiveness of our sins in our

consciences too. Whatever the necessity of repentance, it is not for/unto the forgiveness of sins. We have forgiveness. We will have that in our consciences as well without works, including the works of repentance. We have that by faith only because by faith we are engrafted into Christ and are partakers of his riches and gifts. That is the thing about repentance. It is not faith. However good and necessary repentance is, it is not faith. We have forgiveness by faith alone and without works, including the work of repentance.

Now, this is also the teaching of the Holy Spirit in Romans 5:1–2:

1. Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:
2. By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

Peace with God is reconciliation with God. Or we can say the experience of God as a reconciled God. He reconciled us to himself. We have this because we are justified—which means forgiven—by faith only and without works. By Christ—only on the ground of his righteousness and our justification for his sake by faith alone without works—we have access into the grace wherein we stand. A more thorough statement of the experience of salvation by faith without works—including the work of repentance—can hardly be imagined. We have God as our God, we have peace with God, and we stand in God’s grace for Christ’s sake alone by faith alone and without works—including the work of repentance.

As I said, the issue is not whether repentance is necessary. Rather, the issue is whether repentance is the contingency of justification—which the letter calls forgiveness. The letter writer repeatedly posits a relationship between repentance and forgiveness that consists of dependence. He denies that this is the case, but that is how repentance functions in the letter: without repentance God may not forgive us. But such is not the relationship between repentance and forgiveness. Rather, God forgives out of his free mercy by faith only and without works, including works of repentance. And God manifests his children in the world by repentance. Repentance is a manifestation and an attestation of the children of God, who are forgiven.

And the necessity of this repentance is not for justification, forgiveness, or the experience of salvation, but the necessity of this repentance is the eternal will of God. This is the teaching of Ezekiel 33:11: “Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye

die, O house of Israel?” The pleasure of God in the text is that the wicked turn from his way (repent) and live. The life of the text is the life of the justified who live with God and who stand in his grace and who have peace with him. That is God’s eternal good pleasure. God does not have pleasure in the death of the wicked. He desires that the wicked live. That pleasure of God is not an impotent wish. It is not a will of God that is contingent on repentance, so that God may not grant life until the wicked repent. The pleasure of God is the sovereign and powerful will of God, who does all his pleasure infallibly. Because it is the will of God, God works that. There is no relationship of dependence between repentance and life. There is the necessity of the will of God. The issue, again, is not the necessity of repentance but whether repentance is necessary for justification, for life, and for fellowship with God.

The letter writer turns to 1 Kings 8:33–34 to prove his point that repentance is necessary for justification, which I say is to teach that justification is contingent on repentance. The passage reads,

33. When thy people Israel be smitten down before the enemy, because they have sinned against thee, and shall turn again to thee, and confess thy name, and pray, and make supplication unto thee in this house:
34. Then hear thou in heaven, and forgive the sin of thy people Israel, and bring them again unto the land which thou gavest unto their fathers.

He interprets the passage this way: “Only when God caused Israel to repent would he forgive them of their sins and show His favor to them once again.”

This statement I reject as flowing from the false doctrine that repentance is necessary for (the contingency of) forgiveness. The statement loses sight completely of the unchangeable nature of God, of the decree, of the faithfulness of the promise of God, and of the organic conception of the covenant. I find that the statement also arises out of the Protestant Reformed idea that there are activities of man that precede the blessings of God. These activities are supposedly God-wrought and God-worked. The activities here are to repent and to pray. And then, and only then, would God forgive. But Israel was a nation of elect and reprobate. God was always and ever favorable to Israel as the elect heart of the nation. In his favor God always forgave his Israel. He never beheld iniquity in Jacob. Because he forgave elect Israel, he instructed Israel to pray, repent, and by implication believe. God was not saying that this was what Israel had to do before God would forgive Israel. But he told Israel to pray and repent because in the midst of the severe chastisements, that is

how God's elect people were distinguished from the reprobate shell, and that is also how God's forgiveness of his people became evident.

Considering the same passage, the letter writer says, "So, I believe that this passage teaches that repentance is necessary for forgiveness, so that God does not show his favor toward his people while they walk impenitently in sin."

I find the statement chilling and utterly reject it. I have heard statements like this from Protestant Reformed ministers, and I find that they teach a totally different God than I believe in. The Protestant Reformed Churches say that they do not have losable grace, but they do. They lose the grace of God daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, and perhaps eternally because they do not repent. Listen: "God does not show his favor toward his people while they walk impenitently in sin." You have grace when you repent. You do not have grace if you do not repent. This is conditional, contingent theology expressed clearly by the correspondent.

He supposes that he escapes the charge. He writes his characterization of conditional theology: "God is not a reactionary God who has to plead and beg with his people and who must wait upon his people to repent." But this is precisely the kind of God that he is proposing when he says that God does not show grace to his people while they walk impenitently in sin. To state it differently, God does not show grace to his people until they repent. The grace of God is contingent on their repenting. That the writer says that this repentance is caused by God does not free him from the charge of conditional grace. It really only exacerbates the problem, for now God cannot do something (show grace) until God does something else first (cause the people to repent). God gives God a condition. Which is pure nonsense, and the name of God is only used at that point as a justification and an excuse for man's having a condition.

God is the God who brings to pass. God does not show grace when his people repent. God shows grace eternally and unchangeably. In his eternal and unchangeable grace toward his people, he brings to pass his will for their salvation. Applying this to forgiveness, he brings that to pass; he forgives by faith alone without works, including works of repentance. He also causes them to repent, but not so that he can show grace or so that he can or may forgive, but because he willed it and works it so that they become manifest in the world as his children saved by grace. No matter how much the elect in Israel sinned, they could never *not* have the grace of God; they could never forfeit their state of justification; and thus also God infallibly renewed them to repentance—not in order that they may be forgiven and not so that God

might forgive them, but because Jehovah had forgiven them all their sins.

In the same vein the writer says, "Though for a time God may sovereignly will that his people walk in sin, he will infallibly cause them to see their sin, to repent of their ways, and be forgiven by him." I suppose the statement could pass muster by itself. But in light of what he has written before and after the statement "and be forgiven by him," he means consequently or thus. That is also what he wrote in a previous version of the letter: "He will infallibly cause them to see their sin, to repent of their ways, and *thus* be forgiven by him" (emphasis added). I do not know why he took out the word *thus* in his final letter, but he should have left it in because it expresses exactly the theology of the letter. The word *thus* means consequently. There is a relationship of dependence expressed by the word. So forgiveness is the consequence of repentance. That is the theology of the whole letter, regardless whether the word *thus* is included or not.

And that is the expression of the theology that I reject regarding repentance and forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins is not the consequence of repentance. Forgiveness is not even the consequence of faith. And so when the correspondent says that repentance is not the cause or ground of forgiveness, that does not mean anything. It is simply an empty denial. Repentance is functioning in his theology as that without which forgiveness does not come, and forgiveness is the consequence of repentance. This is teaching that forgiveness is contingent on repentance. But whether you repent or not is not the explanation of forgiveness. Forgiveness is the work of the free mercy of God.

And this brings up the larger point that the theology espoused in the letter, along with the theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches of which it is a part, does not know what the word *and* means. God calls us to repentance *and* faith. God grants faith *and* repentance. The writer says that God "will infallibly cause them... to repent of their ways, and be forgiven by him." Now, that word *and* in all these instances is a verbal coupler. It joins together two things without stating the relationship between them. But this theology takes *and* to mean result or consequence, so that repentance *and* forgiveness come to mean forgiveness that is the result of repentance or forgiveness that is a consequence of repentance or repentance that is unto forgiveness. But result or consequence is not the meaning of *and* when repentance and forgiveness are placed together. The word *and* indicates two works of grace. The one is to forgive without works, including works of repentance. The other is to work repentance as that by which God's children are manifest in the world. But the concept of repentance for

forgiveness—and I add the similar concepts of repenting in order that you may be forgiven and repenting and consequently being forgiven—is nowhere in scripture or in the Reformed creeds. The practical effect of that false doctrine is that the one going to God for forgiveness inevitably looks somewhere else besides Christ. He looks at his repentance specifically, and then there can be no stability or confidence before God.

The author of the letter contradicts his own theology later when he writes,

The Israelites would know that God would hear and answer all their prayers not because of anything in themselves, but only for the sake of Christ, who is the head of God's covenant.

That is correct. Before the Israelites went to God in prayer, they were confident of forgiveness. There is real, actual forgiveness at the cross of Christ, and because I trust that mercy of God to me in Christ, then as the ungodly I go to him. I do not go as the repentant, as the believing, or as the obedient; but I go as the ungodly, confident that God justifies the ungodly.

The letter writer turns next to Jeremiah 36:3 to prove his doctrine of justification contingent on repentance, which he phrases as repentance being necessary for forgiveness and which others have stated as repentance being unto forgiveness or repentance in order that we may be forgiven. Jeremiah 36:3 reads, "It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the evil which I purpose to do unto them; that they may return every man from his evil way; that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin." The correspondent writes, "Notice here especially that God says he **may** [bold and underlined by the writer] forgive Judah their sins."

I do not have any doubt that he picks up on the word *may* because it was chosen by Professor Engelsma to express his doctrine of conditional justification: that we repent in order that God may forgive us. I attacked that specific word in my writing against Professor Engelsma. So contra Reverend Langerak, we now supposedly have proof that in fact scripture does teach the concept that we repent in order that God *may* forgive us. But I reject that as emphatically as I did against Professor Engelsma. The letter writer's picking up on that word *may* is telling for his whole theology. Forgiveness is contingent, and you do not have it until you do something. He gives his own interpretation of the word *may*: "God also through the mouth of Jeremiah teaches that God does **not** [bold and underlined by the writer] forgive his people while they walk impenitently in sin."

I reject this interpretation of the text. It can be heard on Protestant Reformed pulpits every Sunday, and it fills

Protestant Reformed writings. Besides, the interpretation does not state the real point of the author, which is that God does not forgive his people unless and until they repent. This is supposedly taught because the text says that God *may* forgive Judah. He may only forgive when Judah repented. Forgiveness was contingent on repentance. God's act was contingent on man's act. And the correspondent says with emphasis that there was *not* forgiveness while Judah walked in impenitent sin. This is the expression of the conditional justification theology of the letter. I say that there was forgiveness while Judah walked in impenitent sin; and if there was not forgiveness while Judah walked in impenitent sin, then Judah would forever perish in her sins, and God's will and purpose would be unfulfilled, made shipwreck on man's failure to repent.

The translation of the text in question is as follows: "Perhaps the house of Judah will hear all the evil that I think to do to them in order that a man turn from his evil ways, and I will pardon their iniquity." The word "perhaps" expresses a wish or desire. The wish or desire here is the wish and the desire of God. It is the divine wish; it is his infallible purpose. You can understand the text this way: "It is my infallible purpose that Judah hear the evil that I think to do and that a man repent." The word comes to all, to the whole house of Israel. God's purpose is particular, namely that "a man," one chosen of God, repent. The text is about God's sovereign purpose that his people repent. His people were part of, indeed the elect kernel of, the house of Israel. They were the true Israel of God, and they were the true house of Judah. God was not at all expressing that he did not forgive while Judah walked in impenitent sin. He was not expressing that he would forgive when Judah repented. He was expressing his sovereign purpose for his people's salvation, which includes their repentance. He willed then that in the writing of all the evil that he would do to the house of Israel, his people in the house of Judah would hear. They would hear not only with the ear but with the hearing of faith. That hearing of the man who repents is not merely hearing the judgment but hearing in that pronouncement of judgment that there is only one way out, and that is the promised righteousness of Jesus Christ. God's will was that they hear judgment and hear that God's gracious will was that they repent, and so they repented. What the King James Version translates as "that I may forgive" means "and I have forgiven." It is a form of the word *forgive* that is called the prophetic perfect. It was a word of God that was so sure that when the prophet spoke it, it was as though it had already happened. So that prophetic perfect can be translated without any violence to the words as "and I have forgiven." All the activity of writing and causing to hear

and causing to repent came out of God's free mercy that forgave. He forgave Judah. That was the reason Judah was not destroyed. That was why God granted repentance to life. He forgave! He never did not forgive. This is what Canons 5.6 means when it says that we never "forfeit the state of justification" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 174). The elect child of God is always, constantly forgiven. Thus Jeremiah 36:3 does not teach what must take place—repentance—before God *may* forgive. But the verse teaches what God's purpose and forgiveness work in his people, namely repentance and the knowledge of their salvation.

It is in light of the writer's doctrine that God does not forgive while his people walk impenitently that I also point out his statement "Rather, God chastises." So the full statement is "God does **not** forgive his people while they walk impenitently in sin. Rather, God chastises His people."

I find this statement to be of a piece with the one made earlier: "So, I believe that this passage teaches that repentance is necessary for forgiveness, so that God does not show his favor toward his people while they walk impenitently in sin." This is chilling and cruel theology. I find these statements Christless, graceless, and decreeless. The theology behind this statement is brutal and leads to brutality in the church. If God deals with his people in this way, then he is not the God I know; and if we deal with each other in this way, then the church will be nothing but a bloody den of cruelty. So the thinking goes, I do not forgive, and so I chastise, which means nothing more than loveless beating up of the neighbor. It is what the servant in Christ's parable who was forgiven a great debt did to his fellow servant who owed him a little debt. He beat him up. There is no love in that statement whatsoever.

First, the statement that God does not forgive (or show grace) while his people walk in sin is simply wrong. As the passage in Jeremiah 36:3 teaches, he has forgiven, also when Judah was walking in sin. God's forgiveness of his people belongs to his unchangeable will. They can never, no matter how much they sin and how little they repent, ever forfeit the state of justification.

Second, if God does not forgive but chastises, this is horrible. The judgment is not chastisement any longer but punishment by a holy and just God on men who deserve it. The very facts that God forgives and his people never forfeit the state of justification make it so that God chastises and does not punish. If he judges and does not forgive, then he damns. God chastises because he forgives.

The writer concludes his treatment of Jeremiah 36:3 with this statement: "Thus, it is only when we live a life out of repentance that we can know God's favor."

I have treated this concept at length elsewhere, so I will be brief. The thought is completely contrary to the doctrine of justification by faith alone and the practical application of that doctrine to the conscience and life of the child of God: "To him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly..." and "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 4:5; 5:1). God does not justify working people, penitent people, or loving and obedient people. He justifies those who do not work but believe on him who justifies the ungodly. God justifies ungodly, disobedient, and loveless people. These people, being justified, have peace with God. They know the favor of God, to use the language of the letter writer. They know that favor without works.

I also point out in this connection that the letter writer has been arguing that repentance is necessary to have the favor of God. Now he adds yet another condition to salvation, and that is a life out of repentance. The whole godly life now is a condition to know the favor of God. Rather, we live our lives out of faith in the gospel. Those lives are lives of repentance, so that we hate sin and love righteousness. We have the favor of God without works; and having that, in thankfulness we live in that favor. We do not live and we cannot live before God without the righteousness that is imputed without works. Repentance and the whole life of repentance are the manifestations of my faith and thus my knowledge of God's favor that I have apart from works of repentance.

The author of the letter turns next to Psalm 51 to prove conditional theology. He focuses on two phrases in the psalm: "Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice" and "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation" (vv. 8, 12). Regarding the first phrase, the letter writer simply makes up a scenario to fit the theology that he is advocating. He writes,

This expression shows the tremendous grief and anguish he felt after God caused him to see how wicked his sin truly was. He realized that his sin was so great that his soul was in danger of hell if he continued impenitently in his sin.

This scenario stands in the service of making David's plea the plea of the one who did not know the forgiveness of God apart from his act of repentance. The correspondent writes, "This joy of our salvation can only be restored when God causes us to see how he is chastising us...and makes us repent in dust and ashes."

But this is entirely false. First, the scenario does not fit the historic record of scripture. David prayed in Psalm 51 as the man to whom Nathan the prophet had said

that God forgave. David thus prayed in the knowledge of God's mercy and the forgiveness of his sins. He was praying as the impenitent who realized all of a sudden the peril in which he stood. He was praying as the forgiven man to whom the Lord imputed no iniquity and whose transgressions the Lord had forgiven. God broke David's bones when he was ignoring his sin, and God troubled David in his sin. Those broken bones God began to heal the moment Nathan said that God forgave David. What David was praying in this passage was for the gospel that alone heals broken bones. He was not praying from the standpoint of one who does not have God's favor and who comes into that favor as he repents. David was praying from the standpoint of a child of God whom God forgave but whose bones the Lord had to break. That expression is expressive of the wound of the conscience that does not heal immediately. Thus David spoke of the lingering, ongoing, continual need of the gospel of Jesus Christ that God justifies the ungodly.

Second, the letter writer makes the expressions in Psalm 51 about David's repentance, but they are about the ongoing need of the gospel. We need that gospel every day, week, month, and year. The joy of salvation given to a wounded conscience is not received by repenting but by hearing, or we would say by faith only. What is specifically heard is the glad tidings of the gospel and the joy of salvation to the ungodly whom God justifies. The letter writer can say in defense of his theology "that repentance is **never** the cause or the reason that God forgives," but that is not the issue. In the letter and in his explanation of this passage, repentance is that without which God does not give salvation's joy. Rather, God restores salvation's joy by causing us to hear the blessed news of the gospel.

The writer goes on to treat the fifth petition of the Lord's prayer. He finds in this petition a ground for his doctrine that God does not forgive—that is, give us his grace—until we forgive. He writes,

So, does this mean that God does not forgive us our sins when we walk in sin by holding anger or malice against the neighbor? Yes, I believe that is exactly what Christ means. However, when God causes us to repent of our sin and to again desire to forgive the neighbor, that is not the reason or grounds of God's renewed forgiveness of us. Rather, by bringing us to repent of that sin, God forgives us.

Here again is a statement of the theology of the whole letter: God does not forgive unless and until we forgive. God does not forgive unless and until we repent. Repentance—God-wrought, of course—is the

contingency of our forgiveness. This is an expression of the Protestant Reformed idea of repentance and forgiveness. Anger against the neighbor turned off the spigot of grace. Repentance turns the spigot back on. But we never forfeit the state of our justification. We are always forgiven of God. The perfectly acceptable and Reformed explanation of the passage in Matthew 6:12, "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," is Lord's Day 51. Christ was not teaching in this petition what we have to do to have forgiveness. He was rather teaching the sure relationship between God's forgiveness of his people and their forgiveness of their neighbors. These two forgivenesses are the same in character, and the one is the inevitable fruit of the other. God forgives us, and the evidence of this grace in us is that we forgive the neighbor. That is Reformed.

Following his treatment of the Lord's prayer, the writer moves on to Ephesians 2:10. His theology of the Lord's prayer is that God does not forgive our sins and thus assure us of our salvation while we walk in sin. So he asks, "Why?" He finds the answer to this question in Ephesians 2:10: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." The two previous verses in Ephesians 2 read,

8. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:
9. Not of works, lest any man should boast.

About these verses he writes, "In the previous two verses, the apostle Paul had developed the wonderful truth of justification by faith alone. He showed that we are not saved by works, but we are saved by faith alone."

By limiting these verses to justification, he guts the meaning of the text. All of salvation—union with Christ, regeneration, faith, calling, justification, sanctification, and glorification—is not by works at all but by faith alone. That is because all of salvation is in Christ, and we become partakers of Christ by faith alone; and being joined with Christ, he is made to us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30).

The writer's purpose for limiting the glorious statement of the apostle about our gracious salvation becomes clear when he writes,

In this verse [Eph. 2:10], the apostle Paul shows us the proper place of good works in the child of God's life. We are not saved by good works. Rather, we are "created in Christ Jesus **unto** good works" [bold and underlined by the letter writer]. This word "unto" indicates a purpose. That purpose is God's eternal will for our sanctification.

However, works are not included in sanctification any more than they are included in justification. Works are the fruit of sanctification that is wholly by grace and not at all by works.

He writes, “Thus, the testimony of the Holy Spirit that we are sons of God only arises as we walk in thankfulness before God, and not while we walk impenitently in sin.”

But this does not follow from his previous statements. His previous statements mean that we can be justified and not know that we are sons of God. This knowledge comes only after we obey. So he means that we do not have the assurance that we are sons of God until and unless we obey.

This I deny. I have peace with God and thus the assurance that I am God’s and he is mine by faith and without works. By grace I am saved and not by works. Because I am Christ’s and because I am made a member of Christ, the Spirit testifies with my spirit that I am a son of God and an heir of the world. This same Spirit produces in me fruit of my salvation, which is obedience. Salvation and the experience of salvation and the assurance of salvation, which to me are the same thing, are not contingent.

There are two contingencies in this letter: “Repentance is necessary for forgiveness” and “A sanctified life of repentance is necessary to experience God’s favor.”

I deny both of these contingencies. The reformation that led to the formation of the Reformed Protestant Churches fought over these ideas that we rejected. I charge those ideas that are argued for throughout the letter with teaching contingency and with turning again

to Protestant Reformed false doctrine. When I wrote that we have forgiveness without repentance, then I threw out repentance *as a condition*. And it should stay out. The theology of the letter is thoroughly Protestant Reformed. The word *condition* is not used. The word *condition* is denied. But repentance and obedience function as conditions: they are those things without which God may not, cannot, and will not forgive. To that all I say that if God does not, may not, cannot, and will not forgive me until and unless I repent, then I better not repent, for my repentance in that case is nothing but wickedness.

It is this doctrine espoused and argued for in the letter that we reject and with us does the whole Reformation. John Calvin said it best:

Repentance cannot be the cause of the forgiveness of sins: and we also did away with that torment of souls—the dogma that it must be performed as due. Our doctrine was, that the soul looked not to its own compunction or its own tears, but fixed both eyes on the mercy of God alone.²

We likewise have done away with that dogma of repentance as that which is due. And if that holy and godly work of repentance cannot be a condition unto justification and the knowledge of our salvation, then nothing can. We have abolished the dogma of anything that is due for salvation and the assurance of God. We are justified and have peace with God by faith only because of the mercy of God in the cross of Jesus Christ.

—NJL



Dear Editor,

Thank you for your response to my letter in the February 15, 2022 Letters Edition of *Sword & Shield*. I found that every time I read your response, and the more I studied the explanation of the order of salvation that you set forth, I was impressed with the awe, beauty, harmony, grace, and most splendid and excellent glory of God’s work of salvation. I thoroughly appreciated the main objective of your response to direct us, especially in our consideration of the order of salvation, to see on the foreground the glory of God, who is the beginning and the end and the all in all in our salvation, and to see the emptiness of man, the most undeserving object of this glorious salvation. Undoubtedly, the main point of the order of salvation is not

to explain man’s experience of his salvation but to make abundantly clear the sovereignty of God in the salvation of His elect people for His eternal glory.

While I see the importance and beauty of viewing salvation organically as one interconnected work of God rather than a stack or a train of blessings, I do not yet understand how the organic nature of salvation means that there can be no temporal aspect to the application of that salvation to us in our hearts and lives. I agree that the decrees of God are outside of time because they are all eternal decrees, but when we are speaking, not about God’s eternal decrees, but about God’s application of salvation to us in time, how can we say that that application is entirely outside of time? We are creatures of time, and

2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 1:536; emphasis added.

God applies salvation to us in time, yet there is no temporal aspect to that application? If there is no time element to the order of salvation, then I don't understand why you are fine with saying that repentance precedes justification or justification precedes repentance. If there is no time element, then how can you say "As to time, I know and everyone knows and no one is denying that faith precedes justification, that repentance precedes forgiveness, and all the rest" (pg. 12, October 15, 2021 S&S)? On the one hand, you clearly deny that the order has any temporal aspect—"The order is not temporal at all" (pg. 25, Feb. 15, 2022 S&S). On the other hand, you acknowledge that one must have faith before he can repent—"Without faith no man can repent or be justified; so the logical order is faith, conversion, justification" (pg. 25). I am probably totally misunderstanding you, but I must admit that I am thoroughly confused on this point. Is it nothing but utter folly to speak of this before that in the order of salvation, or is it true that there is an actual order to God's application of His salvation to us?

As I understand it, God's work of salvation is an organic whole, as is beautifully pictured in a fruitful vine (John 15). Christ is the seed, the root, and the vine, we are ingrafted as branches into the vine (by faith), being united to Christ the vine, we receive all nourishment, life, and blessings, which flow to us from Him (including the forgiveness of sins), and, receiving all life and blessings from Him, we bring forth fruit (repentance & good works). God as the sovereign husbandman plants the seed, ingrafts the branches of his choosing, feeds and nourishes them so that they bring forth fruit, and gathers up the fruits of *His* labors. On the foreground in the picture is the Husbandman, whose vine it is. Yet, when one looks closer at the handiwork of the husbandman to admire the beauty and glory of it, he sees the various parts—the vine, the branches, and the fruit—and understands that the life of the plant is in the roots and flows from the vine to the branches so that they produce fruit. In other words, he sees that the root and the vine come before the branches, which come before the fruit. The defining characteristic of fruit is that it is produced by the branch. So, what I mean by "Such an essential relationship demands a certain temporal relationship because one's experience in time cannot be different than reality" is simply that the fruit must come after the branch and thus it is impossible to experience that the fruit comes before the branch. I believe you are right that we ought not get so caught up in looking at each individual part of the plant that we lose sight of the beauty of the plant as a whole as the glorious handiwork of the husbandman. Yet, if a scientist were to examine the plant and declare his findings to the world and instruct everyone that, in his study of the plant, he

discovered that the fruit precedes the branch, then I would have to tell him that he does not understand the plant at all. So likewise, when I am instructed that repentance (the fruit) precedes the forgiveness of sins, which I am assured of by faith (the branch), then I must tell such a one that he doesn't understand God's work of salvation at all. Furthermore, if he insists that the fruit truly does come before the branch, then I must inform him that he has now taken the fruit and planted it, so that it is now changed into the seed which then brings forth the vine and branches and more fruit. But he must take note that now Christ is no longer the seed, root and vine of that plant, but rather the fruit is become the seed, root and vine of that plant. My point throughout the controversy in the PRC has been exactly this: By saying that the fruit (good works and repentance) precedes the branch (all the blessings of salvation including the forgiveness of sins that we have by faith), the PRC has changed the fruit into the root and thus has replaced Christ with our repentance and good works. The teaching of the PRC according to Synod 2020 is that "there is an activity of the believer that is prior to the experience of a particular blessing from God" (pg. 81, Acts of Synod 2020, Art. 51 C.2.c.). Which is to say that blessings of salvation, like the forgiveness of sins, flow out of activities of man, like his repentance. Which is to say that the root out of which blessings of salvation flow is man's activities. There can only be one root; either Christ or man's activities. The PRC has made man's activities the root. Therefore, I would agree that the error of the PRC is much deeper than simply establishing a "wrong order." But, their "wrong order" betrays their ignorance of the truth of God's glorious work of salvation.

I maintain, therefore, that there is a definite, precise order of salvation because there is a definite, precise relationship between all the different works of God in our salvation. It is an organism. And, all the various members of an organism have a very definite relationship to each other. Furthermore, that precise relationship itself shows the glory and sovereignty of God in our salvation. I believe God reveals the order of His work of salvation to us for the very purpose of revealing His sovereignty in that work. Therefore, you are correct that I do believe that putting man's activities (including repentance) at the very end of the order of salvation as nothing but the fruit of God's labors does eliminate works of man preceding the works of God. As fruits, they are the end goal of our salvation. God's purpose with us is that we bring forth fruits to His glory. Because their purpose is the glory of God alone, they are motivated by the love of God and thankfulness to Him alone. They are fruits and fruits only, and they are for God and God alone. They are not means unto more blessings, and they are not motivated by the prospect of

receiving more the more fruitful we are. That our activities (including repentance) are not means unto further blessings is most clearly seen in the fact that they are at the very end of the order of salvation. Therefore, let us not throw out the order of salvation, but let us see how the definite, precise order of salvation shows the sovereignty of God in salvation and thus serves the glory of His name. As you pointed out, the order of salvation can be added to or taken away from depending on how finely one wants to parse the various works of salvation, but I do not agree that the order of salvation can be rearranged as anyone sees fit. If you could rearrange it, then we couldn't really say that there is any order at all. For God's work of salvation to be an organism rather than a heap of blessings there must be a very definite relationship between the various works of God in our salvation.

As you also pointed out, words can be used to refer to various things and can be used broadly or narrowly. Therefore, it is certainly important that we define our terms very clearly. I have defined repentance in terms of HC QA 89: "A sincere sorrow of heart that we have provoked God by our sins, and more and more to hate and flee from them" (pg.21, Feb. 15, 2022 S&S). In short, I have defined repentance as "an expression of our love for God and our hatred for sin" (pg. 21). As such, I have contended that repentance can be nothing other than the fruit of faith, that is, the fruit of experiencing forgiveness through faith (pg. 21). From the examples you give of the Phillipian jailor and Martin Luther, it seems that your definition of repentance is simply to know one's

sins and to stand fully exposed before God. If this is your definition of repentance, then I can see how you could conceive of repentance preceding the forgiveness of sins. Certainly, if we have no sin, then we need no forgiveness. Is this what you mean by "we are justified in the way of repentance" (October 15 S&S)? With what definition of repentance can you see the order of "repentance preceding justification" being correct, and where do you derive that definition of repentance from?

May God grant us all His Spirit to discern these things which can only be spiritually discerned.

I Corinthians 2:10-16: "But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? but we have the mind of Christ."

Respectfully in Christ,
Sara Doezema

EDITOR'S NOTE

The doctrinal issues that our correspondent raises in her letter have been addressed in many pages of *Sword and Shield*. It is my judgment that the specific questions that our correspondent asks have already been sufficiently answered in the articles to which she refers. Therefore, Miss Doezema's letter is published here without additional response. The interest-

ed reader who would like to pursue this further can consult the February 15, 2022, Letters Edition of *Sword and Shield*, as well as the many articles by the editors and other writers over the last year and a half that have addressed the relationship between repentance and forgiveness.

—AL



August 13, 2022

Dear Editor,

I am writing to ask a question of any editor, office-bearer, or even vocal member of the RPC who cares to answer. From the beginning, the Sword and Shield generally, and Rev. Lanning in particular, have rejected the following statement of Rev. Koole, as heretical:

If a man with his household was to be saved and consciously enter into the kingdom, placing himself with his family under the rule of Christ as his Lord and Savior, he was called, he was required, to respond obediently to the call and command of the gospel—"Repent and believe, that thou mightest be saved with thy house." ("What Must I Do...?" Standard Bearer 95, no. 1 [October 2018]: 7-8)

If the testimony of scripture is true, and Jesus Christ rose from the dead, then it must also be maintained that believing that point of doctrine is an organic necessity. Assuming that Jesus Christ ascended into heaven, then even those who died in faith in the Old Testament and infants who die before they are born, can be brought to believe that, though they might never see the world. The example of the Apostle Paul, who was called by Jesus Christ in such a manner that he heard the call, while those travelling with him did not, is an example of just such a calling. The repeated testimony of scripture is that believing that point of doctrine is the primary sign of true faith. In fact, part of the error of De Wolf's statement, "our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter into the kingdom of Heaven," is that the statement ignores the truth that someone who repents in the way of faith, already has the kingdom of heaven in his consciousness, because he already believes the resurrection. Not only do regeneration and calling include spiritual gifts that belong to the resurrection, but one who truly places his trust in the crucifixion, repents, prays, etc. does so, because he already believes the resurrection. The teaching that faith is an instrument rather than a condition does not eliminate the truth that there is a certain absolute minimum believing that is necessary for conscious salvation. The truth that faith is an instrument rather than a condition is what makes the whole system of doctrine taught in the confessions important, because it confirms the basic premise, but the whole system is useless if you aren't at least open minded to the basic premise. The Heidelberg Catechism assumes that believing in LD 1 before it ever gets to the system of doctrine.

So, now I ask you, any one of you, how is it possible for anyone to pass through the final judgement and enter into the New Heavens and Earth without believing the

resurrection of Jesus Christ? That, after all, is the minimum obedient response to the command and call of the gospel. Although believing the resurrection does not fulfill a condition, believing that, and holding onto that, is an organic necessity, both in the sense that God effectually works it in the hearts and minds of his elect by regeneration and calling, and in the sense that a human being needs to know that in order to experience salvation in the end. Tell me, how is it possible to be consciously saved without believing that? Even supposing that the statement has to do with the Church as it exists in this world, how is it possible for someone to genuinely place himself under the rule of a man who he believes to be dead? How is it possible to consciously "enter into the kingdom," without believing, when the external organization manifestly has no visible King? One who does not believe simply does not genuinely place himself under the rule of anyone. Even if we assume the Church of Rome or the Church of England, which can be said to have a visible ruler, that earthly ruler is still not Christ. In addition, placing one's self under the rule of Christ is a doing, as is "entering." Rev. Koole's statement is almost a tautology, because even if the resurrection is a lie, the statement would still be true. He might as well have said, if A then A. For a man to experience the Church, or even this present world, as a kingdom with Christ as the ruler, he must necessarily believe the resurrection, whether it be the truth or the lie. Do those in the RPC reject both scripture and logic? How is it even possible for Rev. Koole's statement to be false? How is it possible to be consciously saved without believing?

Now, as this pertains to repentance preceding forgiveness, that also is a universal principle. Virtually all religion teaches that. In fact, even the rationalist philosopher Spinoza teaches that. Even Pharaoh and Ahab recognized that. In fact, even animals can be trained to have some sense of it. The issue is that God's long-suffering and forbearance, our repentance, and God's forgiveness are not final salvation. What's more, I literally experience a sense of forgiveness in the way of repentance. Even worldly psychology recognizes that there can be a sense of catharsis associated with it. Any man who experiences any sexual emissions (Lev. 15:16-18) and who so much as washes his hands (James 4:8) goes through the motions of repentance and experiences a sense of forgiveness.

In fact, let us suppose that someone merely believes that Jesus was an idealized rabbi and a good example. Let us suppose that the ten commandments were just a human observation of natural wisdom, that the Lord's Prayer is a safe response to that, because it does not use God's name directly, and that Acts 15 is a realistic expectation for religious law that recognizes basic health and safety.

I certainly have heard people who professed to be unbelievers, but recognized that. Even someone who is simply convicted that they should say the Lord's Prayer once in a while, whether one is a Jew or Christian, and who finds some relief in that, though they certainly should not go to the Lord's Supper without more evidence of faith, should still be able to recognize that there is some benefit in it for this life. In fact, even the people who want to believe that Jesus was a mere man without actual sin, and therefore only a good example, should be able to recognize that he humbled himself in washing his disciple's feet before exercising his authority in instituting the Lord's Supper.

In fact, even such things as the scientific method, continuous improvement in software development, and other technological developments are all based on seeing errors, changing one's mind, and attempted improvement. All of these things can be tied to the cycle of repentance, forgiveness, and renewed positive work. That's not grace to the reprobate personally, but particular grace does overflow into the creation organically (Prov. 12:10), so that even the reprobate take advantage of that power.

About the only people who don't recognize that

repentance precedes forgiveness are criminals who are convinced they can get away with their crimes and narcissistic dictators.

For the above reasons, I'm primarily concerned that repentance is worked by the power of the resurrection, given through the bond of faith. In other words, that repentance must be a sign of faith in its operation. However, you still can't get away from the fact that repentance precedes forgiveness. Even when repentance and forgiveness are the issue, it still boils down to the question of the resurrection. If the sins of the elect are also forgiven in the world to come (Matt. 12:32), if God first forgives even the sin that stains our good works (Matt. 25:36-40), then any repentance in this life necessarily precedes forgiveness. So, in the end, your position implies the self-righteous legalism associated with the Federal Vision.

As far as I can tell, your position involves a rejection of scripture, the Reformed creeds, historic positions of the PRCA, rational philosophy, and empirical science. How can you possibly get around that?

Sincerely,
Christopher Miersma

REPLY

An Army of an Unholy Alliance

Your last paragraph contains the answer to your final question: "How can you possibly get around that?" You provide before this question a summary statement of your letter's content: "As far as I can tell, your position involves a rejection of scripture, the Reformed creeds, historic positions of the PRCA, rational philosophy, and empirical science."

What an army you have mustered before this position you attribute to the Reformed Protestant Churches! You propose an organized army, operating in unity under one command. You propose that its divisions are clearly aimed at one common enemy and that its weapons are alike powerful and intimidating with their destructive powers. You propose that there must be only one reaction to this powerful alliance: surrender. You ask, "How can you possibly get around that?"

What are the divisions of this army that is so unified? What an unholy alliance!

It is bad enough that you join together the first three members with the last two. You join scripture, the Reformed creeds, and the historical positions of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America (PRCA) with rational philosophy and empirical science. What does

scripture say about this union that you have made? Scripture rejects this union.

14. Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?
15. And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?
16. And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? (2 Cor. 6:14-16)

What do the Reformed creeds that you make a part of this union say about this union? Will they allow your unholy alliance between the word of God and the musings of rational philosophy and empirical science?

Neither do we consider of equal value any writing of men, however holy these men may have been, with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees, or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, for the truth is above all;

for all men are of themselves liars and more vain than vanity itself. (Belgic Confession 7, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 27–28)

Nay further, this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God. (Canons of Dordt 3–4.4, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 167)

What do the “historic positions of the PRCA” show about your army and its ability to cooperate and intimidate? In accordance with the above quotation from the Canons of Dordt, the historical position of the PRCA has been against common grace. The false teaching of common grace is that rational philosophy and empirical science, in addition to scripture, have much to contribute to the body of truth received and used by Christians. Your denomination’s rejection of common grace must break apart this union that you have made. That rejection of common grace gives to rational philosophy and empirical science no place on the battlefield but sends them away. The man of God commanded King Amaziah to send away the army of Israel (2 Chron. 25:5–10). Even the Philistines sent away David and his men, understanding that they would be only a liability on the field of battle.

Even your union of the scriptures, the Reformed creeds, and the historical positions of the PRCA is not strength but severe weakness. With this union you deny the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*. Scripture will not stand on the battlefield either with the Reformed creeds or with the historical positions of the PRCA. Scripture claims all authority for itself. It excludes the authority of men. Scripture will not suffer equality with any creed or with the historical position of any church. Scripture alone must rule in the church of Christ. The only authority of the Reformed creeds is their agreement with scripture. Refer to Belgic Confession 7, as quoted above. Refer also to the Formula of Subscription, with its line that is the basis for adherence to the Reformed creeds specifically indicated, that they “do fully agree with the Word of God” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 326). What of the historical positions of the PRCA, which can all be protested on the basis of God’s word? What of the Reformed creeds, which can be changed by gravamen on the same basis of God’s word?

No, you have no army. You have no divisions. You have no weapons. No intimidation. There is nothing to get around. Why is God’s word alone insufficient for your task? Why not use that weapon that is identified

and given in the word of God, “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17)?

A Question of Faith

Turning to the material of your letter, you put forward your first point of contention. It concerns a quotation from an article written by Rev. Ken Koole following the meeting of the Synod of the PRCA in 2018. You signify the importance of this quotation. First, you isolate it as the only thing worthy of inclusion in your letter. Second, you put it forward as one of the “historic positions of the PRCA,” implying that it has the support of your unified army, from the scriptures to “rational philosophy, and empirical science.”

If this quotation of Rev. Ken Koole is indeed a historical position of the PRCA, I must conclude that your denomination is in serious trouble. In connection with the defense of this so-called historical position of the PRCA, the same theologian called the position of the founder of the PRCA, Herman Hoeksema, “nonsense.”¹ Furthermore, another theologian of the same denomination, Prof. David Engelsma, took violent exception to this historical position announced by Rev. Ken Koole on the basis of the biblical truth of salvation by sovereign grace alone.²

It should also be noted that Rev. Ken Koole’s quotation was written in response to the decisions taken by the synod of the PRCA in 2018. That synod declared that Classis East had erred in its defense of the preaching and teaching of Rev. David Overway. Rev. David Overway had taught that there are certain things that Christians must do in order to receive benefits of salvation such as assurance of justification and answers to prayer. Synod 2018 condemned those teachings and Classis East’s support of those teachings by way of a doctrinal statement composed by a committee of Classis East. Rev. Ken Koole’s response? Indeed there are things the Christian must do, and must do to receive benefits of salvation. To declare that Reverend Koole’s statement that you quote is a historical position of the PRCA is at the least very confusing. At the most it is simply false.

What follows in your letter is a leap over a chasm that is unbridgeable by any kind of logical connection. Whether you recognize it or not, you leap from Reverend Koole’s quotation about the necessity of faith as an act of man to a statement about faith’s having some kind of a definite, limiting content. According to the context of Reverend Koole’s quotation, as an errant commentary on Acts 16:31, the object of faith given in the word that Paul spoke to the Philippian jailer was Jesus Christ himself.

1 Kenneth Koole, “Response,” *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 12 (March 15, 2019): 279.

2 David J. Engelsma, “Faith as a Doing?,” *Standard Bearer* 96, no. 4 (November 15, 2019): 83–84.

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.” Nothing there about the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Setting aside your pretension to define faith according to the vast host you enumerate, you muster your support. You ground your contention that faith must consciously accept the singular truth of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead in Jesus’ resurrection itself. Indeed, Jesus did die in order to atone for the unbelief of the elect and to purchase by his blood the gift of faith. Indeed, he did arise from the dead in order to send his Spirit to his church, in order that his Spirit work faith in the hearts of the elect. But that is not to limit faith to the doctrine of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Nor is it a justification for your assertion that faith in Jesus’ resurrection is the ground for distinguishing true, saving faith from a faith that is not true and that does not save.

With this limitation of faith to Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, your attempt to further limit faith to its operation in the consciousness of the believer for the *conscious* experience of salvation collapses on itself. If you reduce faith to a conscious acceptance or agreement with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that will be as far as it must go in the consciousness of the believer as well.

It is passing strange that you declare that Lord’s Day 1 contains the “assumption” of believing in Lord’s Day 1, when question and answer 2 of the Lord’s Day identifies the three things that are *necessary* to know in order to live and die happily in the comfort of belonging to Jesus.

You pose the argument in your letter, “That, after all, is the minimum obedient response to the command and call of the gospel.” You make here a bare assertion without any proof. Everything that follows in the paragraph runs in a circle that is entirely without support and runs itself out of energy. The challenge at the end is no challenge at all. The reader can only watch as the argument collapses on itself.

What follows of your “universal principle,” which you draw from many alleged sources without a connection to the subject of faith, makes a fearful connection. The connections you state are behavioral. Shall we turn faith into a certain behavior, whether psychological or physical? Shall we take that behavior and make it a condition for obtaining salvation, even assurance of salvation? May it never be! How much worse is your effort in the following paragraph to graft this “universal principle” into anything remotely resembling Christian experience! How fearful that you make Christ into an example to support your contention: “...should be able to recognize that he humbled himself in washing his disciple’s [*sic*] feet before exercising his authority in instituting the Lord’s Supper.”

I must admit that I cannot make sense of your paragraph that begins with the words “For the above reasons.” It makes stunning twists and turns that defy both

logic and comprehension. Yet it manages somehow to arrive at its end: “So, in the end, your position implies the self-righteous legalism associated with the Federal Vision.” I am left to wonder if you were so attached to your conclusion that your premises mattered not at all.

In all these observations it becomes evident that you share a common feature with your quotation of Reverend Koole. This feature is common with rational philosophy and empirical science. (By the way, I understand that what you mean by “empirical science” is science according to the philosophical principles of the Enlightenment carried forward by Immanuel Kant, etc.) What is this feature?

This feature is to limit faith to parameters that are agreeable to the nature of man. Man’s reason is the standard. Man’s reason is the standard for what faith must be. This is rationalism, pure and simple. This is the rationalism of Arminianism. This is the rationalism of Reverend Koole. Because man himself does believe, faith must be the deed of man. This is your rationalism. Faith must have a minimum content, namely Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. This minimum content, because it accords to man’s reasoning, must be true. Reason will count up a number of propositions because it can only conceive of faith as agreement or subscription to those definable propositions. Or, in your case, reason will single out one such proposition, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It is fitting to paraphrase James 2:19: Thou believest that Jesus was raised from the dead; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.

Yes, there is indeed a war. There is an army on the battlefield of this war. But this army is the army of the words and thoughts of men summoned together against the word of God and the truth of his word. The battle is exactly that which is described in Ephesians 6. It is the warfare observed by article 7 of the Belgic Confession as that Reformed creed reflects on the truth of Psalm 116:11, which verse is also referred to in Romans 3:4.

This true warfare identified in scripture is not of one kind or sort of idea about faith against another kind or sort of idea about faith. It is the warfare of unbelief against faith. It is a battle taken up against God. In this battle man wrests the truth of faith from the Bible and must mold and shape it into a vain image to which he can conform on his own terms. It is not, therefore, faith in God or faith in Christ the mediator between God and man. It is instead faith in man himself. It viciously empties out the glory, the wonder, and the power of faith as the gift of God. It makes of faith a vain show, grotesquely to distort it into a form agreeable to man’s pride.

The Bible refuses to allow faith to be so twisted and distorted. The Bible teaches that faith is ruled wholly and entirely by its one true and proper object: the person and the work of Jesus Christ, true God and man, the only savior and redeemer, the fulfillment of the law and the

prophets. Although you do not refer to Romans 10:9, where the Holy Spirit specifically places the truth of Jesus' resurrection from the dead in connection with true, saving faith, the context of verse 9 denies your rationalistic goal. The words that follow two verses later make clear that the object of faith is not a proposition but Christ himself. "The scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed" (v. 11). Earlier in the passage, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth" (v. 4). This same glorious truth about faith is made evident in the very passage that Reverend Koole wrested in his desperate attempt to make faith into a deed. In Acts 16:31 the apostle Paul correctly identified that same proper object of faith, Jesus Christ. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." By the very identification of faith according to its object, Jesus Christ in all his glory as the complete savior, the foolish notion of faith as a doing that has standing before God ought to dissolve completely, were it not for the perverse pride of men—rationalism.

There is the testimony of the answer to the Ethiopian eunuch's question to Philip, "See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?": "Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:36–37). The purpose of the gospel according to John, given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is stated in John 20:31: "These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name."

What is to be said about these references? Can it possibly be that they set out a number of minimum requirements for true faith? That faith must believe one, two, three, or a hundred items of truth? Or must it believe in Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6)? It must. Indeed, faith must not and cannot believe in Christ if it is of man in any respect. If faith is of man, it can never come to Christ. True, saving faith must be and must always be the gift of God in Christ himself (Eph. 2:8).

Do the Reformed creeds fully agree with the word of God on this subject? Or do they stand in support of the quotation of Reverend Koole as a historical position of the PRCA, in support of your letter's content, and in support of rational philosophy and empirical science?

Lord's Day 7, clearly teaching on faith itself, gives its sharp answer to the question of your letter:

Q. 22. What is then necessary for a Christian to believe?

A. All things promised us in the gospel, which the articles of our catholic undoubted Christian faith briefly teach us. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 91)

Is saving faith saving faith because it entertains some doctrinal propositions, even doctrinal propositions derived from scripture? Can the faith of devils (James 2:19) be true, saving faith? Can this weak, morally vacuous, and spiritually inept view of faith compare to the testimony of the Reformed creed, the Belgic Confession?

We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Ghost kindleth in our hearts an upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, appropriates Him, and seeks nothing more besides Him. For it must needs follow, either that all things which are requisite to our salvation are not in Jesus Christ, or, if all things are in Him, that then those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him. (Article 22, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 49–50)

I have a reason for including the second sentence of the above quote. In it, together with the first sentence, the Belgic Confession lays bare the deepest flaw of the erroneous conception of faith you assert. This deepest flaw runs through every rationalistic consideration of faith, whether yours, Reverend Koole's, or the Remonstrants' in their rationalism. Your erroneous conception of faith is that it asserts "that all things which are requisite to our salvation are not in Jesus Christ." It makes Christ insufficient. Faith as a doing or an act of man makes Christ insufficient. Faith defined as man's agreement with certain propositions defined by man makes Christ insufficient. These conceptions of faith are legal in their character, not organic, in spite of your vain contentions twice appearing in your letter. The faith you purport to be supported by your army is not of God the Holy Spirit but is of the vain imagination of man.

Yea, let God be true but every man a liar, as it is written.

I also express a word of caution about certain elements of your letter that demonstrate unbelief: "If the testimony of scripture is true." "Assuming that Jesus Christ ascended into heaven." "Even animals can be trained to have some sense of it." "Even worldly psychology recognizes that there can be a sense of catharsis associated with it." "All of these things can be tied to the cycle of repentance, forgiveness, and renewed positive work."

On account of these elements, I answer your letter with deep humility and sorrow. It demonstrates in a powerful way that true, saving faith is indeed always and only a divine gift given to unworthy sinners. Only God's grace by the Holy Spirit can break the powerful grip of depravity's unbelief and bring that depraved unbeliever to rest in Christ alone without reservations or conditions.

—MVW

Article 21, Conditional?

Dear brethren in our Lord Jesus Christ.

I am writing this article from a different perspective, then some of the saints, that have already written.

I am writing because of a concern I have with regards to Article 21 of the church order. No one appears to be troubled by this, but I believe that this is a serious error. We have just come out of the Protestant Reformed Churches, because of their conditional stand on the Word of God and the covenant. Now it would seem that we are returning to a conditional covenant with Article 21. It states that the parents must train their children in christian schools, as a demand of the covenant. I was taught that the covenant stood alone and the demands of the covenant, (the commandments from God or ten commandments) were fulfilled through the perfect work of our Lord Jesus Christ. He came to this earth in our nature, and died on the cross to satisfy God's justice for our sake. We have many references to this fulfillment in the Heidelberg Catechism, Canons of Dordt, Belgic confession and Scripture etc. Yet here we have a demand or condition placed in the covenant that requires our fulfilling in order for us to receive the benefits of the covenant and it's promises by the establishment of a christian school. Here, again we have something man must do first before he receives covenant blessings.

The reason I have become more concerned, is statements Rev Lanning made in his editorial regarding Christian education as a demand of the covenant. I quote: "Although the form of a Christian school may vary according to circumstances, God's covenant demands that there be a Christian school." There he states that the demand is in or part of the covenant, which says that the work of Christ in the covenant is not complete. It requires Christian schools to fulfill the covenant conditions. Further in the article he states, "Inasmuch as the covenant of God requires a Christian school, the covenant also forbids independentism in the rearing of the covenant seed." Again "Covenant fellowship and fulfillment requires Christian schools". This is one of the statements in the controversy, that in order to have the Covenant fellowship of God, man has to do something first, which in this case is have a christian school. The Covenant is independent of works, as I said earlier. The education of our children through schools is the fruit of the Covenant rather than a fulfillment of the Covenant. The catechism in the same way, shows in so many ways that the law of God is now done in gratitude not to fulfill the law for our justification, but to serve God in love. Schooling of our children should be done out of gratitude and love. The Catechism in Art 38 does not state it as a demand of the covenant, but more like our

forefathers stated, that the consistories are to see to it that the Christian Schools be maintained. This is a calling on the part of the office-bearers to oversee schools. Also when you see where our forefathers placed this question, you can see that it is placed under the heading of Thankfulness or Gratitude. The passage that Rev Lanning uses to prove a demand of the covenant Deut 6:4-9, begins with a commandment which, calls Gods people to love God with all their heart, soul and might. Jesus also takes this up in Matt 22:37-40 "thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." The Lord shows that the commandments are about the love of God, which, then shows itself, in our loving our neighbour, as part of the second table of the law. Our neighbours then, are our children who God calls us to train out of love. So because our covenant relationship with God, is through our Lord Jesus Christ's work, we as parents have a calling to train our children with what ever tools God provides at that time. These tools do not make the Covenant conditional to our salvation as a demand of the covenant, but are used as tools of gratitude for that purpose.

The original article of the Church Order in the 1600's never had this statement: Quote "All consistories shall see to it that there be good school masters who not only teach the children reading, writing, languages and liberal arts but also train them in godliness and the catechism." I realize that this was in state run schools, when the state still had some semblance of Christianity, so there was no need for schools run by christian parents. As society evolved the state run schools became corrupted so the article needed to evolve to include the parents, school masters and schools. After that it didn't change much more until 1914 or around that time, when the Christian Reformed Church Synod decided to add this statement to the church order. They had no trouble with this because they were already on the road to a conditional doctrine. It troubled me when I joined the Protestant Reformed Churches in 1975, that the churches accepted this statement in the church order when it was so conditional, because they claimed to be unconditional in their doctrine. But we had other difficulties with the PRC at that time and didn't pursue it. Now we have joined the RPC and they have taken this statement and used it to explain the need for Christian Schools. Now don't get me wrong, I agree the Christian School is a good tool for Christian parents to use and should be used, just as home schooling and the use of the internet is, and for me, it is a tool that we are blessed to use at this time, but not

conditional to my salvation or my covenant fellowship with God. Also Christian Schools in themselves cannot fulfill the covenant demand, because they are only buildings that are filled with sinful teachers and children and not the perfect work of Christ.

We as parents, have raised eight children and sent them to a Christian School, as well as home schooled some of them, due to some difficulties in the Christian School. When I look at how sinful our attempts at training our children were, we can never say we fulfilled the demand of the covenant. And if we didn't rest in Christ's fulfillment of the covenant, we would lose the assurance of our salvation. Also, we trust in God's election from before the foundation of the world that he will save the seed of his covenant people through the preaching of the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit. We took our responsibility very serious, but still see our many failures, as weak sinful parents and therefore need that assurance that Christ is our Saviour and has fulfilled the covenant demands for us. He has made us righteous, not the act of having a Christian school. We could only do this work to the best of our ability and leave the rest in God's hands. The results have brought joy to our lives, because we see the wonderful work of God and his Holy Spirit, in the faith of many of our children despite our failings.

As the time of Antichrist draws closer, we will not be able to have Christian Schools available to us. There are signs today, where governments are attempting to change current Christian curriculum to to their own sinful agenda. But teachers and schools here in Canada, have so far been able to circumvent these false doctrines without incurring the government's wrath. Jesus himself stated in Matt 24:16-20 that the church would be persecuted and would have to flee to the mountains, leaving behind all their worldly goods. You may say O yes, but those are exceptions, but if you study the history of the world, you will see many, many occasions when this did happen. At the time of the apostles the Christians had to flee Jerusalem, leaving behind all their schools and worldly goods. In Europe the Christians were persecuted and imprisoned and either fled to America or were sent there as prisoners. These Christians made churches and preaching a priority, and many of the women taught their children reading and writing etc, but the parents together taught the Word of God to their children. They did this through personal instruction and example as well as catechism by the preachers. There are many more examples of Christians fleeing. Even today many Christians are fleeing and being persecuted. Did all of these parents then fail to fulfill the demands of the covenant by not establishing a christian school. Were they not saved or receive the assurance of covenant blessings? No of course not! We have been spoiled with wealth

and riches, so it is easy to say that the school is required as part of the covenant, making it a conditional covenant, but it was not always so. As society changes again, we also need to remove that statement from article 21, to meet the needs of the parents. They will still have the responsibility of training their children in the Word of God no matter where they are and with what tools are available to them. So again the child of God would be a failure in training, because there would be no schools to send them to, resulting in the breaking of the covenant and no salvation or covenant fellowship for them.

As you can see this is very troubling for me. I have studied some church orders from other reformed churches, and none of them have accepted this statement in their church order. I will quote three of these here.

United Reformed Church: The duties belonging to the office of elder consist of continuing in prayer and ruling the church of Christ according to the principles taught in Scripture, in order that purity of doctrine and holiness of life may be practised. They shall see to it that their fellow-elders, the ministers and the deacons faithfully discharge their offices. They are to maintain the purity of the Word and Sacraments, assist in catechizing the youth, promote God-centred schooling, visit the members of the congregation according to their needs, etc.

Free Reformed Church, Art 54: The Consistories shall see to it that the parents, in harmony with the promises made at the baptism of their children, have them taught at schools where the instruction is in accordance with the Word of God and the Three Forms of Unity.

Canadian Reformed Church, Art 58: The consistory shall ensure that the parents, to the best of their ability, have their children attend a school where the instruction given is in harmony with the Word of God as the church has summarized it in her confessions.

I can quote more of them, but will limit it to three. The CRC of Australia has removed this statement as well, and the Free Reformed of Australia also does not use it. Also as you can see the Canadian Reformed Church doesn't have the demand in their church order. The schools are well attended, the buildings have expanded, and more teachers hired, to handle the new students that attend. When the CRC began to ignore the demand of the covenant, it was not the cause of the lack of school attendance. The CRC by 2005 had failed to maintain the truth of the Word of God, so that many of the saints of God had fled the church. The preaching no longer called the people of God to bring forth the covenant seed, so the people used birth control which resulted in a large loss of the number of children. Couples would also delay having children until they were financially established. This is my experience in Canada.

If the churches stay true to preaching the truth of

Gods Word, the guiding of the Holy Spirit will work in the hearts of Gods people the love of God and their children, to move them to send their children to a Christian School.

The baptismal form is correct when it states that the parents make a promise before God to raise their children in the truth of Gods Word. This promise does not make their covenant relationship with God conditional, but comes out of that covenant relationship of fellowship and friendship in the work of our Saviour, which blessings they have received. I think Rev Lanning describes the Covenant very nicely. They realize that when making this promise, it is in sin and weakness, but to the best of their ability, through the work of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise they could never make such a promise. The parents also will train their children, because first they love their children dearly and wish them to have the joy that we as parents have in salvation. Secondly they love God dearly as the Holy Spirit guides them to know Gods love and grace, which results

in the blessed work of raising these children in his name, using Christian Schools as they are available. As Gods says, our weakness manifests Gods grace, wisdom and power.

I am writing this so that the ministers, elders and deacons and the saints in our church may think on this and discuss it. Some may not agree with me but I am convicted that this is a conditional statement and should be studied, looked at and even removed.

So I believe that the article in the church order should be changed so that it does not reflect a conditional covenant, thereby attempting to mislead Gods people to think that training their children in a Christian school, is a good work that will fulfill the covenant or that it may take away their hope of salvation because they recognize, how sinful and with what frailty, they preformed their calling before their God.

Your brother in Christ Art Tolsma.

From the First PRC of Edmonton.

REPLY

An Advance

As Mr. Tolsma's letter indicates, the Reformed Protestant Churches are in the midst of controversy regarding the Reformed doctrine of the Christian school. The Reformed doctrine of the Christian school, as stated in article 21 of the Church Order, is that the Christian school is a demand of the covenant. The Reformed doctrine of the Christian school, as stated in Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism, is that the fourth commandment requires that the Christian schools be maintained. Some members of the Reformed Protestant Churches deny that the Christian school is a demand of the covenant and that the Christian school is required by God. In this denial they stand opposed to their own confession and to their own Church Order. Their denial of the Reformed doctrine of the Christian school has erupted in controversy in the Reformed Protestant Churches.

Mr. Tolsma's letter marks an advance in the controversy. For this reason I am very thankful for his letter. I heartily disagree with his letter, but I am grateful that he has advanced the controversy. The controversy over the Reformed doctrine of the Christian school has been good for the Reformed Protestant Churches. God uses controversy to sharpen his church and to reform his church. The reform is either that the church stands upon sound doctrine, to the exclusion of those who oppose the sound

doctrine; or that a church institute apostatizes from sound doctrine, so that a new church institute must be formed. Mr. Tolsma's advance of the controversy will also be good for the Reformed Protestant Churches, under God's blessing.

Mr. Tolsma advances the controversy by bringing to the pages of *Sword and Shield* an issue that has been mentioned in the magazine in principle but that has not been explicitly addressed in the magazine. Mr. Tolsma recognizes this:

I am writing this article from a different perspective, then some of the saints, that have already written.

I am writing because of a concern I have with regards to Article 21 of the church order. No one appears to be troubled by this, but I believe that this is a serious error.

To this point the debate on the pages of *Sword and Shield* has been whether the word "schools" in the confessions and Church Order actually means *schools* or whether the word "schools" can also mean *homeschools* or something other than *schools*. The debate has also been whether the phrase "demands of the covenant" and the word "require" apply to the school or only to covenantal instruction. That is, is the school the demand of the

covenant, or is the demand of the covenant only Christian upbringing, whether that happens in a school or not? The debate has also been whether or not scripture teaches that the school is the demand of the covenant.

Mr. Tolsma's letter now advances the controversy by alleging that a demand of the covenant is a condition of the covenant. For him the debate is not what "schools" mean but what "demands of the covenant" mean. For Mr. Tolsma "demands of the covenant" mean "conditions of the covenant." Therefore, he rejects article 21 of the Church Order with its language of "the demands of the covenant" because he is convicted that the article teaches a conditional covenant. This marks an advance in the controversy. The question that Mr. Tolsma now puts to the Reformed Protestant Churches is, "Article 21, Conditional?" The answer that he proposes to the Reformed Protestant Churches is that "demands of the covenant" in article 21 "is a conditional statement and should be studied, looked at and even removed." The end of the matter for Mr. Tolsma, and he hopes for the Reformed Protestant Churches, is "that the article in the church order should be changed so that it does not reflect a conditional covenant."

An Understanding...

Mr. Tolsma is an opponent of article 21, but he is one of the few opponents of article 21 who reads right. He correctly understands that "demands of the covenant" in article 21 refer to "schools" and not only to Christian instruction: "[Article 21] states that the parents must train their children in christian schools, as a demand of the covenant."

Mr. Tolsma is correct in his understanding that article 21 identifies the school as the demand of the covenant. In this understanding he breaks ranks with his fellow opponents of article 21. Opposition to article 21 usually takes the form of an opponent's denying that the phrase "the demands of the covenant" refers to "schools." The opponent of article 21 insists that "the demands of the covenant" refer only to Christian parental instruction but not to schools. For the opponent of article 21, the good Christian school is not a demand of the covenant.

This is the Protestant Reformed opposition to article 21 by its reinterpretation of the article at its 2009 synod.

The phrase "according to the demands of the covenant" in Article 21 modifies "instructed" and not "the good Christian schools." Thus, according to Article 21, what the covenant *demands*

is Christian instruction; but the covenant does not demand the particular form this instruction takes, namely, the Christian day schools.¹

Within the Reformed Protestant Churches, this is the opposition to article 21 by Rev. Martin VanderWal.

But does this Article state that "good Christian schools" are "the demands of the covenant"? Cutting out the middle part of the article is it proper to read it this way: "The consistories shall see to it that there are good Christian schools according to the demands of the covenant."

Should one read the Article this way, he cannot reach the conclusion that good Christian schools are the demand of the covenant...

If "the demands of the covenant" were meant to apply to Christian schools themselves, it would not have been written in its form in the Church Order.²

This interpretation of article 21 is opposition to the article because it guts the article of its plain force and meaning. Article 21 reads, "The consistories shall see to it that there are good Christian schools in which the parents have their children instructed according to the demands of the covenant" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 387).

The plain subject of article 21 is the "good Christian schools." The article says nothing about other forms of child-rearing, such as parental instruction in the home or catechetical instruction in the church. Article 21 is strictly about the "good Christian schools." The requirement of article 21 is that "the consistories shall see to it." Consistories shall see to it that there are schools, and consistories shall see to it that parents have their children instructed in those schools. Though there are many other things that parents also ought to be doing in the rearing of their children, article 21 says nothing about those other things. The one subject of article 21 is the good Christian schools. Therefore, when article 21 brings up "the demands of the covenant," it brings up those demands as the reason consistories shall see to the good Christian schools. The *schools* are "according to the demands of the covenant." Consistories shall see to it that there are good Christian schools because good Christian schools are the demand of the covenant. Consistories shall see to it that parents have their children instructed in these schools because good Christian schools are the demand of the covenant.

I suppose that we could wrangle forever over the grammar of article 21 and never come to an agreement

1 *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America 2009*, article 81, 72-73.

2 Martin VanderWal, "Good Christian Schools and Article 21," October 13, 2022, <https://notallopiousandecclasiastical.wordpress.com/2022/10/13/good-christian-schools-and-article-21/>.

about which phrase modifies which. But all of this wrangling is put to rest by Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Lord's Day 38 explains the fourth commandment of God's law. God's law is a covenant law. It is the law of "the LORD thy God" (Ex. 20:2). "The LORD thy God" is God's covenant formula. The law is God's demand for his covenant people, teaching them how to live in gratitude to their covenant God. To borrow the language of Church Order article 21, we could say that the ten commandments are "the demands of the covenant." Lord's Day 38 teaches that in the fourth commandment, "God require[s]...that...the schools be maintained" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 128). In the fourth commandment the demand of the covenant is the school.

It is so simple! Our covenant God requires the school.

Why, then, all of the angst and wrangling over article 21? Why all of the endless prattle to prove that "the demands of the covenant" cannot possibly modify "good Christian schools"? It is the plain teaching of the Reformed confession that God's covenant law for his people requires that they maintain Christian schools. It is not a strange new thing for a Reformed denomination to teach that the school is the demand of the covenant. The Christian school as demand of the covenant is the old paths.

It is here where I appreciate Mr. Tolsma's honesty in dealing with article 21. He is an opponent of article 21, but he is one of the few opponents of article 21 who correctly understands that the demand of the covenant in article 21 is the school itself.

...And a Misunderstanding

However, Mr. Tolsma is gravely mistaken in his explanation of how the demand of the covenant functions. For Mr. Tolsma a demand of the covenant can only function as a condition in the covenant. For Mr. Tolsma a demand of the covenant can only mean something that man does first in the covenant in order to receive what God will do second in the covenant.

Yet here we have a demand or condition placed in the covenant that requires our fulfilling in order for us to receive the benefits of the covenant and its promises by the establishment of a Christian school. Here, again we have something man must do first before he receives covenant blessings.

Mr. Tolsma's understanding of demands is wrong in two respects. First, Mr. Tolsma wrongly understands the phrase "demands of the covenant" to mean "demands *unto* the covenant." That is, he assumes that if God demands

anything in his covenant with man, then man must fulfill that covenant demand before man can obtain covenant fellowship with God. The demands, then, are the conditions, prerequisites, and contingencies upon which God's fellowship with man depends.

With this misunderstanding Mr. Tolsma reads every reference to a *demand of* the covenant to mean a *condition unto* the covenant. For example, he takes statements such as "Although the form of a Christian school may vary according to circumstances, God's covenant demands that there be a Christian school" to mean "There he states that the demand is in or part of the covenant, which says that the work of Christ in the covenant is not complete. It requires Christian schools to fulfill the covenant conditions."

Mr. Tolsma's error is his assumption that a demand *of* the covenant is a demand *unto* the covenant. The reality is that a demand *of* the covenant means a demand *because of* the covenant. God has established his covenant of grace with elect believers and their seed in Christ. God has graciously made his people members of his family and taken them into his fellowship. God graciously maintains that covenant, perfects that covenant, and gives his people all of the blessed joy of that covenant. There is nothing that God's people are required to do in order to remain in the covenant or in order to prosper in the covenant.

Now, God gives demands to his people *because of* that covenant that he has established and maintains. Not *unto* the covenant but *because of* the covenant. They are to love him. They are to love their neighbors. They are to have no idols. They are to go to church. They are to maintain schools. And they are to do all of this not in order that they may have a covenant with God but because they already have a covenant with God by his gracious establishment of that covenant with them in Christ.

Another way to say this is that the *why* of the demand is all-important. The difference between a conditional covenant and an unconditional covenant is not whether there are demands in the covenant. It is not the case that a conditional covenant says that there are demands in the covenant and an unconditional covenant says that there are no demands in the covenant. Rather, the difference between a conditional covenant and an unconditional covenant is the *reason* for the demands. In conditional covenant doctrine the reason for the demand is so that man may obtain something from God by his obedience to the demand. In unconditional covenant doctrine the reason for the demand is because God has already given man everything by his grace.

You can test this by asking the question, why? about the demands.

Love God. Why? So that God will love you. That is conditional.

Love God. Why? Because God already loves you. That is unconditional.

Love your neighbor. Why? So that God will be merciful to you. That is conditional.

Love your neighbor. Why? Because God has already been merciful to you. That is unconditional.

So also with the Christian school as a demand of the covenant, the all-important question is, why?

Establish a Christian school as a demand of the covenant. Why? So that God will make his covenant with you and your children. That is conditional.

Establish a Christian school as a demand of the covenant. Why? Because God has already made his covenant with you and your children. That is unconditional.

When the Reformed confessions and Church Order speak of the Christian school as a requirement and as the demand of the covenant, they are speaking of an unconditional demand. They are not speaking of prerequisites, but they are speaking of demands of gratitude that we owe to God as thanksgiving for what he has already done.

The second respect in which Mr. Tolsma's understanding is wrong is with regard to the work of Christ. Mr. Tolsma refers several times to Christ's fulfillment of the law for his people. For example:

I was taught that the covenant stood alone and the demands of the covenant, (the commandments from God or ten commandments) were fulfilled through the perfect work of our Lord Jesus Christ. He came to this earth in our nature, and died on the cross to satisfy God's justice for our sake.

Mr. Tolsma's error is that he understands Christ's fulfillment of the law in the place of his people to be the abrogation of the law in every respect for God's people. Mr. Tolsma writes in several places about Christ's fulfilling the demands and that we can never fulfill the demands, and thus that we do not ever have to fulfill the demands. Mr. Tolsma is absolutely correct that Christ fulfilled the entire demand of the law and that we cannot fulfill the demand and that we do not ever have to fulfill the demand. This is the good news of the gospel.

Where Mr. Tolsma goes wrong is his assumption that the law, now fulfilled by Christ, has no place in the life of the believer. The truth of the matter is that the law is the rule and standard of the believer's life of gratitude.

Our relationship to the law is not that we must fulfill it. Christ did that. He was under the law, so that we are not under the law but under grace. The law is now the light upon the believer's feet to show him how he is to walk in this world to God's glory. There are law, commandment, and demand for the child of God, but he is not under any law. There are law, commandment, and demand for the child of God, but Christ has already fulfilled all of them. The child of God is not saved by his obedience to law, commandment, and demand. The child of God is saved by Christ in order that he may obey law, commandment, and demand in gratitude.

A Grave Error

Mr. Tolsma's misunderstanding is a grave error. His error would abolish any commands, requirements, and demands from the covenant. According to Mr. Tolsma, a demand of the covenant is a condition of the covenant. Therefore, there may be no demands of the covenant. With this understanding we would have to remove not only article 21 of the Church Order but also the Reformed creeds and liturgical forms. We may no longer have the baptism form ("Therefore are we by God, through baptism, admonished of and obliged unto new obedience") or the Catechism's explanation of the law ("What doth God require?").

I write in general now and not specifically regarding Mr. Tolsma. Let not only Mr. Tolsma, but also me and all of God's people hear this. The error of the letter is so grave that it must be rejected out of hand as a corruption of the Reformed faith. One who holds such a position is guilty of unbelief. One who holds such a position maintains doctrines inconsistent with Christianity. Such an one must be put out of the kingdom of heaven by Christian discipline, except he repent (Lord's Day 31, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 119).

The position advocated in the letter marks a significant advance in the school controversy for the Reformed Protestant Churches. The advance is that those who attempt to make the demand of gratitude into a condition will be excluded from the churches by discipline. The false doctrine of turning the demand of gratitude into a condition in order to reject the demand will be exposed for the unbelief that it is. The churches will have peace in the gospel and will live together with God and with each other in the life of his gracious covenant, not troubled by false brethren.

Let all who are entangled in the erroneous thinking repent toward God and believe in Jesus Christ. And may God preserve the Reformed Protestant Churches in the doctrine and the blessing of his covenant.

—AL



Dear Editor,

Thank you for your response to my letter in the May 2022 issue of *Sword & Shield*. Thank you for your response and especially your criticisms. It is responses like this that help us sharpen one another in the truth. I can see how my first letter was a bit confusing and contradictory, so I would like to begin by clarifying what I believe regarding the demand of the covenant and christian education.

In the first place, I believe the christian school is still grounded in the demand of the covenant, even though the school is not itself *the* demand of the covenant. The reason why parents (not you, not me, but the parents collectively) decide to start a school is because they see it as necessary for themselves as parents to fulfill their covenant callings. As I understand the first point of your response, you contend that there can be no ground for starting a christian school unless the school is itself required by the demand of the covenant. However, just because the school is not required does not mean that parents cannot start a school and that there cannot be any other proper grounds for starting one. Bible studies and special services are not required either, but that doesn't mean we can't have them to help us fulfill our callings to be daily in the Word, to edify one another, and to redeem the time. There is therefore nothing wrong with establishing schools as tools to aid in rearing one's children and instructing them of God in every area of life. Nor must we necessarily conclude that parents are abdicating their calling by hiring teachers to stand in their place for a part of the day. Certainly, if the parents view the school and use the school as a replacement for their personal instruction of their children and figure they have fulfilled their calling simply by sending them to the christian school, then they would be abdicating their calling. But, when the schools and teachers are used as tools and aides rather than as replacements, then they can be properly used by parents without abdicating their calling, which I maintain does indeed belong to them as parents. If the parents decide that a school would be helpful, then they can form one. Such is not sin and no one has to legislate to them when they need to form one. But if all the parents in a church believe they can fulfill their calling best by homeschooling, then I don't understand what would be wrong with that. Why is it wrong for all the parents in a church to decide to home-school rather than form a school?

In the second place, I believe you are correct that CO art 21 and the confessions have in mind instituted schools rather than home-schools when they refer to schools. However, I also do not believe that the meaning of the articles would be changed at all if the word "school"

was replaced with "christian education." Just as much as the history may show that "school" refers to instituted schools, so also does the history show that the concern of those writing the articles was not so much that a school was formed but that the children be educated in the fear of the Lord. (See *The Church Order Commentary*, Third Edition, by Idzerd Van Dellen, Martin Monsma, pg. 92ff and *Notes on the Church Order*, by Prof. Herman Hanko). When the CO was written, the schools were a given, and it was a given that the parents sent their children to the schools. This is because of the church/state relationship that existed in the Netherlands. The Netherlands was interested in raising up good, Reformed Netherlanders, so they delegated to the church the calling to make sure the education in the schools was Reformed. The main concern was not the school itself but the content of the education in the school. The purpose behind CO art. 21 was to make sure all the children were instructed from a Reformed perspective. The schools may have been the way the children were being instructed at that time, but the main concern was what they were being taught. Since consistories today still have the calling to oversee the spiritual life of the parents and children, they still have the calling to ensure that parents are fulfilling their calling to instruct their children in the fear of the Lord.

Furthermore, even the wording of CO art. 21 itself identifies instruction as the demand of the covenant rather than the school as the demand of the covenant. In CO art 21, "according to the demand of the covenant" is modifying "instructed," not "school." They must be "instructed according to the demand of the covenant," which is to say that they must be instructed in the fear of the Lord. I do not understand how it is impossible for parents to rear their children in the fear of the Lord through homeschooling. Thus, while the CO and confessions clearly see christian schools as important, the deeper question we must answer is: why do they consider those schools so important? I believe the answer is not because the school itself is a demand of the covenant as such, but because they see them as instrumental in rearing the children in the fear of the Lord so that they can take up their callings in the church and so that men will be prepared for the ministry. Therefore, while schools mean instituted schools in the CO and the confessions, the overall meaning would not be lost if the word "school" was eliminated.

In the third place, I can see how using phrasing from Deuteronomy 6 in connection with the calling each of us has toward the children of the church is confusing. You are correct that I do not believe that Deuteronomy 6 is

instructing all of Israel in what they are to do collectively as a body. As I explained in my first letter, I believe God in Deuteronomy 6 is instructing all of the fathers in Israel regarding their individual calling to rear their own children in the fear of the Lord. While this calling to rear a child in the fear of the Lord belongs to that child's parents particularly, that does not mean that all the rest of the members of the church have no calling whatsoever toward that child. As I demonstrated from several other passages of scripture in my first letter, each of us in the church does have a calling toward every other member of the church, including each child, when we come into contact with each other. When God brings one of the children of the church upon my pathway, I have a calling to be a godly example, instruct and admonish them as the opportunity arises, and demonstrate care, love and compassion toward them. This is included in my calling to love God and my neighbor, which is the summary of the whole law, which God gave to all Israel in Deuteronomy 5. We all share in this common calling to love God and our neighbor, but the keeping of this calling is, nevertheless, performed by each of us individually, beginning in our individual hearts. You contend that God's address to "Israel" in Deuteronomy 6 indicates that the following instruction is something they are to fulfill together as a body. However, the "Israel" being addressed in Deuteronomy 6 is the same "Israel" being addressed in

Deuteronomy 5. If you could explain how God was indeed instructing all of Israel in what they were called to do collectively in the giving of the 10 commandments in Deuteronomy 5, that would be helpful to me in understanding how God's calling to all Israel in Deuteronomy 6 is also a calling they are to perform collectively rather than individually. To help me understand how the christian school is itself the demand of the covenant, therefore, I would appreciate it if you could explain at least one of the following: 1. How my understanding of Deuteronomy 6 and Psalm 78 as set forth in my first letter is in error, 2. How the school is an ordinance of God as the way He has ordained that parents are to instruct their children, which ordinance therefore is required or 3. How it is impossible for parents to fulfill their covenantal calling to instruct their children in the fear of the Lord through homeschooling.

As for your last editorial in the May 2022 issue, I can see how the truth of election and the truth that the children belong to God explains why they must be instructed in the fear of the Lord, but I do not see how it explains why they must be instructed in a school and why parents must cooperate in this instruction. Could you further explain how the truth of election requires that parents cooperate in instructing their children in a christian school?

Sincerely in Christ,
Sara Doezema

REPLY

I do not agree with the perspective of this letter that the writer and the editor are sharpening one another by our correspondence. My perspective is that the writer and the editor have a sharp doctrinal disagreement with one another and that we are engaged in mortal combat for the destruction of one of our positions and the establishment of the other position. I know that this may sound harsh to some, just as some apparently considered my previous reply to Miss Doezema to be harsh.¹ For what it is worth, I do not intend to be harsh to Miss Doezema personally. But I do intend to be clearly and sharply Reformed. I also intend that any doctrinal position that is not Reformed be driven from our midst. I believe that Miss Doezema shares this intention. Miss Doezema writes with a certain grace of style and deference of tone that may be lacking in my writing, but her letter is still very clear that the position that I am advocating is unbiblical. The letter is very clear that I must abandon my doctrinal position

on the school and that I must allow for a biblical and confessional right to homeschool. In our correspondence neither one of us is at some stage of sharpening the other, but we are locked in an attempt to overthrow the error that we perceive the other to hold. It is in that spirit of controversy on behalf of the truth that I intend to write this reply, God being gracious. In order to make clear that I am attacking a doctrine and not a person, I intend to refer in my reply to "the letter" and not to "Miss Doezema."

The issue for which the letter contends is that the parent alone has the covenant calling to rear his own children. The demand of the covenant is merely Christian content in education, but the demand of the covenant is not the Christian school. The parent may decide to have a Christian school, but he may just as legitimately decide to homeschool. Because the demand of the covenant is not the school, no one may require the parent to have a Christian school.

¹ Andrew Lanning, "Reply," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 18 (May 2022): 13–17.

I believe the christian school is still grounded in the demand of the covenant, even though the school is not itself *the* demand of the covenant. The reason why parents (not you, not me, but the parents collectively) decide to start a school is because they see it as necessary for themselves as parents to fulfill their covenant callings.

If the parents decide that a school would be helpful, then they can form one. Such is not sin and no one has to legislate to them when they need to form one. But if all the parents in a church believe they can fulfill their calling best by homeschooling, then I don't understand what would be wrong with that. Why is it wrong for all the parents in a church to decide to homeschool rather than form a school?

I consider this position to be entirely contrary to the Reformed confessions, the Reformed Church Order, and the Reformed doctrine of God's covenant of grace with believers and their seed. I have written and spoken about this at length already, as has Reverend Langerak, so I will not repeat every argument. Let me only say here that the letter's position and my position cannot exist together in the church of Christ. One is Reformed, the other is not. One is confessional, the other is not. One is love, the other is not. It is up to each individual and family to decide where they stand. If one agrees with my position, then that one is Reformed Protestant. If one agrees with the letter's position, then that one is not Reformed Protestant. Such an one must either be instructed so that he understands his own confessions or he must leave the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC). (And before anyone shouts, "Hierarchy!" those who agree with the letter must leave not because I say so or because I am the measure of what is Reformed Protestant but because the Reformed confessions and Church Order of the Reformed Protestant Churches do not allow for the letter's position.)

As for the specifics of the letter, here are my brief replies.

First, I maintain that if the school is not a demand of the covenant, then no parent has a right to form a school. The letter's examples of a Bible study or special services are entirely beside the point. In a school teachers stand *in the place of* parents. That is not the case in a Bible study or special services. God says to you, "Heed my word." You don't send your friend to church in place of you. You go to church, and you perhaps go to Bible study. So also in a school, if God says to the parent alone, "You teach your children," then the parent is not at liberty to say to God, "Well, I sent my friend in place of me." God says, "You rear your children," and rear your children you must, without anyone standing in your place. This is why when one denies that the Christian school is a demand

of the covenant, one must eventually destroy the school. The homeschooling movement and the Christian school cannot exist side by side. So I say again to our readers, if you are of the homeschooling movement, either repent of your loveless independentism or leave the Reformed Protestant Churches. (And before anyone cries, "Hierarchy!" I say this not because it is my denomination to order around, thanks be to God, but because the Reformed confessions of the RPC do not allow the homeschooling movement to exist in the RPC.)

Second, the letter is ignorant of the history of Christian schools. The letter proposes that the real concern of our Reformed fathers was not schools as such but merely that the content of the children's instruction be Christian. So, the theory goes, when the fathers formulated article 21 of the Church Order, their references to "schoolmasters" and later to "schools" merely reflected the local circumstances in the Netherlands. Schools just happened to be a given at the time. But the fathers could just as easily have written about "homeschools" if they wanted because their only concern was the content of the children's instruction.

This theory is preposterously wrong, but it is popular. It is the favorite theory of those who want to divorce "the demands of the covenant" in article 21 from "good Christian schools" in article 21. If one can assert that the only point of article 21 is that there be Christian instruction, then "schools" can mean anything. Any place where Christian instruction is given is now a school. How absurd this is! If you give Christian instruction in your home, then your home is a school? Well, what about when I pray before eating pizza at Chuck E. Cheese? In my prayer I have given Christian instruction to my children. Is Chuck E. Cheese now a good Christian school referred to in article 21 of the Church Order? Absurd!

Here is clarity. A home is a home. A school is a school. Chuck E. Cheese is Chuck E. Cheese. I may give Christian instruction in all of them, but that does not make all of them a school.

The truth is that the concern of our Reformed fathers was just as much that there be schools as it was that there be Christian instruction. Schools and Christian instruction were inseparable for our fathers. The schools were the institutions where the covenant children would be reared in the Reformed and Christian faith. Our fathers' insistence on schools was not merely a reflection of circumstances as they happened to find them in their own day. Their insistence on schools was deliberate. The only difficulty in demonstrating this is to limit oneself to a quotation or two, when one could just as easily quote the entire history of the Reformation. Here is a quotation from Luther:

When schools prosper, the Church remains righteous and her doctrine pure...Young pupils and

students are the seed and source of the Church. If we were dead, whence would come our successors, if not from the schools? For the sake of the Church we must have and maintain Christian schools.²

Here is a quotation from a historian regarding the influence of the Christian schools that the Reformation established: “Everywhere the evangelical Reformation flourished, Christian school education was right there on the front line and provided depth and durability to its noble objectives.”³

The theory that our Reformed fathers were only interested in Christian content is wrong. This theory should stop being peddled to us as if it were great knowledge. Our Reformed fathers required schools.

Third, the whole debate about which phrase modifies which in article 21 of the Church Order has worn thin for me. We could debate whether “demands of the covenant” is about schools until Gabriel’s horn sounds, but advocates for homeschooling will not accept that it is, just as I will not accept that it is not. We could debate about whether “schools” means schools until we are interred, but advocates for homeschooling will keep the term up for grabs, just as I will insist that the term is not up for grabs.

Happily, we do not have to debate forever about article 21. The debate about article 21 of the Church Order is settled by Lord’s Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism. What does God require? That the schools be maintained. It is as simple and clear as that. God requires schools. Not merely Christian education. Not a homeschool. But schools. God requires schools. To what purpose, then, is the homeschool movement’s endless wrangling about article 21? The Reformed confession is that God requires schools.

Therefore, if you want to be Reformed Protestant, you must not debate and wrangle about article 21. And if you do not want schools to be the demand of the covenant in article 21, then you are not Reformed Protestant. I wish you would be instructed on the matter from your own confession in Lord’s Day 38. I maintain that it is your duty to be instructed on this matter. But if you will not heed this instruction, then you should separate from the RPC, go your own way, and have your own church where “schools” can mean whatever you want it to mean. As for the RPC, God being gracious to us, we will happily and gratefully hold our confession in Lord’s Day 38: God requires schools.

Fourth, the constant agitation over Deuteronomy 6 and Psalm 78 is fruitless. I have explained how these passages are the biblical foundation for the Reformed

doctrine of the school. The letter takes issue with that explanation, offers its own explanation again, and asks for clarification on how these passages teach the Christian school as demand of the covenant.

This correspondence is becoming like the controversy between Baptists and the Reformed over the doctrine of infant baptism. There is no verse in the Bible that explicitly says, “Baptize infants.” The doctrine of infant baptism is certainly found throughout the scriptures and can be decisively demonstrated from the scriptures. The doctrine of infant baptism is established by the biblical doctrine of God’s covenant with believers and their seed. Reformed churches confess in their confessions (Belgic Confession 34 and Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 27) what they have found in the scriptures regarding infant baptism. The Baptists hear all of this explained to them again and again, but they still do not accept it. They complain that the verses that we cite do not explicitly say, “Baptize infants.”

So it is with the biblical basis for the Christian school. The doctrine that the Christian school is a demand of the covenant is found throughout scripture and can be decisively demonstrated from the scriptures. The doctrine of the school as demand of the covenant is established by the biblical doctrine of God’s covenant with believers and their seed. Reformed churches confess in their confessions (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 38) what they have found in the scriptures regarding the schools. Those who are opposed to the school as demand of the covenant hear all of this explained to them again and again, but they still do not accept it. They basically complain that the verses that we cite do not explicitly say, “The school is the demand of the covenant.”

If there are readers opposed to my explanation of Deuteronomy 6 and Psalm 78 and who are in favor of the letter’s explanation, my reexplanation of the passages (followed no doubt by another reexplanation of the passages and another) is not going to advance anything. If anyone is interested in being instructed on the matter, I highly recommend that he listen to Rev. Nathan Langerak’s speech given for Sovereign Reformed Protestant Church in Iowa.⁴

There are members of the RPC who are at a crossroads. The dividing point is the doctrine of the Christian school. The choice is clear. Either maintain the stand of the RPC as that stand is expressed in her confessions and Church Order or find or form a church that will maintain your stand.

—AL

2 Quoted in Paul A. Kienel, *A History of Christian School Education* (Colorado Springs, CO: The Association of Christian Schools International, 1998), 1:167.

3 Kienel, *A History of Christian School Education*, 180.

4 Nathan J. Langerak, “The Necessity and Demand of the Christian School,” October 14, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3dmgPsLXzU>.



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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

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.
—James 1:19

Obeloved brethren, whom God begot of his own will with the word of truth. You are those in whose hearts God has also planted the Word, even Jesus Christ our savior. We are the firstfruits of every creature, the beginning of the recreation of all things in our head Jesus Christ, and thus the center of the new creation in the perfection of God's covenant of grace. We are such by the engrafted Word! Engrafted first in the incarnation, death, and burial of Jesus Christ. Sprung up to new life in the resurrection of Christ and implanted by the Holy Ghost in our hearts. Receive with meekness the engrafted Word! Let every man humble himself and become nothing before that Word. Let every man give all glory to that Word for his salvation. Let every man cleave to the Word as his salvation. Let every man obey his voice today while it is yet today. For that Word ever speaks and is ever heard in the house of God.

And so, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.

Slow to speak because man is quick to object. He excuses himself in the face of the Word's condemnation of him. He justifies his works in the face of the Word's condemnation of his works. He replies against the Word that it is nothing more than the preacher's opinion, and he is welcome to it. He objects to the Word that it is totally out of touch with reality, is unfair, or is hierarchy in the church. He replies against the Word that it is nothing more than the preacher's agenda. And by his objections and condemnations of the Word, he declares that it is not in fact the Word of God at all.

And man is quick to object to the Word because he is quick to wrath. The Word brings condemnation, a rebuke, heavenly wisdom antithetical to man's wisdom, division in the family, or the cross of suffering into a man's life. And a man is quickly angry at the Word's interference—as he says—in his life. A man is incensed because the Word condemns his way of life. A man is angry because the Word brought division among his friends. A man is mad because the Word condemned his family. And angry at the Word, the man reacts against the Word with denunciations.

And man has this reaction to the Word because of filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness. Filthiness is simply worldliness. Our objections against the Word and anger with the Word of God come from our flesh, which loves the world. And superfluity of naughtiness means that this filthiness is a fountain of malice in us toward the Word himself.

Such a man will receive the Word the same way that the innkeeper of Bethlehem received him, so that there was no room for him in the inn. Such a man will receive the Word the same way that Nazareth received him, by trying to push him off a cliff. Such a man will receive the Word the same way that Israel received her prophets, whom they killed because the Word of God enraged them. Such a man will receive the Word the same way that Pontius Pilate and Herod and the Sanhedrin received him, which was not at all, and he will crucify the Word.

Rather, let every man, beloved brethren, be swift to hear. For in that Word is not a preacher's agenda, worldly wisdom, or cunningly crafted lies, but the Word made flesh, the Word that is able to save your souls.

—NJL