

The background features a stylized orange illustration. A sword is positioned diagonally from the top left towards the center. A shield is positioned in the lower left, partially overlapping the sword's hilt. The shield has a circular design with several smaller circles inside. The overall style is minimalist and graphic.

SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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

Deuteronomy 33:29

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No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him. — John 1:18

To see God! That was the hope of Job: “Though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God” (Job 19:26). To see God is the blessedness of the pure in heart: they shall see God (Matt. 5:8). Seeing God was the desire of Philip, the apostle who led others to see the Christ. Philip said, “Lord, shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us” (John 14:8).

Yes, this vision of God alone satisfies the longing of the believer’s soul. To see God and to know him, to be with him and before him in all his grace and glory, who is good and the overflowing fountain of all good. To see God is the end of our salvation and the purpose of God. That we see God is the great will and purpose of the Holy Spirit who is in us.

But no man has seen God. Neither can any man see God, “the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen” (1 Tim. 6:15–16).

The only-begotten Son, he has declared God. Such is the declaration of the gospel at the advent of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came, and he declared God.

Jesus Christ came to John in the wilderness as he was baptizing in Bethabara. The Pharisees had wondered who John was. Was he Elias? Was he the prophet long ago promised to Moses in Deuteronomy 18? Was he the Christ? And John confessed that he was not the Christ! John was only the voice crying in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord!” Christ was coming after John, who was preferred before John because he was before John. Strange declaration! John baptized with water, but this one would baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire!

And Jesus came! A man? And John baptized him? Jesus did not baptize John. Mysterious. And as Jesus came up out of the water, John saw the Spirit descend on Jesus from heaven like a dove, and it abode on Jesus. What manner of man is this? Whom do men say that he is? Whom do you say that he is?

John saw and declared that Jesus is the Son of God.

He was a man. He was in the world. He became flesh. He lived and dwelt among us. He came unto his own. He was born in a stable in Bethlehem. Angels sang, shepherds came, and wise men traveled from afar because they saw his star. His mother cared for him. He went with his

parents to Nazareth, and there he lived in a house and was the son of a carpenter. He traveled to Jerusalem with his parents at age twelve. If there was any indication of his future work, it was that he stood among the doctors and lawyers and other scholars of the law, asking and answering hard questions. But he returned with his parents to Nazareth and was subject to them, as every child must be subject to his parents.

All that happened in Bethlehem and in Jerusalem among the doctors and lawyers was quickly forgotten. Only Mary laid those things to her heart, wondering what they meant.

When Jesus came unto his own, his own received him not. He was not the chief prophet according to their imaginations. He was Joseph’s son, whose brothers and sisters and father and mother they knew. He was from Nazareth. Nothing good came out of Nazareth, and no prophet ever arose out of that town. Search the law, and you will see.

And yet how he spoke! He spoke with power and authority. He so spoke and declared among men that they were compelled to say who it was that spoke. The people wondered at him. The crowds followed him. The Pharisees, his inveterate enemies, had to ask of him, “Who is this that forgives sins also?” Jesus declared, “I am the bread from heaven. Whosoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood shall never die, but I will raise him at the last day.” He said, “I am the light of the world” and “I am the door” and “I am the good shepherd” and “I am the way, the truth, and the life”; and especially did he say, “Before Abraham was, I AM!”

He also declared that he is the water of life, which if a man drink he shall never thirst. Christ forgave sins and commanded that the sinners go and sin no more. He commanded the weary and heavy laden to come unto him, and he would give them rest.

By his voice he said to the lame, “Walk”; to the sick, “Arise”; and to the dead, “Come forth.” He said to the powers of creation and to the devils too, “Be still.” All of that he accomplished with his word. Everywhere he went he went preaching the gospel of the kingdom.

He pronounced a determined woe against Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum—wherein most of his mighty works had been done and in which his mighty words had been heard—because they neither heard his word nor believed his works.

Who is this who lived among the people, so that their eyes saw him and their hands handled him and their ears heard him? Oh, when he spoke, especially did ears hear and hearts burn.

He is the only-begotten Son. Adam was the son of God by creation when God created Adam in God's image and likeness. We are sons of God by grace and the Spirit, being begotten in God's image. We have been begotten again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Of God, according to the context of John 1, we are given power to become the sons of God. But only Jesus is the only-begotten Son. He is the image of his Father. Begotten before all worlds. Begotten, not made. God of God, Light of light, true God of true God. He is the offspring of the Father. He is the one in whom God has fully reproduced himself. The Son is the image of his Father: the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person. Jesus is God! Of the same essence with the Father and the Holy Ghost and coequal and coeternal with them.

And as Son he is in the bosom of his Father. This is altogether lovely and beyond our comprehension. It is staggering in its graciousness that God gives us a window into his household and allows us a glimpse of this eternal covenant of life. And John 1:1 goes even further and describes the qualifications of Jesus Christ. Father and Son are in a loving embrace. The life of God is love. The life of God is fellowship. The life of God is the most intimate communion. The Son sits on his Father's lap like a little child, an only Son, loved and cherished by his adoring Father. And the Son lays his head upon his Father's chest. He is snugly resting in his Father's bosom. Or to make the point with another figure, a man's wife is the companion of his bosom. He receives her and loves her and communicates with her and lives with her in close, intimate fellowship. And this bosom? This loving embrace of Father for Son and loving fellowship of Son with Father? The Spirit! Yes, the Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father; so close and so intimate is their friendship and fellowship.

When the Son was among us, he was God. He became flesh; but the Son did not cease being God, so that in him all the Godhead dwells bodily; and he came to us as the one who reposed sweetly and securely in the Father's bosom. Thus there is fullness in Jesus Christ. He is the full revelation of God. He fully knows the will of God. He is full of grace. He is full of truth. In him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

Jesus Christ is the one who declares. *To declare* means to exegete. When you exegete something, you take that which is compact and unfold it; or you take an event and relate the details of that event. You take that which is

revealed in a few words and explain its sense and meaning. This is the activity of the only-begotten Son when he comes to us. He exegetes. He declares.

That one! That one described as the only-begotten; that one who is in the bosom of the Father; that one who in himself, in his own person, is the full revelation of the Father; that one who declares the Father; that one who preaches to us and speaks to us. We see a man, but in the Son dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. God has come to us and spoken to us.

Absolutely necessary it is that Jesus declares God because no man has seen God at any time.

To see does not merely mean to see with the eye of the body. To see, according to the scriptures, does not mean merely to look at, but to see is to know and to know with an intimate and close knowledge of friendship and fellowship. The only-begotten Son lies in the bosom of the Father and thus by implication has seen him. It is the seeing of the Father by the Son. It is the free access and close fellowship that a Son has with his Father. To see God is to have fellowship, life, communion, and sonship.

To see God is salvation itself.

No man has seen God. No man has seen God because man cannot see God. Sinful man cannot see God. He may not see God. He does not have the right to see God because man is a sinner. And he cannot see God because the sight of God would destroy man. But the contrast here is not between sinful man and Jesus Christ.

The contrast in the text is between Man. Man at his very best. John 1 describes the very mightiest of the prophets before Jesus. They did not see God either. Moses talked with God face to face, but this is a description of his close fellowship with God; even Moses only saw God from behind. With the other prophets God did not talk face to face but in visions and dark sayings. John the Baptist, the mightiest of those born of women and the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, did not see God. Man cannot see God and live. Man cannot look on the bare deity of God. God is other than man.

If man cannot see God—man at his very best—what shall we say of sinful man: that is, us, man, the whole human race as it is perished and fallen in Adam? John here takes all of mankind from the world's beginning until the judgment day and collectively passes judgment on all men: they have not seen God! And this places all men on the same level as having no saving knowledge apart from the only-begotten Son. Natural man can discuss God with about as much authority as a blind man can discuss a Rembrandt painting or a deaf man can discuss a Bach fugue. No one has seen God at any time.

We are blind to God and to his glory. We do not know him. All is darkness with us. To see God is life. To be

apart from God is death. God's sentence on man was that he shall see God's face no more.

And man's condition is much worse than that. He has no right to see God. He is a guilty sinner by nature.

And further still, when God shows man God's eternal power and Godhead in creation, then man takes that and holds it down in unrighteousness. Man does not see God veiled and wrapped in creation and worship him. Man does not give glory to the creator. Man worships the idol, and God gives him up to vile affections. Man would not see God in creation if God did not show himself and manifest his power and Godhead to man. And God only shows so much of his power and Godhead in order to leave man without excuse. That is for man's condemnation.

What man needs is grace. We need God in his infinite favor and his profound love and his omnipotent power to come to us, to give us the knowledge of himself, and to save us.

Was that not most clearly seen in the law? As John was preaching Christ, John declared that the law had come by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. Shocking to the Jewish ears! No grace and truth in the law! But Moses had received the law by the disposition of angels on the holy mount of Jehovah! Jehovah himself had inscribed that law with his finger! The law was the very oracles of God! It showed the will of God! The law declared who God is. But when Moses gave the law, he did not give grace and truth. He gave Israel the law: do this, and thou shalt live. And God was the God who remained afar off; the knowledge of God was hidden in the blackness of man's depravity; the way to God was impossibly barred by man's sin and guilt. If Moses and his law could not give grace, then nothing in the world can. No work of man, no worship of man, no wisdom or sacrifice of man, and no act of man. There is no grace in the law because there is no Christ in the law. He is the way, the truth, and the life. The law is not the truth. Jesus Christ is the truth. Just as the law is not grace. Christ is grace. The law is true only as it is subservient to God's purpose in Jesus Christ.

Grace and truth came by Christ. The only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has declared the Father because the Son sees the Father and is the one to whom the Father has fully communicated all the secrets of his will and purpose. The very appearance of the Son is gracious. His incarnation, his suffering, his death, and his resurrection are grace. He is the gracious fulfillment of the promise of God. He himself is full of grace and truth.

Of his fullness we receive grace for grace. The Son shows us the Father. Whoever has seen the Son has seen the Father; whoever has intimate fellowship with Christ

has intimate fellowship with the Father. Christ speaks, and faith is given. He speaks, and grace comes. He speaks and forgives our sins, so that we have the right to see the Father. Christ speaks, and there springs up in us the desire to see the Father. Christ opens the eyes of our understanding, and we see the Father revealed to us in Jesus Christ. In him we are holy to see the Father!

What is this true knowledge? That I have everything by God's grace and truth and that without him I am absolutely nothing. Through the gospel one learns from Jesus Christ to look on God's face. When this happens, man must die to himself and live by Christ alone. No man has seen God. This is our misery. The only-begotten Son, he has declared the Father. This is our salvation.

And all this Christ does by declaring to us. He is our chief prophet, who fully reveals to us the eternal counsel and will of God for our salvation.

Christ himself is the declaration of God. That Christ came is the declaration that God is faithful. In Christ's actual coming, he is the declaration that God is powerful, for Christ became flesh and dwelt among us. And he is in his own person the full revelation of the Father. In Christ's own ministry he powerfully spoke the Word.

He does this today by declaring in the preaching. Not every word that comes off the pulpit is the Word of God. The exegesis of the word is the way that we know God. Thus the preaching must unfold, interpret, and explain the words of scripture, so that Christ is declared; and in that declaration he himself speaks, so that the preaching is in truth the very Word of God. Everywhere in scripture the Word is revealed, and that Word in himself reveals the Father to us. If Christ is not preached, God is not revealed. The only way that we see God is to see him in Jesus Christ.

This is what Jesus told the Pharisees, who imagined that they were great teachers of the people because they could expound the law in minutest detail. "You take away the key of knowledge," Christ said to them. "You do not see me in the law and in the psalms and in the prophets; and you do not see, therefore, that God is gracious only in me and that salvation is not the end result of your earnest keeping of the law. You do not see me in the law and in the prophets; and, therefore, the scriptures are a closed book to you and to the people whom you instruct." Yet again Jesus said, "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me" (John 5:39). The Pharisees thought that they had eternal life in the scriptures; but what they saw in the scriptures was a way of salvation that involved their scrupulous observance of the law in order to merit with God, and they were ignorant that the whole law shut off man-salvation and drove to Jesus Christ. The Jews saw in

Moses and his law a way to God. He could be reached by dint of man's efforts to keep the law. But this is what Moses did, as does every true prophet: he pointed to Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

This also then is the task of all true prophets. This is what John the Baptist did. He declared that the one who came after him was preferred before him because he was before him. This is what the preaching must do today. We do not need a man. Christ uses men. That is true. But that may not be interpreted to mean that we need this man or that man. Israel did not need Moses after Christ came. The law came by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. We do not need a man. We need God who became a man to show us the Father, who fully reveals God's will concerning our salvation, and who declares God to us in the careful exegesis and explanation of the scriptures.

We need nothing besides Jesus Christ. The knowledge of God is the beginning and the end of all blessedness. The knowledge of God is above all things most precious. It is salvation itself. In Christ we behold God face to face. In Christ we are made acceptable to God by the forgiveness of sins and through sanctification of the Spirit and all by his Word. He who lies snugly in the Father's embrace became a man and dwelt among us, became one with us, in order to save us. In him alone is the way to the Father.

By faith now! In the preaching of the gospel.

Then face to face.

"Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

And that is salvation!

—NJL

EDITORIAL

HENRY DANHOF AND THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL IN SULLY, IOWA

Introduction

In the previous editorial we reacquainted ourselves with Herman Hoeksema's first doctrinal controversy. That controversy continued from 1914 to 1920 in Fourteenth Street Christian Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan. The doctrinal issue in that controversy was the Christian school. Herman Hoeksema taught that God's covenant required that families in Fourteenth Street maintain and use Holland Christian School. The result of the controversy was a split in Fourteenth Street, with many members leaving not only Fourteenth Street but leaving also the Christian Reformed denomination altogether. The result of the controversy was also peace in Fourteenth Street, which peace was God's gift to his people of unity in his truth.

In this editorial we acquaint ourselves with another father of the Reformed Protestant Churches, Henry Danhof. Along with Herman Hoeksema and George Ophoff and others, Henry Danhof opposed his Christian Reformed denomination's false doctrine of common grace, adopted by the Christian Reformed Synod

of Kalamazoo in 1924. Along with Herman Hoeksema and like-minded Christian Reformed men, Henry Danhof started the *Standard Bearer* to expose the errors of his denomination and to set forth the truth of God's sovereign, particular grace. Along with Herman Hoeksema, Henry Danhof was deposed from the ministry in the Christian Reformed Church. Along with Herman Hoeksema and similarly deposed men and consistories, Henry Danhof signed the Act of Agreement in 1924, which federated the churches and which federation would eventually become the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC).

Although by his confession Henry Danhof was one in doctrine with Herman Hoeksema and the Protestant Reformed Churches, Danhof sinfully separated from Hoeksema and the PRC in 1925 for apparently personal reasons. Henry Danhof and his congregation in Kalamazoo, Michigan, led an ecclesiastically independent life with no denominational affiliation for many years. When Danhof neared emeritation, he and his congregation sought to be reunited with the Christian Reformed

Church (CRC). Although both Danhof and the CRC knew that Danhof and his congregation still opposed the doctrine of common grace, the CRC received them into the denomination. Thus Danhof added to his sin of schism from the PRC the sin of false ecumenism with the Christian Reformed Church. The emeritus Henry Danhof soon was in trouble with the CRC again for agitating against common grace, which he had promised not to do as a condition of being received back into the CRC. The end result was that the CRC, skittish about excommunicating Danhof from the kingdom of heaven, invented a new way to terminate membership in the church. The denomination simply “erased” Danhof and several members from the membership rolls against their will, all the while insisting that the erasures were not discipline. For the second time in his life, Henry Danhof was cast out of the Christian Reformed Church, that time for good. The aged and sick Henry Danhof ended his life ecclesiastically independent again, preaching to a small group until one Sunday in the pulpit he succumbed to a tumor behind his eye and died a few weeks later.

Although Henry Danhof committed the sin of schism against the PRC so early, he is still considered a father of the Protestant Reformed Churches in the historical sense. Almost alone among the many Christian Reformed ministers of the day, Herman Hoeksema and Henry Danhof stood shoulder to shoulder against the hellish doctrine of common grace. Henry Danhof was a founding editor of the *Standard Bearer*, which was a powerful instrument in the formation of the Protestant Reformed Churches. The churches were established upon the doctrine of sovereign grace that Henry Danhof taught and wrote.

The Reformed Protestant Churches today are the continuation of the old PRC. The Protestant Reformed Churches have apostatized from their doctrinal heritage by making man’s work the instrument of his salvation. The doctrine of the PRC today is that if a man would be saved, there is that which he must do. God brought reformation to the Protestant Reformed Churches, not by correcting the apostate PRC but by forming the Reformed Protestant Churches out of the PRC. Therefore, the Reformed Protestant Churches claim Herman Hoeksema as our spiritual father. And the Reformed Protestant Churches recognize Henry Danhof as an instrument that God used historically in the formation of our mother. In this historical sense Henry Danhof is a father of the Reformed Protestant Churches.

The tale of Henry Danhof and the Christian school is gripping, with parts of it almost unimaginable. The history demonstrates the conviction of our fathers that the Christian school is the demand of the covenant. Our

fathers sacrificed all their possessions and were willing to sacrifice their safety and their lives for the sake of having and maintaining the Christian school. Only God’s covenant with believers and their seed could give rise to such conviction.

The First Major Issue in Danhof’s Ministry

Henry Danhof’s first charge as a Christian Reformed minister was Sully Christian Reformed Church in the Dutch settlement of Sully, Iowa. Danhof served the Sully congregation from 1910 to 1914. When Danhof arrived in Sully in 1910, the church was in the midst of a tremendous struggle to establish a Christian school. Therefore, the first major issue that Henry Danhof had to face in his ministry was not common grace in 1924 but the establishment of the Christian school from 1910 to 1914.

It is striking that God made the Christian school the first issue that both Herman Hoeksema and Henry Danhof had to face. For Henry Danhof from 1910 to 1914, the issue was establishing a Christian school. For Herman Hoeksema from 1914 to 1920, the issue was maintaining and using the already-established Christian school. But for both men the first major issue of their ministries was the Christian school. When the Reformed Protestant Churches look all the way back to our fathers’ beginnings, the one issue that we find is the Christian school. Because the Christian school is the demand of the covenant, the one issue that we find in our fathers’ beginnings is God’s covenant with believers and their seed. What a worthy issue to find at the beginning!

When generations to come look back at the beginning of the Reformed Protestant Churches, they will find that the Christian school as a demand of the covenant was also one of the very first issues that the Reformed Protestant Churches had to face. Within mere months of the denomination’s beginning, the school question arose. Must we establish Reformed Protestant schools, or may we use the Protestant Reformed schools? May we as a denomination be a haven for homeschooling, or is the Christian school required? Is the good Christian school a demand of the covenant, or isn’t it? These questions are not hard to answer. They are as clear as a sunny morning. But the answering of them is always controversial, for there are always those who will not stand with their own confessions and with God’s covenant.

Nevertheless, God loves his covenant; and time and again in history, he brings the truth of his covenant before his people by bringing before them the school question. In their struggle with the school question, God brings his people to see the truth and beauty of his covenant with believers and their seed.

The Struggle to Establish Sully Christian School

When Henry Danhof arrived in Sully in 1910, the school question was the issue of the day. For two years already the congregation had seen the need for a Christian school.

It was at a Men's Society meeting "few in number" at that early date of February 11, 1908, that the necessity of Christian education was not only considered, but it was decided to call a general assembly for this noble cause.¹

These few fathers rightly viewed the school as a "necessity." They rightly viewed the school as "this noble cause." But what was it that made the school necessary and noble? There was only one thing: God's covenant with believers and their seed in Jesus Christ. Any other foundation than the covenant of God would leave the school on the shifting sands of man's will. When the general assembly met to discuss the school in 1908, two area ministers pled the school on the basis of God's covenant.

These two ministers made a sincere and impressing plea for the covenantal promise pledged in the baptismal vow by the parents toward their children, God's heritage. The result was that a society was organized, and at once a School Board was elected.²

Another account of the history highlights the conviction of these fathers that the school was required.

A men's society was organized to study God's Word and matters pertaining to the training of the covenant children of the congregation. As a result of these discussions a Christian School Society came into being. This was the beginning of our present Christian School Society. These pioneers of yesterday gave evidence of conviction that God wills that our children receive a Christian training and that it isn't merely a matter of choice what kind of training our covenant children receive and we are rightfully proud of the fact that we still, by and large, subscribe to the "world and life view" of our fathers.³

However, between the organization of the society in 1908 and Henry Danhof's arrival in 1910, the difficulties began to mount.

A School Society was organized and a School Board was elected, but to build a school was a much more difficult matter for such a small group. Many ways and means were considered but no decision taken at this time. As time marched on the hopeful and high spirit of former days seemed to subside somewhat. A few more meetings were called by the Board with no results and sometimes it seemed as though the whole matter would die in infancy and the hope to attain the goal of a Christian school would never be realized in Sully.⁴

Early in 1911 Henry Danhof, then the minister in Sully Christian Reformed Church, spoke at a general meeting. He taught the Christian school as a necessity. With that speech positive action was taken to establish a Christian summer school.

But a covenant God rules and reigns supreme and many fervent prayers were sent up to the throne of grace and these prayers were heard even when it seemed in vain. Not until February 11, 1911, did any action take place. On that date a general meeting was called and our pastor, Rev. Henry Danhof, again pressed the need for a Christian day school. Plans were laid and later realized to start a summer school in the consistory room of the Christian Reformed church, that in this way and by these efforts "used as a stepping stone" to the real goal, namely, a Christian day school, might be obtained. From then on many propaganda meetings were held.⁵

The summer school met for the summers of 1911 and 1912. By 1913 the parents became convinced that they needed a full-time Christian school. And what was the foundation of their conviction? Nothing less than God's covenant. Though they faced much opposition from their own members, the truth of God's covenant with believers and their seed established the determination of these parents to have a Christian school.

These two summer sessions were convincing factors to start not only summer school sessions, but a full fledged elementary school in order that the baptismal vows might be fulfilled according to the demands of our covenant God and that the entire instruction rendered should be in harmony with the Scripture.

1 "Fifty Years in Retrospect," in *50th Anniversary: School for Christian Instruction*, the fiftieth anniversary booklet of Sully Christian School (no author or publication data given), 12.

2 "Fifty Years in Retrospect," 12.

3 *Sully CRC 50th Anniversary Booklet*, 8. This is not the same booklet as the one listed above.

4 "Fifty Years in Retrospect," 12.

5 "Fifty Years in Retrospect," 12.

The School Board decided to call another general assembly to see what could be done so as to get a schoolhouse and get started by September of 1913. After prayerful consideration and trust in our faithful covenant God, committees were appointed to raise funds by donations and pledges. Shares were also sold to be redeemed later. There was much opposition by those who failed to see their covenant responsibilities.

The group, few in number, striving to attain the goal set before them, and with faith in God placed the need of positive Christian training in school as well as in the home before Him, and went forward in the spirit of Nehemiah of old who said, "We, his servants, will arise and build and the God of heaven will prosper us." Although more opposition arose from the inside than from the outside of the circle, with God's help the effort of these few was not put to shame. After all, the Lord does not forsake those who seek to follow His commands and shoulder the task set before them.⁶

Tremendous sacrifices were required if the school were to open. Many of the people lived so far away that sending children to school was virtually impossible. In fact, at the beginning of 1913, it still looked like it would be impossible to open a full-time Christian school. A report of Sully Christian Reformed Church in the January 9, 1913, *Banner* noted,

Other societies, usually found in our church circles, are all there, even a society for Christian Primary Instruction, although the prospects of the last named are, at least for the time being, not very bright on account of the very large territory over which our people are scattered, more than 150 square miles, not figuring the extremities and the mud roads of Iowa which are almost impassable for horses, not saying anything about children, in rainy weather, particularly during the spring season.⁷

If the school were to open, those who lived so far away would have to leave family farms behind. This they did for the sake of their brethren and their children. That is, this they did for the sake of God's covenant.

Several who lived too far away to send their children sold their farms and moved as close to Sully as they could. Many sacrifices were made and those

who made them experienced that these sacrifices were rewarded in God's own time.⁸

The school opened its doors in September of 1913.

The Struggle to Maintain Sully Christian School

The school had been built upon the foundation of God's covenant with believers and their children in Christ. This was the only foundation that could weather the storms that were coming. If the school had been built on the foundation of man's will or merely as a good option for parents, the school would never have lasted after Henry Danhof left Sully for Dennis Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1914. Only if the school was the demand of the covenant could the parents maintain their conviction to maintain the school against the forces that were soon arrayed against them.

A fierce storm of opposition to the school swept through Sully in 1917 and 1918. World War I had been raging in Europe since 1914. When the United States entered the conflict by declaring war on Germany early in 1917, a wave of anti-German sentiment swept through the United States. Because some Americans found the Dutch language and culture to be similar to the German language and culture, the anti-German sentiment of the war years was often directed against the Dutch. The Christian school in Sully, Iowa, became the focus of this opposition.

Adding to the danger for Sully Christian School was the fact that the governor of Iowa, William Harding, inflamed the anti-Dutch sentiment in his state by outlawing the speaking or writing of the Dutch language in Iowa.

Harding is probably best known for his infamous Babel Proclamation in 1918 during World War I, declaring that only English could be spoken and written in Iowa, pitting citizen against citizen and casting innocent Iowans as traitors.⁹

Two powerful forces were arrayed against Sully Christian School in 1917 and 1918: the howling mob and the government. In the face of these powers, only God himself and his covenant with his people in Christ could save the school. If the school had been built on any foundation other than God's covenant, the school undoubtedly would have perished. But time and again, in the face of governmental demands to close the school and in the face of angry men who wanted to burn down the school, God's people in Sully maintained the school as the demand of

6 "Fifty Years in Retrospect," 12.

7 "Sully, Iowa, Items," in *Banner* (January 9, 1913).

8 "Fifty Years in Retrospect," 12.

9 "William Harding: Making the Case for Perhaps Iowa's Worst Governor," in *Iowa History Journal*, <https://iowahistoryjournal.com/william-harding/>.

God's covenant. The fiftieth anniversary booklet of Sully Christian School tells the tale.

The future was to be a period of struggle and anxiety. It even seemed to be a matter of life or death.

In our neighboring town of Peoria, they experienced serious trouble and the results were that their school and church were both burned down to the foundation by arsonists. Rumors were spread that the Dutch School at Sully was to be next because it was claimed that Dutch was being taught. This was designed to blaspheme our institution, for no Dutch had been taught in the school for years. Yet it seemed that the Christian schools were the object of spite work for on short notice the rumors became a reality. A telephone call was received from Newton, our own county seat, that the school must close its doors at once. The reasons given were that the public was against the school and if we did not close down at once mob rule was inevitable and the building would be burned down. A School Board meeting was called at once to talk matters over and decide what should be done. It was decided to give a vacation and appoint a committee to investigate and discuss the matter with the county authorities. The committee took action at once and experienced a very cold reception from the authorities at our county seat. It was given them to understand that if the school re-opened we could not expect any protection from them. The promise was given that if they were willing to send their children to the public school they would be protected in every way. The committee understood very well that their plight was a very sad one and the very existence of our Christian school was at stake. But the committee appointed did not tarry and was not discouraged so as to give up that easily. At once they went to Des Moines to investigate with our state authorities and got in touch with Governor Harding and insisted on protection from then on. Assurance was given them and that the matter would be investigated at once and a report would be forthcoming in the near future. So all they could do was wait for an answer and before many days had passed, one morning some mourning crepe was hanging on one of the school door knobs bearing the inscription, "Dead and Buried."

The promise made by Governor Harding was never fulfilled and not a word was received from state authorities. Again a committee was sent to contact state authorities and this time they were told that the county must give protection. With this glad news the committee went to Newton

at once but with the same result—they received no hearing. Therefore, the Board called a general Society meeting to discuss future plans and the outcome was that it was unanimously decided to open the doors at once, which of course took a lot of courage and conviction. This step was taken only after prayerful and careful consideration and meditation upon the possible consequences of this action. After all, principles were at stake—Christian covenant convictions.

Surely a word of gratitude to our teachers, Mr. Henry Kuiper and Miss Marie Vos, is not amiss. They were very willing and ready to teach, even under such adverse and trying conditions. On the 20th day of May all the pupils arrived and school work was resumed on schedule. This was a direct proof that the school was not "dead and buried", but full of life and courage. Many hearts rejoiced and were thankful that the children could return to school again. However, some fear was expressed that the real test was yet to come. This soon proved to be true and grim reality. The same afternoon seven men of the county authorities appeared with the request to close the doors at once. Among those who appeared were: the president of the Council of Defence, the County Attorney, the Sheriff, and another attorney. They tried to impress the Board that it was un-American to have a separate school and that the county could not protect such a school. The officials also advised that they should send their children to the public schools and then they would give protection from every angle.

The spokesman of our Board tried to explain to this committee from Newton that God's Word was our basis for education and the principles laid down in Scripture our aim and guide. But all this was spoken in vain and they would not promise any protection. The Board stood shoulder to shoulder and told them the School Society had decided to re-open the school and the Board had no right to shut down.

A call was sent through the Society for volunteers to come and guard the school building against mob rule which, according to rumors which reached our Board, was to come that night.

Some 30 men, members of the School Society, appeared to protect the school property although nothing really happened that night. The sheriff had expressed himself by saying, "If anything turns up, boys, just let me know at once and I'll be there in 20 minutes." It is possible that this saying of the sheriff had its proper effect elsewhere and, although

everything seemed quite peaceable, a vigil watch was kept each night. Two armed guards were placed by turns, but as time went on and nothing happened and all remained quiet, the guards left for home about three o'clock in the morning. One morning, thinking that all had quieted down, they left as usual. But again we were to be reminded that God's providence rules everything.

Rev. Haveman rose about four o'clock that morning to prepare himself for the funeral service of George Sjaardema, one of the soldier boys of our congregation. As he entered his study in the parsonage, Rev. Haveman noticed fire in the northeast room of the school across the street. He hurried to the Dan Dieleman home to get help and together they were able to put the fire out. The entire room had been sprayed with kerosene and a fire had been started under Miss Vos' desk. The fire had burned a large hole in the floor so that the desk had fallen through into the basement. However, it seemed that the fire could not make much headway as the windows had all been left shut except the one through which the firebug had entered. It seemed that the fire did not receive sufficient air to burn fast. Every window pane in the room was cracked but none had fallen out. The hand of the Lord could clearly be observed and it is marvelous in our eyes!

Efforts were made to find out who the guilty party was. Two secret service men with blood hounds were obtained from Des Moines but it seemed that no evidence could be found to prove who the guilty party was. It was felt that the detectives learned more than they would admit at the time and the case remained in the hands of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. About two years later the guilty party was caught and convicted and drew a long time jail sentence.

The damage done by the fire was covered by insurance and repairs were speedily accomplished. School was resumed at once and all went well although guards were placed every night for quite some time. The Lord protected us and no other attempts were made to molest the school.

The trials were not yet ended, but the coming test was of an entirely different nature. In the fall of 1918 our community was stricken with influenza, which swept over our entire nation. Many lives were taken during this epidemic. All schools, churches, and public places were closed for quite some time.

Then in the spring and summer many children were stricken with scarlet fever, but by the good hand of our God, no lives were taken.

As we now look back upon the past experiences and trials we openly confess the Lord turned all to our good. Many prayers were sent up to the throne of grace in these trying times and these prayers were heard and the love for our Christian school has grown among our people.¹⁰

In 1920 Henry Danhof would have one more opportunity to speak to God's people in Sully regarding their school. At the dedication service of the newly-expanded building, Henry Danhof was invited back as the main speaker.

In the afternoon Rev. Henry Danhof, the main speaker for the day, gave a message. Rev. Danhof was a former minister of Sully and during his pastorate at Sully the school opened in September, 1913. His topic that day was "The Antithesis", in which he brought out the contrast between the people of God and the people of the world. The task placed before the people of God is a heavy task, yet a pleasant task. He also stressed the fact that if we strictly maintained the principles clearly stated in the Word of God we would surely experience opposition of the world, but that the Lord's blessings also will be certain and sure. We returned home with happy and thankful hearts to our covenant God for His guiding hand so clearly shown and the work was begun with renewed enthusiasm and high spirits for the year to come.¹¹

Conclusion

The conviction of Henry Danhof and the Christian Reformed parents in Sully, Iowa, in the early 1900s was that the Christian school is a demand of God's covenant. By grounding the school in the truth of his covenant, God preserved the school through fierce storms. No other foundation could have sustained the school in those years. Upon what other foundation could fathers have risked their lives and limbs to protect the school? Upon what other foundation could the parents have told the government officials that they could not obey their orders? Only God's covenant can answer to those threats to the school.

When Reformed churches today sever the connection between God's covenant and the Christian school, they kill their Christian schools. When Reformed churches deny that the Christian school is the demand of the covenant, they take away the covenant foundation of the school from under the feet of the parents. What will the

¹⁰ "Fifty Years in Retrospect," 13-15.

¹¹ "Fifty Years in Retrospect," 15.

parents say when the government someday tells the Christian school to close its doors because anti-Christian sentiment is running high? Those parents will have to obey the unlawful mandate of the government, close their school, and scatter to their homes to homeschool their children. For them the school is not necessary. It is preferable, maybe. It is the best option, probably. But it is not the demand of the covenant. According to them the demand of the covenant is only Christian content, and the parent can give that in his home. This is the death of the school. Only if the Christian school is the demand of the covenant by God's own ordinance can the parents insist on maintaining the school over against the threats that will never stop coming against the school.

The Reformed Protestant Churches must learn from this history. Our mother has already destroyed her schools by her synodical decision in 2009 that the school is not the demand of the covenant. Her schools have no more foundation in God's covenant when the storms will inevitably rise against those schools. No one in the PRC will be able to rise up and say, "But the Christian school is necessary as the demand of God's covenant." No one in the PRC will be able to rise up and say, "We must obey God rather than men," for God has not commanded the school. All of the PRC will have to rise up and say, "We must close

our schools, for they were only ever one option—even if the best option—among many." The PRC have torn down the covenant foundation of their schools and have left their schools exposed to their enemies.

And what of the schools of the Reformed Protestant Churches? The threat to the Reformed Protestant schools does not come first of all from our mother, though her example inexplicably seems preferable to some. The threat to the Reformed Protestant schools comes from within our own midst. There are men teaching us that we can do away with article 21 of the Church Order. There are men teaching us that "the demands of the covenant" does not apply to schools but only to the content of Christian instruction. There are families caught up in the homeschooling movement, so that they would prefer to homeschool even where there is a Christian school. There are those who say that they want a school and who use a school but who deny that the Christian school is a "must" of the covenant and say only that it is a "may." All of this is a threat to the Reformed Protestant schools.

Beloved Reformed Protestant Churches, learn your history. Learn God's covenant. God requires the school. Upon this foundation, and upon this foundation alone, can the school be built and maintained.

—AL

FROM THE EDITOR

In this issue of *Sword and Shield*, a snake gets stepped on, a school is defended against arson, the reward of grace is truly gracious, a project to redefine all Protestant Reformed doctrine is uncovered, and more. Plenty to keep one's blood warm as one hunkers down amidst the snow.

Mr. Luke Bomers finishes his series on the reward of grace, completing the recovery of this doctrine for the Reformed faith. We also welcome a new author, Mr. Braylon Mingerink. Braylon is a high school student at Grace Reformed Protestant School and a confessing member of First Reformed Protestant Church. Braylon has closely followed the doctrinal issues in the reformation that resulted in the formation of the Reformed Protestant Churches, and he contributes a staunch defense of the truth.

With this issue we also welcome a new copyeditor to *Sword and Shield*. Mrs. Allyson Ophoff joins Mrs. Evelyn

Langerak and Mrs. Stephanie Lanning in the behind-the-scenes labor of copyediting the articles for the magazine. Evelyn and Stephanie have spent countless hours combing through the articles submitted by the writers to correct everything from spelling to grammar to style to clarity and more. They also work with the typesetter, proofread the typeset magazine, and make sure everything is correct and fits in the given layout. Ally is a welcome addition to the copyediting team.

God has been good to our magazine in many ways. Not only does he give us much material to write about, but he also gives us those who are willing and able to put that material into a legible form for the benefit of the readers. He truly is the overflowing fountain of all good (Belgic Confession 1).

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

—AL

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

SLITHERING AROUND AGAIN (4): FAITH AND REPENTANCE

Introduction

In the last three articles in this rubric, I dealt with Rev. Martyn McGeown's series "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness" from the blog of the Reformed Free Publishing Association.¹

The articles in his series stand in the service of promoting official Protestant Reformed dogma that there are activities of man that precede the blessings of God. This statement of Protestant Reformed dogma was adopted by the Protestant Reformed synod in 2020. The Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) have since qualified and modified the statement, but it still stands in all its naked Pelagianism as it was originally adopted, and all the qualifications and modifications do not make the statement better. Those qualifications—God-wrought, God-worked, by grace—serve only as deception and cover for the false doctrine of the statement.

The theology of the statement takes many different forms and has many different permutations and iterations. But they are all united in the theology's promotion of man. The Protestant Reformed Churches have committed themselves to giving man a place in his salvation in some shape, form, or fashion, whether it be by teaching faith as that which man must do to be saved, repentance as that without which God may not forgive a man, forgiveness of the neighbor as a prerequisite to God's forgiveness of the believer, or the godly life as the way to assurance of salvation.

In short, the theology is conditional—a theology of prerequisites. First man must do something—fill in the blank—and then God does something in response—fill in the blank. Unless and until man does what is required, God cannot and may not bless, assure, comfort, forgive, and the like. It is a man-first-and-God-second theology.

This theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches is also united in being terrified of God's decree. Reverend

McGeown is typical of Protestant Reformed ministers and theologians in his oblique criticisms, cautions, and warnings against sound, Reformed, decretal theology. This attack on the decree takes the form of an attack on eternal justification, but all of his warnings and cautions about eternal justification apply equally to the decree in general. The decree makes him nervous and fearful that perhaps the decree will not leave enough room for man, and so he goes about to undermine confidence in the decree and to make decretal theology to appear antinomian. In his series, for instance, he makes this statement:

If God forgave our sins without repentance or before we repented, he would be communicating to us that sin does not matter. We might conclude that God approves of our sin, and it would even encourage us to continue in sin.²

Reverend McGeown is absolutely petrified of the gospel of the cross of Jesus Christ. God communicated to us that he forgave our sins before we repented when he said in Romans 4:25, concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ, "And was raised again for [because of] our justification." Justification is forgiveness, or, better, forgiveness is one side of justification. When God says, "Justification," he includes in that forgiveness of sins. He forgave our sins at the cross before we repented. And according to 2 Corinthians 5:18–19, he will have that preached in the whole world:

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.

1 Martyn McGeown, "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness." The seven-part blog series began April 27, 2022 (<https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-1-repentance>), and ended June 1, 2022 (<https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-7-repentance-and-remission>). All of the italics for emphasis in the quotations are McGeown's.

2 Martyn McGeown, "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (7): Repentance and Remission," June 1, 2022, <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-7-repentance-and-remission>.

When God says, “Not imputing their trespasses unto them,” he means forgiveness of sins and justification. When he forgave their sins, he reconciled them to himself. All who claim to be ministers, such as Reverend McGeown, are to preach the ministry of reconciliation or they are utterly unfaithful to God, who sends ambassadors into the world to proclaim these glad tidings. God demands that ministers of reconciliation, if they be that, declare exactly what Reverend McGeown and the whole PRC find so offensive. By that same measure there is no ministry of reconciliation in the PRC. The ministry of reconciliation declares that the elect are forgiven! They are reconciled! God is not communicating in this that sin does not matter. He judged his Son at the cross because sin does matter. The cross stands as the testimony against Reverend McGeown’s invented fear about preaching forgiveness without repentance.

The theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches is apostasy from the historic position of the denomination. These churches would cast out Herman Hoeksema as antinomian and call for a reexamination of all his theology. He loved eternal justification, and he would have nothing to do with man-first-and-God-second theology. He loved decretal theology and was neither nervous nor fearful about it. The theologians of the Protestant Reformed Churches make an appeal or two to Herman Hoeksema when it suits their purposes, but they are done with the theology of the man at its essence, which was to give all glory to God. He was accused of being one-sided, but the Protestant Reformed Churches are finished with being one-sided. Being apostasy from the positions of their fathers, the dogma of the Protestant Reformed Churches is also apostasy from the Reformed faith for which their fathers stood.

Reverend McGeown’s attack on the decree stands in the service of his theology of faith, repentance, and forgiveness, all of which for him mean man and what man does in his salvation. His theology is not decretal—that is to say, God first—theology, but it is temporal—that is to say, man first—theology.

I warn that if anyone starts to argue with you about a temporal order, he is up to no good. He is an Arminian. The Arminians are all about what happens in time. For the Arminian what happens in time is what God therefore decreed. The Arminian loathes the idea that what God decreed is what happens in time. For the Arminian *time*—by which he means the will and works of man in time—is decisive in salvation. Time and what happens in time are decisive for the Protestant Reformed Churches as well. Time for them is real. The decree is an abstraction.

Reverend McGeown’s man-centered, man-first theology is that justification is by faith and repentance. For him God does not and God may not forgive sinners unless and

until they repent and believe—with an active faith and by God’s grace, of course. McGeown’s doctrine of justification is that in a man’s mind and conscience he is not justified until he repents. His doctrine is the same as Professor Engelsma’s doctrine. It is a repentance-first-and-then-remission doctrine, or it is a repentance-first-and-then-justification doctrine. Or, better, McGeown’s doctrine is justification by faith and by repentance. For him man must first repent, and then and only then will God forgive him. God may not and God does not forgive unless man repents. This doctrine of repentance first and then remission is a corruption of the doctrine of justification by faith alone and is the teaching of justification by faith and works. Reverend McGeown’s doctrine that he teaches the churches, that he teaches his church, and that he promotes on the blog of the Reformed Free Publishing Association is a doctrine of justification that is the same in essence as Rome’s doctrine.

He introduces so many distinctions in his series that it is hard to keep them all straight. There is a distinction between faith and repentance, a distinction between repentance and conversion, a distinction between repentance and works, and a distinction between justification and forgiveness. Then when he should make a distinction—between faith and repentance—he mashes them together into a single entity.

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

44. And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.
45. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures,
46. And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day:
47. And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.
48. And ye are witnesses of these things.
49. And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.

Two Sides of One Coin

Reverend McGeown begins his treatment of forgiveness by faith and repentance with an explanation of repentance. It is noteworthy in light of his later classification of repentance as *not a work* that he quotes from the Greek scholar Richard C. Trench, who says about the word *repentance*

that it “gradually advanced in depth and fullness of meaning, till [it came to express] that mighty change in mind, heart, and life wrought by the Spirit of God.”³

I note that Trench also quotes favorably from William Chillingworth:

But that repentance to which remission of sins and salvation is promised, is perpetually expressed by the word *metanoia*, which signifieth a thorough change of the heart and soul, of the life and actions.⁴

Thus it is well established that repentance encompasses the whole life. This idea is not some oddity of rabid and radical Reformed Protestant ministers. This is why Luther wrote, as the very first of his Ninety-five Theses, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” And again Luther wrote, as the third of the Ninety-five Theses, “Yet it does not mean solely inner repentance; such inner repentance is worthless unless it produces various outward mortifications of the flesh.”

This is also the view of the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord’s Day 33:

Q. 89. What is the mortification of the old man?

A. It is a sincere sorrow of heart that we have provoked God by our sins, and more and more to hate and flee from them. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 121)

The Reformation, and with it the Reformed creeds, recognized that repentance involves the whole life. Repentance is a way of life. Repentance is a description of the works of the believer. Along with this, when the gospel promises salvation to the repentant, the gospel does not do that because repentance is the cause or condition of salvation but because repentance is the mark of God’s children, who are forgiven and to whom God has promised eternal life. By that repentance, as manifested in its fruits, the child of God is made known in the world.

But the important thing for Reverend McGeown is not simply the definition of *repentance* but that definition as he crafts it in order to *declassify repentance as work*. He writes,

If repentance is a “change of mind,” how exactly do we classify it theologically? Confusion in the church world forces us to face that question. Is it

something we do, is it something God does, is it a gift to us, is it an activity of man, is it part of our salvation? These questions are asked today.⁵

Reverend McGeown does not state that there is confusion about the doctrine of repentance only because of the Protestant Reformed false doctrine of repentance that is necessary in order to receive forgiveness or of repentance as a prerequisite to the forgiveness of sins. Over against this is the clear teaching of the Reformed Protestant Churches that repentance is not faith. That is the issue. The issue is not whether repentance is an activity of man, a gift, or something God does. *The issue is whether repentance is faith*. And if repentance is not faith, then repentance belongs to those things that may be called works.

It is here that Reverend McGeown goes to work on the understanding of repentance. He writes,

Third, repentance is not a work, that is, repentance is not the doing of a good work, such as obedience to the law is a good work.⁶

It is here that we see why Reverend McGeown in his definition of *repentance* was so concerned to separate it from the life of the believer. He supposes that he can escape the charge against his doctrine of justification by faith and repentance that his doctrine is justification by faith and works. His supposed proof in question and answer 91 of the Heidelberg Catechism for excluding the life of the believer from repentance is foolish. He writes,

Heidelberg Catechism A 91 defines good works, and does not include repentance in that definition: “Only those which proceed from a true faith, are performed according to the law of God, and to his glory.”⁷

His appeal to the Catechism is wrong. Answer 91 in its definition of “good works” is explaining its statement about the “quickening of the new man,” that it means “to live according to the will of God in all good works” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 121–22). McGeown must remember that the Catechism in Lord’s Day 33 is explaining conversion. The negative side of this is sorrow of heart for sin and to hate and flee from it, and the positive side is to live according to the will of God in all good works. You could just as easily say that the Catechism is describing the whole life of repentance, by which the child of God

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

4 William Chillingworth, “Nine Sermons before Charles,” in R. C. Trench, *Synonyms in the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1989), 269.

5 Martyn McGeown, “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (2): Classifying Repentance (a),” May 2, 2022, <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-2-classifying-repentance-a>.

6 McGeown, “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (2).”

7 McGeown, “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (2).”

becomes manifested in the world. In this case repentance includes not only the sorrow of heart or change of mind but also the good works that are the fruits of this.

I note only in passing that Reverend McGeown quotes favorably from G. I. Williamson's commentary on the Westminster Confession:

*We could not more radically misconceive repentance than to regard it as a work performed...Repentance, far from being a conscious act of obedience well-pleasing unto God and bringing in return his blessing and reward, is rather a consciousness of one's total inability to please God or to do anything to secure his blessing and reward.*⁸

Obviously, this matter of repentance not being work is very important to Reverend McGeown. He spends a great deal of time making sure no one can think that repentance is work. He even breezes over Williamson's total corruption of the idea of work in the believer, which Williamson defines as "a conscious act of obedience... bringing in return his blessing and reward."

Really! So work brings reward. Well, if that is what a work is, then there are no works in the Christian religion because the very idea that obedience brings a reward in return is anathema. By that measure Reverend McGeown can include the whole Christian life as that which is outside the concept of work, for where in the Christian life does anyone ever consciously obey to bring a reward from God in return?

But none of this corruption is allowed to detain Reverend McGeown in his pursuit of the idea that repentance is not work. And the question is, why? What purpose does that serve? It serves the purpose of allowing him to teach justification by faith and repentance.

Still pursuing the idea that repentance is not a work, Reverend McGeown also treats us to his theory that "repentance is not conversion." He also reminds us that "theological precision and distinguishing of concepts are important."⁹ And he is not finished making distinctions. He denies that repentance is conversion, with the obvious purpose to blunt the sword of the Heidelberg Catechism that would be used against his distinction between repentance and conversion. He writes,

The Heidelberg Catechism [LD 33] teaches about the mortification of the old man, which is one part

of the two parts of conversion...Repentance is not the same thing as mortification of the old man.¹⁰

This is rich! He must take his audience for fools. He had written previously,

When God brings us to repentance, we see our sins as God sees them...and we hate them. Because we hate them, which is a radical change of mind concerning them, we turn from them.¹¹

But now because Reverend McGeown has to distinguish repentance from conversion and the Heidelberg Catechism stands against him, he simply redefines his terms. But he runs afoul of the Catechism again because in Lord's Day 33 the Catechism teaches about conversion. As part of conversion the Catechism teaches about the "mortification of the old man." In its description of that mortification, the Catechism speaks about "sincere sorrow of heart," "hate" of sin, and "flee[ing]" (let's say turning) from sin. Previously, Reverend McGeown had written that these things belong to repentance, but now—since repentance is not conversion and the Heidelberg Catechism says that all the things that Reverend McGeown says belong to repentance belong to conversion—these things must be gotten rid of. This is just theological nonsense—jabberwocky! He is simply inventing distinctions and definitions as they suit his purpose. What is his purpose? He intends to teach forgiveness by faith and repentance.

He continues his distinction. He writes, "Fifth, repentance is not faith and faith is not repentance."¹² All right, there is something with which we can agree. Faith is not repentance, and repentance is not faith. Amen.

But it is not amen for Reverend McGeown. Having distinguished faith and repentance, he now proceeds to deny the distinction:

Nevertheless, faith and repentance are inseparably connected. Since we believe in Christ for salvation from sin, we necessarily repent of our sins at the same time. We cannot look to Christ in faith for salvation from sin while we hold to our sins. If we have true faith, we change our mind concerning our sins. Thus repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin.¹³

Oh, now I see why repentance could not be work, and repentance could not be conversion or mortification of the

8 McGeown, "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (2)."

9 Martyn McGeown, "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (3): Classifying Repentance (b)," May 6, 2022, <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-3-classifying-repentance-b>.

10 McGeown, "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (3)."

11 McGeown, "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (1)."

12 McGeown, "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (3)."

13 McGeown, "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (3)."

old man. It is because Reverend McGeown makes repentance part of one coin with faith. He goes on later to write about separating faith and repentance, as though that is what he is all about. But separating faith and repentance is an entirely different thing from making faith and repentance “two sides of the same coin.” A coin is a single entity. So faith and repentance are now a single entity. At this point there is no more danger of separating faith and repentance than there is of separating heads from tails. The purpose of all his silly, pointless, stupid, and deceptive distinctions is *to make faith and repentance one entity*. You must remember that. Thus when he says, “By faith alone,” he means faith and repentance. And when he says, “Repentance,” he means faith and repentance. It is one coin, these two. He continues and quotes Acts 20:21 to prove his one-coin theory: “Testifying both to the Jews and the Greeks repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁴

But that is a corrupt use of the passage. The passage is not teaching that faith and repentance are two sides of the same coin. But the passage is teaching—just as every other place in scripture that mentions faith and repentance—two distinct graces of God. The one is faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. We are saved by faith alone. The gospel that declares Jesus Christ as the only way to the Father likewise calls for faith in Christ and warns all who do not believe that they will certainly perish. That gospel also speaks of the sure and certain mark of God’s children of repentance toward God. But nowhere in the passage—or anywhere in scripture—does it speak about faith and repentance as two sides of one coin.

Reverend McGeown does not care about the separation of repentance and faith. He cares very much that they are two sides of one coin. He goes on to quote from Calvin, as though Calvin supported this monstrosity of a coin that consists in faith and repentance. Calvin does not say, “Make faith and repentance a single entity,” but he says, “Even though they cannot be separated, they ought to be distinguished.”¹⁵

The theologian can say that about a lot of things. You cannot separate faith and obedience. You cannot separate justification and sanctification or election and calling. But warning against separating these things does not give the theologian license to make them a single coin. Many things are to be distinguished but not separated. So repentance and faith are not to be separated. But then to go on to make them a single coin is as bad a theology as making justification and sanctification a single coin. You have heresy at that point.

McGeown goes on to pretend that he is still concerned about not separating faith and repentance and that the Canons support him. He quotes Canons 1.3: “God mercifully sends the messengers of these most joyful tidings...by whose ministry men are *called to repentance and faith*.”¹⁶ Here the article in the Canons does what Calvin said. The article does not separate but distinguishes faith and repentance. But nowhere in the Canons or in the Reformed creeds are faith and repentance made two sides of a single coin. This is false doctrine. It is the false doctrine of justification and salvation by a repenting faith or by a repentant faith or by faith and repentance.

This is the same false doctrine as Rome. Cardinal Sadoleto said the following about faith:

Moreover, we obtain this blessing of complete and perpetual salvation by faith alone in God and in Jesus Christ. When I say by faith alone, I do not mean, as those inventors of novelties do, a mere credulity and confidence in God, by which, to the seclusion of charity and the other duties of a Christian mind, I am persuaded that in the cross and blood of Christ all my faults are unknown; this, indeed, is necessary, and forms the first access which we have to God, but it is not enough. For we must also bring a mind full of piety towards Almighty God, and desirous of performing whatever is agreeable to him; in this, especially, the power of the Holy Spirit resides. This mind, though sometimes it proceeds not to external acts, is, however, inwardly prepared of itself for well-doing, and shows a prompt desire to obey God in all things, and this in us is the true habit of divine justice. For what else does this name of justice signify, or what other meaning and idea does it present to us, if regard is not had in it to good works? For Scripture says, that “God sent his Son to prepare a people acceptable to himself, zealous of good works;” and in another place it says, that we may be built up in Christ unto good works. If, then, Christ was sent that we, by well-doing, may, through him, be accepted of God, and that we may be built up in him unto good works; surely the faith which we have in God through Jesus Christ not only enjoins and commands us to confide in Christ, but to confide, working or resolved to work well in him. For faith is a term of full and ample signification, and not only includes in it credulity and confidence, but

14 McGeown, “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (3).”

15 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:597.

16 McGeown, “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (3).”

also the hope and desire of obeying God, together with love, the head and mistress of all the virtues, as has been most clearly manifested to us in Christ, in which love the Holy Spirit properly and peculiarly resides, or rather himself is love, since God is love. Wherefore, as without the Holy Spirit, so also without love, naught of ours is pleasing and acceptable to God. When we say, then, that we can be saved by faith alone in God and Jesus Christ, we hold that in this very faith love is essentially comprehended as the chief and primary cause of our salvation.¹⁷

The two sides of Sadolet's coin were faith and love. We are saved by faith alone, as long as we understand that faith is a double-sided coin of faith and love. That is the same false doctrine of Norman Shepherd and the federal vision and their obedient faith. You can see all my writings on federal vision where I prove this.¹⁸ The two sides of the federal vision coin are faith and obedience or, as the federal visionists are fond of saying, "Trust and obey."

Reverend McGeown has labored so long, so hard, and so deceitfully to make sure that everyone understands that repentance is not work and to distinguish repentance from about everything else under the theological heaven, in order that he can make repentance another side of the coin of faith. The importance of distinguishing faith and repentance is the same as the importance of distinguishing faith and love or faith and obedience. When any of those—repentance, obedience, or love—is made one coin with faith, you no longer have the gospel but what is damned by the apostle Paul as anathema. Reverend McGeown's two-sided coin is simply another manifestation of the Protestant Reformed Churches' appalling apostasy from the gospel. However one classifies repentance, obedience, and love—which in the end are the same—the important thing is that they are not faith. Justification is by faith alone, which is to say for Christ's sake alone. Justification is free, absolutely free.

Forgiveness Not Justification

In his ongoing assault on the gospel of free grace and gracious justification, Reverend McGeown turns to yet more distinctions. This time he is going to distinguish between the forgiveness of sins and justification:

In the minds of some, forgiveness of sins is the same thing as justification by faith alone and, since we are justified by faith alone without works (and the same

people often define repentance as a work), to connect the forgiveness of sins in any way to repentance jeopardizes the truth of justification by faith alone.

He continues,

Forgiveness or remission of sins is not *exactly the same thing as* justification. Justification is very similar to forgiveness of sins and they are related, but we should distinguish them from one another.¹⁹

Of course we should! Let's distinguish some more! This should be interesting.

When he mentions "some" and "the same people," he is talking about the ministers and members of the Reformed Protestant Churches. We have a controversy with the Protestant Reformed Churches over the gospel truth of justification by faith alone. The PRC have corrupted that doctrine, as we see with Reverend McGeown's two-sided coin consisting of faith and repentance. Now we are told that justification is not forgiveness, and forgiveness is not justification.

We will see what slippery McGeown does with this novel distinction; but first, scripture and the Reformed creeds demolish the distinction between justification and forgiveness.

He labors hard to prove that justification and forgiveness are "not *exactly the same thing*." He makes appeals to the creeds. I will not trouble you with those appeals. The reply to all of his supposed proof for his distinction is that here is where his coin analogy would work perfectly. Justification is the act of God to declare the elect righteous for Christ's sake. That one act—one coin—has two parts to it. First, the forgiveness of sins. Second, the imputation of righteousness. Sometimes scripture speaks of forgiveness of sins, and sometimes scripture speaks of the imputation of righteousness. When scripture mentions the one or the other, it is not distinguishing between justification and the forgiveness of sins any more than it is distinguishing between justification and the imputation of righteousness. Rather, when scripture speaks of the forgiveness of sins, it means justification and refers to it by one of its parts. Scripture substitutes the part for the whole. It is like when someone says that a teenager got a nice set of wheels. Wheels stand for the whole car. So forgiveness of sins simply stands for the whole act of justification. And one's doctrine of justification, then, cannot differ from one's doctrine of forgiveness. There is one truth.

Scripture uses the words *forgiveness of sins* and *justifica-*

17 James Sadolet, "Sadolet's Letter to the Senate and People of Geneva," https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/calvin_sadolet.html.

18 Nathan J. Langerak, "Revisiting Norman Shepherd," *Sword and Shield* 1, no. 14 (April 2021): 10–16; "Revisiting Norman Shepherd (2)," *Sword and Shield* 1, no. 15 (May 2021): 15–19; "Revisiting Norman Shepherd (3)," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 1 (June 2021): 16–20.

19 Martyn McGeown, "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (4): Forgiveness of Sins," May 11, 2022, <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-4-forgiveness-of-sins>.

tion interchangeably. So, for instance, in Psalm 32:1: “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” The subject obviously is the forgiveness of sins. It is the forgiveness of sins in the believer’s conscience and daily. In Romans 4:6–7, where the issue is justification, scripture explains Psalm 32:1 as being about 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.

Scripture does not distinguish between justification and forgiveness but treats them as one and the same. In Luke 18:13 the publican prayed—if he prayed for anything—for the forgiveness of his sins: “God be merciful to me a sinner.” And Jesus’ conclusion to the parable in verse 14 was this: “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified.” Jesus did not distinguish between justification and forgiveness.

Neither do the creeds distinguish. However, for his distinction Reverend McGeown tries to take the creeds to his side by appealing to article 23 of the Belgic Confession. He writes,

Similarly, the Belgic Confession does not say in Article 23 that the forgiveness of sins is justification, but that “[in the forgiveness of sins] our righteousness before God is implied.”²⁰

He handles the creeds as deceitfully as he handles scripture. He is a manipulator of men, of scripture, and of the creeds. Article 23 of the Belgic Confession says, “We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ’s sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 51). This means that we believe that God forgives our sins, and in that forgiveness of sins our justification is implied. The creed grounds this in scripture: “As David and Paul teach us, declaring this to be the happiness of man, that God imputes righteousness to him without works. And the same apostle saith that we are justified freely by His grace.” For the Belgic Confession forgiveness of sins and the imputation of righteousness are two sides of one coin—justification.

The better question is, why does Reverend McGeown labor so hard to distinguish what is the same in scripture? The reason, as always, for Protestant Reformed distinctions is to get man involved in his salvation, in this case

in the forgiveness of sins. Scripture is crystal clear that justification is by faith alone. God justifies the ungodly. The ungodly has nothing, including faith and repentance, and has only sin. The one who believes that God justifies the ungodly is justified. Reverend McGeown cannot very well say that justification is by faith and repentance. He would be exposed. So he labors to separate forgiveness from justification so that he can teach forgiveness by faith and repentance. In the service of this false doctrine, his understanding of justification is that it is a one-time event. He writes,

If we have been justified, our sins have been forgiven. Yet even after justification we commit sin. When that happens, we do not need—strictly speaking—to be justified again...we need to be forgiven.²¹

Justification is a one-time event. Forgiveness, by comparison, is an ongoing need. Never mind that Jesus said the publican went home justified. These small and inconvenient details cannot be allowed to bother Reverend McGeown. And we can say based on his next comment that justification is not only a one-time event but is really an abstraction:

We need to be forgiven in our consciousness concerning particular sins so that we know God’s forgiveness and are assured of it.

Now we are in the realm of experience and assurance. This is where scripture particularly applies the truth of justification, for instance in Romans 5:1: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The scripture has spoken of Abraham and of David and their justification and even their justification over against specific sins and their assurance about God’s forgiveness for those specific sins. But this cannot be allowed to mar the theological reconstruction project of Reverend McGeown. For him justification for specific sins is not strictly needed. Justification happened once, and now what we need is forgiveness; and this forgiveness gives us the knowledge and assurance of our salvation. He refers to David and writes, “How miserable David was until he repented!” So McGeown’s thought is, as he wrote earlier, that

when a believer (who has already been justified) commits a gross transgression of God’s law he “incurs a deadly guilt” (Canons 5:5); yet...such a believer “does not forfeit the state of justification.”²²

A man is justified before God and yet does not hear in his conscience that God forgives him his sin. Really, the

20 McGeown, “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (4).”

21 Martyn McGeown, “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (6): Justification by Faith Alone,” May 23, 2022, <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-6-justification-by-faith-alone>.

22 McGeown, “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (6).”

issue is, how does a man come into the knowledge of his justification? Justification before God is made an abstraction, what is unknown. You have justification but do not know it. But how does justification come into your conscience and experience?

And Reverend McGeown finally gets to the issue: “We want to examine more closely the relationship between repentance and the remission of sins.”²³ It was, of course, interesting to see all of his other false doctrine, but this is the issue. And I want everyone to understand that all of his other false doctrine follows from his corruption of the truth at this point *of the relationship between repentance and remission*. To go wrong on this point of the relationship between repentance and remission is to go wrong on the gospel, and then you go wrong on every other doctrine. It is inevitable.

Reverend McGeown first states the relationship between repentance and remission as a simple matter:

Quite simply, God forgives the sins of those who repent, or God forgives sinners *when* they repent... That should be enough—God forgives us when we repent—but to dispel confusion, we should explain the relationship further.²⁴

McGeown’s further explanation not only does not dispel confusion, but it also creates confusion and further denies the gospel. In his explanation of the relationship between faith and repentance, he first checks all the appropriate orthodoxy-boxes. Repentance is not the ground for remission of sins. We do not earn remission by repenting. Repentance is not meritorious. Importantly, for a Protestant Reformed audience to whom he is about to teach conditions, he writes, “Repentance is not a condition that we fulfill in order to get or obtain forgiveness.” And he immediately qualifies this:

It is true that repentance precedes or comes before forgiveness, so that God forgives us after—not before—we repent, but that does not make repentance a condition for forgiveness.²⁵

To make sure that his definition of repentance before forgiveness is not viewed as conditional, he defines a condition as “not something that comes before another thing, but a condition is something that we must do *upon which the obtaining of something depends*.”²⁶

But that is not an adequate definition of a condition. A condition is simply A, without which B does not come. And that is the conditionalism of Reverend McGeown’s

repentance. Repentance is the A without which the B of God’s forgiveness does not come. God cannot and God may not forgive sinners before those sinners repent. When he says that God gives repentance, Reverend McGeown is not saving the theology from being conditional. Every heretic who has taught conditions has said that man fulfills the conditions by grace.

Now we are beginning to see why he labored so hard to deny that repentance is work and to make sure that justification is distinguished from forgiveness. Forgiveness is that which does not come and the believer does not have until and unless he repents. God cannot and may not forgive until or unless we repent, by God’s grace of course.

A Shocking Statement

And at the conclusion of his long and convoluted explanation of the distinction between justification and forgiveness, Reverend McGeown makes an utterly shocking statement that exposes his theology of repentance and remission as another gospel:

Justification, which is not the same thing as forgiveness, is by faith alone without works, and repentance is *not* a work that we perform in order to obtain any blessing from God.²⁷

Is *forgiveness* by faith alone and without works? This Reverend McGeown cannot and will not say.

He means in his statement above, first, that his doctrine of repentance and remission is a different doctrine from the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The doctrine of justification by faith alone does not have a place in his doctrine of repentance and remission. Since he is dealing with what must be preached according to the command of Christ, justification by faith alone really has no vital place in the preaching of the gospel of repentance and remission. Indeed, in the practical and real life of the church, his doctrine of forgiveness by faith and repentance replaces justification by faith alone in the preaching of the church. Job asked, “How shall a man be right with God?” That is the pressing question of the church and of the believer every day. Reverend McGeown’s answer is not justification by faith alone but remission by faith and by repentance.

The second admission of the statement is that repentance is that which is performed, done, an activity that indeed does obtain. Whatever else his doctrine of repentance and remission means, it does not mean the same thing as justification by faith alone. And that is damning

23 McGeown, “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (6).”

24 Martyn McGeown, “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (7): Repentance and Remission,” June 1, 2022, <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-7-repentance-and-remission>.

25 McGeown, “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (7).”

26 McGeown, “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (7).”

27 McGeown, “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (7).”

for his doctrine of repentance and remission. It is also fatal to his view of what Christ's actual commission to the church was. Christ's commission to the church in Luke 24 can without any injustice to the command be understood this way: when Christ said that "remission of sins should be preached," he meant preach justification by faith alone for the sake of Christ's atonement and through the mercy of God and absolutely without works. The works and deeds of the sinner, the activities and acts of the sinner, and the sins and sinfulness of the sinner are not the reason he is justified or not justified or the reason he experiences or does not experience peace with God, nor the reason he has the knowledge of eternal life and enjoys the assurance of his salvation. Christ's death alone is the reason.

When Christ said to preach remission, he was telling the church to preach him. Remission was to be preached "in his name" (Luke 24:47). Whatever else that means, it means that all who are united to Christ by a true and living faith have on the basis of his atoning death everlasting righteousness and eternal life in their consciences.

And when Christ said to preach repentance, he was telling the church to preach that calling and sure mark of all his children, whom he has forgiven apart from their deeds, works, and activities. This too is the meaning of "in his name." This means that all who bear the name of Christ and have the forgiveness of sins by the free mercy of God shall become manifested in the world by repentance. That repentance is not merely an inward change of mind, but repentance includes the whole life of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is, as Christ said elsewhere to the church, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19–20). This is not a separate command of Christ to his church in distinction from and in addition to what he taught in Luke 24. Rather, it is Christ's explanation of what preaching remission and repentance means. His ministers are to teach faith in Christ and remission for his name's sake, and they are to teach thankful obedience to Christ, beginning in the heart with repentance and being made manifest in all one's life by obedience to Christ's commands.

Reverend McGeown wants to make repentance that which the believer performs and without which he cannot be forgiven. He thereby makes repentance a condition unto justification. This is of a piece with his doctrine of faith. In another article on the blog of the Reformed Free Publishing Association, he actually had the temerity to say that faith is "not God's act" and to mock the doctrine of true faith by making it look foolish, as though we are teaching that God believes for us.²⁸

But his mockery aside, if one is going to err in the doctrine of faith, then I would say, "Err on the side that God believes for us and not on the side of Reverend McGeown that faith is 'not God's act.'" For Reverend McGeown faith is "not God's act," but faith is man's act. Faith is what man must do to be saved, which of course is sheer Arminianism and not Reformed at all.

The Reformed faith speaks differently. The Reformed faith teaches that faith is God's act entirely and in all its parts, from beginning to end. Faith is God's act. Faith is as much God's act as conversion is God's act. At one time this was considered good Protestant Reformed language about repentance. Repentance is God's act. Faith is the same; it is God's act. The Reformed faith expresses this by saying that faith is the gift of God. He "produces both the will to believe and the act of believing also" (Canons 3–4.14, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 169). The Heidelberg Catechism says that I am engrafted into Christ. To be engrafted is passive. That graft with Jesus Christ is my union with him, and that union is my faith. Is that man's act? That is God's act.

I suspect that Reverend McGeown does not believe that union with Christ is really faith. But in the Reformed faith, that union with Christ is the *essence* of faith. And this means that union with Christ is what faith really is. It is what faith is in an infant, in an adult, and even in my being dead. Faith is union with Christ. I am joined with him and am made a partaker of his riches, gifts, and treasures. And this means that even when, in the language of the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 7, we talk about faith as "a certain knowledge" and "an assured confidence," we are still talking about union with Christ (*Confessions and Church Order*, 90). The essence of that activity is union with Christ. When we speak of faith in any sense, we mean Christ Jesus, for the simple fact that faith as to its essence is union with Christ. By faith I am one with Christ, and by faith Christ is in me and I am in him.

This, of course, all bores Reverend McGeown to death because the truth bores him to death, and he cannot wait to get to man and what man does.

Now in this dreadful piece of theologizing, he makes yet another spiritual gift of grace to be a condition. This time it is repentance. Faith and repentance, now two sides of one coin, are that by which a man experiences his forgiveness. Reverend McGeown's doctrine of justification is justification by faith and by repentance. His doctrine is a denial of the gospel, a corruption of the truth of faith, a mangling of the doctrine of repentance, and a displacement of Christ, in whose name repentance and remission are to be preached.

This now is Protestant Reformed theology.

—NJL

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

FACEBOOK FRANKNESS

I take note of a comment from Facebook that was brought to my attention.

Facebook is a place where many say things frankly. And this post is a frank admission. The poster is Gary Vander Schaaf. He is a very well-read member of the Protestant Reformed Churches. The discussion on Facebook was regarding various Protestant Reformed doctrines, such as good works, reconciliation, forgiveness, assurance, justification, and sanctification. The discussion, as discussions do on Facebook, meandered around for a while as various other posters contributed their two cents regarding these doctrines.

But then this from Gary:

Eternal Justification as taught by Hoeksema has been rejected by some PR professors and ministers. It is important to notice that I said “as taught by Hoeksema” since all PR ministers to my knowledge hold to the view that the cross and resurrection accomplish and seal a justification that is certainly before my believing.

This rejection of HH’s views on such basic ideas as election and justification means that virtually all theological ideas (sanctification, repentance, forgiveness of sins, you name it) will have to be reworked. Thus, the spate of articles and speeches and sermons on topics that were once considered the A, B, C’s of faith. You will want to read David Engelsma’s book “Gospel Truth of Justification”, especially chapters 12 & 13, where the differences between his views and those of his teacher are made explicit.

Just one example. Compare DJE to HH.¹

HH first... “We do not become righteous before God in time, by faith, but are righteous in the tribunal of God from before the foundation of the world. God beholds us in eternity, not as sinners, but as perfectly righteous, as redeemed, as justified in Christ (Num. 23:21, Is. 49:16, Rom. 8:29,30)... And this indeed, is the comfort of faith. Faith in Christ takes hold upon eternity, and knows that there is no condemnation, that there never was condemnation for them who God hath justified” (*Triple Knowledge*, v. 2, p. 337).

This is the view that you [the former poster] put into words above, both as to its content and to the great comfort—our only comfort—we draw from

it. And this shows, too, that your mom was right, that this is the truth as she was taught it, and that she in turn taught you.

Now hear DJE, “Implied by the reality of justification in time by means of faith is that it is a mistake for a Reformed preacher or teacher when treating of justification, to put eternal justification first and foremost in his sermon or lesson...The main message and issue is not eternal justification, but justification by faith—justification by faith alone” (*Gospel Truth of Justification*, p.259).

As Rev. MMG has noted on this site, here is a polite rejection of HH’s view. Polite, to be sure, but a rejection all the same.

And so the PRC finds itself in a period of transition, where everything needs re-examining and restatement.

First of note regarding this post is the frank acknowledgment that Herman Hoeksema’s view of eternal justification has been *rejected*. But then it must also be noted that Herman Hoeksema’s view of the decree has also been rejected, and with it the decretal theology of Herman Hoeksema has been rejected. Decretal theology was the theology of Herman Hoeksema, and so the theology of Herman Hoeksema has been rejected by the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Second, the one who led the way in this rejection was Prof. David Engelsma. Hoeksema taught that we do not become righteous in time; we are righteous eternally. Prof. David Engelsma calls the placing of this reality first in a sermon and in teaching “a mistake.” As others have noted, this *is* the rejection of Herman Hoeksema’s view.

Third, and most fascinating of all, is the frank admission that the Protestant Reformed Churches, having rejected Hoeksema on the decree, are “in a period of transition.” In this period of transition, “everything”—everything—“needs re-examining and restatement.”

This is what Protestant Reformed ministers and professors have been doing. They sold the people the story that they were faithfully following Herman Hoeksema, but they had rejected him and were reexamining and restating everything in his theology.

With this assessment of Gary, I absolutely agree. Let the Protestant Reformed Churches be done with the charade that they are faithful disciples of Herman

¹ Note that DJE is Prof. David J. Engelsma, HH is Rev. Herman Hoeksema, and MMG is Rev. Martyn McGeown.

Hoeksema. They are transitioning away from him. Transitioning away from Hoeksema, they are transitioning away from the truth and the Reformed faith. Rejecting the Reformed faith, they have rejected God and are working hard to promote man. The Protestant Reformed Churches have rejected God at the heart of the gospel—the decree and justification by faith alone. This project of reexamination and restatement of all of theology is

simply the working through of their rejection of the truth as their father taught it to them. They are the foolish children who did not heed the instruction of Solomon (Christ), who said, “My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother” (Prov. 1:8).

Will anyone hear?

—NJL

SOUND DOCTRINE

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

LAW AND GOSPEL, FAITH AND REPENTANCE: THE HEART (1)

Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.—Romans 7:12

Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.—Romans 7:7

The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.—1 Corinthians 15:56

*Whence knowest thou thy misery? Out of the law of God.
—Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 2*

In the same light are we to consider the law of the decalogue, delivered by God to His peculiar people, the Jews, by the hand of Moses. For though it discovers the greatness of sin, and more and more convinces man thereof, yet as it neither points out a remedy nor imparts strength to extricate him from misery, and thus, being weak through the flesh, leaves the transgressor under the curse, man cannot by this law obtain saving grace.—Canons of Dordt 3.4–5

Introduction

As seen in previous articles, the necessity of faith and repentance is the necessity of the grace of God.¹ That necessity is rooted in the counsel of God. From eternity God determined both the end of his elect people in the eternal life of heaven and all their way to that end. According to that way determined in his counsel, God determined his gifts to his people, including faith and repentance, worked by his sovereign grace in them. That necessity is also the necessity of the death of Christ, their mediator and head, on the cross. His blood was the price of their redemption from the dominion of sin. His blood purchased the breaking of the power of sin; their repentance;

and the gift of faith to redeem them from their unbelief, in which they were conceived and born. The necessity of faith and repentance is also the necessity of the operation of the Holy Spirit. Working according to the will of God and according to the redemption that belongs to his people in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit works all things in all, including repentance and faith, both as the will and the acts of repenting and believing.

This necessity extends fully to the believer’s entire life of repentance and faith. This necessity extends also to all the believer’s fruits of his repentance and his faith. The believer’s entire salvation—both his justification and sanctification; his regeneration and conversion; his beginning, his way,

¹ Martin VanderWal, “True Repentance,” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 1 (June 2022): 36–39; “True Repentance (2),” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 2 (July 2022): 17–19; “True Repentance (3),” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 3 (August 2022): 15–18; “True Repentance (4),” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 4 (September 2022): 23–26.

and his end—is entirely of God’s grace alone. Salvation is entirely without works and entirely without merit. All grace is sovereign, particular, unconditional, and irresistible. The working of God’s grace is never subject to the will of man.

This sovereign, irresistible, particular, and unconditional grace must be seen as one unbroken stream that runs through the regenerated child of God. This stream runs from the throne of God through the mercies of Christ and is applied by the Holy Spirit to the whole nature of the child of God. This stream runs through his whole nature into his whole life as a child of God. The stream of grace controls him in his worship of God and his whole life of gratitude to God. Grace governs him in his whole pilgrim’s way and leads him all the way into the eternal glory appointed to him from the foundation of the world. That stream may not be broken or divided.

Grace by Man’s Will

There are two ways in which this stream of grace is being broken and divided.

The first way is obvious. That way is dividing grace according to its fruits and effects. There are some fruits and effects of grace that are made to be contingent upon what man does. The grace of forgiveness is made contingent upon repentance or upon repentance and faith. Continued forgiveness is made contingent upon the willingness of the forgiven sinner to forgive others. Blessings of communion and fellowship with God are made contingent upon acts of worship and devotion, such as prayer, reading of scripture, and attendance upon the means of grace.

Although this first way is ground well-trodden in the recent controversy, it is worth noting some reasons for this division. The first is the alleged biblical ground for such a division, namely the promises of God in their grammatical form, which is often conditional. Put generally, if God’s people seek him, they shall find him. The argument follows: since this promise of God must be true, then finding God is contingent or dependent on his people’s activity of seeking him. Whether the relationship is expressed by time before and time after or cause and effect or merit and reward, God’s grace is brought under man’s control. A second reason for this division is to make room for man as a creature and for man as having significance and importance as a creature. Because man is important as a creature, his will and behavior are important. God’s grace recognizes the importance of man’s will and behavior. To ensure the integrity of man’s will and behavior, that is, his creatureliness from God, grace must take into consideration who and what man is. If grace does not properly recognize man’s importance as a creature, then man is said to become a stock and a block or a wooden puppet controlled by strings.

The second way of breaking the stream of grace is less

obvious but is just as detrimental to the truth of God’s abounding grace. This way is to distinguish between salvation and assurance of salvation or between justification and assurance of justification. To be more specific, the division is between salvation as objective and salvation as subjective.

The second way breaks the stream of God’s grace in Christ into two streams: an objective stream and a subjective stream. The objective stream is God’s grace for man’s salvation apart from all his conscious experience of salvation. This stream includes the grace of election. As election is eternal and unconditional, set in God’s counsel from before the foundation of the world, election is above time and history. In that election, or predestination, man is appointed to salvation and the way of salvation. In this objective stream is also the death of Christ according to God’s sovereign and particular decree. At the cross the elect were made acceptable by Christ’s atonement. The death of the Son of God was the payment for all their sins. Their guilt was removed. Their standing before God as acceptable was fully accomplished in Christ. Both election and the death of Christ on the cross were accomplished away from and apart from the involvement of the elect. The elect were not personally present in eternity or at the cross. They were not conscious of those acts of God and of the Son of God incarnate.

Because the elect were not present and personally conscious of their election and the death of Christ on the cross, those acts are said to be *objective*. In them salvation is certain. It is guaranteed and sealed. This salvation needs only to be applied to the elect.

The application of salvation to the elect in time, when they are personally present to receive this salvation, is declared to be an entirely different matter. This application is still gracious. It still entirely depends on the grace of election and the grace of the cross of Christ. But this grace flows in a separate stream. While the objective stream of grace flows around, over, and under the elect, the subjective stream of grace flows into the elect. As it flows into the elect, this stream reveals a different character. It might flow much or little. It might flow not at all into some areas. It has limitations.

What are these limitations? What are the controlling factors that are present? Why is the first, objective stream of grace so full and free but the second, subjective stream is so narrow and controlled?

Because this second stream of grace is said to be adapted to man as a creature. This is grace that must be able to fit into him as a creature who has a limited mind and will. Because he can think and will in a certain direction or pathway that he determines, grace must be adapted to the operation of his mind and will. He can only receive as much grace as he himself determines. What about his assurance of justification? It depends on

whether and how much he forgives one who has sinned against him. What about his communion and fellowship with God? If man consecrates himself much, he will have much communion and fellowship. If he consecrates himself little, he will have little communion and fellowship.

The amount of grace, little or much, that flows into the heart and soul of a man and gives to him the consciousness of his salvation and fellowship with God depends on how the man conducts himself. The stream of grace may flow widely and abundantly into his soul, if he thinks and lives according to the will of God in all good works. But if that man is spiritually lazy and works not at all in the things of God's word or kingdom, then grace will only trickle into him. His conscious experience of assurance may be very little or not present at all.

It is here that grace becomes subject to the will of man. How much grace will he receive? It depends on what he does. Where is the grace for that man to do more than he has been doing? He is sent back to himself. Do more. Believe more. Think more. Read more. Pray more. Study more.

Two great difficulties manifest themselves with this approach.

The first great difficulty is that this approach must always work backward to destroy the truth about grace. It is truly impossible to draw limits to the subjective stream of grace that are under the control of the elect and not have those limits apply to the objective stream of grace. The apprehension of grace in one stream must and will effect the apprehension of grace in the other stream. For grace is ultimately one. Its unity is in its head, Jesus Christ.

The second great difficulty with the notion of two streams of grace is that it does not hold for all Christians. On one side are elect who do not struggle with respect to their assurance of salvation. From observing them outwardly, one might conclude that they ought to struggle. They appear to be weak, yet they seem to have no struggle with assurance. On the other side are elect who are diligent in their use of the means of grace. They know and love the word of God. Their prayers reflect both a sense of God's majesty and glory and childlike devotion and rest in him. Their speech reflects a deep spirituality. They demonstrate a devotion to God that endures in spite of hardship. But they do not convey a deep sense of assurance. They can speak of deep doubts and fears, deep struggles of faith.

Scripture also addresses these differences. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, is identified in holy scripture as a woman who feared the Lord. Scripture places her in stark contrast to her adversary, Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah. Yet Hannah was greatly distressed by the opposition of her adversary, leading Hannah to pour out her soul before the Lord in his temple. On the other side of the spectrum was Samson, who was often led alternatively by his lusts and by his personal seeking of revenge against

his enemies. Nevertheless, he is listed in Hebrews 11 as a hero of faith.

How must these differences be appreciated? What do they truly signify? What is the difference between Hannah and Samson? What is the difference between the deeply religious and the superficial and shallow? What is the difference between those who possess deep, unbroken assurance and those who struggle to have any assurance at all?

Comparing persons to persons must end in complete confusion and the heresy of merit. In that confusion man will seek what is pleasing to his flesh. He will devise his own way. He will make the objective into the subjective to gain power. He will labor to put grace under his control. He will indeed pay homage to free grace, as required by scripture and the Reformed creeds. But he will split off another stream of grace in order to have it under his control. Scripture becomes a collection of examples. Be like these. Do not be like those others. Be like these by having a strong faith. Be like these who show great holiness. Follow the plan because the results must certainly follow. Such an approach must yield a system of merit and deny grace as grace.

God's Word the Only Standard

Only one comparison is proper: the comparison of God's word between law and gospel. The authoritative standard before man is the word of God. It is that perfection of the word of God that is represented by the law on the one side and the gospel on the other side. Who was Hannah before the law? Who was she before the gospel? Who was Samson before the law? Who was he before the gospel? Who is the child of God before the law? Who is he before the gospel?

What a difference this only correct comparison makes!
Whence knowest thou thy misery?

Out of the law of God.

The law must reduce everyone to the same level. The law must reduce the strongest and the weakest children of God to nothing but miserable sinners, lost in sin and under the wrath and curse of God. The law must make clear that the need of grace is total. It must also make clear that grace simply cannot at all be under the control of the miserable sinner. By all that he is and all that he does, he constantly makes himself unworthy of any blessing or benefit of God. He deserves only God's wrath. Grace must truly be gracious through and through.

This reduction of man by the law constantly applies to the child of God throughout his entire life in this world. The doctrine of the law, God's perfect word, is always applying its force to man, always showing him his true misery apart from Christ. The law of God, explained and applied according to scripture in Lord's Days 2-4 of the Heidelberg Catechism, does not last only until salvation by

faith in Christ as explained in Lord's Day 7. The law of God does not only come to the believer in Lord's Days 34–44 as the knowledge of how he is to show his gratitude for his salvation.

Throughout the entire life of the child of God, the law applies its force. Such is the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 33. In teaching the doctrine of the mortification of the old man, the application of the law to the believer's heartfelt sorrow over his sin is his during his whole life. Repentance must be the character of the life of the Christian. Such is also the teaching of Lord's Day 44. One of the reasons for the strict preaching of the law of God is the knowledge of how far short the people of God fall, to make them all the more earnest in seeking the remission of their sins in the blood of Christ. Another reason is that they must learn to know more and more the depths of their depravity.

The power of the law is to show the power of sin. The strength of sin is the law. The law gives the knowledge of sin: "I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet" (Rom. 7:7).

For the sake of true repentance, the mortification of the old man, the law of God's word must be the law that is certainly and truly applied to the child of God throughout his whole life. The law must be taken up in its normative force. It must be applied as the law, that is, as that which requires and demands, which threatens and judges as guilty and unworthy of God's fellowship. The law must be so applied that the elect child of God brings before God the confession of his sins in deep humility of heart. His confession must be out of the depths of his heart: God be merciful to me, a sinner.

The law cannot be a mere abstraction. It cannot be observed merely from a safe distance. The law cannot be just an idea that contributes to another idea, that one is a sinner, who has the following idea that he somehow, some way needs the savior, Jesus Christ, to save him from an abstract condition or distant idea.

Scripture demonstrates that the law has a powerful effect when it is applied by itself alone. It stimulates sin. Although the law in itself is righteous and good, when it comes to the sinner who is dead in his trespasses and sins, it rouses and stimulates sin. The entire history of the nation of Israel can be summarized as both the Israelites' failure to obey God's law and their perversion of that law in order to provoke God to anger, which anger brought about their judgment.

Another, similar effect of applying the law without Christ and the gospel is that the law of God is abused in order to establish self-righteousness. Scripture shows this most clearly in the sect of the Pharisees. Scripture also shows that self-righteousness in the outward observances of the law, which were condemned by the prophets as

abominable in the sight of God, incurred his wrath. Malachi 2:2 is but one example.

If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto my name, saith the LORD of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings: yea, I have cursed them already, because ye do not lay it to heart.

The reason that the effect of self-righteousness is similar to the arousal of sin is that both are sinful rebellion against God's law. The most powerful demonstration of this is hatred of Christ, the true fulfillment of the law of God, which hatred followed through to the crucifixion of the righteous Son of God on the cross.

But the most important effect of the law of God is that which is categorically denied by the Canons of Dordt in the third and fourth heads of doctrine. In speaking of the law of God, given by Moses in the form of the ten commandments, Canons 3–4.5 proceeds with a contrast. These effects of the law are identified: "It discovers the greatness of sin, and more and more convinces man thereof." Immediately after that, the article denies any power with respect to grace. "Man cannot by this law obtain saving grace" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 167). No grace is obtained. No kind of grace. No aspect of grace. No form of grace.

The same article of the Canons explains why saving grace cannot be obtained by this law: "Yet as it neither points out a remedy nor imparts strength to extricate him from misery, and thus, being weak through the flesh, leaves the sinner under the curse..." There is no remedy pointed out by the law. It only grips with its demands, holding its hearers accountable. The law imparts no strength. Contrary to Pelagius, the law never says, "You can do it." As vast and weighty as the law's threatenings and judgments are, shown also in their execution (for example, Sodom and Gomorrah), there is no strength in the law to obey the law, no matter how strong the deterrents are spoken or shown. The sinner is simply left under the curse.

The weakness of this law means that the law itself cannot work the grace of repentance. According to the depravity of man, the law will work rebellion. It will work self-righteousness. It will even work self-despondency. But it cannot work true repentance. It will not work a sorrow that is holy and Godward.

True repentance can only be worked through the holy gospel, the gospel that shows the mercy of God in Christ Jesus. True repentance is worked only by the grace of God in Christ accompanying that gospel. Only the gospel proclaims the true repentance that truly abhors sin and self as sinful for the sake of God's mercy. Only by the gospel is true turning from sin for the sake of turning to God to seek his mercy in the forgiveness of sins.

—MVW

A REEVALUATION OF THE REWARD OF GRACE (3)

Introduction

In this series of articles, we have been considering the reward of grace according to the definition that I have proposed: namely, that the reward of grace is the wages of Jesus Christ, which is freely bestowed by God in election and which superabundantly replaces all that the children of God lose in this life as they follow after Christ.

In the previous two installments, we examined the basis and essence of this reward.¹ Christ by his perfect work as head and mediator of the covenant (the basis) merited eternal life (the essence) for all who belong to that covenant by divine election. By this I do not mean merely that Christ merited eternal life so that all the members of his covenant have a general entrance into the everlasting kingdom of heaven. Rather, I mean that every specific detail in that glorious kingdom has been merited by Christ. The very name and place that each of his people possess in that kingdom are earned by Christ *personally*. What his people enjoy in heaven is graciously given to them *apart from* their works. In other words, heaven is an inheritance.

Many pay lip service to this doctrine. However, they confuse the whole matter as soon as they start talking about degrees of glory in heaven. As we observed last time, it seems as though the whole church world pants after this doctrine, especially as this doctrine relates to one's own good works. "More good works," the church says, "means more reward in heaven." If the ministers had any courage, they would say what they really think: "Your works gain you blessing. Now get busy!"

In this final installment I will contend against this idea that degrees of glory in heaven are according to good works. Such a conception fails to reckon honestly with God's decree of election. Such a conception fails to reckon honestly with the superabundance of God's grace in Jesus Christ. I will also connect the reward of grace to another

important principle that governs all of scripture's teaching concerning the reward. What is this principle? Loss. The reward is used by Jesus Christ to comfort his church, which must always endure loss in this present age.

Election Theology of the Reward

I insist that it is improper—even detrimental—to teach that the reward of grace is proportional to good works. Nor am I alone in this. In his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, Herman Veldkamp wrote,

I do not deny that in heaven there are degrees of glory, but that is the way on earth already too. That this has something to do with rewards, I do not believe at all.²

And in his paper on degrees of reward, Craig Blomberg asserted,

I do not believe there is a single NT text that, when correctly interpreted, supports the notion that believers will be distinguished one from another for all eternity on the basis of their works as Christians. What is more, I am convinced that when this unfounded doctrine of degrees of reward in heaven is acted upon consistently...it can have highly damaging consequences for the motivation and psychology of living the Christian life.³

Rather than to teach that the reward is proportional to works, I contend that the only way to speak about the reward of grace is in connection with election in Jesus Christ. This is the election theology of the reward. This is why I include in my definition that the reward of grace "is freely bestowed by God in election."

That election is the only proper starting point for the reward of grace is the clear testimony of scripture.⁴ God

1 Luke Bomers, "A Reevaluation of the Reward of Grace (1)," *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 5 (October 2022): 31–36; "A Reevaluation of the Reward of Grace (2)," *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 6 (November 1, 2022): 34–39.

2 Herman Veldkamp, *Children of the Lord's Day: Notes on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. Harry Kwantes (n.p.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1990), 1:230.

3 Craig L. Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, no. 2 (June 1992): 160, https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/35/35-2/JETS_35-2_159-172_Blomberg.pdf.

4 Election is also the emphasis of the creeds: "The faithful and *elect* shall be crowned with glory and honor" (Belgic Confession 37, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., vol. 3, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* [New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996], 435–36; emphasis added).

chooses the inheritance. “He shall choose our inheritance for us, the excellency of Jacob whom he loved” (Ps. 47:4). God chooses who receives that inheritance. “In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will” (Eph. 1:11). And God chooses the place that each of his children possesses in that inheritance. “For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him” (Isa. 64:4). When the Son of man returns in his glory, he will announce the glory of this election to the whole world and will say to the sheep at his right hand, “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 25:34).

That the kingdom has been prepared from the foundation of the world implies that every aspect of that kingdom is already determined. The place that each of God’s children will have in that kingdom is predetermined. Their places are determined without their works and only of God’s good pleasure. “For we are his workmanship” (Eph. 2:10). When the saints receive the kingdom, they receive that which they possessed already in eternity, not what they worked for in this life.

All of this is reflected in God’s choice to make Israel dwell with him in Canaan. The land of Canaan was God’s to give, for the land was absolutely his property: “The earth is the LORD’s, and the fulness thereof” (Ps. 24:1). In his good pleasure he chose to make Canaan his abode: “For the LORD hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it” (132:13–14). And in his good pleasure, God chose Israel above all the nations of the earth to receive this land: “Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD; and the people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance” (33:12). The way in which God gave Canaan to the Israelites made clear, without doubt, that it was his free gift to them. He redeemed them from bondage. He typically and symbolically gave them the land through the passover lamb, whose blood covered their sins. He baptized them in the Red Sea. He opened the way into Canaan through the Jordan. He gave Israel the victory over the land through the angel of Jehovah. Then he apportioned the land himself, choosing by lot where each tribe should settle. And God was the one who determined the allotment.⁵

In the New Testament the election theology of the reward is inferred from the apostle’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 12 about the nature of the body of Christ. God determined the place of each member of the church. “Now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him” (v. 18). And he tempers the body together so that each member works for the well-being of the other members. The members do not choose their places and functions. God does. Certainly, there is a difference between one member and another member. But, as Cocceius said,

The difference is not the different proportion of merit, nor does it argue a discrepancy in justification; it will be in accord with the grace of God, by which Christ was given a body in which God’s manifold wisdom might be displayed.⁶

I reiterate my main contention: when the reward of grace is taught as the place that each elect child of God possesses in the eternal kingdom and everlasting covenant of God, it must be taught from the viewpoint that this reward has already been determined in eternity. This reward is not determined by good works, but it is determined by election.

I observe that in this matter the emphasis of our Reformed fathers was upon election as well. Herman Hoeksema wrote,

In the covenant God has *prepared* some of His people to do great things, to be special witnesses of His name, to fight the kingdom of darkness in a special way. And just because God has *prepared* some of His children for special works, so that they do more than others and suffer more than others and bear the brunt of the battle more than others, they also shall have a special place in glory. They were in suffering more than others. They were despised more than others. They were in tribulation in a special sense of the word. God *prepared* Elijah to do great things. But he also fought more than all the prophets of his time. God *prepared* His prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, for special work. But they also went through special suffering and tribulation. God *prepared* the apostles and the martyrs to be faithful in a special sense of the word. And they suffered more than others. And so it shall be at the time of Antichrist. Not all are equally strong among the children of God. Not all are equally fit

5 Homer C. Hoeksema, *Unfolding Covenant History*, vol. 4, *Through the Wilderness into Canaan*, ed. Mark H. Hoeksema (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2003), 357.

6 Quoted in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, trans. G. T. Thomson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 709.

to testify and bear the brunt of the battle. It is not because they themselves are less faithful; not as if the stronger would have any power of their own. *No, God has prepared them, and even prepared their works, also their special works.* But what now shall become of these? Shall they all be lost? Shall in the day of judgment all these works dwindle away in the general bliss of God's people? Of course not; their works shall follow them...And those whom God *prepared* to do more work than others and to suffer more than others may thank the Lord God for this great privilege. For their works shall follow them also in the new creation.⁷

Prepared...prepared...prepared—this is the all-important emphasis of election theology. God prepared all things according to his good pleasure. In the context of suffering and intense labor, all that the believer does on earth has been prepared for him and worked in him by God.

Concerning this idea Herman Hanko wrote,

By his grace God works in every one of his people so that they fulfill their calling and purpose in life, whatever that may be. In doing this, God sovereignly and graciously shapes and fits each saint for his place in glory—and for his capacity for glory. Thus the reward is in direct proportion to his works, but both the works and the reward are of grace.⁸

This is what Hanko taught: in accordance with the name and place that God gives to each saint in heaven by election, God also perfectly molds and forms that saint in this life for his eternal life. This is the essential matter. Regarding the matter of the reward being in direct proportion to his works, it is my judgment that this is an unnecessary and improper extrapolation from the truth of election.

That the believer should think about the reward in terms of his good works is foreign to Christ's parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31–46. When the king commends the sheep on their deeds of love toward him, they respond by asking when they had done such things. They were not focused on their good works at all.

Not too long ago, a wise woman whom I know wondered aloud if God's people are ever really conscious of their good works. I appreciate her thought. It echoes the

teaching of this parable. It also accords with what Hanko wrote regarding the parable:

This denial of the saints is also indicative of the fact that although the saints did these things, they were not conscious of them, because a good work that is genuinely a good work is done with complete self-forgetfulness. Those works that are good are done only to the glory of God...He [the child of God] is completely oblivious to the fact that he has done anything good because his motive is the glory of God and thankfulness to God for the great salvation given him in Christ, though he is a wretched sinner.⁹

However, the ecclesiastical assemblies in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) could only speak about the reward in connection with good works. The ecclesiastical assemblies—Hope Protestant Reformed Church's consistory, Classis East 2020, and Synod 2020—all supported the doctrine of the "Reward of Grace" sermon that the reward is according to works.¹⁰ Hope Protestant Reformed Church's consistory asserted, "Scripture and the Reformed confessions teach *plainly* that the reward of individual believers is in proportion to the good works that they perform in this life."¹¹ Both the classis and the synod declared, "Use of the words 'according to' to connect the reward of grace to deeds done in faith...is biblical."¹²

As proof for their decisions, the Protestant Reformed ecclesiastical assemblies cited Matthew 16:27, Mark 10:29–30, Romans 2:6, 2 Corinthians 5:10, Revelation 22:12, and Belgic Confession article 24.

But what do these passages say?

The Mark 10 passage reads,

28. Then Peter began to say unto him, Lo, we have left all, and have followed thee.
29. And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's,
30. But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life.

7 Herman Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 510–11; emphasis added. See also page 531.

8 Herman Hanko, *The Mysteries of the Kingdom: An Exposition of Jesus' Parables*, 2nd ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), 315.

9 Hanko, *The Mysteries of the Kingdom*, 406.

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

11 *Acts of Synod 2020*, 129; emphasis added.

12 *Acts of Synod 2020*, 36, 138.

This text was cited as justification that the reward is proportionate to good works.¹³ But in Mark 10 Jesus Christ was not teaching a reward of proportion. He was teaching a reward of superabundance! By following after Christ and his gospel, every disciple loses in this life and receives persecutions besides. In fact, he loses all—all that does not pertain to Christ and his gospel. *All* may include spouses or children or friends. *All* may include possessions or houses or lands. This is pitiful. Yet when the disciple has Christ, he has more than he can fathom! A hundredfold! Superabundance!

I say again that this text does not teach a reward of proportion. It was Peter who expected a reward of proportion when he said, “Look at all the things we have done. What shall we receive?” Peter’s conception of the reward—which is the conception of our flesh—was a crass and mercantile thing. Jesus exposed that wicked conception of the reward by declaring that *all* his disciples shall receive freely of his grace and goodness. They shall receive the reward not because they have done enough. They shall receive the reward solely because God has joined them to Christ, so that they share in the bounty that Christ has earned.

The citations from Matthew, Romans, 2 Corinthians, and Revelation are all similar in doctrine. Matthew 16:27: “The Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.” Romans 2:6: “Who [God] will render to every man according to his deeds.” 2 Corinthians 5:10: “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.” Revelation 22:12: “Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be.”

In all of these verses, the context clearly indicates that scripture is speaking about a *judgment*. The verbs of interest may vary. The verbs of interest are translated in the King James Version as “reward” or “render” or “receive” or “give.” Frankly, I don’t care how you translate them. What is important is that the texts are speaking about a judgment—the judgment in the day of the Lord.

And this judgment distinguishes between *two different groups*. What stands between the two different groups is God’s grace in Jesus Christ. What stands between the two different groups is the cross. On the one hand, there are those whom God has elected into Jesus Christ.

When Christ takes his place on the glorious judgment seat, he manifests the elect as righteous and holy because they have his perfect work imputed unto them. On the other hand, there are the reprobate, in whom God has no pleasure. Christ manifests them as unrighteous and filthy because they never had him. The basis of this judgment is not what they have done in their lives, but the basis is whether or not they have Christ’s perfect work according to God’s divine decree.

I hear the objection now: “But the Greek says *κατὰ*! You deny the clear teaching of the text that the judgment is *according to works*.”

Indeed, the whole of scripture insists on this. But note well that every rational, moral creature will be judged *according to works*, not *by works*. When scripture speaks of *according to works* in connection with the judgment, it highlights the specific function that men’s works have in the theodicy of God. God will use the works of men to demonstrate and vindicate his righteous judgment, such that his glory and honor are acknowledged by every rational, moral creature.

The simple teaching of these texts must be mangled in order to draw out that the reward is according to works, such that the believer receives more or less glory based on his deeds. What these texts set forth is the nature of God’s judgment, not the nature of heavenly life. And the natural contrast in these texts is between elect and reprobate, not between different kinds of believers.

What about article 24 of the Belgic Confession? The article reads, “We do not deny that God rewards good works, but it is through his grace that he crowns his gifts.”¹⁴ At the very least, does the article not establish a connection between good works and the reward?

The teaching of the Confession must be understood in light of all that God gives his people by his decree of election. For example, Alsted wrote,

Eternal life is felt by us in this world, but it is after this life that it touches us fully and in this sense it is divided into imperfect and perfect, inchoate and consummated.”¹⁵

In connection with Alsted’s statement, Heppe added, “What believers already possess in germ here on earth, is imparted to them [in heaven] in its perfection.”¹⁶ What ties the spiritual life that the believer experiences on earth together with the fullness of his life in heaven? Election! Election is the fountainhead from whence flow both the

13 “Hope’s consistory understands it [the reward of grace] to mean the degrees of glory spoken of in Scripture (...Mark 10:29–30)” (*Acts of Synod 2020*, 137).

14 Belgic Confession 24, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:412.

15 Quoted in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 709.

16 Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 708–9.

“inchoate” and the “consummated.” The beginning of eternal life that the believer now enjoys shall culminate in that everlasting life with Christ in heaven. The good works that the believer now enjoys shall culminate in his reward of grace from Christ in heaven.

If one speaks about the relationship between good works and the reward, this relationship makes no sense unless it is rooted in what God has decreed for his people by their election in Jesus Christ. Good works and the reward must never be abstracted from election. They are included in election.

Therefore, what does it mean that “God rewards good works” and “through his grace... crowns his gifts”? To use the figure of the Confession, the reward comes upon a life of good works like a crown comes upon a head that is first prepared with anointing oil. The oil does not cause the head to be crowned. The oil does not determine the crowning at all. But God pours the oil, and then God places the crown. And through these actions he gives his covenant friend-servant a name and a place in the kingdom of his Son.¹⁷

Replacement

Thus far I have shown that the reward of grace is the wages of Jesus Christ, which God freely bestows in election. What remains is that the reward “superabundantly replaces all that the children of God lose in this life as they follow after Christ.” This aspect of the definition rightly describes how the church should use the reward in her preaching and pastoral care.

There is a wrong way to use the reward. The “Reward of Grace” sermon used the reward in a wrong way. This was acknowledged in 2020 by Classis East of the PRC when it sustained the objection of a protestant against the sermon. The sermon asserted that the reward is according to good works, so that “the less number of works, the less of a reward one receives.”¹⁸ In response to the sermon, the protestant asked,

If this is true that we are rewarded less of a good work the less the reward and more of a good work the more the reward, how is a child of God to find his comfort and his assurance in that?¹⁹

Classis East concurred with the protestant and stated that the sermon was “susceptible to the interpretation that the believer is left with no comfort or assurance of grace.”²⁰

But the right doctrine of the reward always leaves the believer with comfort and assurance.

In this life the child of God experiences loss. In Matthew 16 Christ instructs his church about this loss that they must endure as his disciples.

24. Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.
25. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.²¹

Psalm 45 echoes this exhortation of Christ:

10. Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline thine ear; forget also thine own people, and thy father's house;
11. So shall the king greatly desire thy beauty: for he is thy Lord; and worship thou him.

The calling to follow Christ means that his disciples must forsake their old lives. Throughout their lives they must die to themselves, mortifying the flesh and the deeds of the body. Disciples of Christ must forsake the world. They may also be required to forsake family and friends. They may lose possessions. They may exhaust themselves for the cause of Christ and his gospel. They may even be required to lay down their lives for his sake. All these things bring sorrow and grief. An outstanding example of all this was Moses. Moses forsook his place among aristocracy as the son of Pharaoh's daughter in order that he might bear the reproach of Christ, “for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward” (Heb. 11:26).

All of this is so eloquently summarized by Luther:

Once you have become a Christian and have a gracious God and the forgiveness of sins...a certain result will be that you will have to do much and suffer much on account of your faith and your Baptism. As [Jesus' sermon on the mount has] shown in detail, the devil himself, together with the world and the flesh, will attach himself to you and torment you from every side, making the world seem too narrow for you. If we were left to be stuck in this, without Word or consolation, we would despair and say, “Who wants to be a Christian or preach or do good works? You see what happens to them. The world tramples them underfoot, defames and

17 I use this illustration for the sake of explaining the words of the Confession. Yet we must not forget that even babies who die in infancy rule together with Christ. And they rule having done no works in their earthly lives.

18 *Acts of Synod 2020*, 120.

19 *Acts of Synod 2020*, 121.

20 *Acts of Synod 2020*, 138.

21 These words are oft repeated in the gospels. See Matthew 10:38–39, Mark 8:34–35, and Luke 9:23–24.

slanders them, and tries every kind of villainy and evil trick on them, finally robbing them of their honor, their property, and their life. All Christ can call me is poor, troubled, hungry, meek, peaceable, afflicted, and persecuted! Is this supposed to last forever and never change?”²²

In these narrow circumstances Christ promises his reward to encourage his church.²³ These circumstances are explored in more detail below.

First, Christ gives the promise of the reward to the church when she is threatened by apostasy, so that the church might take heed and expend herself to fight against that apostasy.

This is the explicit teaching of 2 John 8. After warning about many deceivers and antichrists in the world, the apostle exhorted, “Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward.” To the church at Pergamos, the risen Lord said, “Watch! Do not remove the sentinel of discipline and give evil men a place in your assembly! And those who overcome shall have their reward.”²⁴ To the church at Thyatira, the Spirit exhorted, “Root yourselves in the objective truth of God’s word, and do not drift away in the subjective experience of man! And those who overcome shall have their reward.”²⁵ And Herman Hoeksema, in connection with the dead church at Sardis, warned,

Many a church has fallen asleep in our day... Shall we remain faithful?... We shall, if, by the power of the grace of God, we fight the good fight even unto the end.

Watch... that no one take your crown!²⁶

It is appropriate for the church to exhort and encourage herself with the promise of the reward in these late hours, when apostasy tightens its grip upon the church world. In times like these a few elders and deacons may be called to stand up against ministers, professors of theology, and even entire denominations. To those few the consolation of the reward comes. And such an exhortation and encouragement will be most appropriate when Babylon sweeps down upon the faithful remnant to shed

its blood.²⁷ Take heed that you lose not the truth but that you receive the reward!

Second, Christ gives the promise of the reward to the church when she faces persecution for his name’s sake. That the church of Christ must suffer persecution is expected. Paul wrote in Philippians 1:27–29, “Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ... And in nothing terrified by your adversaries... For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.”

In Romans 8 Paul wrote,

16. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:
17. And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

Belgic Confession article 37 speaks of the faithful and elect who are “condemned by many judges and magistrates as heretical and impious” because their cause is the cause of Christ.²⁸

The early church father Irenaeus even spoke of the reward of the saints as “the reward of their suffering.”²⁹

Sometimes, persecution comes upon the entire church. Other times, persecution comes upon certain members of the church, whose spouses or children or parents belittle them for the truth’s sake and call them wicked.

To his persecuted saints Christ said in Matthew 5,

10. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
11. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.
12. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

To the saints at Smyrna, who would be persecuted by the devil, Christ exhorted, “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life!” (Rev. 2:10). And

22 Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21, *The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 290.

23 “By eternal life we mean... that happy and blessed life, which God promises to the faithful as the end, reward, and gain for all their miseries and toils” (Walaeus in Heppie, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 707; emphasis added).

24 See Revelation 2:12–17 and Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 97.

25 See Revelation 2:18–29 and Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 113.

26 Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 131.

27 See Hoeksema’s manner of exhortation in Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 704.

28 Belgic Confession 37, in *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:436.

29 Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 561 (V.32.1).

to those who endure loss from enemies, Christ exhorted, “Love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil” (Luke 6:35).

That the reward may be used to encourage the church in times of suffering is observed in the writings of the early church fathers. In a letter to Athanasius and his church at Alexandria, an ecumenical council wrote,

You have undergone many severe and grievous trials; many are the insults and injuries which the Catholic Church has suffered, but “he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved.” Wherefore even though they still recklessly assail you, let your tribulation be unto you for joy. For such afflictions are a sort of martyrdom, and such confessions and tortures as yours will not be without their reward, but ye shall receive the prize from God. Therefore strive above all things in support of the sound faith, and of the innocence of your Bishop and our fellow-minister Athanasius.³⁰

After one of his expulsions from Alexandria, Athanasius wrote to the bishops of his province, saying,

For this is what they thirst after; and they continue to this day to desire to shed my blood. But of these things I have no care; for I know and am persuaded that they who endure shall receive a reward from our Saviour; and that ye also, if ye endure as the Fathers did, and shew yourselves examples to the people, and overthrow these strange and alien devices of impious men, shall be able to glory, and say, We have kept the Faith; and ye shall receive the crown of life, which God hath promised to them that love Him. And God grant that I also together with you may inherit the promises, which were given, not to Paul only, but also to all them that have loved the appearing of our Lord, and Saviour, and God, and universal King, Jesus Christ.³¹

Third, Christ gives the promise of the reward to those whom he has called faithfully to rule his church and preach his gospel.³² Such labor is often wearisome and thankless, if not plagued by opposition. They must promote and defend

the truth regardless of the cost. Sometimes they labor night and day to bring God’s word, only to be called the spawn of Satan. Paul described in 1 Corinthians 4 what he endured as a faithful minister of truth: hunger and thirst and nakedness, buffeting, lack of dwelling, reviling, persecution, and defamation. He was treated as the scum of the earth.

Such laborers scripture consoles with the promise that they have a reward. In connection with the fields of harvest, Christ said to his disciples, “He that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together” (John 4:36). Peter said to the church, “The elders which are among you I exhort...Feed the flock of God which is among you...And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away” (1 Pet. 5:1–4).

Athanasius illustrated this legitimate usage of reward in a letter to a fellow minister named Lucifer, who had labored diligently to defend the truth against the fierce opposition of the Arians:

O truly Lucifer, who according to your name bring the light of truth, and have set it on a candlestick to give light to all. For who, except the Arians, does not clearly see from your teaching the true faith and the taint of the Arians. Forcibly and admirably, like light from darkness, you have separated the truth from the subtilty and dishonesty of heretics, defended the Catholic Church, proved that the arguments of the Arians are nothing but a kind of hallucination, and taught that the diabolical gnashings of the teeth are to be despised...But I know and believe that the Lord Himself, Who has revealed all knowledge to your holy and religious spirit, will reward you for this labour also with a reward in the kingdom of the heavens.³³

Fourth, Christ gives the promise of the reward to those who labor as slaves in this world, whose gain from their labor is little to none.³⁴ The reward is used to encourage them as they diligently serve their masters. For example, Colossians 3:

22. Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God:

30 “Letter of the Council of Sardica to the Church of Alexandria,” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ser. 2, vol. 4, *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff, Henry Wace, and Archibald Robertson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, n.d.), 121.

31 “To the Bishops of Egypt,” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 4:235. This letter was written by Athanasius after his expulsion by Syrianus in AD 356.

32 See Matthew 10:41–42, Mark 9:41, and 2 Timothy 4:7–8.

33 “Letter LI: Second Letter to Lucifer,” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 4:562.

34 Herman Hoeksema, *Exegesis of Colossians* (Grandville, MI: Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, [1997?]), 91.

24. Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ.

Although a slave may gain nothing from his earthly masters in this life, yet as a slave of Jesus Christ he gains everything in the life to come.

Finally, Christ gives the promise of the reward so that the church may pray with ever-greater intensity, “Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!”³⁵ The church who hears about all the catastrophic events that must shortly come to pass will not work herself into a frenzy. Rather, as she becomes more and more conscious of her present misery and tribulation and suffering in the midst of the world, she looks forward to the manifestation of the glory of her bridegroom and the time when she will be ever with him. Thus the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!”

Superabundance

A marvelous promise is the reward of grace. It superabundantly replaces all that the child of God loses in this life.

The reward is superabundant because it is unspeakable glory. The eye has beheld the flowering fields and the radiant sun and the towering peaks, but it has observed nothing comparable to the sights of heaven. The ear has

heard the melodious birds and the thundering clouds and the babbling brooks, but it has heard nothing comparable to the sounds of heaven. The believer has seen the glory of Jesus Christ evidently set forth in the preaching. The believer has heard the resounding of his savior’s fame in the gospel. Yet what things God has prepared for him have not entered his heart.

The reward is superabundant because it is eternal. Light affliction—this is what the apostle called being troubled on every side, perplexed, persecuted, cast down, and scarred by the world’s hatred of Christ. Momentary affliction! Indeed, such tribulation is heavy and grievous, but it works a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

Superabundance implies that there can be no proportion between the believer’s labor on this earth and the reward of grace. This correct doctrine of the reward is liberating to the believer. He is freed from all his furious calculating about gaining his place in heaven. Rather, he trembles that God has so loved him from eternity that he has chosen for him a place in his new and splendid creation forever. It is a place that is wholly other than the believer’s wearisome pilgrimage on this earth.

—Luke Bomers

FAITH AND LIFE

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

IDEALISM (2)

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

Introduction

The words of Psalm 12:4 indicate a specific kind of the great sin of idolatry.

There are different kinds of idolatry. The sin of idolatry must not be limited to naming certain beings and elevating them to the status of divinity. Idolatry must not be limited to ascribing to these other beings the virtues that belong to the one true God. It must not be limited

to making physical representations of these beings and putting them in temples or other holy places, presenting to them gifts and offerings, and bowing down to worship them instead of the one true God.

Idolatry is also the substitution of man for God. Idolatry is this substitution in two distinct ways that aggravate the sin before God. The first way is common to all idolatry. Rather than giving to God the glory of his sovereignty,

³⁵ Hoeksema, *Behold, He Cometh!*, 27.

attending to his word, and having God as one's only God according to his word, man determines the god he will worship and serve. Because man must determine rather than God, the god or gods which man chooses to serve will most definitely not be the one true God. In this determination man establishes himself as sovereign, taking God's place for himself. The second way of substitution is that man gives to himself glory and honors himself as the creator.

As the creator!

With his words man takes the prerogative of the creator. With his tongue man will prevail against the living God, who speaks his word of power and truth. With man's speech he will make his own world in which God is not sovereign. Man will make his own world in which he is free to do as he pleases. He will make his own world in which he makes himself ruler. He will make his own world in which he freely oppresses and abuses those over whom he claims this power. He considers the works and the fruits of his oppression as accomplishing his own power and glory. He enriches himself in his position and control. He sees the fruit of his labors in the fearful and slavish submission of those whom he oppresses. He has dominance. He has control of his world. He has gained his followers to act after him, to speak after him, and to think after him.

In taking the prerogative of the creator for his own advantage, the idolater takes from God the glory of God's truth and sovereignty. The idolater sets up his own world by his words in conflict with the truth that belongs to God. The idolater sets up his world that is in conflict with the sovereignty and truth of God that God alone is the creator and ruler of heaven and earth. The idolater sets up himself in conflict with God and also sets up his world in conflict with the world over which God reigns and rules.

And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. (Gen. 11:4)

And Balak said unto him, Come, I pray thee, with me unto another place, from whence thou mayest see them: thou shalt see but the utmost part of them, and shalt not see them all: and curse me them from thence. (Num. 23:13)

6. They helped every one his neighbour; and every one said to his brother, Be of good courage.
7. So the carpenter encouraged the goldsmith, and he that smootheneth with the hammer him that smote the anvil, saying, It is ready for the soldering: and he fastened it with nails, that it should not be moved. (Isa. 41:6-7)

And he shall speak great words against the most High, and shall wear out the saints of the most High, and think to change times and laws. (Dan. 7:25)

And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him? (Rev. 13:4)

This form of idolatry has been a cornerstone of worldly philosophy.

Such idolatry is the philosophy of idealism.

The Philosophy of Idealism

To understand what idealism is, it is helpful to go to one of the chief sources of this philosophy, the philosophy of Plato. The so-called "cave allegory" is given in book 7 of his *Republic*. The book begins with the following:

And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: — Behold! Human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the first and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.¹

Plato then wrote of one of these human beings being freed from the confines of the cave and finding his way out of the cave. After the painful process of accommodating his senses to the world into which he has emerged, he is able to know and understand the source of the shadows that he has seen in the cave. He also comes to understand that what he thought was real while confined to the cave, the light and the shadows, were only the effects of the reality he did not see before, the reality that was outside the cave.

Plato wrote of two additional movements of this human being who has been freed from the cave. First, this enlightened individual goes back into the cave to try to explain to his former fellow prisoners what he has encountered outside. His fellow prisoners, still stuck in the cave, remain unenlightened. They cannot seriously consider that what they are being told is true. All they know and understand are the light and shadows that they see in front of them.

¹ Plato, *Republic* (New York: Scribner Press, 1928), 273.

This freed individual also moves to different and higher levels of reality. He becomes accustomed to the truth that there is more than one level of reality. As he learns to accommodate his senses to these different levels, he is able to reach more of them, until finally he reaches what is ultimate.

This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed—whether rightly or wrongly, God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.²

In addition to this movement from inside the cave to outside the cave and this movement beyond and upward, there are additional features in the above quotations that figure into idealism as a philosophical tendency. Plato is the human being about whom this allegory centers, not as a philosopher but as *the* philosopher. The world of knowledge is above the world of sight, and Plato has the ability to access this world of knowledge in order to come back to the world of sight with what he has learned. The world of knowledge is vastly superior to and controls the world of sight. Finally, in this world of knowledge, one is able to find what is unavailable in the world of sight: “the idea of good...inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right.” In short, God is to be ascertained and known in this world of knowledge, and the knowledge of him is to be brought back to the world of sight as ultimate truth.

From the above it becomes clear why so many in Christianity gave Plato a place in the kingdom of God. It also becomes clear why Plato’s teaching was seen to be a basis for the doctrine of common grace. His teaching seems to be exactly the teaching of scripture. Why can’t the God of the holy scriptures be this truth that Plato identified, the truth that is eternal and the truth that is above all? Why could God himself not have revealed this truth to Plato by way of general revelation?

That such an influence of Plato’s philosophy carried through to dominate Western thought is clear from the preface to Plato’s *Republic* by Charles M. Bakewell:

Plato’s own philosophy, if one may hazard a definition in a single sentence, may be said to be a transforming of the Socratic tentative quest for universal definitions in the sphere of conduct into a metaphysical theory of reality, which enabled him to extend the Socratic principle to the interpretation of nature as well as of man, and to bridge the gap between the relativism of the “flowing philosophers,” as he humorously called the Heraclitans, and the absolutism of the Eleatics, for whom the real, as object of reason, must be fixed and eternal.³

“Fixed and eternal.” What so easily can be called God and God’s counsel.

Inroads into Western Thought

There might yet seem to be a very great gap between Plato’s cave allegory and the idolatry identified before. There might seem to be an even greater gap between Plato’s cave allegory and Western philosophy and even Western Christian philosophy, and perhaps a greater gap yet between that allegory and Christian theology. How much time has passed since Plato has come and gone. How much difference there is between Athens and Jerusalem or Athens and Rome or Athens and Leiden or Athens and Grand Rapids.

But there is no gap at all.

The bridging of this gap is not common grace as a doctrine. The bridging of this gap is not the many Christians’ thinking that Plato is in the kingdom of heaven because of his wisdom.

The bridging of this gap is due to a similarity of basis, of method, and of end that deals with the general philosophy of idealism. Idealism takes many different shapes. Its content also may differ widely. But the end is the same: a higher, more fixed and firm reality than what is commonly enjoyed and understood to be the reality of this life, which is apprehended through the physical senses. The method is the same: the use of rational argument with a presupposed basis. The presupposed basis is that there must be a controlling factor on a higher level and that human thought is able to and does penetrate to this higher level through the use of reason, coming to conclusions from premises laid out. That is, just as one argues logically from premises to conclusion, so can one

2 Plato, *Republic*, 277.

3 Plato, *Republic*, xiii.

argue from one realm to a higher. Lastly, the basis is the same: human thought and human reason.

The Idolatry of Idealism

Scripture exposes idealism as idolatry.

First, all idealism overturns the clear distinction made by the word of God between the creator and the creature. “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” (v. 27).

Because of its basis and method, all the “truth” about God that is “discovered” through the thoughts of men depends on those men themselves. The world of knowledge depended on Plato’s ability to think of it and to form arguments about it. Plato did not access “truth” as a human being staggering out of the darkness into the light. Plato made “truth.” He imagined it. Plato’s “world of knowledge” was not more real than the “world of sight.” His world was significantly less real. A general acquaintance with the company of philosophers in Western civilization yields a staggering amount of significant disagreement among them. This disagreement gives the lie to the notion that by their thoughts they were accessing the same realm as Plato’s, let alone one another.

Second, idealism denies the truth of the inspiration of scripture and the necessity of scripture to give the true knowledge of God. “The prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Pet. 1:21). For Plato to be able to argue with his cave allegory to the true and living God for the attainment of fellowship and friendship, scripture must be denied as necessary to salvation; and the name of Jesus Christ must no longer be the only name under heaven given among men, whereby they must be saved (Acts 4:12).

Lastly, and from a strictly logical standpoint, idealism is an ongoing logical fallacy. It is always assuming what needs to be proved and cannot be proved. Idealism assumes that it can argue to what is more real from what is less real. But it can never prove that anything is more real. Nor can idealism prove that its basis is real. It must always be assumed. From another viewpoint, it is impossible to prove that what a man might imagine or think about is more real than the man himself who imagines or thinks it. Though Glaucon could agree with Plato over and over, Plato’s cave allegory does not

become more real. Ahab and Jezebel’s institution of Baal worship upon penalty of death did not make Baal real and Jehovah not real. Majority decisions of ecclesiastical assemblies may become settled and binding according to article 31 of the Church Order, but those decisions cannot make scripture and its truth more or less real.

Just as surely as idolatry is the bowing down of man before his gods of wood and stone, so also is man’s worship of his own imagination. Just as vain, just as helpless, and just as much under the wrath of God.

The indictment of idealism as idolatry must be brought to bear on much of what passes for theology even in Reformed circles.

Is idealism being entertained when debate ensues about eternal justification, justification at the cross, or the sinner’s justification by faith in the forum of his conscience? Why is one appealed to over against the other? Upon what ground can one stand to be able to pass judgment on one over against another? To suppose that one is going to be more real or less real than the others?

Is idealism the reason that the authority of scripture alone is forsaken for the authority of men and their thoughts and ideas to prevail? When men try to rationalize and build their theology on their experience and knowledge, they oppose the word of God as the sole basis for all truth; and they carry on the same method as idealism. When leaders in churches take their flocks away from the word of God with their own judgments and determinations, they pit their own imaginations against the word of God.

What about debating which is more real, God’s counsel or time and history? What makes it necessary to choose one over the other? Upon what ground can a man stand in order to pass judgment on one or the other?

Idealism casts its long shadow upon much of Christian thought. Idealism enters into arguments about God’s existence. René Descartes postulated the existence of God on his own, beginning with his famous dictum, “I think, therefore I am.” Idealism enters into theology by arguing to God’s perfections from man’s reflection of them. Idealism enters into much thought about the afterlife: it supposes heaven is a great deal like earth, except that it will be perfect; everything evil will be removed, and what was enjoyed on earth as good will be brought up to an ideal form. Ideal bodies, ideal environment, ideal enjoyments.

To be continued with the consequences of idealism.

—MVW

THE PRC'S PERVERSION OF THE SIMPLE GOSPEL

For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen. — Romans 11:36

The doctrine of man in relation to the infallible fruits of election has become a battleground in pursuit of the truth in the controversy between the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC) and the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). This doctrine of salvation, though such a simple doctrine, has been corrupted and distorted, twisted and turned in man's pride. The Protestant Reformed Churches have been doing exactly that. They have taken the simplicity, joy, and freedom of the gospel and have formed it into no gospel at all. Their doctrines of man and of the activities of faith are doctrines of bondage and corruption and are ultimately from the devil. (For how can anything contrary to the gospel not be from the devil?) One might ask, what are the infallible fruits of faith, and what is their place in the life of a Christian? What about repenting? What about obeying in relation to the experience of God's favor? In this article I hope to make plain the simplicity of this doctrine and the simplicity of the gospel and furthermore to push and preserve the Reformed faith.

For the past years I have heard a lot about man in my former denomination, the Protestant Reformed Churches. "Man does stuff, you know: he does repent, he does believe, he does do good works. He must do these things to be saved." And I have heard, "I want to be told in sermons what to do"—give me a list of things I need to do in my life of holiness to check all the boxes. And I believe this was because ministers and professors were seeing unbelievable worldliness and wickedness in their congregations, so they thought, "Let's bring the law, and then we will see the people bring forth the fruits of faith." As Professor Cammenga said, "God uses the preaching of the law...positively, as a means of grace."¹

What these men are blind to is the fact that you can't incentivize or legislate holiness because man is nothing

of himself. Only God can work holiness in his people, and this work is infallible. The PRC have perverted this doctrine by claiming that God justifies, but I sanctify myself—by his grace, of course. How did the PRC get all the way to this point? I believe God's Spirit left the PRC a long time ago, and I am of the generation that arose and knew not the Lord.

In 2003 a sermon statement of Rev. Ronald Cammenga was protested by Marvin Kamps to his consistory at Southwest Protestant Reformed Church, and in May 2004 the protest was brought to the floor of Classis East. Classis agreed with Cammenga's statement and upheld it. This statement has since become the official dogma of the PRC.

It is not enough for salvation that God has sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. It is not enough, that there is a Jesus. It is not enough, that this Jesus was born of a virgin; that this Jesus lived a perfect life; that this Jesus taught and defended the Word of God; that this Jesus suffered under the wrath of God in an atoning death; that this Jesus arose with his body from the grave on the third day; that this Jesus is ascended in power at the right hand of God in the heavens. Not enough for salvation. God must not only have sent Jesus into the world, but I must come and you must come to Jesus. I must become one with him so that I enjoy his fellowship and share in his salvation. For salvation it is necessary that I come to him. And if I do not come to him, there is no salvation and no enjoyment of the blessings of salvation.²

Christ is not enough. I don't know what you think when you hear or read that Christ is not enough, but I shudder at this doctrine. I hate it and can't stand it for

1 Ronald Cammenga, "Thou Shalt and Thou Shalt Not: Preaching the Commands of the Gospel," speech given for a Protestant Reformed seminary conference on preaching, October 29, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQDzWX__Mvk&list=PLxmaZMLHKEvS1gOlZGG37F0T5fwHEd_Sc&index=3.

2 Ronald Cammenga, "Jesus' Call to the Weary (1)," sermon preached in Southwest Protestant Reformed Church, October 12, 2003. See agenda of Classis East September 8, 2004, 9.

a moment; it makes me spiritually sick when I read it. I have pity on those who can stand this doctrine for a moment. Yet this has been an official dogma for eighteen years in the PRC. Christ's perfect work on the cross was not enough for our salvation. Christ's full satisfaction for sins on the cross was not enough for our salvation. There is something yet that man must do for salvation.

This is semi-Pelagianism at its finest. "Of course," Protestant Reformed people will say, "we are justified by faith; of course we are saved by grace; of course Jesus died for our sins; *but* you and I must come to Jesus, and if we do not come to him, we do not have salvation." God desires to save his people; he does everything in his part for salvation; but now man needs to do his part for salvation.

What then does Romans 6:23 mean to the PRC, when the verse says that "the gift of God is eternal life"? They have to deny it. The Protestant Reformed Churches just cannot accept a gift. They don't know what a gift is. They add man wherever they can and look to slip him into their doctrine. Eternal life is a gift of God, and we cannot lose that gift. God's gift to his people is eternal life in heaven with him, and getting that gift is not dependent upon how well we obey or how much we repent, but eternal life is entirely a gift.

The PRC's dogma is that Christ is not enough and grace is not sufficient to save. Those who disagree with the PRC's dogma may not say, preach, or write anything against *Christ is not enough*. The PRC has adopted this semi-Pelagian theology into their preaching and writings, and it is blatantly evident. They have so completely destroyed the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ. Many of us in the PRC thought that this destruction of the gospel started with sermons in Hope Protestant Reformed Church, but it had started way earlier than that. The Protestant Reformed Churches have been so sick for a long time, and their members have been too blind to even see it. The denomination has displaced the perfect work and sacrifice of Christ upon the cross. It is true that the gospel was found in the PRC many decades ago, but now God's judgment is upon these churches. God's judgment is making itself known as the marks of the true church fade away. Out of *Christ is not enough* developed man-first theology.

But here is the truth of the gospel that God mercifully gave to the Reformed Protestant denomination: Christ is enough, and he is the perfect sacrifice. There is nothing man must do. This doctrine is nothing new. It is the old Reformed paths as taught by Herman Hoeksema.

Those who say that the PRC and the RPC teach the same doctrine must recant that saying. There is a fundamental doctrinal difference between the PRC and the

RPC, and that is who man is and who God is. For the PRC it is *Christ is not enough* and *man must do*. Christ did his part, and now man must do his part for salvation and for his experience of salvation. For the RPC Christ is everything, and man is nothing. There is nothing man must do to be saved; that work of salvation was completely finished on the cross by Jesus Christ.

I ask each Protestant Reformed person who reads this, what do you believe? Where is your gospel and your hope? If it is *Christ is not enough*, then stay in the PRC. Openly confess that doctrine with all your heart and proclaim it unashamedly, being willing to lay down your life for *Christ is not enough*. If this is not your gospel, then I urge you to come out from that bondage and hear the gospel that Christ is everything and you are assured of your salvation. Your comfort in life and in death is Jesus Christ, and he alone is your comfort—not how much working or obeying you do. Christ is your comfort, and his work was enough.

As you can see, since 2003–4 God has been removing his Spirit from the Protestant Reformed Churches. And now you see professors and ministers writing and saying things as shocking as Professor Cammenga's statements, and it is at a speed I did not see coming. It is as though after reformation came, God pushed them down the slippery path they were on, and now they can't wait to deceive you.

So what about these inevitable fruits of election? In Canons of Dordt 1.12, we have these words:

The elect in due time, though in various degrees and in different measures, attain the assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election, not by inquisitively prying into the secret and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves, with a spiritual joy and holy pleasure, the infallible fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God—such as a true faith in Christ, filial fear, a godly sorrow for sin, a hungering and thirsting after righteousness, etc. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 157)

These fruits of election are worked in the heart of the elect child of God through the Holy Spirit. That these are infallible fruits of election means that these fruits are *inevitable* in the child of God. The child of God can't help but sorrow over sin, hunger and thirst after righteousness, and have filial fear. The child of God must do these things, and he will. This *must* is not a must of possibility. This *must* is not a must of *you have to do this, and if you don't you will not get or you have to do this to get that*. Absolutely *not!* That is not the gospel; that is not the good news of the gospel, but man's words. This *must* of the gospel is a *must* of inevitability. The man who is elected and

engrafted into Christ must walk in these fruits because God preordained the elect to walk in them (Eph. 2:10; see also Phil. 2:13). The elect child of God *will* walk in these fruits all his life long. What a gospel that is! The child of God *may*, *must*, and *will* walk in repentance. It is absolutely impossible that the Spirit take abode in the heart of one of his children and then not work the willing and joy to walk in obedience to God. What freedom that is for the child of God! No more working to get, just resting in the finished work of Christ. That is the liberty of the gospel that has been lost and perverted in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Let me prove to you that the perversion of the simple gospel has been full steam ahead. What do men in the PRC preach, write, and defend?

When criticizing the doctrine of the RPC and claiming that it is “unchristian” and “un-reformed,” Professor Engelsma wrote, “I refer specifically to their denial of the necessity of repentance in order to receive from God the forgiveness of sins.” “Repentance precedes forgiveness.”³

Reverend McGeown wrote, “One of the problems with an emphasis upon eternal justification is that justification by faith becomes simply *a realization that we were always justified*...This leads to the extreme view that we were always saved, never lost.”⁴

Reverend Key preached, “John also understood that the experience of that covenant fellowship with God and the joy of his fellowship, which is by faith, comes also only in a particular way of life.”⁵

These statements are shocking. How can one dare say these words and then boldly confess to be Reformed? How can one dare to bring this pitiful doctrine to the throne of God? Repentance can only and will only ever be a fruit. Repentance and confessing sins can and will only be good works of the child of God. The only thing we do is sin, sin, and sin some more. Our debt grows and grows.

An emphasis on eternal justification? Do Reformed Protestant people actually believe that? Yes, Reverend McGeown, we do believe that. That is the whole comfort of the believer: that he was predestinated and perfect in the sight of God from the beginning of the world. Man never had to do anything to realize that he was saved; he has always known his salvation through the bond of faith, which is also an assured confidence.

Faith is not the only way to experience God’s covenant fellowship; there is a certain way of life you have to live too? For Reverend Key there is a certain way of life you have to live; and if you don’t live a certain way, you won’t experience God’s covenant fellowship with you. This is heresy. God gives you faith, and through faith you have all your assurance. You can’t do anything to add to or complete your assurance, but faith *is* assurance and confidence that you are saved and that you have covenant fellowship with God. Our particular way of life is good works, which are the fruits of our faith—fruits that come out of our assurance and confidence. We can’t merit fellowship with God because of what we do, for what can we merit? Faith is our bond with Christ, by which all his blessings are bestowed upon us; and the child of God can’t help but live in the joy of God’s fellowship. Sin interrupts it, of course, but the child of God never loses God’s fellowship. How can he lose that fellowship? The Spirit lives in him always! Who can take the Spirit out of the heart of the believer? Satan? Our flesh? That can’t be, for we know that Christ overcame the devil and our flesh. We have experience through faith alone.

Why all this emphasis on good works and something that is not fulfilled in Christ? It is so that man can creep in and have some place in his repenting and have some doing in his salvation. Protestant Reformed men take the good work of repentance; and, though they do not say the word *merit*, they make that good work of repenting to merit. They teach that God makes our repenting merit forgiveness, and we do not receive or consciously experience forgiveness *until* we repent. Again, though repentance is worked by God, this does not mean that repentance is not a good work or that we have an excuse not to repent. Though worked by God, we do repent; and it is a fruit, though men try to tell you otherwise. The Belgic Confession says in article 24 regarding our good works that they are fruits:

These works, as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, forasmuch as they are all sanctified by His grace; howbeit they are of no account towards our justification. For it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even before we do good works; otherwise they could not be good works, any more than the fruit of a tree can be good before the tree itself is good. (Confessions and Church Order, 53–54; emphasis added)

3 David J. Engelsma, “The RP Church: Failing to Hold the Traditions,” letter to his family (March 31, 2022), in *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 1 (June 2022): 9–10.

4 Martyn McGeown, “Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness (5): Forgiveness and Justification Distinguished,” May 16, 2022, <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-5-forgiveness-and-justification-distinguished>. The emphasis is McGeown’s.

5 Steven Key, “Radiating Divine Love,” sermon preached in Loveland Protestant Reformed Church on June 5, 2022, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=65221658432493>.

This section of article 24 clearly states that we are justified before we can ever do a good work. Being justified means that we are made legally righteous before God. How can a totally depraved sinner be made righteous before God? We go back to the Belgic Confession for the answer. Article 23 says in its opening sentence, “We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ’s sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 51). Our being legally righteous before God has to do with the remission of sins. For the child of God to be justified, his sins must be forgiven and blotted out. On the cross Christ took and bore upon himself all the sins of his people in totality. There is not one sin that we now have to repent for that was left out on the cross. Christ is a complete and perfect savior. Christ paid for and covers all of our sins. God looks down upon us in love and in mercy before we can ever repent. God forgives us because he sees us in Christ. God never looks down upon his people in wrath or anger, for all that anger and wrath was poured out upon Christ on the cross. We are not justified in time or at a certain point in our lives, but we have been completely and eternally justified.

We have been taught by our mother church that God accepts our imperfect works of repentance, obedience, and any other fruit; and by that we have experience of our salvation. The fact is, God cannot accept something that is not perfect, which means that God cannot accept any work except it is sanctified in Christ. The problem is that the PRC took those works and made it possible to have experience by them. We cannot experience God’s favor more by doing more, but good works are the fruits of having God’s favor upon us. Our works are filthy and disgusting, and the only work acceptable to God is Christ’s work. Christ is the one who gives us experience, and we have experience when we have faith. This is laid out in the Canons of Dort 5.9–10. We cannot perform anything that will give us more experience of salvation. So what is our comfort? It is this: God, who is rich in his mercy, looks down on us as a just and faithful God and says to us, “I love you, and you are mine, and I will never leave nor forsake you.” Day after day we sin and sin; yet God is merciful, God is gracious, and God is just. This is grace upon grace.

The Belgic Confession goes on to teach that if we relied on our repenting, for example, we would have no hope or comfort in our Christian walk. Article 24 says this:

Moreover, though we do good works, we do not found our salvation upon them; for we can do no work but what is polluted by our flesh, and also punishable; and although we could perform such

works, still the remembrance of one sin is sufficient to make God reject them. Thus, then, we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences continually vexed, if they relied not on the merits of the suffering and death of our Savior. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 55)

It is impossible to find any good work, no matter how good of a work it is, as a part of our salvation. If our remission of sins relied on our repenting, then we would never do enough, much less know if we did enough repenting. In fact, we would be like Martin Luther, confessing every specific sin to God and then leaving the confessional only to walk right back in and say, “I have not repented perfectly. Lord, forgive me.” This is bondage and not how the work of repentance is manifested in the life of a Christian.

This is shown in the example of a baby. A baby has never done one good work nor repented for the sins that he has committed. God does not now work in some different way in an adult or have some different election for an adult. That would be impossible for God. For we know the doctrine of the Trinity: God is one person with one mind and one saving work. Not one person with two minds and two different saving works of election. Absolutely not.

Furthermore, with regard to election, article 16 of the Belgic Confession states that the elect have been “elected in Christ Jesus...without any respect to their works” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 41). God cleansed us in eternity; he forgave us in eternity; and he elected us in eternity without any of our repenting or any activity of faith. Everything was foreordained in eternity and accomplished on the cross. This means that all man’s activities are in response to what God has done. And if you think this makes man a stock and a block, then you do not know the gospel of Christ. Man can and will only ever respond to what God has done. Man without God is dead in sin and under the reign of the old man in his body; but through the cross and Christ alone, we are made new and are now no more under the bondage of sin, the law, and the old man but under grace. Under grace.

This is the gospel, the good news that leaves the child of God with unbelievable hope, peace, and comfort. Yes, there is the issued command to repent; yes, we do repent; but never do we base the obtaining of our forgiveness on that repenting, whether that means entirely or consciously/experientially. We love our repenting, and we love our good works; we just do not want to be saved by them or have them be the basis of our salvation. We now therefore don’t command God’s people to sin more so that grace may abound, and we do not tell them that

it doesn't matter if they commit sin because their sins are forgiven already. Of course not. Knowing that you have been elected does not make you desire to live like the world, nor can you, because you are elected in Christ. The gospel says, "Live freely in the gospel. Live a life of thankfulness and love for the Lord God your Father." When the child of God hears that gospel, he will inevitably bring forth every good work because God put those works in his heart in eternity. The child of God does not hear the words "Live freely and live a life of thankfulness" as a command that he must do to be saved but as a manifestation of the working of the gospel in him and as evidence that he is saved. What a gospel that is! It is grace for grace. The works we produce, our election, our assurance—these are all of God's grace. Then when we thank God for working that grace in us, we see God's grace again in giving us thankfulness.

The PRC's doctrine of obeying and repenting has been sliced and whirled together into a blended-up shake full of code words, good Reformed language, and man. You don't even really know what exactly is being said, but when you hear it, it all sounds good and Reformed. You hear words such as *cross*, *Christ*, *grace*, *faith*, *believing*, *God-worked*, etc., as ministers think they can maneuver their way around into preaching the gospel. They think they can use good Reformed language to cover their preaching of man. In addition to this blended-up shake of false doctrine, the PRC look to have a "balanced, full-orbed gospel." What? A balanced, full-orbed gospel? What gospel is that, which is no gospel at all? The Protestant Reformed ministers bring Christ into their sermons and proclaim him; but as soon as they do that, they pump the brakes, and in comes man and what he needs to do. By the end you will have heard a "balanced, full-orbed gospel" full of code words and Reformed language and, of course, man.

Giving man a place, even just a little place, in his experience of salvation or even in a part of his salvation is lethal. It is a doctrine that comes in like a silent, venomous virus and destroys a denomination. Satan uses this deadly virus in such a devious and slippery way that it comes unannounced and is undetected by almost any soul. Satan is on a mission to slaughter the sheep, and yet he does it so quietly that the sheep are oblivious to what is going on. He lures the sheep in by using language that the sheep hear often, which is good and lovely Reformed language, but then he puts his little twist on that Reformed doctrine. Satan adds man into the gospel: man and what he has to do to experience the favor of God; man and what he has to do to be forgiven. Satan craftily makes it sound good by saying that your obeying is all of grace

and all God-worked. He makes sure his lie comes in not looking like a lie but looking like the gospel. Satan has masterfully lured in the sheep and has them suffocating spiritually by his silent, deadly virus. The sheep are dead before they even knew they were sick.

To say that man has to obey to experience the fellowship of God is blasphemy. This means that the more you obey, the more fellowship with God you have. It also means the opposite: the less you obey, the less fellowship you have with God. But obedience is a result of what God has done for you. Why do the PRC keep talking about obedience? Because they believe that sanctification is man's work. Rather, obeying is a fruit and only a fruit of being in fellowship with God. Obeying can only ever be a fruit and the result of what Christ did on the cross. To make God's fellowship conditional on how much you obey makes your obeying no longer a fruit but a work. A man with this belief will be constantly tossed to and fro due to the uncertainty of knowing whether he has done enough obeying. I ask someone who is entrenched in this doctrine, how are you doing in your spiritual life? Have you obeyed enough to experience more of the fellowship of God? Isaiah 64:6–7 says that even if we could "do" something, "all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags." Our obeying is nothing short of filthy rags; and to bring to God our filthy, bloodstained rags of obeying is utterly anathema to the most high majesty of God. We cannot so much as produce and bring to God one acceptable good work, for everything we do is polluted and tainted with sin.

The PRC have even gone so far as to permit the doctrine of a conditional covenant, though they will not use the term *conditional*. Reverend Key said this in a recent sermon on 1 John 4:7–11:

He [John] knew that his salvation was entirely of grace by Christ and was his through faith. But John also understood that the experience of that covenant fellowship with God and the joy of his fellowship, which is by faith, comes also only in a particular way of life, a life which reflects the love of God. And specifically, the Holy Spirit accomplishes that work and brings it to expression in us and through us. He brings to expression in us and through us that radiation of divine love by the use of means. God brings to completion his sovereign work in us by the use of commands.⁶

Reverend Key corrupted the doctrine of the covenant. The establishment, maintenance, perfection, and enjoyment of the covenant are all gifts from God. God

6 Steven Key, "Radiating Divine Love."

has a unilateral covenant. It is one-sided and all of God. The covenant never is nor can be bilateral. But to Reverend Key and the PRC, the enjoyment of the covenant is dependent on what man does in his life. They make the covenant bilateral. They put you under bondage by harping on the fact that if you do not live a particular way of life, you will not experience God's fellowship. They make God's fellowship a potential with this doctrine.

But it is an impossibility that the child of God does not live in fellowship with God. The life of the child of God is inevitably a life of good works. Through faith we know and experience our fellowship with God. And faith's object is always Christ. The confessions beautifully teach us that our election will bring us fellowship and the experience of it before we even do a good work because faith is a certain knowledge and an assured confidence. Isn't that true? You grow up and know God's forgiveness, and you know God's drawing you to repentance. That is because of election theology, which is gone in the PRC. Canons 1.7 reads,

This elect number, though by nature neither better nor more deserving than others, but with them involved in one common misery, God hath decreed to give to Christ, to be saved by Him, and effectually to call and draw them to His communion by His Word and Spirit, to bestow upon them true faith, justification, and sanctification; and having powerfully preserved them in the fellowship of His Son, finally to glorify them for the demonstration of His mercy and for the praise of His glorious grace. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 156)

We are irresistibly called by God's grace and given all the benefits of salvation. In question and answer 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism, we read that Christ preserves us in "the enjoyment of" our salvation (*Confessions and Church Order*, 96). The Catechism makes it so clear that when we are elected we have "the enjoyment of" all the benefits of salvation. The life of fellowship with God is the great blessing of being members of God's covenant. Those who are elected are brought into the covenant and never leave it. Your sins cannot take you out of the covenant. God still loves you when you are sinning all day long. Isn't that the most amazing and gracious thing? That is God's promise to his people throughout scripture. Being in the covenant means we never lose God's fellowship with us, nor do we do anything to experience it, for we already experience God's fellowship with us. Though sin interrupts that fellowship, we as God's people can never lose it. That is impossible. We experience God's fellowship with us by faith alone in Christ alone. Through faith

we are given all the blessings of salvation on account of what Christ has done for us. Our particular way of life is thankfulness to God, and that thankful living is the fruit of being in fellowship with God.

And here is the biggest difference for me between the RPC and the PRC. In the PRC you have to work to get something or feel something from God, whether it be his favor (because you are told you don't always have it) or whether it be assurance or peace (because you are told you can't just have that as a free gift; you must do something). *No!* The glorious truth of thankfulness has been restored. *Stop working!* Salvation, and the blessings of salvation, is finished! Rest in Christ's work! There is freedom; there is joy. It seems, as they say, "too good to be true." That is the good news of the gospel. The whole life of the elect child of God is a life of fruits. The "good" that a child of God does never benefits him or gains him anything but is the result of what God has done and works in him.

I urge the members of the PRC to get out from this bondage. Leave Babylon and the yoke that she places upon you. Come hear the gospel of Jesus Christ! Be freed and liberated in the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ that he has done it all and there is nothing left for you to do unto salvation.

I write this article not out of pride, nor do I write this thinking that I am better than anyone. I am the chief of sinners and completely deserving of hell. I write this article out of love for those in the PRC and with great thankfulness to God for opening my eyes when I am so undeserving. I love my mother church, and I love the members there, but I hate the doctrine that she promotes and defends. I have sorrow over those who are in the PRC and hear from Sunday to Sunday that Christ is not enough and that there is still something man has to do to experience God's favor. I have sorrow over those members because of the great and glorious joy I have in hearing the true gospel of Jesus Christ. I have joy in hearing that all of my sins are forgiven and that no matter what I do, I cannot lose the favor of God. I may lose the sense of God's favor when I sin; but I can never, no matter how unfaithful I am, lose that favor. I now know that this does not make me careless and profane, but it makes me willing and wanting to serve Christ. I have joy in hearing that Christ is my all in all and that I do not add anything to my salvation. I have joy in knowing that I do not work to experience God's favor but that I already have it through faith. There is no greater joy than to hear the gospel and to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Look to Christ for your salvation and for your hope, for he alone has the words of eternal life.

"Peace if possible; truth at all costs."—Martin Luther

—Braylon Mingerink



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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

Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in thy way. — Psalm 119:37

Impossible prayer!

Man has filled the world with vanities. Vanities are concrete lies. Vanities are evil that appears good, corruption that seems whole, misery that offers itself as joy, death that pretends to be life. Vanity is a sweet and beautiful poison full of sin, death, and hell. As soon as you look at vanities, they will bite like an adder and strip you of all that is good, joyful, living, and lovely. Man created vanity in the beginning, and vanity is the object of man's longing: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Man gave ear to a lie that he would be as God, and man created that lie in his mind when he saw that the fruit was good to make one wise. Man turned from God to vanity; and he can never turn again from vanity, but he must bring vanity to its bitter end in hell. Constantly, man creates in the whole world and in all of history vanities: vain riches; vain glory; vain pleasure; vain philosophy; vain religion. Wherever one turns and in every sphere of life, man has filled the world with vanities. To turn your eye from one vanity is to turn your eye to another: a lying wonder; a sweet poison; a delectable hell; a pleasing death. To turn your eyes from them would be to go out of the world. And yet even in your seclusion, the world of vanities would press itself upon you; for the soul, mind, and flesh of man are full of vanities.

Turn my eyes! The windows of the soul. With the rest of the senses, the eyes are that by which man receives and perceives the world about him. Through the eyes the world streams into his soul. Man had light. He beheld all in the light of the glory of God and pressed all into the service of that glory of Jehovah God. But what a vain creature he has become. He turned his eyes from God to vanity. The very light that is in him has been turned into darkness. He is full of darkness and thus of enmity against God and of love for the vanity of this world. To that world also the believer belongs by nature. His eye is naturally evil, and with it he is insatiable in his desires for the world's vanities.

Turn my eyes! Not that he would not see. For he is in the world. It is impossible for him not to see vanity. But seeing, that I may turn away in disgust and abhorrence; that seeing, I might not admire and desire but hate.

Wonder of grace! Quicken thou me in thy way. Oh, a prayer for an entirely new way of seeing and an entirely new life. Flood my eyes with the light of the glory of God; cause me to see thy way; teach me; give me understanding; incline my heart to thy word. Not a life of the love of vanity but of love for God. Not a life walking in vanity but a life walking in Jehovah's statutes. Jehovah's statutes are the way through the world that the believer must walk. To observe the commandments of Jehovah he considers a very great good. In that way quicken me! Cause me to live, cause me to walk, cause me constantly by thy almighty power and grace to live in the way of Jehovah God.

Quicken thou me because I have yet the flesh, which is full of and lusts after nothing but vanity. To have confidence in self is itself vanity of vanities. Do thou quicken me. Do thou turn my eyes. For thou art my God, and I am thy servant. Confidence in God and his promise.

—NJL