

The background features a stylized, orange-toned illustration. On the left, a sword is shown in profile, pointing upwards and to the right. On the right, a shield is depicted, also in profile, facing left. The shield has a circular design with several smaller circles inside. The sword and shield are rendered in a flat, graphic style with white outlines and orange fills.

# 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

AUGUST 2023 | VOLUME 4 | NUMBER 3

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*Sword and Shield* is a monthly periodical published by Reformed Believers Publishing.

Editor in chief

Rev. Nathan J. Langerak

All quotations from scripture are from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.

Quotations from the Reformed and ecumenical creeds, Church Order, and liturgical forms are taken from *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), unless otherwise noted.

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325 84th St SW, Suite 102  
Byron Center, MI 49315  
Website: [reformedbelieverspub.org](http://reformedbelieverspub.org)  
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## BEAUTIFUL EATING AND DRINKING

*Behold that which I have seen: it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life, which God giveth him: for it is his portion. Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God. For he shall not much remember the days of his life; because God answereth him in the joy of his heart. — Ecclesiastes 5:18–20*

**S**urely, Solomon here speaks of eating and drinking. He means our actual, physical eating and drinking. And further, Solomon uses that as a summary of our consumption of earthly things in general. He refers to living in our houses, sleeping in our beds, and eating food and drinking beverages. Because man eats his bread in the sweat of his brow, Solomon brings up the toil and labor of man in the earth. And because man does nothing apart from his mind, body, and will, Solomon also refers to our plans and purposes.

Eating and drinking, like breathing, are necessary activities and are basic to the continuation of human life. Man must eat to live. He is not like the angels, but he is flesh and blood that is nourished by food and drink. Yet man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. God so created man that he must eat; and perhaps even more crucially, he must drink. Through these means God exerts his power, and man's life is continued for another day, a month, or a year. And so man, also in his eating and drinking—and in his breathing, work, care, industry, and use of earthly things—has to do with God his creator; and in man's earthly life, he is wholly dependent on God.

Thus the preacher is not interested in speaking merely about eating and drinking and the use of earthly things. He is not like the Stoic, who teaches that to eat or not to eat is indifferent; or like the Epicurean, whose philosophy is to eat and to drink, for tomorrow we die; or as the modern philosopher of health, who is consumed with what he will eat and what he will drink to achieve the best health and the longest life; or as the preacher of earthly wisdom, who cautions moderation in all things. Solomon carefully distinguishes two kinds of eating and drinking. Are the mere eating of food, the drinking of wine, the filling of the belly, and the consuming of earthly things blessings from God, so that all eating and drinking by everyone are blessed?

There is a good eating.

There is a bad eating.

There is a spiritual eating.

There is a carnal eating.

One is the work of the deceitful heart of man, who abuses the good gifts of God.

The other is the gift of God to those upon whom alone his favor rests.

There is beautiful eating and drinking.

Solomon describes this beautiful eating and drinking against the dark backdrop of ugly eating and drinking.

There is ugly eating and drinking!

In the consumption of earthly things, beware of ugly eating and drinking! Solomon says about man, "All his days also he eateth in darkness" (v. 17). If all your days you would eat in darkness, you would be a disgusting mess, and your eating and drinking would be ugly, like a beast's rather than a man's.

Such are the eating and drinking of the unbelieving man. No matter the grandeur of his situation, no matter the lavishness of his table, no matter the richness of his consumption of earthly things, all of them are ugly eating and drinking.

Such ugly eating and drinking find their source in man's ugly, covetous heart. So the preacher says that there is a man in the earth who loves silver and abundance (v. 10). Such is man's love for silver and abundance that they consume his thoughts and his labors: get silver and get it in abundance. The covetous man will be rich in the world. Even if he is dirt poor, he will be rich, or at least he will have the trappings of wealth. He is covetous. Such a man is never satisfied, even when silver increases and when there is great abundance. So in all his life, he lives out of the principle of covetousness. Mammon is his god. Riches are his goal. To get silver and to have abundance, he bends all his labors and efforts. Happiness for the covetous man consists in the multiplication of things.

But what trouble comes to him! So the preacher says, “When goods increase, they are increased that eat them” (v. 11)! When such a man comes into money, he begins to keep a bigger and better household. With more money come bigger houses, more cars, more toys, and more of everything. And the preacher observes this and says, “The abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep” (v. 12). With all his things the rich man is worn down with cares and concerns and anxieties. Worse is what Solomon says about this man and his money: “There [are] . . . riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt” (v. 13). Not all saving is good. There is a saving that destroys the owner. He would have been better off without all his wealth, for his riches destroy his soul, lift him up in pride, provide him with the means to sin greatly, and are the opportunity to show his miserly and covetous heart because he keeps his riches at all costs, even at the cost of his soul. Better to sell all that he has and to follow Christ.

And how foolish is this man when one considers his attitude toward silver and gold in light of the reality of death. What a miserable existence to live for riches and to hoard wealth when death comes and sweeps the man away from his money. As he came naked out of his mother’s womb, so he will return naked to the grave. We bring nothing into this world, and it is certain that we can carry nothing out. And having gained the world in this life, he will lose his soul in the life to come. What good are all his riches? With them he can neither pay the ransom for his soul nor purchase an entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

It is especially in his sickness that the spiritual bankruptcy and covetousness of this worldling is revealed. All his days he eats in darkness, and he has “much sorrow and wrath with his sickness” (v. 17). In calamity, trouble, affliction, or setback—either that which devours his riches, prevents him from using them, or threatens his possession of them—he frets and worries and is full of anxiety, or he storms and rages against God, who strips him of his things that are so dear to him and for which he labored all his life and by which he pierced himself through with many sorrows in hope of a lasting gain.

What a terrible eating is the eating of this unbelieving and covetous man. He eats of his labors. But he eats in darkness. It is the darkness of his own unbelief. It is the darkness of his own folly that treasures gold rather than heaven. It is the darkness of God’s curse and wrath upon this unbelieving and covetous man.

Note well, the preacher is not condemning riches as such. It is true that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Yet it is not riches that the preacher condemns. He also does not condemn the use and

enjoyment of earthly things, and even in abundance, although it is true that abundance brings with it the spiritual danger that we forget God. Neither is the preacher praising abject poverty, for it also comes with the threat that we curse God and ask, “Where is the Lord?” And the preacher is not extolling mere moderation, although the man who strives for mastery is temperate in all things. Solomon is not cursing with the darkness of God’s wrath only a drunken eating and drinking, a gluttonous eating and drinking, a debauched eating and drinking, mean miserliness, or a showy opulence.

But Solomon condemns the eating and drinking of the covetous man, who eats and drinks out of the heart that loves silver and abundance. He may be moderate in all his eating and abstemious in his drinking, but his heart is wrong. Though his eating and drinking be with impeccable manners and the greatest decorum; though his eating and drinking be with the greatest discipline; though he squanders not a dime, as far as the world is concerned, with wasting; and though he may mouth some meaningless words about thanksgiving and God and gifts, all his eating and drinking are out of his covetous heart that loves silver. And the one who loves silver does not love God, for a man cannot serve two masters. He cannot serve God and mammon.

Such a man’s eating and drinking are ugly eating and drinking because they are evil eating and drinking. They are eating and drinking in covetousness, in the worship of mammon, forgetting God, forgetting man’s sin on account of which he deserves nothing in this life except judgment, and forgetting that it is appointed unto men once to die and after that the judgment. Forgetting all this in the blindness of his mind and in the covetousness of his heart, the covetous man loves silver and abundance; and loving them, he hates God, the giver of every good and perfect gift.

Over that eating and drinking, the curse of God hangs like the sword of Damocles.

Antithetical to that ugly eating and drinking stand the beautiful eating and drinking of verse 18: “Behold that which I have seen: it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink.” *Comely* means *beautiful*. So there is a good and comely eating and drinking. The goodness of a thing is always that it serves the purpose for which God gave it. Beautiful eating and drinking are beautiful because they are eating and drinking that serve the purpose for which God gave eating and drinking. Being good, nothing can be alleged against that eating and drinking, and they cannot be charged with sin.

Notice, that involves eating and drinking too. It is not good that man starves himself, abstains from meat and drink that God gave to be received. It is good and comely

to eat and to drink. And notice that eating and drinking also involve a man's labor. He eats and drinks in the way of his labor. Belonging to the goodness and beauty of his eating and drinking are the goodness and beauty of the labor by which he eats and drinks. And note as well that Solomon makes the same rule for all men: they all eat and drink in the way of their labor. In verse 18 Solomon establishes the rule that there is a beautiful eating and drinking, and in verse 19 he applies that rule to the man of wealth. The rule stands whether a man has little or much. The beauty of this eating and drinking is seen in the man of less substance in that he eats and drinks what is his without coveting more; the beauty of the eating and drinking of the man of more substance is that he eats and drinks what is his without coveting more or hoarding what he has.

And note as well that Solomon applies this rule not only to all men but also for all times of their lives. Because Solomon says that it is good and comely for a man so to eat and to drink in all his labor, which he takes under the sun all the days of his life that God gives to him. So the rule applies to everyone, at all times, in all places, and in every situation.

This beautiful eating and drinking begin with the proper view of one's life and substance.

The proper view is that all that one is and everything that one has are of God.

Where in the whole description of the life and the wild pursuit of riches by the covetous man is God mentioned? God is not mentioned because God is not in the thoughts of the covetous man. God is not the God of the covetous man, but mammon is his god.

In verse 9 Solomon established the principle that it is not the things of the earth that are the problem. The evil and ugliness of eating and drinking are never the fault of things, not even in the abundance of earthly things. There is no evil in things. The profit or increase of the earth is for all. For man, for beast, for great and small, for even the king with his great riches are served by the field. God distributes to all many good things. He gives riches and wealth; he gives strength and labor; he gives length of days and end of life. And in all of this and to all, he feeds all from the increase of the field. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, its wealth and all that

they contain. Because the earth is the Lord's, all things in the earth are good and nothing to be refused. God did not make evil things. He made everything good. And in all those things that God gives and also in the abundance and increase of the earth, the Lord does good to all. He is an overflowing fountain of all good. He never does evil, but he always does good.

So in faith this beautiful eating and drinking say, first of all, that one's whole life is given to him by God. All the days of life that God gives him! God is in this man's thoughts every day and all day. He lives consciously in the reality that God gives to him his very heartbeat, numbers the hairs of his head, that his days are written

in God's book, and his name is in the book of life. He lives in the reality that he has an allotted time on this earth. That it is appointed unto men once to die and after that the judgment. So he lives by this principle: if the Lord wills, I will live and do this or that. Such a life begins with faith in the absolute sovereignty of God over one's entire life. For if God knows one's very days, then all the details of one's life are also given by God; and if God controls the least of things, then God also controls all things great and small.

Second, faith says that God gives one his portion in this life. Literally, a *portion* means an *inheritance*. As a father allots various portions of his estate to

his children, so God allots a portion of his things to his people. God gives to this one and to that one as he sees fit. What God gives is one's portion. Further, just as with an inheritance, a portion is undeserved. It is given. An inheritance is a mark of the overflowing goodness of the father to his children that apporions to them from his wealth in the earth. So when we say that God gives a portion, we mean that out of his overflowing goodness he allots to those who are wholly undeserving of it that which they might have and enjoy. Solomon places the riches of man under that same rule. God gives to some riches and wealth. That is their portion. They are allotted those riches by God. But since all are undeserving and since all is given in God's overflowing goodness, that portion, whether great or small, is always unmerited and a manifestation of God's overflowing goodness, since all men deserve nothing at all.

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And thus beautiful eating and drinking are measured eating and drinking. The preacher says that a man who eats and drinks beautifully takes his portion. God gives a man a portion, and from that portion a man takes. That Solomon speaks of this in connection with the rich man makes the preacher's point even sharper. Because the rich man sees that everything comes from God and that God gives him all that he has as a portion, the rich man takes for his use his own portion of that. And this means that he does not see his substance as his own but as God's and as directed by the word of God in its use. The man sees that his substance is not all for himself to be used for himself. But the portion that he eats and drinks is just a portion of all his substance because he sees that God gave him his substance, not only to be used and enjoyed but also to recognize that others and other things have a claim on his substance. There is a portion for the poor and a portion for liberality and a portion for the church and a portion for the school and a portion for his children.

Thus this beautiful eating and drinking involve enjoying the good of all a man's labor. Solomon says basically the same thing again in verse 19: "To rejoice in his labour." He means that this man's eating and drinking are joyful and the good that he has from his labor. There is nothing more that all your and my earthly labor can give than for us to eat and to drink. Man eats in the sweat of his brow. The good in earthly labor is that by means of it one may eat and drink. Labor has no other good that it can give. Labor is for the support of one's earthly life. That is it.

What a pitiful soul is one who places his happiness, joy, and blessedness in earthly things that he gets by his earthly labor. When earthly things increase, he never can be satisfied because they do not bring satisfaction, and he is full of anxiety lest he lose them. And when earthly things are taken away, he rages and storms because he has lost them and with them lost his happiness.

Rejoicing is something that the man who loves to be rich can never do. He never rejoices. He loves silver, but silver has no joy to give; and when silver increases,

it only brings anxiety. He loves abundance; but when abundance comes, he is not satiated.

And does this not point out that beautiful eating and drinking involve contentment? There is no joy where there is no contentment. There is no contentment where lust reigns because there is no satisfaction with such things as one has. Beautiful eating and drinking are contented eating and drinking. And what is contentment except that one's joy, happiness, well-being, and satisfaction are not found in earthly things at all but are found in the God who gives these things. Only if one's joy is in God can one also rejoice in his labor in the station and calling that God gives to him in the world, and only then can he see good in all his labor as he eats and drinks of the portion that God gave of this world's goods.

And if one is to rejoice in his labor and see the good in his labor, does this not mean that in his eating and drinking he uses those things in harmony with the purpose for which God gave them? God gave them as supports of earthly life, not for drunkenness and surfeiting. He gave them to be received with thanksgiving, not to be worshiped as gods. God gave them to be used for his glory. God made all things for his glory. God gives all things so that they serve his glory, mere food and drink too, so that those things will support a life lived to the glory of God.

And you have to say that such beautiful, contented, proportioned, God-glorifying eating and drinking are the work of God's grace. Beautiful eating and drinking are eating and drinking with grace. So Solomon says, "Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God" (v. 19). "Gift" can be translated as *reward*. And since every reward of God to man is a reward of God's grace, Solomon is talking about God's grace. Grace explains man's beautiful eating and drinking.

That is what grace does. Grace always makes beautiful again what man has made ugly. So God had given man beautiful eating and drinking in the garden, but man made them ugly by his covetousness and sin, and all

To the one who believes in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of all his sins, there is a blessed forgetfulness. That man will not much remember the days of his life. That is blessed forgetfulness because the days of his life are full of sin. That sin God forgives for Christ's sake...God gives joy to the believer by grace and by faith, and this joy...makes his days blessed and makes all his eating and drinking to be beautiful eating and drinking.



things in the judgment of God were subjected to vanity. God makes eating and drinking beautiful again by his grace. Apart from the grace of God, a man's eating and drinking can and will only be ugly eating and drinking out of covetousness, out of the heart that loves silver and abundance and which heart is devoid of love for God and is full of hatred toward him.

The lack of grace explains the covetous and ugly eating and drinking of the unbeliever. God overflows to the covetous with his goodness. The covetous man heaps to himself a pile of this earth's goods; but in that goodness, God does not overflow to that man with his grace. God overflows to that man as the only good God in his wrath, in darkness, and with a curse. That is the revelation of God's goodness to the wicked, to the unbelieving, and to the covetous. The revelation of God's goodness is that he overflows with wrath to the wicked and unbelieving and with a curse to them. Thus all their eating and drinking are in darkness.

And understand Solomon's point. He says two things belong to God's grace toward a man who eats and drinks beautifully.

First, Solomon says that God gives to that man things in an attitude of favor toward that man. Solomon does not say that riches and wealth or whatever else God gives to a man of this earth's goods are God's grace. Rather, Solomon says that God gives to that man this or that thing in his grace toward that man. *Grace* is God's attitude in the giving. God gives; and whatever he gives, also when he gives wealth and honor, he gives in his grace.

Second, the preacher says that God gives to man not only riches and wealth in grace but also power to eat thereof, power to take his portion, and power to rejoice in his labor. The thing itself is given in an attitude of favor, and that grace is also the power of the man's proper use of the thing. All of this belongs to the idea that the reception of earthly things is from God; and all the use of these earthly things, so that a man eats and drinks beautifully, is the work of God's grace.

If God only gives wealth to a man but does not give grace to him, that man's eating and drinking will be ugly and cursed eating and drinking, rooted in covetousness. But when God gives riches and wealth and the power to eat and drink beautifully of those things, so that a man receives them from God, ascribes them all to God, eats contentedly before God, uses his portion as from God, and rejoices with thanksgiving to God, then this is the power of God's grace.

And Solomon calls this a power because grace is the power that changes the naturally covetous heart of man and makes that heart love God, makes that heart

thankful, and makes in that heart the glory of God the goal of all things.

And because the thing is given in grace and because the thing is used by the power of grace, the gift of those things in grace has its foundation in the cross of Christ. Every reward of God is not only the reward of grace, but every reward of God is also based on the perfect work of Christ on the cross. The reward of eating and drinking beautifully in thanksgiving to God and all the grace that comes to us to give us that reward come only on the basis of the cross of Christ and through the forgiveness of our sins. Beautiful eating and drinking have their source in faith in the cross of Christ as the only ground of all our eating and drinking, at which cross he paid for our sins, justified us before God, and restored to us the right to eat and to drink beautifully in God's creation again.

So the preacher speaks of a blessed forgetfulness: "He shall not much remember the days of his life; because God answereth him in the joy of his heart" (v. 20).

There is a cursed forgetfulness that belongs to the covetous heart of man and because of which he eats and drinks in darkness and because of which all his eating and drinking are ugly. In the covetousness of his heart, he forgets God. He forgets his sin. He forgets that it is appointed unto men once to die and after that the judgment. He forgets that this world is but a prelude to the eternal. God answers such a one in his covetous heart. God's answer to him in the covetousness of his heart is that God is cursing all that man's eating and drinking and all his labor. And because that is God's answer to the covetous man's heart, there is no joy to him at all in his labor or in his eating and drinking. He may make merry with the despairing merriment of the world—let us eat and drink and be merry—but they only say that and live that way because tomorrow they die. There is the answer of God to that man's covetous heart that God binds on him all his sin, that God is angry with the wicked every day, and that God is turning all things to that man's destruction.

But to the one who believes in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of all his sins, there is a blessed forgetfulness. That man will not much remember the days of his life. That is blessed forgetfulness because the days of his life are full of sin. That sin God forgives for Christ's sake. God answers the believer with joy in his heart by faith. God gives joy to the believer by grace and by faith, and this joy—a joy in God, a joy in Christ, a joy in the hope of eternal life, a joy in the forgiveness of sins, and a joy in his salvation—makes his days blessed and makes all his eating and drinking to be beautiful eating and drinking.

—NJL

# PRAISE GOD, FROM WHOM ALL BLESSINGS FLOW (3): CONDITIONALITY

## *Legalism is Conditional*

When the May 2023 Classis of the Reformed Protestant Churches voted not to sustain the appeal of Rev. A. Lanning, for some reason the classis did not explicitly condemn his doctrine of exclusive psalmody as conditional. The consistory of First Reformed Protestant Church had condemned his doctrine as conditional. An elder who did not shake Reverend Lanning's hand after his March 12, 2023, sermon on the second commandment and exclusive psalmody also had condemned the doctrine as conditional. And I had condemned his doctrine as conditional. The false doctrine of Reverend Lanning is conditional, regardless of what the classis of the Reformed Protestant Churches decided. However, in essence the classis did decide that his doctrine is conditional because the classis decided that his false doctrine is legalism. All legalism is conditional in its very nature, just as all conditions in theology are forms of legalism.

For instance, that was clear in the Arminians' doctrine at the Synod of Dordt. The fathers at Dordt saw that conditionality and pointed that out in Canons 2, error and rejection 4:

[The Synod *rejects* the errors of those] who teach that the new covenant of grace, which God the Father, through the mediation of the death of Christ, made with man, does not herein consist that we by faith, inasmuch as it accepts the merits of Christ, are justified before God and saved, but in the fact that God, having revoked the demand of perfect obedience of the law, regards faith itself and the obedience of faith, although imperfect, as the perfect obedience of the law, and does esteem it worthy of the reward of eternal life through grace.

Rejection: For these contradict the Scriptures: Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through

faith in his blood (Rom. 3:24, 25). And these proclaim, as did the wicked Socinus, a new and strange justification of man before God, against the consensus of the whole church. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 164–65)

The Arminian doctrine regarding the role of faith in salvation is that faith is the condition that man must fulfill—that which man must do—in order to be saved. God did his part, and now man must do his part—of course, all by grace.

The Synod of Dordt not only condemned conditions as Arminian by putting the word *condition* in the mouths of the Arminians, but the synod also charged that the Arminians with their conditions brought in again the wicked doctrine of Socinus with regard to justification. The Socinus the synod referred to was Faustus Socinus, a contemporary of James Arminius. Socinus was generally condemned as wicked for his anti-trinitarianism and his denial of the deity of Christ. Socinus was a theological liberal, and his doctrine of justification can be summarized as that a man attains unto eternal life through bearing suffering and imitating the obedience of Christ by faith. Man comes into eternal life by his efforts. That wicked doctrine of justification the Arminians brought in again with their conditions of faith and the obedience of faith. Both false doctrines are a species of *legalism*, which generally can be defined as *attaining the favor of God or entering into fellowship with God in the way of obedience*.

The false doctrine of exclusive psalmody is likewise a species of legalism. Being legalism, the doctrine is conditional. As conditional, the doctrine must be condemned as such and by name. There is value in condemning the doctrine as conditional. The outstanding value is that a condemnation correctly identifies the error and places it under the Reformed condemnation of conditions. The legalism of the doctrine of exclusive psalmody is essentially no different from the legalism of the Protestant Reformed Churches, who make man's fellowship with God come to man through his activities. So also with



exclusive psalmody: the fellowship of the church—her singing with Jesus—is through her singing. First, she must sing the psalms, then she can sing with Jesus. This is legalism, and this is a condition, if there ever were one.

Reverend Lanning denies that he taught conditional theology or legalism. He writes,

The consistory asserts that the sermons taught “that if the congregation sings any versification of the Scriptures (other than the Psalms) then the congregation does not have God dwelling with them nor experiencing his covenant fellowship through Jesus until man’s law is met.” This assertion is entirely an invention of the consistory. The sermons taught no such thing. The sermons cannot even be misunderstood to teach any such thing. The sermons taught that Christ has already completed and fulfilled all our worship, including fulfilling the regulative principle. The sermons taught that our worship is our gratitude for salvation already accomplished. The sermons cannot be construed in any way whatsoever to be saying that the congregation does not have God dwelling with them nor experiencing covenant fellowship until man meets some law.<sup>1</sup>

But what Reverend Lanning calls “an invention of the consistory” is precisely what Reverend Lanning taught. He taught that you can sing, but you do not sing with Jesus if you do not sing the psalms. You can sing some song other than the psalms, and Jesus will keep on singing the psalms, but he will not be singing with you. That is conditional. *Singing with Jesus*—if we may use that terminology for a moment—is fellowship. And you do not sing with Jesus, and Jesus does not sing with you until a

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condition is met: sing “the psalms, those 150 God-inspired songs.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, you do not have fellowship with Jesus until your activity is performed. Your singing makes the difference. Your activity makes the difference.

The church sings; Jesus is singing. But whether the two who are singing come together in harmonious fellowship depends on the decision and activity of the church. It is not Christ who accomplishes the harmonious fellowship. It is the church. It is not the powerful will of God that

does this. It is the church’s will. It is not the powerful work of the indwelling Spirit who performs the harmonious fellowship. It is the church’s work. It is not the powerful work of the indwelling Word who makes the church sing, but it is the church’s own fickle will deciding that she will sing with Jesus.

Reverend Lanning also taught that our singing is a matter of our fellowship with God. The exact quotation from the March 12, 2023, sermon on the second commandment is this:

There is a question of the application of the regulative principle to the singing of the church, especially this question: *Does the regulative principle require exclusive psalmody?*

We will look at that question tonight, but that does not mean that this topic for the church of Jesus Christ is something fearful, not something to be afraid of whatsoever. This is the matter of your worship. It is the matter of God dwelling with you and bringing you into his covenant fellowship through the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

I understand that when Reverend Lanning said, “*This is the matter...*” he meant the subject of the regulative principle and its application to singing. I also maintain that the phrase “it is the matter of God dwelling with you and bringing you into his covenant fellowship” is a false statement. Even on the most generous interpretation of

1 “Rev. Andrew Lanning Appeal,” in *Reformed Protestant Churches in America Agenda of the Classis Meeting to be held May 18, 2023*, 45, [https://mcusercontent.com/417b9db4fbf7b0604e0d0a6c4/files/6b143e11-1020-2849-66ab-fd671dc4b0cb/Agenda\\_May\\_18\\_2023\\_Classis\\_RPCA.pdf](https://mcusercontent.com/417b9db4fbf7b0604e0d0a6c4/files/6b143e11-1020-2849-66ab-fd671dc4b0cb/Agenda_May_18_2023_Classis_RPCA.pdf). See also Andrew Lanning, “Protest,” *Reformed Pavilion* 1, issue 1 (April 15, 2023): 24.  
2 Andrew Lanning, “The Regulative Principle of Worship,” sermon preached in First Reformed Protestant Church on March 12, 2023, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=312232237135528>.  
3 Lanning, “The Regulative Principle of Worship.”

the phrase, Reverend Lanning meant simply that when discussing the regulative principle, we are discussing your worship and discussing a matter of God's dwelling with you and God's bringing you into his covenant fellowship through the Lord Jesus Christ. Reverend Lanning, then, merely wanted to introduce into this discussion of the regulative principle the question of whether the regulative principle demanded exclusive psalmody. Thus this discussion about exclusive psalmody and the church's singing is a matter of God's dwelling with you and God's bringing you into his covenant fellowship through the Lord Jesus Christ. Many apparently were convinced that this was a perfectly acceptable sense and that Reverend Lanning should not on account of that statement be condemned with conditionality. I disagree. The statement as such is wrong, and the statement is part of a larger erroneous theology of worship.

First, the statement itself is wrong. When we are discussing the regulative principle of our worship, we are not, in fact, discussing God's bringing us into his fellowship at all. The discussion about God's bringing us into his fellowship begins and ends with faith in Jesus Christ, wholly apart from our observance of the regulative principle. How well or how poorly we observe the regulative principle has nothing to do with God's bringing us into his fellowship. We say the same thing about exclusive psalmody if it is part of the regulative principle. How well or how poorly we sing the psalms has nothing to do with God's bringing us into his fellowship. God's bringing us into his fellowship happened eternally in election and happens when he joins his elect people to Jesus Christ by the Spirit through faith. At that moment God has brought us into his fellowship, wholly of grace, wholly without works, and by faith alone. And in our consciences and experiences, we enter into that fellowship by faith alone in Jesus Christ and wholly apart from the consideration of the goodness or badness of our worship or how well or poorly we sing the psalms. When considering the law, we are not discussing God's bringing us into fellowship. We are discussing thanksgiving for bringing us into his fellowship. That is what true worship of God is: it is thankfulness. On that understanding those who sing psalms as the way in which God brings them into

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his fellowship are chargeable with unbelief and gross unthankfulness.

Then further, what Reverend Lanning said about the regulative principle and singing being a matter of God's bringing us into his fellowship, when taken together with the rest of his theology on singing, means that our fellowship with God comes through our singing. When Reverend Lanning said, "It is the matter of God dwelling with you and bringing you into his covenant fellowship through the Lord Jesus Christ," Jesus Christ was just window dressing. Our singing, not Jesus Christ and his cross; our singing, not the Spirit of Jesus Christ; our singing, not the grace of God; our singing makes the difference in our fellowship with God. Our singing is decisive in the matter of our fellowship with God because our singing is decisive for our singing with Jesus.

In that corruption of the second commandment and in the introduction of conditional fellowship through singing, the lure of that doctrine is the promise that when we sing the psalms, we sing with Jesus. And you must note the order. The order is important. First, you sing the psalms, and then you sing with Jesus.

And I maintain that this language "singing with Jesus" is not Reformed. Whoever heard of that before? Where is that language in the creeds? Where is that language in scripture?

That doctrine of singing with Jesus is a corruption not only of the regulative principle but also of the whole concept of worship and the believer's relationship with Jesus Christ. That very concept of singing with Jesus must be abandoned. It must be abandoned because of the implications of that concept. Even if someone could use it with the best intentions as they possibly could, the concept has been corrupted. It has been corrupted by men outside the Reformed Protestant Churches, and it has been corrupted by former members of the Reformed Protestant Churches.

### *Outside Influences*

Those who promoted the language and concept "singing with Jesus" in the Reformed Protestant Churches have been influenced by others outside the denomination and are parroting their language. And the promoters of it outside the Reformed Protestant Churches have told us very

clearly where this concept leads, and Reverend Lanning is following them.

One such man is Michael LeFebvre in his book *Singing the Songs of Jesus*. Michael LeFebvre says about singing with Jesus: “These are the two unique features of the psalms. They are the church’s only inspired hymns, and they are the church’s only Christ-led hymns.” “Jesus sings the psalms alone, and he invites us to join with him.”<sup>4</sup>

LeFebvre writes, “The New Testament saw in Jesus the ultimate song leader for the church’s praises.”<sup>5</sup> The New Testament did? Where is it found in scripture that Jesus is the ultimate song leader? The scriptures say that Jesus is our savior, our redeemer, our Lord, our king, and our eldest brother.

And Michael LeFebvre is not shy about where the concept of singing with Jesus leads. Understand what this means. Singing with Jesus means that Jesus is singing. He is singing alongside of and apart from the consideration of his church. He is that husband who carries on with his life and says to his wife, “Keep up. Keep up!” Jesus is singing, and the church may join with Jesus by her singing, if she wills to.

Michael LeFebvre says that singing “is a process that produces grace in the heart to the Lord. This grace is our praise of the Lord.”<sup>6</sup> Singing produces grace. LeFebvre also says, “Singing sanctifies the heart.”<sup>7</sup> “Singing”—not the Holy Spirit, not the grace of God, not the blood of Jesus Christ, and not faith—“sanctifies the heart.” This is conditional language. Man’s activities are the decisive and powerful things.

Rev. Angus Stewart of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Northern Ireland also promotes this position in a published speech found on his website.<sup>8</sup> He writes,

By teaching and admonishing one another with God’s own Psalms, “the word of Christ” dwells in us “richly” (Col. 3:16), so that we enjoy covenant fellowship with the Holy Trinity. Are man-made songs “the word of Christ”?<sup>9</sup>

Note that Rev. Angus Stewart teaches that Christ dwells in us by means of our singing the word of Christ. The result of our singing is our enjoyment of covenant

fellowship with the triune God. So also, then, Reverend Stewart teaches that by means of our singing, we enjoy covenant fellowship with God. Rev. Angus Stewart is a conditional theologian with regard to singing.

He asks, “Will the church be able to stand before God on the judgment day with their uninspired hymnals and say, ‘We sang the Word of Christ?’”<sup>10</sup> Reverend Stewart has the church coming in the final judgment with her songs and defending those songs before the Lord Jesus Christ. So the church comes and boasts, “Lord, we sang the psalms.”

The Lord will say to the person who comes on the judgment day with his psalm singing, “Depart from me, you wicked evildoer. I never knew you. All your psalm singing was a stink to me and an odor and an offense because you were going to come to me with your psalm singing and suppose that by means of that singing you could have fellowship with me.”

Even if I did sing nothing but the psalms, I would not defend that in the day of judgment because my singing, as all of my life, is full of sin.

However, the statement of Reverend Stewart gets at his mindset. He really does believe that because the church sings the psalms, God is pleased with her now; and because she sings the psalms, God will be pleased with her in the final judgment.

Rev. Angus Stewart continues,

Moreover, Ephesians 5 states that singing God’s Psalms (v. 19) is the way of being “filled with the Holy Spirit” (v. 18). This is the connection between verse 18 and verse 19 in Ephesians 5! Singing “the Lord’s song[s]” (Ps. 137:4) is a divinely-given means to be filled with the Holy Ghost and so under His blessed influence.<sup>11</sup>

He states clearly what his doctrine is: singing the psalms is the means to come under the blessed influence of the Spirit. The Spirit is not given to you, so that by that Spirit you have fellowship with Jesus Christ and out of the power of that Spirit you sing to Jesus Christ and to the triune God. You have to sing the psalms first. You have to sing the psalms out of your own will. You have to sing the psalms well enough. You have to sing them

4 Michael LeFebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus: Revisiting the Psalms* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2010), 51, 56.

5 LeFebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus*, 50.

6 LeFebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus*, 110.

7 LeFebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus*, 111.

8 Angus Stewart, *Singing the Canonical Psalms*, <https://cprc.co.uk/articles/singingcanonicalpsalms/>. This is an edited, written version of Reverend Stewart’s opening presentation in the debate on exclusive psalmody with Rev. Ivan Foster. The debate can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYylgZR3XK4>.

9 Stewart, *Singing the Canonical Psalms*.

10 Stewart, *Singing the Canonical Psalms*.

11 Stewart, *Singing the Canonical Psalms*.



purely enough. And you must sing accurately enough only the God-inspired psalms, or you will not have the Spirit.

Reverend Lanning teaches the same thing. And his doctrine falls under the same condemnation. The doctrine is conditional. You could substitute other activities of man for singing the psalms, and the doctrine would be no different than the false doctrine of the Protestant Reformed Churches with regard to fellowship with God. So you could say, “You have to repent enough, and you have to repent thoroughly enough, and by that means you have fellowship with the triune God.” The conditionalism of the doctrine I call *exclusive psalmody* is not less real or serious. You have to sing the psalms to sing with Jesus, and then in singing with Jesus you have fellowship with the triune God.

### *Jesus Christ Was Displaced*

The concept that we sing with Jesus is purely carnal. It is as carnal as the Pharisees’ law about how many footsteps someone could take on Sunday. That was carnal. The carnality of the concept that we sing with Jesus is that it divorces the church from Jesus Christ, from his perfect righteousness, and from fellowship with God in Jesus Christ that is ours by faith only. The concept that we sing with Jesus takes the focus off Jesus Christ and his perfect work, and it turns the focus to what man must do. The concept takes the power of righteousness from the atoning death of Jesus Christ and places it in the impotent works of man.

Jesus Christ was displaced in Reverend Lanning’s sermons regarding the second commandment and exclusive psalmody, beginning with the May 2 sermon in 2021.<sup>12</sup> He dangled Jesus Christ before the eyes of the congregation as the prize. Reverend Lanning presented Jesus Christ as the singing Christ, who sings wholly apart from the consideration of his church and who invites the church to sing with him. That is how vulgar those sermons were. That is how carnal they were: Jesus Christ was a prize! Jesus Christ was a lure! If, and only if, you sing

the psalms accurately enough and purely enough can you sing with Jesus. It is a carnal doctrine. It is a carnal doctrine of man and what man must do to have fellowship with Jesus Christ and with God. As such the doctrine is also conditional.

And besides, the doctrine corrupts Christ’s relationship to his church. With regard to all the other elements of worship, how does Jesus do them? Jesus does them. I will say that Jesus sings the psalms for the sake of argument. Jesus also preaches, so that what is preached is not the word of man but the very word of God, and in that preaching the voice of Jesus Christ is heard. Jesus administers the sacraments, so that from heaven

he feeds us with his proper and natural body and blood and we eat and drink him, and with his life he devours our death. Jesus takes care of the poor too, so that the mercies of Christ are actually dispensed to the poor and indigent in the church. Jesus Christ carries out the discipline of the church, so that he opens the kingdom of heaven to believers and shuts the kingdom fast against unbelievers. How does Jesus Christ do these things? In and through his church, which is his bride, his body, and the fullness of him who fills all in all in the church. Jesus is in heaven; but by his majesty, grace, and Spirit, Jesus Christ is at no time absent from his church. He preaches and

administers the sacraments in and through his church through a God-ordained minister. Jesus Christ dispenses his mercies in and through his church through God-ordained deacons. Jesus Christ exercises Christian discipline in and through God-ordained elders. Jesus Christ fills his church with his Spirit, and he operates through her. Jesus Christ does things in and through his church. Jesus sings through his church. He does not sing alongside his church; he sings through his church. Think about how wrong it would be if you were to say, “Jesus is preaching; and if you want to preach with Jesus, you have to do this, that, and the other thing. Jesus is taking care of the poor; and if you want to take care of the poor, you had better do this, that, and the

The carnality of the concept that we sing with Jesus is that it divorces the church from Jesus Christ, from his perfect righteousness, and from fellowship with God in Jesus Christ that is ours by faith only. The concept that we sing with Jesus takes the focus off Jesus Christ and his perfect work, and it turns the focus to what man must do.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Lanning, “Recompensed according to My Righteousness,” sermon preached in First Reformed Protestant Church on May 2, 2021, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=522115542507>.

other thing. Then you can take care of the poor with Jesus.”

Jesus sings in and through his church. Therefore, Jesus gives his church all her worship. Worship is not, first of all, what we bring to God. But worship is about what God gives to us in Jesus Christ. He gives us salvation, and he gives our worship to us. When the church sings a hymn or a psalm, God gave that to her. God gave that to her first in her heart. He regenerated her heart and put his Spirit in her heart. He gave righteousness, peace, and joy in her heart. He put the love and the praise of God in her heart. Do not let anybody rob you of that.

God gives me my worship. Jesus Christ gives me my worship. He gives me that worship and fellowship with him in that worship wholly apart from the consideration of my singing and on the basis of his atoning death alone.

If you sing something sinful, that did not come from Jesus Christ. That is really what those who promote exclusive psalmody have to say: “The church must sing the psalms as the only God-given praise in the church and to sing any other song is of the devil and the carnal flesh of man.” That is always the antithesis. The antithesis is between what is of God and what is of the flesh and of the devil.

Besides, in the worship of the church, singing is the end or goal. The truth of the covenant that Herman Hoeksema taught us must be applied to worship and singing. The covenant is the goal. The covenant is not a way to the goal. The covenant is the goal. The covenant is the end. When God gives you fellowship with himself in Jesus Christ, he has given to you all that he is going to give to you. That is the end or goal. So it is with singing. Singing is not a means or a way unto something. This is what Reverend Lanning teaches. Singing is a way or a means unto something. That is not what singing is. Singing is the goal. Singing is the goal of God’s election. Singing is the goal of the cross of Jesus Christ. Singing is the goal of the righteousness of Christ freely imputed to the ungodly. Singing is the goal of the indwelling Spirit and his sanctifying the believer’s heart. The goal is that the church sings. She sings, as she prays, as the chief part of her thankfulness. She sings with grace in her heart, making melody unto the Lord. She praises him out of the truth that is in her heart. That is why scripture

describes heaven as singing. In heaven do the saints have to sing the psalms in order to sing with Jesus? No. When they get to heaven the saints are with Jesus. That is the goal. In thanksgiving for that the saints sing. Singing is not a means unto an end. Singing is the end.

### *Erroneous Interpretation of Scripture*

And what about Jesus’ singing the psalms? The proof that is often put forward for this conception is Hebrews 2:12: “Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee.” Hebrews 2:12 is a quotation of Psalm 22:22. So it is said that Jesus in these passages is singing in the church, and the implied calling of the church is to sing with Jesus. In Hebrews 2:12 Jesus is supposedly singing the psalms and the psalms exclusively, so that in order to sing with Jesus the church must sing the psalms and must sing them exclusively.

That interpretation of the text is erroneous.

That interpretation of the text completely misses the context and the purpose of the quotation from the psalm. The quotation by the apostle in Hebrews 2:12 was not given

by the apostle to teach that Jesus sings the psalms and, therefore, that for the church to sing with Jesus, she must likewise sing the psalms. That is a literalistic abuse of scripture. And I would say that about all of the proof texting by the promoters of exclusive psalmody. It is just that, proof texting. It is not *exegesis*, which is the explanation of scripture according to the intent of the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, those who proof text come to scripture with an idea or a doctrine, and they seek to find proof for that in scripture. They thought up something in their brains, and they go to scripture to find it. That is not exegesis, but that is *eisegesis*. *Eisegesis* is the interpretation of a text by forcing one’s own understanding of a passage on that passage.

So this eisegetical and literalistic use of scripture is pressed into the service of finding exclusive psalmody in scripture. For instance, as compelling and irrefutable proof of the command to sing the psalms exclusively, the churches are pointed to the words of Psalm 95:2: “Make a joyful noise unto him with psalms.” If that is how the church is going to interpret the psalms, we should also break out our timbrels and instruments of ten strings, lift up our hands, and clap and shout in church too.

In heaven do the saints have to sing the psalms in order to sing with Jesus? No. When they get to heaven the saints are with Jesus. That is the goal. In thanksgiving for that the saints sing. Singing is not a means unto an end. Singing is the end.

Hebrews 2:12 comes in for the same eisegetical treatment. But that interpretation is an abuse of scripture to confirm one's own idea brought to scripture for proof.

Rather, in Hebrews 2:12 the apostle quotes from Psalm 22 to establish the oneness of the church with Jesus Christ. Christ and the church are one. Christ and the church are one according to texts because Jesus Christ became a man, and as a man he really did worship God. And being a man and worshiping God as a man, Jesus Christ became totally one with his brethren. Hebrews 2:12 points to the incarnation, not to psalm singing. The text points to the incarnation as the great and central wonder of our salvation. That is why the apostle says that Jesus sings in the great congregation. If you read Psalm 22:22 and if you read that psalm as it is quoted in Hebrews 2:12, and you say, "Ah, Jesus sings the psalms, and I have to too," you do not understand the scriptures. To establish the truth of the incarnation, God says in the psalms that Jesus sang in the great congregation. The apostle makes that perfectly clear. The whole context in Hebrews 2:10–16 reads as follows:

10. For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.
11. For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one [that is God]: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren,
12. Saying [now he quotes], I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee.
13. And again, I will put my trust in him. And again, Behold I and the children which God hath given me.
14. Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil;
15. And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

16. For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham.

Hebrews 2:12 establishes that Jesus sings in the great congregation. He is our brother. He is not an exclusive psalm singer; he is our brother. He and we are both of God. He is our brother by the incarnation, that greatest of all wonders, when God became flesh. That is the purpose of the text.

The purpose of the text, therefore, is also to establish our oneness with Jesus Christ. It is precisely this point that the false doctrine of singing with Jesus denies. *We are one with Jesus Christ.* There is no other way that you can sing but to sing with Jesus. Worship, the proper worship of God, is always the fruit of our fellowship with Jesus Christ. The false doctrine of exclusive psalmody places Christ outside us, separates us from our head and from the activity of our head, until we do something ourselves.

This false doctrine also presents the horrible and chilling proposition that the church could sing something good, theologically sound, God-honoring, and Christ-glorifying but that Jesus would not sing it. This is a horrible thought for the bride of Jesus Christ that she would do something apart from her head.

This false doctrine also teaches that the origin, the source, and the power of the church's singing is not Jesus. The origin, source, and power is you: it is you and your decision to sing with Jesus.

Thus this false doctrine corrupts the gospel of God's unconditional covenant with his elect church in Jesus Christ her head. The gospel of our singing is very clearly and simply stated in Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Christ's indwelling, not your will; Christ's indwelling, not your singing, explains your fellowship with Jesus Christ and with God. That is why the doctrine, the false doctrine, of exclusive psalmody must be rejected. It corrupts the gospel of the unconditional covenant.

—NJL



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

## A DISTORTED DOCTRINE OF PRAYER (1)

### Introduction

The doctrine of prayer is a spiritually thrilling topic for the elect child of God. This topic is of great interest to the church of Jesus Christ, as prayer properly belongs to her thankful worship of her covenant God. We pray to our covenant God, humbling ourselves before his divine majesty. “Hearken unto the voice of my cry, my King, and my God: for unto thee will I pray” (Ps. 5:2).

Prayer is a type of speech in which God is glorified and adored. Singing the word of God is also a type of speech. Confession of faith in public worship each week is a type of speech. Our confessions combine the speech of the child of God as publicly calling upon the Lord (Lord’s Day 38, Q&A 103). Prayer, in whatever form it may take, is part of our thankful worship of the living God. In fact, it is the chief part of thankfulness, a fruit of faith, a good work. Prayer is the highest expression of what lives in the heart of the regenerated child of God who is filled with the Spirit of Jesus Christ. It is in prayer that the child of God draws very near unto God by a true faith in full assurance to lay bare his soul and to drink deeply of the inexhaustible fountain of God himself in Jesus Christ. Simply stated, prayer is the joyful confession of the believer that God is good as his goodness is revealed to that believer in Jesus Christ.

### Gross Distortion

The doctrine of prayer is a source of wonder, excitement, and rich depths; and it is also a doctrine that has been grossly distorted. In Lord’s Days 45 through 52, the Heidelberg Catechism gives its instruction on prayer according to the model prayer of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is in this model prayer that our master teaches us how to pray, that we might grow in our understanding of this holy

art of prayer. And it was in these Lord’s Days that the then-Reverend David Overway and the “Special Classical Committee to Assist Hope” taught and defended conditional covenant fellowship in the way of good works as a matter of our experience and conscious enjoyment of that fellowship.

The order then is first, prayer; secondly, grace. That’s very obvious as we simply look at the answer of the Catechism. Prayer, and then grace...

We must pray—must pray. It’s required in order for us to enjoy God’s grace, in order for us to enjoy His Spirit, His blessing.<sup>1</sup>

How do we come to the Father to enjoy His fellowship? In confidence, on the basis of the merits of Jesus Christ, in **the necessary way** of sanctified obedient prayer.<sup>2</sup>

Forgive others. Live in that obedience. Live out of those good works. And only in that way will you be assured that you’re forgiven, that you are justified by Jesus Christ your Savior.<sup>3</sup>

Prayer was made into a good work that obtained blessings of God. Prayer was no longer a matter of thankful worship but was distorted into a means to obtain the experience of the covenant and salvation, assurance of justification and remission of sins, and God’s grace and Holy Spirit in one’s consciousness. It is important to remember that this battle was fought in the subjective realm of one’s experience. How do Jesus Christ and all the blessings of salvation come into my possession consciously? In the “necessary way” of prayer, good works, and obedience? Or by the Holy Spirit applying Jesus Christ and all his riches to me according to the sovereign grace of God by faith alone?

1 David Overway, “Prayer: Required of Baptism,” sermon preached December 14, 2014, as quoted in *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America 2018*, 166–67.

2 David Overway, quoted in “Hope Consistory response to Connie Meyer” in *Acts of Synod 2018*, 179. The emphasis is Overway’s.

3 David Overway, “Forgiveness Known Through Prayer,” sermon preached June 6, 2016, as quoted in *Acts of Synod 2018*, 179.

It was this distorted doctrine of prayer that was defended by the special committee, who crafted the doctrinal statement regarding experiencing fellowship with the Father. That committee fell off the rails in section I.C of the doctrinal statement:

Furthermore Scripture and the confessions also emphasize the necessity of the exercise of faith *in a holy life of obedience* to enjoy the intimacy of the Father's fellowship.<sup>4</sup>

And the committee then proceeded to ground that in Lord's Day 45, question and answer 116: "Because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him and are thankful for them."

The Protestant Reformed Synod of 2018 judged the following statements from various sermons of Reverend Overway to have used

improper and ambiguous language without clearly defining or explaining what is meant or what is not meant, which left his intentions and meaning in doubt and open to interpretation, particularly that a new "necessity" or purpose for good works was being introduced in Hope Church.<sup>5</sup>

We do good works to have our prayers answered... We do good works so that we can receive God's grace and Holy Spirit in our consciousness. So that we can consciously and with awareness receive the grace and the Holy Spirit of God... Obedience is required here, obedience that I must perform in order to enjoy fellowship with God. We do good works. We can look at them. We see them. They're obvious. They're evident, much more so than faith is.<sup>6</sup>

But this false doctrine was never eradicated, and it continues to plague the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) like a swarm of ravenous locusts devouring the earth (Nahum 3:15).

### *Same Teaching Today*

Prayer is still taught throughout the PRC as a good work that obtains blessings of God. Prof. Ronald Cammenga, in a recent series of sermons on Lord's Day 45, continues

to teach the same false doctrine as Reverend Overway. Professor Cammenga's sermons are Christ-less sermons, focusing almost completely on man and what man must do. The sermons are also a mess from an organizational standpoint, jumping around and combining separate thoughts of the Catechism.

In a sermon on March 19, 2023, after quoting from Ursinus' larger catechism (note: this is not a confession held by either the PRC or the Reformed Protestant Churches), Professor Cammenga says the following:

Are you praying? Do you want to pray? Do you pray frequently and fervently? Take that as an evidence that you are a child of God, adopted of God, a member of his covenant of grace. For you would never desire to pray if you were not a child of God.<sup>7</sup>

Professor Cammenga takes the doctrine of prayer in hand—prayer, which is a good work and the chief part of thankfulness—and he distorts that doctrine. He takes prayer, thankful worship, and makes that evidence of justification. He refers to the doctrine of adoption of children, which is part of the threefold content of justification.

Rev. Herman Hoeksema wrote regarding this: "Justification implies the complete forgiveness of sins... justification implies the adoption unto children... justification implies an eternal righteousness."<sup>8</sup> Justification implies the adoption unto children.

Never mind the fact that the quantity or quality of prayer somehow plays a role for Professor Cammenga, but the teaching that prayer itself is evidence of one's justification is not confessional or scriptural (see Lord's Days 22–23; Belgic Confession 22–24; Rom. 3:23–24; 4:25; 5:1).

Cammenga's defense of this distortion of prayer is Lord's Day 32, but Lord's Day 32 is no bulwark for Professor Cammenga. This Lord's Day is not teaching the believer to look at his good works, specifically prayer, as evidence of his justification. That is what Rev. David Overway taught and which Synod 2018 said introduced a new necessity or purpose of good works. If the PRC were honest, they would reinstate David Overway, as the doctrine he taught is the same as the doctrine that Professor Cammenga is actively teaching.

The evidence of justification cannot be obtained by good works, namely, by looking at the activity of prayer

4 Garry Eriks, Carl Haak, James Slopsema, and Ronald Van Overloop, "Doctrinal Statement: RE: Experiencing Fellowship with the Father (November 21, 2017)," *Acts of Synod 2018*, 196–97.

5 *Acts of Synod 2018*, 227–28.

6 *Acts of Synod 2018*, 227.

7 Ronald Cammenga, "In the School of Prayer (1): Why Pray?," sermon preached in Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church on March 19, 2023, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=319231925416178>.

8 Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), 2:98.

in one's life. Good works cannot in any sense be part of our obtaining of salvation or the blessings of salvation, including assurance, or as evidence of sonship and justification. Lord's Day 32 says that we do good works "because Christ, having redeemed and delivered us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 120). Being united to Christ, the living vine, we bring forth fruit (John 15:5). Romans 8:14–17 teach that the evidence of our adoption unto children is by the Spirit of God testifying with our spirits not by our activity of prayer.

14. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.
15. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.
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.

It is the Holy Spirit who leads his people. He does so by the word of God. And the Spirit guides the children of God from within those children in their new hearts. The Spirit opens their hearts and causes them to see and seek after God. As many as are guided by the Spirit, they are the sons and daughters of the living God in Jesus Christ.

We *receive* the Spirit. This is the point of the text. We received the Spirit of God. God gave us the Spirit through Christ. He poured the Spirit out in the church. Why? What is the mission of the Spirit? The mission of the Spirit is to tell us that we are children of God and to make us children. God sends His Spirit, through Christ, into the church to assure His children that they *are* children.<sup>9</sup>

The Spirit testifies with our spirits that we are the sons and daughters of God; the Spirit gives evidence of that. The assurance of sonship has its deepest cause in the eternal decree of God, its foundation in the perfect sufficiency of the cross of Jesus Christ, and its manifestation by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the elect (Canons of Dordt 5.10). The evidence of sonship is not by the activity of prayer.

## *Sincere Desires*

In Professor Cammenga's second sermon in his series on prayer, which was adapted for the blog of the Reformed Free Publishing Association and published as a three-part series, he begins working with the idea of sincere desires. Question and answer 116 of the Catechism reads as follows:

Q. Why is prayer necessary for Christians?

A. Because it is the chief part of thankfulness which God requires of us; and also, because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with *sincere desires* continually ask them of Him and are thankful for them. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 134; emphasis added)

Professor Cammenga provides the German translation of the Catechism's answer as "because God will give his grace and Holy Spirit to those only who groan inwardly and pray continually."<sup>10</sup> He goes on to briefly state,

To groan inwardly implies that our prayers aren't just words on our lips but that our prayers arise out of the depths of our being. They're sincere. They're the groanings that come from our hearts.<sup>11</sup>

The professor does all the work of translating or finding the original translation and providing that striking detail to the congregation in his sermon. But he never dwells any further on those sincere desires as groanings from the heart in connection with the threefold groaning in Romans 8 of the creation (vv. 19–22), the child of God (v. 23), and the Holy Spirit (v. 26). He does not speak of the sincere desires as the Holy Spirit. Professor Cammenga is literally right there. He is inches away from opening the word of God in all its depths and riches to the congregation. He has a launchpad into the sovereignty of God, the purpose of God, the groaning of the creation as it waits for redemption, the groaning of the child of God as he longs for deliverance, and the groaning of the Holy Spirit and his mysterious, awe-inspiring work of making intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered. Professor Cammenga misses the most important point that is staring him right in the face.

That he flies so close to the truth and steers away is because the Lord sent a dearth of hearing the words of Jehovah. The word is a closed book to the ministers in the

9 Herman Hoeksema, *Righteous by Faith Alone: A Devotional Commentary on Romans*, ed. David J. Engelsma (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2002), 332–33. The emphasis is Hoeksema's.

10 Ronald Cammenga, "In the School of Prayer (2): The Requirements of True Prayer," sermon preached in Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church on March 26, 2023, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=3272300336903>.

11 Cammenga, "In the School of Prayer (2): The Requirements of True Prayer."



PRC. “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD” (Amos 8:11).

Instead of delving into the riches of Romans 8, Professor Cammenga is chomping at the bit to get to man.

Professor Cammenga plows ahead to immediately define those sincere desires as something the child of God must do in prayer. He makes sincerity in prayer to be man’s obedience and godly walk of good works.

When we pray, God is watching, and God is listening. He knows whether I am just saying words without thinking at all about the meaning of those words, maybe the same words and the same phrases that I’ve used over and over again in my prayers, so that without even thinking those words and phrases spill out of my mouth. He sees me during congregational prayer...whether I am sleeping or whether I’m thinking about other things...He’s watching and listening...He notices when you’re not following the prayer.

One very important part of sincerity in prayer is that when we pray we are walking in obedience to God’s commandments. To put it differently, sincerity in prayer is that we are not walking impenitently in disobedience to God while at the same time we’re praying.<sup>12</sup>

The sincere desires of the Catechism the professor understands as man’s acts, and the professor does not find the Holy Spirit and the sovereignty of God as the sources of all prayer and good works.

The activity of prayer must be grounded in the sovereignty of God and in his decree of election to have mercy upon his chosen people united to Jesus Christ. The only man that can and will pray is the elect child of God who is regenerated and given the gift of faith. Professor Cammenga never explains prayer from an election theology. He quotes Proverbs 15:8 and does not see election in the “upright” man. He quotes Psalm 109:7 and does not see the wicked man who tries to worship God in prayer as the reprobate man of verse 6. If the reprobate man does try to pray, he is a hypocrite like the Pharisee. But the impenitent child of God, living in sin, will be renewed to repentance and prayer because of the mercy of God toward him in Jesus Christ. Election governs what worship is pleasing to God. If that worship is done in true faith, then God delights in that prayer because he delights in his Son, with whom that elect child is united.

And if a requisite for prayer is that a man’s heart must be sincere by a man’s actions, how sincere must a man be in prayer before God will hear? If a man is doing really well in the battle against sin, is he sincere enough that now God will hear that prayer? Or what if that man is beset by sin, now is he not sincere enough? And who is judging when one is sincere enough and has adequately released his besetting sin out of his clutches? Because the standard is God himself and his perfection. One must be as sincere as God himself to be heard. If prayer to God depends on sincerity as Professor Cammenga defines it, then that one praying is destined for destruction. That one praying will never be sincere enough for God to hear him. The Christian prayer life would be an impossibility, as would be the inseparably connected Christian life.

Professor Cammenga makes the sincere desires entirely carnal. But he must be consistent and apply that also to all the inward and spiritual thoughts and desires as well. God does not demand just a little outward sincerity, but he demands absolute perfection in the entirety of man—in man’s heart, mind, and soul. If the one praying is not perfectly sincere, he is condemned. Matthew 5:48: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”

### *The Holy Spirit*

The sincere desires or inward groanings of the Catechism are not what man is doing and are not man’s obedience to the law of God. Those sincere desires cannot be man’s emotions or feelings. Those sincere desires of prayer do not even have their origin and source in man. The elect child of God is given those sincere desires by the sovereign grace of God and the operation of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

What are those sincere desires? What is the inward groaning of the child of God? It is the Holy Spirit that indwells the believer. God gives his elect child a new heart of flesh, and God puts his Spirit within him (Ezek. 36:26). God plants in that elect child the incorruptible seed, the Word that lives and abides forever (1 Pet. 1:23). The Holy Spirit groans or sighs in that regenerated child of God. There is the constant, unbreakable bond of the Holy Spirit to Jesus Christ whereby the elect child of God remains in never-ending communion and fellowship. “The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually binds us to himself.”<sup>13</sup> The Holy Spirit that takes up his abode in the child of God is continually seeking after God. The Spirit searches after the deep things of God (1 Cor. 2:10). The Holy Spirit in the new heart cries out to

<sup>12</sup> Cammenga, “In the School of Prayer (2): The Requirements of True Prayer.”

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 3.1.1, 349.

God. Galatians 4:6: “Because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” That crying of the Holy Spirit comes to conscious expression in the child of God by a true faith, whereby he knows he is beggar; he knows his great need and sinfulness; he confesses his dependence upon the grace of God; and in thankful worship he praises and adores his maker. The prayers of the children of God are confessions that “everything good in us is a fruit of his grace.”<sup>14</sup> The Spirit works all prayer in us as a fruit of the grace of God.

Our prayers come to expression from the new, regenerated heart by a true faith, but our totally depraved natures and flesh pollute those prayers. We do not pray for the things that God commands, and we pray for our own carnal desires, but the Holy Spirit offers the perfect prayer to God.

26. Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.
27. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom. 8:26–27)

More prayers arise from our regenerated hearts than we are ever conscious or aware of. The Spirit of Jesus Christ utters groanings to God. He knows just what we need continually at every moment of our lives. The Spirit knows exactly what must be done in order for God’s kingdom to come, for his name to be hallowed, for his will to be done, and for his purpose to be realized. The Spirit prays for saints with infinitely perfect knowledge of God’s purpose for God’s glory.

And the reason for the Spirit’s intercession is because of our infirmities.

The Holy Spirit comes to help our infirmities, *in* us to pray *for* us, as tho it were our own prayer.

The Holy Spirit prayed therefore for and in him with groans that cannot be uttered.<sup>15</sup>

The context of Romans 8 is the longing of the children of God for the fulfillment of our hope for complete and final redemption, where our bodies and the entire creation will be delivered from the bondage of corruption. Our problem in this life is that we are imperfect. We are carnal, sold under sin. And because we are so utterly

earthly, we cannot take our eyes off the things that we can see. The Spirit helps our infirmities. He prays for all the details that we simply could never express in our carnal minds. We do not pray for the things that we ought. We often pray only generally and broadly, but the Spirit prays for all the perfect details. God gives to his people exactly what the Spirit sighs to God. The Catechism is rightly laying its finger on the sincere desires as the Holy Spirit who dwells in the regenerated heart. The Holy Spirit is the author of faith. The Holy Spirit produces the prayers of the child of God, which God has before ordained that he should walk in (Eph. 2:10), and the Holy Spirit also continually utters to God prayers that never arise to the consciousness of the child of God.

Prayer is the chief part of thankfulness. Prayer is the chief part of the walk of the elect child of God in the midst of this world. The believer, redeemed by the cross of Jesus Christ, is renewed by the Holy Spirit to be a living stone. God dwells in that believer by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. “Ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (2 Cor. 6:16).

The regenerated child of God must pray, he may pray, he can pray, and he will pray. The *must*, the *may*, the *can*, and the *will* are all in harmony within the regenerated heart of the elect child of God. Prayer and all the good works of a believer’s lifelong worship to God can be summarized in this simple statement.

### *Fully Persuaded*

Professor Cammenga’s doctrine of assurance is well known at this point.

Although God works the assurance of faith under the preaching of his word, we are active in this whole matter of the assurance of faith. God does not drop assurance out of the sky on us, and now we have it forever, can never be taken away from us, and we have nothing to worry about as regards this matter of the assurance of our faith; but God’s people are active, busy in this whole matter of the assurance of their faith.<sup>16</sup>

Professor Cammenga does not teach that faith is fully assured and fully persuaded in prayer. That would go against his false doctrine of assurance by good works. But the only way that the believer can approach unto God is

14 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.1.1, 350.

15 Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri Devries (1900; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 638–39. The emphasis is Kuyper’s.

16 Ronald Cammenga, “Saving Faith as Assurance,” sermon preached in Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church on March 14, 2021, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=31421175035658>.

fully persuaded (LD 45, Q&A 117). He must come into the holy sanctuary of the living God in full of assurance of faith. Hebrews 10:22: “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.”

Professor Cammenga references Hebrews 10:22 as proof that the heart of the child of God must be true and sincere in the way he defines sincerity, which is man’s obedience to God’s commands. He never mentions faith. But this text proves that faith is assurance, which the professor has bristled against repeatedly. Faith is fully assured. It must come before God in that way. Faith is not half assured whether God will hear or not. Faith does not doubt or wonder whether God will answer our prayers or not. Faith is a certain confidence, as Lord’s Day 7 explains it. And we are fully persuaded that God will certainly hear our prayers and answer us for the sake of Jesus Christ and his perfect work alone.

Hebrews 10:22 gives the reason that faith is fully assured. The heart of the regenerated child of God is purified and cleansed from an evil conscience. He is not condemned by his sins when he comes to God in prayer. He is not cast away from God in his conscience even though he has committed all evil, is totally depraved in all his members, and is insincere in all his desires. God has redeemed that ungodly elect child of God with the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross, Christ’s blood sprinkled on that child’s heart to cleanse it from the consciousness of sin. And all the terror that the believer should have in his coming before the all-consuming God is removed entirely.

And Hebrews 10:22 states next that our bodies are washed with pure water. And that refers to the Holy Spirit and our lives of sanctification. Faith is full assurance and fully assured, being justified by Jesus Christ alone and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In principle the child of God is holy and consecrated to God. He has the principle of the new life in him. That principle never grows, but the intensity of the warfare between the flesh and the Holy Spirit increases as the child of God walks through this life.

Hebrews 10:22 does not prove Professor Cammenga’s assertion that the sincere desires are the good works that

man does or the evil that he avoids to have God hear his prayer.

Professor Cammenga turns next to Job 11:13–15 to prove his point about sincerity. One of Job’s friends, Zophar, gave Job counsel in this text.

13. If thou prepare thine heart, and stretch out thine hands toward him;
14. If iniquity be in thine hand, put it far away, and let not wickedness dwell in thy tabernacles.
15. For then thou lift up thy face without spot.

It is important to remember Job 1:1 as one considers Job. Job was “perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil.” God had declared Job righteous in the blood of the promised lamb. Job had the Holy Spirit in his new heart. He was justified by faith alone. And he did good works that testified of his faith to those around him (James 5:11).

The book of Job is first and foremost about the sovereignty and righteousness of God to do what he pleases because he is God. The calamities that befell Job occurred because God said so. All God’s ways are righteous, and all his works are good and eternally known unto him (Ps. 145:17). All those things befell

Job, and God never told Job why. Job’s sincerity and life of good works had no effect whatsoever on the counsel of God to afflict Job.

When all those calamities befell Job, his friend Zophar told Job that he must be doing something wrong. Zophar’s advice was that if Job was sincere enough in his prayers and repentance, then God would bless him and take away the calamities.

Professor Cammenga is a lot like Zophar. Professor Cammenga read Zophar’s bad advice to Job and preached it to his congregation as the truth. Professor Cammenga would be a comfortless friend, as Zophar was, to put it charitably. Picture it today: Here comes a wounded sheep who is troubled by many earthly cares and spiritual needs. That sheep is bleating, looking for comfort. He is bruised by his sin and wickedness, and the thought of God brings him no peace. And Professor Cammenga tells that sheep, “You are not sincere enough in your prayer life. When you are sincere enough, then God will look upon you with favor, and you will experience his intimate fellowship.” And Professor Cammenga sends that sheep

The Spirit knows exactly what must be done in order for God’s kingdom to come, for his name to be hallowed, for his will to be done, and for his purpose to be realized. The Spirit prays for saints with infinitely perfect knowledge of God’s purpose for God’s glory.

away to rummage for some good works and to conjure up some sincerity. That sheep will despair because he knows he will never be sincere enough. He knows that he is a hypocrite and liar in his flesh.

Job's response to the wicked counsel of Zophar and his two other friends is found in Job 13:4–5: "Ye are forgers of lies, ye are all physicians of no value. O that ye would altogether hold your peace! and it should be your wisdom."

### Conclusion

The wonderful truth of the gospel is that all our sins are completely paid for in full by Jesus Christ alone. He took the full weight of God's wrath, died for our sins, and drank those bitter dregs to the complete end. Jesus earned for us his perfect righteousness and clothed our nakedness. We are justified by faith alone, and being justified we have peace with God (Rom. 5:1). The truth of

justification by faith alone without works is the foundation of prayer and of the Christian life. And we come before God confidently and boldly, fully persuaded in true faith that he will hear our prayers. Even though we are unworthy of ourselves to receive any good thing, God will grant us all things necessary for body and soul, for the sake of Jesus Christ in whom God is well pleased.

Lord willing, next time we will examine the Catechism's explanation of prayer in Lord's Day 45 as to its necessity, its principles, and its content and continue to work through Professor Cammenga's distorted view of prayer.

"Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you: and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men: for all men have not faith" (2 Thess. 3:1–2).

–TDO

## RUNNING FOOTMEN

*And ye shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword.—Leviticus 26:7*

# REFORMING EDUCATION

### Reformation of the Christian School

The reformation in the early months of 2021 that brought us out of the Protestant Reformed Churches included a reformation of the schools. Even as the reformation of the church is not of the will of man but of God, so the reformation of the school was entirely God's work. This was evident by the fact that we (to our shame) could find little desire to leave the schools where our life was comfortable. To leave the church was relatively easy compared to leaving the schools. In spite of us, God began a reformation in our education by kicking us out of a place we did not belong.

God, not man, has made the Christian school a battleground in the reformation of his church.

Through our short history God brought us to see the necessity of Christian education in accord with the vows

made at baptism. At baptism each of us parents vowed before God to "see these children...instructed and brought up" in the doctrine of scripture and the creeds as taught in "this Christian church": the church of our membership and confession (Form for the Administration of Baptism, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 260).

In the Protestant Reformed Churches, we had been taught that this was a vow of convenience. If we had a school available, then we had to use it—that is, if we were officebearers.<sup>1</sup> If the fathers were not officebearers, then their neglect to use the school might bring a grave and self-righteous shake of the head but not Christian discipline. If a school were not available, then the only requirement was to *want* to have a school but not to build one. Certainly, not to build one if building a school were deemed "impossible."

<sup>1</sup> For further reading, see Andrew Lanning, "The Christian School as Demand of the Covenant (3)," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 10, (December 1, 2021): 7–10.



God graciously brought us out from the inconsistency of the Protestant Reformed Churches to the principal necessity of both forming and using Christian schools to teach our children.

On this battleground there have been two recent developments in the Reformed Protestant Churches that gutted the school of its foundation upon the covenant. The first development was a claim that the *essence* of the Christian school is that students are taught *together*. The second development was a claim that the purpose of the school is that we teach our children to know God *and* that we teach our children to serve God. These ideas will guarantee that the covenant will not govern the education of our children as a living foundation of the school.

God has made the Christian school to be a battleground in the reformation of his church. Do not take your eyes off this battleground, no matter who tells you to look away. We must evaluate these new ideas that have recently entered the field of battle. We must reject what is false and continue to develop and apply a proper understanding of the Christian school.

### *A Living Foundation*

It has been well established, and there is little debate that the Christian school is founded upon God's covenant of grace. Even those who refuse to agree that the Christian school is a *demand* of the covenant allow for the covenant as the foundation of the Christian school. But for us to get this foundation into the proper perspective and to apply an understanding of this foundation, let us get this in our minds: What is the covenant?

Our God is a triune God of fellowship: three persons eternally abiding in the unity of the Godhead. This relationship of friendship in the Godhead is the essence of the covenant. Any time we think about the covenant as it touches us, whether with regard to the Christian school or in any other aspect of our lives, this is where we must begin.

God brings us into this covenant life through Christ. This is the gospel that is so dear to us: the promise that God has chosen us to be members together with Christ. "For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him" (Col 2:9–10).

According to Rev. Herman Hoeksema in his *Reformed Dogmatics*,

If this communion of friendship in the Trinity implies a perfect knowledge of one another, then also the covenant life of man must consist in

knowledge and communion: God reveals himself to man, causes man to know him, reveals his secrets to him, speaks to him as a friend with his friend, walks with him, eats and drinks with him, and lives with him under one roof.<sup>2</sup>

Hoeksema again:

The covenant is the relation of the most intimate communion of friendship, in which God reflects his own covenant life in his relation to the creature, gives to that creature life, and causes him to taste and acknowledge the highest good and the overflowing fountain of all good.<sup>3</sup>

The point is that when we speak of the covenant, we may not simply stop with the covenant as a foundation. The covenant is not merely a basis. It is a way of life. It is not a foundation like the pilings under your deck that have no living connection to the discussion you are having there. Rather, the covenant is the foundation like the roots of the tree are the foundation of a tree. Certainly, the roots hold up the tree, and apart from the roots the entire tree cannot stand. But the roots are so much more! The roots of the tree also give life to the branches, leaves, and fruit that grow on the tree. You cannot speak of the branches and the fruit without speaking of the roots; they are one.

Likewise, the covenant is not merely a dead foundation that demands that believers teach their children. The covenant is the lifeblood of the school. The covenant will be visible no matter which point of reference we take to look at the school. Will we look at the essence of the school? That will show us the covenant. The purpose? We will see the covenant. The content of the education and the curriculum? We will see the covenant.

When we look at the Christian school from all these angles, what will stand out is Christ, the head and mediator of the covenant. When we look at language and logic, we will see Christ, the wisdom of God. When we look at science, we will see Christ, who was with God from the beginning "as one brought up with him" (Prov. 8:30). When we look at social studies, we will see Christ, the power of God who is given all power in heaven and on earth. When we look at history, we will see Christ sitting at the right hand of God and sending the horsemen of Revelation.

And what is the power that draws all life out of the roots of the covenant and into every subject? Faith! Faith as our union with Christ is the basic requirement of every participant of the Christian school, whether parent,

2 Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing, 2004), 1:459.

3 Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:459–60.

teacher, or student. Not even subject matter expertise or a teaching certification is the most basic requirement, but faith.

### *Essence of the Christian School... Together?*

Considering the living foundation of the school in the covenant, we must reject the idea that the essence of Christian education is merely that we work together to teach our children. According to a previous editorial in this magazine, “Wherever you have the parents’ and other believers’ joining *together* for the instruction of the covenant seed, there you have the essence of the Christian school.”<sup>4</sup>

The word “essence” can be defined as “the most important quality or feature of something, that makes it what it is.”<sup>5</sup> To get to the bottom of this, we must get firmly rooted in our minds a picture of the essence of the Christian school, since that will help direct us in the great work of teaching the covenant seed. God’s covenant demands a school. What does this school look like?

Let us play a mental game. Create in your minds an image of the school in all of its aspects—everything that you can think of when you think of the Christian school. Begin to list out all the different things that belong to the school. Perhaps you start with the physical location, the building, the backpacks, the bus, the bells, the teachers, the books, homework, studying, tests, and grades.

Do you have in your minds a picture of the Christian school with all its trappings?

Good.

Now, start dismantling every aspect of the school that can be removed but not the parts that must remain in order for the school to still be a “school.” For example, take away the extracurriculars. Is it still a school? Of course. Remove the gymnasium? Still a school. Can we remove textbooks? I suppose that is possible. What about the students? Nope, not a school if we remove them. What about the parents? Or what about the teachers who stand in the parents’ place?

The covenant is not merely a dead foundation that demands that believers teach their children. The covenant is the lifeblood of the school. The covenant will be visible no matter which point of reference we take to look at the school...What will stand out is Christ, the head and mediator of the covenant.

This is what we are talking about when we use the phrase “the essence of the Christian school.” How much can we take away from the school, such that what remains is still a school?

The October 2021 editorial claimed that “the essence of a Christian school...is believers’ [especially parents’] working *together* in the covenantal rearing and instruction of their covenant seed.” We may speak of the school as believers’ working together to rear and instruct their children, since that is a definite characteristic of Christian education. We might even include that working together with the essence of the Christian school, since if the education is not done together, there is no school. But the problem with this claim is that the essence of Christian education is parents’ working together is that it takes away too much. There is more involved than parents’ working together to instruct their children. If all that is left is parents’ working together to rear their children, we take away so much that what is left is no longer a Christian school.

The first thing missing is teachers. Godly teachers are an essential part of the school, and without them we do not have a Christian school. The second thing missing is a purpose and goal, which gives the school a distinctively Christian character in contrast to every other school.

### *The Christian School and Teachers*

In the series of editorials “The Christian School as Demand of the Covenant,” the editor denied the centrality of the teacher in the school. In the third installment of the series, the editor wrote:

If the Christian school is not a demand of the covenant, then why have a Christian school and why use a Christian school? Someone will say, “Because the complexity of modern society means that parents are not equipped to teach their children all that they must know today.” But today there is a plethora of comprehensive homeschool materials and curricula complete with textbooks,

4 Andrew Lanning, “The Christian School as Demand of the Covenant,” *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 7 (October 1, 2021): 9. The emphasis is Lanning’s.

5 <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/essence>.

video lectures, homework assignments, and even institutions that will grade the homework.<sup>6</sup>

In this statement the editor presented a problem that since modern society has grown so complex, parents are not equipped to teach their children to live in this modern society. He solved this alleged problem by providing “comprehensive homeschool materials and curricula” and “even institutions that will grade” for the parents or anyone else who is facilitating the children’s learning together.

For the editor the teacher is not the imperative. Rather, the role of the qualified teacher can be replaced by “comprehensive...materials and curricula” and “institutions that will grade,” so long as the circumstance of the learning is still *together*.

Against this claim the teacher is imperative. Without teachers there is no school, let alone a Christian school.

It is clear from scripture that teachers are the means that God has ordained to rear the covenant seed. Speaking to both parents and teachers in whose place they stand, the Spirit tells the young church,

6. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart:
7. And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. (Deut. 6:6–7)

Pay particular attention in this text to the source of the teacher’s instruction. The Spirit focuses on the heart of the teacher. “These words...shall be in thine heart.” This is because the act of teaching is not merely transferring knowledge. A child can memorize facts from a book, but that is not the teaching as directed by God. Rather, teaching is an activity that engages the hearts of both teacher and students.

Solomon acknowledges this in the negative example of Proverbs 5:11–13:

11. And thou mourn at the last, when thy flesh and thy body are consumed,
12. And say, How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof;
13. And have not obeyed the voice of my teachers, nor inclined mine ear to them that instructed me!

Solomon is describing here how the foolish son would not merely reject the content of knowledge taught, but he also actually rejects and disobeys his teachers.

This spiritual aspect of teaching is also shown in 1 John 2, which shows us that instruction is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him. (v. 27)

This text may initially seem to make the point that teachers are not needed, but that is not the thrust of this text. Rather, by showing the centrality of the Spirit in teaching, the text shows the importance of the living bond that the teacher and students both share in that same Spirit, which is the confirmation of the truth between them.<sup>7</sup>

This idea that teachers are necessary to the school is not new to us. In his book *Reformed Education*, originally printed in 1977 and used since then as the essential handbook for Protestant Reformed parents and teachers, Prof. David Engelsma taught the centrality of the teacher in the school.

Although it is slight exaggeration to say that the school is its teachers (for God has blessed and used schools that suffered for a time with poor teachers), the thrust of the exaggeration is correct: Christian education is Christian teachers teaching covenant children.<sup>8</sup>

In the Christian school godly teachers are not optional. God, give us teachers!

### *Know God...And?*

The second element missing from the previous editorials regarding the essence of the Christian school is the purpose and goal of that education. It is this purpose and goal that give the school its distinctive character.

We teach our children together, but so do other schools. Where are we pointing our children in that education? What is our purpose? Are we teaching them to be landscapers or bricklayers? engineers? teachers? nuclear physicists? How should this change if the school were run by farmers and restaurateurs? Depending on the answer to this set of questions, the character of the school will be very different.

6 Lanning, “The Christian School as Demand of the Covenant (3),” 9.

7 For exegesis of this text, see Nathan Langerak, “Taught by Our Anointing,” sermon preached in Second Reformed Protestant Church on May 27, 2023, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=528232247437458>. See especially from minute fifty of the audio recording.

8 David Engelsma, *Reformed Education* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 61.

Although this question was not answered definitively in the series of articles on the Christian school, the question was answered in a lecture given after the series concluded. In this lecture Reverend Lanning proposed that the purpose of Christian education is not only to rear the covenant seed to know God in all his works, but “parents also come together with other believers to rear the covenant seed to prepare them to serve God in all of their callings.”<sup>9</sup> According to Reverend Lanning in the lecture, this also directs the content of the education: “There is the whole curriculum of the Christian school: know God in all of his works and serve him in all of your callings.”<sup>10</sup>

This, according to Reverend Lanning, is the twofold purpose of and content for Christian instruction: know God in his works and serve God in our callings.

The problem with this statement is not the idea that it is the calling of the child of God to serve God in his vocation. That is undoubtedly true. Regardless of our vocation as a teacher, minister, farmer, salesman, painter, mailman, or physicist, we are called to serve God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength.

The problem with this statement is that it finds itself as a purpose of our children’s education alongside the purpose that we teach our children to know God.

These purposes are not equal. They are not even in the same category.

Properly, only one is a purpose. The other is a fruit.

The one, great purpose of education is that we teach our children to know God. This is the emphasis of Deuteronomy 6, the great passage on education: know the Lord and teach your children to know him! This is also the purpose given in the great high-priestly prayer of our Lord prior to his sacrifice on the cross.

2. As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him.
3. And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. (John 17:2–3)

The purpose of God in his people is simply not pointed at life on this earth. The great purpose of God in the election and salvation of his people is that he gives them eternal life, uniting them to him by faith and making them

to know him. This is inclusive of the education of their children, as our fathers held dear even in persecution over the education of their children.

The authors of the law of 1806 saw these statutes as a means to develop useful citizens for the Kingdom of the Netherlands. To further the nation’s well-being in this world—not the next. Seceders were not concerned with this world. They were not of this world...for them, the education of their children’s souls was of much greater importance than the mere development of their minds, which only led to perdition.<sup>11</sup>

The purpose and hope of the child of God are not set on this earth, but his heart is fixed in heaven. As we sing in Psalm 49,

God my waiting soul shall save,  
He will raise me from the grave.  
Let no fear disturb your peace  
Tho’ one’s house and wealth increase;  
Death shall end his fleeting day,  
He shall carry naught away.<sup>12</sup>

The purpose for education as explained in scripture and applied by our ancestors resounds in unison: that our children know God in this life and the next. Whatever *work they do* in this life does not sit alongside this calling to know God. It flows *out of* the knowledge of God. Just as the good works of the believer are fruits that flow out of the knowledge of faith.

In the operation of our schools, this fact makes all the difference.

If practical training were to sit alongside training our children to know God, then in every school subject we would have to decide—will we in this subject, semester, unit, or class period teach our children to set their hope in God? Or will our focus be life and vocation in “modern society”?

The world has an answer to this question. The world answers this question by orienting everything that is taught toward student success in this world. One path may be the college track, where students are given all the college preparatory and advanced placement courses to succeed. Another path to success gets students out of high

9 Andrew Lanning, “The Christian School in Singapore,” lecture given to Berean Reformed Protestant Church on December 16, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onymNhmBFA8>.

10 Lanning, “The Christian School in Singapore.”

11 Janet Sjaarda Sheeres, “Struggle for the Souls of the Children: The Effect of the Dutch Education Law of 1806 on the Emigration of 1847.” Taken from essay compilation “History and Principles of Reformed Education,” <https://www.prcs.org/history-principles-of-reformed-education-course> or <https://drive.google.com/uc?export=download&id=1hbvDOnHhg7hrY98ztUBznuK9a5zrL6bP>.

12 No. 136:3, in *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and added Chorale Section*, reprinted and revised edition of the 1912 United Presbyterian *Psalter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1927; rev. ed. 1995).



school and into skill centers or work release where they can learn a career. Government departments of education are closely aligned with this idea, and they have rewritten their standards to allow for multiple paths, so long as the students are “career oriented.” The world insists that students pursue success in this world.

The answer of the Christian school will be antithetical to the world’s answer, and it will flow out of the root of the school, which is the covenant. The proper education of our children will focus them not on temporal life but on their eternal hope.

All learning—practical, theoretical, or otherwise—must flow out of this one purpose of education: that our children know the Lord. While the children of this world will learn with their eyes on this world, our children will learn with their hope set firmly in heaven, recognizing that they live as pilgrims and strangers on the earth.

### *Development Is Needed*

Even if the textbooks and materials used are the same, the teaching and learning will be different in their motivation, purpose, presentation, and evaluation. This is especially where godly teachers are needed: to develop the implications of this principle throughout their material. Theologians and ministers may set down the basic principles, but they are not teaching twelve units of trigonometry to the students, and so they cannot get into the depth of application that the teacher must bring.

Teachers, before you start unit planning, think about the purpose and motivation that you bring to your students. Will you encourage them with an earthly reward in exchange for applying themselves in your class? Or will you find the purpose for learning the subject in seeing the glory of God in that subject?

I will try an example from literature class.

Why is literature an important part of education? The world will give multiple reasons: to improve reading skills, to give better context to periods of history, to develop critical thinking skills, and other ideas that lure students with the mirage of their “full potential.”

But why (and how) does the Christian school teach literature?

We teach our children to know God by showing them his truth in or (more commonly) over against the literature they study. Regardless of the subject matter, every piece of literature will be a reflection of what the author thinks about the truth. As children of God, we are called to judge all things, discerning between the truth and

the lie. “Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world?” (1 Cor. 6:2). So when we read, for example, a fantasy novel presenting a battle between good and evil, our children must learn to discern what ideas the author may be bringing to their minds. Many *fantasies* show dualism between the forces of evil and good. Who will win? Does the author present this as something that depends on the resourcefulness or inner strength of those on the side of good? Our students must learn to evaluate what that author is teaching along with its parallel in reality, where both the author and the student live. Our students then learn to judge this teaching according to the one standard of truth, that is, according to the revelation of God in Christ. That is one great purpose of the Christian school in teaching literature: that our students learn as saints to discern and judge the ideas of the world.

This is only a sketch, and this idea could be developed further. However, it serves as an example to show how our children know the Lord through an excellent literature education. This must be fleshed out in every subject. In every subject our children learn, they must learn it as it relates to God. This way the focus of learning will not be on themselves but on increasing in the knowledge of God.

Teachers, this can be positively overwhelming for experienced and inexperienced teachers alike. As schools we have much work ahead. I ask you to consider one first step on this path before the school doors open: answer the question, why? Why is it important for your students to learn the subject material in your class? Not why they learn generically but why learn art? Why trigonometry? Why grammar? Answering this question by faith will be the starting point for your syllabus and the guiding light in each unit and lesson you plan.

Parents, teach your children to live and learn by faith, not for the purpose of their lives here below.

Students, in this way may you develop a richer and deeper understanding of the unchanging God of your salvation, to whom is all praise in all his works both in this life and into eternity.

So let there be on us bestowed  
The beauty of the Lord our God;  
The work accomplished by our hand  
Establish Thou, and make it stand;  
Yea, let our hopeful labor be  
Established evermore by Thee.<sup>13</sup>

—Michael J. Vermeer

13 No. 246:3, in *The Psalter*.

## BE CONVERTED (2): THE CALL TO REPENTANCE

In the previous installment of this series, I briefly examined the biblical doctrine of conversion. In that brief examination, I especially noted that conversion is not a one-time event, but conversion is that benefit of salvation that characterizes the entire life of the elect, regenerated sinner. The entire life of the elect sinner can be said to be a mortification of the old man and a quickening of the new man. This is the traditional Reformed view that has been handed down to us from Reformed fathers such as John Calvin, who said, “Repentance consists of two parts, i.e., the mortification of the flesh, and the quickening of the Spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the believer daily hates and flees from sin and seeks to live according to the will of God in all good works. This is the fruit of the work of God in regeneration, whereby he takes the elect but by nature dead sinner and makes him alive. In that regenerated heart of the elect sinner, God the Holy Spirit works faith, uniting that sinner to Jesus Christ and filling him with all the fullness of Christ. Having the dominion within the heart of the elect sinner by faith, Christ rules in that heart by his word and Spirit. By the word and Spirit of Jesus Christ, the elect sinner also is rightly said to repent.

At the end of the previous article, I briefly mentioned that conversion, which characterizes the entire life of the child of God, is also a calling. The call to be converted is just as much a calling as the call to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, where the one is, the other is also implied. For one cannot be said to believe if he does not also repent. Certainly, repentance and faith cannot be confounded, so that you get some strange mixture of the two. That is a present danger as well. Repentance and faith can and must be distinguished. However, they cannot exist separately under any circumstances.

The place for conversion is often given in conjunction with the call to believe. Together they are often referred to as the twofold call of the gospel: repent and believe (Mark 1:15). The call to repent and believe must be the incessant cry of the church in all her preaching and writing, in all her labors in evangelism and missions, in the home

and in the school. Every day and in every circumstance, the church needs to hear that call: repent and believe. The church that preaches the call to repent and believe is assured that she is true in her calling because it is this same call that the Lord Jesus Christ, the only king and bishop of his church, preached and commissioned his disciples likewise to preach.

That there is such a thing as a call to repentance is evident from such passages as I have already referenced. Jesus taught his disciples that except they be converted and become as little children, they should not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:3). John preached the baptism of repentance (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). And the apostles came to their audiences and preached this exhortation: “Repent ye, therefore, and be converted” (Acts 3:19).

### *God’s Sovereignty in Man’s Repentance*

The gospel together with the call to repent and believe must be preached unto all nations wheresoever God will send it, and then the end shall come. The effect that such a call has on the hearts of those to whom it is preached is limited by the sovereign will and determination of God. For some, God wills that they hear the call and be saved. And for others, God wills that they hear the call and be damned.

This much is clear from the Reformed creeds, which teach that the reason that some obey the call and are converted and others do not believe and are damned is not to be ascribed to man or to man’s free will but is to be ascribed alone to God. This is the teaching of Canons of Dordt 3–4.10:

But that others who are called by the gospel obey the call and are converted is not to be ascribed to the proper exercise of free will, whereby one distinguishes himself above others equally furnished with grace sufficient for faith and conversion, as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains; but it must be wholly ascribed to God, who as He has chosen His own from eternity in Christ, so He confers upon them faith and repentance, rescues

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2014), 390.

them from the power of darkness, and translates them into the kingdom of His own Son, that they may show forth the praises of Him who hath called them out of darkness into His marvelous light, and may glory, not in themselves, but in the Lord, according to the testimony of the apostles in various places. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 168)

There is much noise today about the call to repentance. Many charge the Reformed Protestant Churches with making man a stock and a block for apparently denying that man has any responsibility whatsoever to believe and repent. It is my contention that those who make such charges do so because they themselves cannot conceive of a call without it first implying that in some specific sense man's activities precede God's blessing. When they hear the call to repent, or to be converted, they see only that which man must do to be forgiven of his sins.

I have personally experienced this negligence with regard to the doctrine of repentance in a sermon that I recently listened to by Prof. Ron Cammenga on Lord's Day 33, which Lord's Day serves as the basic Reformed doctrine on true conversion.<sup>2</sup> My intention in listening to this sermon was not at all to benefit from it. However, I was glad to have listened to it. I was not glad because I enjoyed the sermon. But I was glad because it gave me a renewed perspective on the place that the confession of Christ has in the Protestant Reformed Churches. That much is obvious. There is no place. At least, Christ is not of primary importance in their preaching.

As was evident in the sermon, when coming to the phrase in the Lord's Day that mentions the operation of the word and Spirit of Jesus Christ, Professor Cammenga simply ran out of time to discuss it:

God accomplishes this daily conversion in our lives through his word, under his word. I don't have the time to say much about that this morning, but that is a critical component of the Reformed doctrine of conversion.

And is there anything else? Apparently, it would have taken entirely too much time to develop that operation of the word and Spirit any further.

In my estimation the professor had no time for explaining the operation of the word and Spirit of Christ in man's conversion because he failed to recognize what stood at the very heart of that Lord's Day. And what stands at the heart of the Lord's Day? Jesus Christ in his person and perfect work, his headship, and his lordship

in man's conversion were utterly removed in place of man's activities (worked by the grace of God, of course). All the emphasis in the sermon was strictly kept on the level of the temporal, on the experience. Failing to preach Christ, the sermon did not take me to heaven with the doctrine. There was no time to preach Christ in that sermon because there was no room for Christ in that sermon. Indeed, it was a Christless sermon.

After listening to the sermon, I could only remember the name Jesus Christ mentioned as many times in the sermon as I have fingers on my one hand, maybe even less. There was no room for Christ in that sermon. For if there had been room, then the entire sermon would have been preached from that perspective. Instead, there was in the sermon more time given to explaining how God makes man active, so that he is not a stock and a block, than there was time given to Jesus Christ. And that kind of preaching is what in large part fueled my desire to write about true conversion.

The emphasis of scripture and the Reformed confessions is in no sense that God makes men active, so that they can and do convert themselves. While it is true that there is an activity of man in his repentance, that is not the emphasis of the Reformed doctrine of conversion. Rather, the emphasis is upon the sovereignty of God in the sinner's conversion. God is sovereign in the sinner's conversion. Therefore, the conversion of the sinner is a wonder of grace and is not at all the work of man. Conversion, or repentance, is that act of God whereby God operates by his word and Spirit in the heart of the elect sinner, whom God has regenerated, and turns that sinner from the hatred of God and the love of sin to the love of God and the hatred of sin.

Conversion, therefore, is utterly and even outstandingly the work of God, even more outstanding than the work of God whereby he created the heavens and the earth. For the world was made *ex nihilo*, or out of nothing. However, in conversion God takes that which is by nature cold, refractory, and set at enmity against him and makes it a willing servant of God in Jesus Christ. There is the power of our God. There is the power of our God in raising the dead, which power belongs to him alone.

Furthermore, in conversion there is a deep, profound change of heart and mind that results in a deep sorrow over sin. Knowledge of who God is, who Christ is, and who we are by nature in relationship to God enters into our own consciences and experiences by faith; and by a wonder of grace, we are mysteriously altered, so that whereas formerly sin was good, and God was evil, now

2 Ronald Cammenga, "True Conversion," sermon preached in Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church on June 26, 2022; <https://www.sermonaudio.com/playpopupvideo.asp?SID=62622167517825>.

the opposite is true. And what explains this? Certainly, a man can change his mind about a great deal of things. However, a man cannot change his mind about sin any more than a leopard can change his spots or an Ethiopian his skin (Jer. 13:23). For man by nature exists at enmity against God and would not come to God or draw near to God on his own (John 6:44).

What, then, if God were to draw a man? Then man cannot do anything but be turned. This is the testimony of the scriptures concerning man's repentance. "Turn thou us unto thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old." (Lam. 5:21). Therefore, it is utterly impossible that conversion be that act of man by which he receives or the way in which he experiences the remission of his sins. Truly, in conversion God is everything, and man is nothing.

### *Repentance: The Call of the Gospel*

The truth of conversion over against the lie that militates against it can further be demonstrated from the call to repentance. Notice that the call to repent is not itself the gospel. No man was ever saved by the mere call to repentance. Apart from the gospel the call to repentance is devoid of any true meaning or saving properties. However, in a similar way that repentance and faith cannot be separated, so also the gospel and its call can never be separated. The call to repentance is found throughout the Old Testament in many places, most often employing the word *turn*. In the New Testament that same calling carries through or simply takes on the word *repent*.

In this connection let us call to mind the words of our Lord Jesus Christ:

14. Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God,
15. And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel. (Mark 1:14–15)

No one had ever preached the gospel like Jesus Christ, nor shall any man ever preach the gospel like our Lord Jesus Christ. And when the Lord preached the gospel, he preached that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The Lord also preached repentance and faith. Jesus Christ called upon all men to repent and believe.

What a statement! The kingdom of heaven is at hand! That kingdom, which God promised to restore and build when Messiah the prince should come (Dan. 9:25), is the kingdom that has come in Jesus Christ. When Jesus Christ entered upon the scene of this present world, taking upon himself the flesh and blood of children, the kingdom of heaven had fully come. And thus Jesus came

preaching the gospel, the good news of that kingdom, saying, "Repent and believe the gospel," or more literally, "Repent and believe *in* the gospel." The covenant and kingdom of God had been fully realized in Jesus Christ. And it is with a view toward the salvation of those who had been appointed to citizenship in that kingdom that Jesus came preaching the gospel and with that gospel the call to repentance.

Our Lord Jesus Christ preached that which ought to be the pattern for all gospel preaching in the church: preaching the call of the gospel indiscriminately to all men, as all men are in duty bound to repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. For the time has come! The kingdom of God is at hand! Whenever and wherever the gospel is preached, Jesus Christ comes and calls upon men to repent and believe. For some, God wills that they believe and repent; and for others, God does not will that they believe and repent, whereunto they were appointed and whose damnation is just.

On the one hand, the call to faith is the call to entrance into that kingdom in Jesus Christ alone. When the kingdom of God came in Jesus Christ, he accomplished for us a wide entrance into that kingdom, throwing wide open the everlasting doors of heaven by his perfect work and righteousness, which he accomplished all his life long and especially on the cross. By the cross of Christ and by faith alone in Jesus Christ, Christ by his Spirit causes us to enter that kingdom, which he has established and of which he makes us the proper citizens.

Legally, God makes us worthy of entering that kingdom, forgiving us all our sins and adopting us as his children and heirs of that kingdom, through Jesus Christ in our justification. This justification is part of the good pleasure of God in his eternal counsel and as such is an eternal reality. Indeed, the reality of our justification is as eternal as the cross of Jesus Christ, which stands as the basis of our justification. For "Christ," who died as a lamb without spot or blemish, "was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you, who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God" (1 Pet. 1:19–21). It is because of our justification from eternity and at the cross of Jesus Christ that God makes us the proper citizens of that kingdom in our own consciences and experiences through the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The Spirit of Jesus Christ both renews us, who are by nature dead in trespasses and sins, and works faith in our hearts by the gospel, so that we who by nature stand outside of the kingdom are brought before the very presence of God into the kingdom in Jesus Christ.

A citizen of the kingdom of heaven does not work to



enter that kingdom. A citizen of the kingdom of heaven does not have to do anything to assure himself of his name and place in that kingdom. All the riches of the kingdom, including the forgiveness of sins and everlasting righteousness, are personally ours on the basis of Jesus Christ and his cross. Upon the basis of the cross of Jesus Christ, the kingdom is established as upon a sure foundation. And it is by faith alone, which at its essence is union with Jesus Christ, that we have access into that kingdom.

Therefore, on the other hand, it is unto those who have been made the citizens of that kingdom that the gospel comes and calls them to repentance. That is what takes place whenever the gospel is preached. God manifests his gracious rule in the hearts of his elect people by the preaching of the gospel, which is the means whereby God accomplishes his good pleasure in them or works in them true conversion. For as God lives, he does not delight in the death of the wicked but that the wicked turn from his way and live (Ezek. 33:11). Therein is revealed the unchanging, immutable, and determinative counsel of God in man's conversion.

When the preaching of the gospel comes and calls all men to repent, God calls those who have been brought into that kingdom and who have been made the worthy citizens of that kingdom in Jesus Christ to live as citizens of that kingdom. For it is impossible that those who have entered the kingdom and covenant of God and have been made the proper citizens of that kingdom in Jesus Christ to not live as citizens of that kingdom. Certainly, a man or woman would not be considered a citizen of the kingdom who sneaks off in the cover of night and conspires with the enemies of that kingdom.

The citizens of the kingdom of heaven, having been justified in Christ by faith alone, are also called in their own consciences and experiences out of darkness into God's marvelous light. They are translated from out of the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God's dear Son, so that they are no more rebels but citizens of that kingdom. Because we have been renewed in Jesus Christ, God also lays hold on us with the grace of conversion, so that we no longer are the servants of sin and unrighteousness but are the servants of God, who seek to live according to the will of God in all good works. That is the meaning of the Heidelberg Catechism in question and answer 90 when it states, "What is the quickening of the new man? It is a sincere joy of heart in God, through Christ, and with love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 121–22).

God does not call us to repent because our forgiveness in some sense depends upon it. For our name and place in the kingdom, including the possession of all the riches

and benefits of that kingdom, are ours as soon as we are brought into that kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ. Rather, when the call comes to us and says, "Repent," God comes and demands that in all our conversation we love God and live out of the principle of regeneration, which is as a deep root in us, whereby we know God in Jesus Christ as the God of our salvation. That demonstrates itself in a life of daily conversion unto God, which is the God-given, God-worked sign of the one whose sins have been forgiven.

That conversion, then, which God works in us, begins first of all with a renewal of the mind, so that we know who God is, who Christ is, who we are by nature and as sinners, and who we are in Jesus Christ. And if we know the truth by faith as it is in Christ Jesus, then we ought to put off the old man and his deeds. Then we ought not to speak and behave ourselves like we have never heard the gospel, but we ought to put on the new man. We ought to start speaking, thinking, and living as those who have been called out of darkness into God's marvelous light. As those who have been joined to Christ by faith, whose sins are forgiven by God on the basis of Christ and his cross, who have been renewed after the image of God in Jesus Christ, we are also called to live out of that principle and bear fruits that are worthy of repentance in every area of our lives.

### *The Call to Repentance: Its Antithesis*

It is this call to repentance that stands over against every false doctrine that makes repentance necessary for entering the kingdom or experiencing covenant fellowship with God. Repentance can never be a prerequisite for entering the kingdom or for experiencing covenant fellowship with God. We enter the kingdom and experience covenant fellowship with God in our own consciences and experiences through the forgiveness of our sins by faith alone in Christ. It is only when our sins are forgiven that God then lays hold upon our hearts and causes our hearts to break with sorrow over sin and love towards God. Therefore, repentance as it is rightly taught and confessed is a great blessing to the church. The Reformed confessions clearly set forth that reality in Canons of Dordt 5.7:

For, in the first place, in these falls He preserves in them the incorruptible seed of regeneration from perishing, or being totally lost; and again, by His Word and Spirit, certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator, may again experience the favor of a reconciled God, through faith adore His mercies, and

henceforward more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 174)

The meaning here is not hard to understand. For it is here that we read that God, who is absolutely sovereign in salvation from beginning to end, is also willing and able to preserve his elect people in that salvation unto eternity. This article in the Canons of Dordt takes the believer right to heaven when the article makes losing the seed of regeneration, or being completely lost and perishing, an utter impossibility for the believer.

It can be inferred that repentance, as the fruit of regeneration, is the way in which the elect child of God ordinarily walks. There is, therefore, no such thing as an unconverted believer. The rare instance that a believer loses the sense of God's favor for a time is not first due to a lack of repentance but to a lack of faith. Although that one is joined to Christ by faith, he does not live by that faith but walks as an unbeliever for a time. The fruit of that unbelief is that he does not hate and flee from sin as he ought, but he continues in the way of sin for a time.

And it is considering this rare but real possibility that the doctrine of the preservation of the saints teaches us that at such a time when God lays hold on one of his wayward sons or daughters and calls them by his word and Spirit, he renews them again to repentance and causes them to experience his favor once more. God does not leave his people who fall into sin, for God is not cruel toward his people but is merciful and gracious. God in his mercy delivers them from the clutches of sin and restores unto them the experience of a reconciled God. Not first because they repented. The child of God who is restored to the way of serious repentance does not experience the favor of a reconciled God because he has repented.

Rather, when God restores the experience of his favor, he does so by faith in Jesus Christ. For that believer, all the while he was walking in sin, never lost the favor of God. Faith in Jesus Christ knows certainly and personally that God has freely forgiven all my sins in Jesus Christ and will not hold them against me. Faith seeks the remission of sins and finds it in Jesus Christ. Faith does not work for the remission of sins. Faith does not repent to be forgiven. Rather, faith in the child of God receives that forgiveness that is his in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, it is the necessary fruit of faith that the one whom God restores also is sorry for his sins and

henceforward more diligently works out his salvation with fear and trembling. That working out of the believer's salvation is not the fear of terror or trepidation, so that the believer can never be certain that he is truly saved or forgiven of his sins. Rather, when the Canons speak of working out salvation with fear and trembling, it is speaking of the entire life of the believer as he sees his sins, more and more hates and flees from his sins, and seeks for the remission of his sins in Jesus Christ. The converted sinner's heart is broken out of love for God, and he shudders at his own sinfulness, so that the sinner sorrows deeply over his sins and desires to do what is right and well-pleasing in the sight of God in the way that God has prescribed in his law, which law serves as the guide for a thankful life. These things do not gain the assurance of salvation, but they form the living confession of the one who knows that he is saved in Jesus Christ and is worthy of eternal life.

In Jesus Christ the elect, converted sinner is personally assured that forgiveness of sins and everlasting righteousness is his possession. The elect sinner is not constantly tossed in and out of assurance according to the degree that he repents, but he is kept by the power of God and is continually assured of his preservation by the word and Spirit of Christ. That assurance is supported by the means of grace, especially the preaching of the gospel. And that assurance is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, who works by means of faith. The Spirit testifies by faith within the heart of the elect sinner that the sinner is a child of God and is worthy of everlasting life.

For all that conversion is, it is certainly not the way in which we receive the forgiveness of our sins or a prerequisite for our entering the kingdom or experiencing covenant fellowship with God. That is not the urgency with which we issue forth the call to repent. Rather, when God calls men to repent through the preaching of the gospel, he works certainly and effectually in the hearts of his elect people, so that having been assured of the forgiveness of their sins by faith only, they may walk as those who are forgiven and might seek to serve him in all love and cheerfulness. God does not call us to repentance out of compulsion, demanding us to work so that we may experience his favor. Rather, God calls us to repentance in love as our gracious and merciful God and Father who willed our repentance and works that repentance in us as a free gift of his grace.

—Garrett Varner





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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*

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee. — Psalm 122:6*

**J**erusalem is the true church, a city altogether lovely. There in Jerusalem is God's house, where he lives with his people through the sacrifice of the lamb and testifies of salvation by sovereign grace. There in Jerusalem is the rule of God's royal Son, who gives judgment unto salvation. There in Jerusalem are riches and glory and joy unspeakable. So God's people love the church, cleave to her, and are glad to go up to Jerusalem.

Pray for her peace!

"O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." (Matt. 26:39)

"O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done." (Matt. 26:42).

Prayers. For Jerusalem's peace.

And upon the cursed tree, Jesus drank that cup of wrath to merit for Jerusalem everlasting righteousness and eternal life. At Golgotha he defeated all Jerusalem's enemies. By him Jerusalem has perfect peace. Peace with God. Peace over against her sins and iniquities. Eternal peace when all Jerusalem's enemies are finally destroyed in the lake of fire, and Jerusalem descends out of heaven as a bride adorned for her husband, and the tabernacle of God will be with men.

Let everyone who loves Jerusalem pray for Jerusalem's peace!

For Jerusalem is surrounded by enemies without and traitors within who hate Jerusalem. These enemies—the world, the devil, false brethren, and our own sinful flesh—labor tirelessly, night and day, that Jerusalem become a heap of rubble.

Pray for Jerusalem's peace. Pray that the gospel of Jesus Christ, which alone brings gladness and joy to Jerusalem, may ever be heard within her walls. Pray that all of the wicked tricks and devices that Satan raises against the church may be defeated. Pray that those who hate the church, who seek to destroy the church, may themselves be destroyed.

Pray that not your will but God's will be done. For in your own will, there is a serious threat to Jerusalem's peace. Be careful that in pursuit of your own will, you do not do injury to Jerusalem's peace. Pray that your flesh may be crucified daily.

For Jerusalem shall prosper! Jerusalem shall forever have peace. Because the one who willed Jerusalem's peace and accomplished her peace at the cross commands peace in Jerusalem, and there is peace.

And in Jerusalem's peace shall they also prosper who love her.

—NJL