



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

OCTOBER 2023 | VOLUME 4 | NUMBER 5

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

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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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Sword and Shield does not accept advertising.

Please send all business correspondence, subscription requests, and requests to join Reformed Believers Publishing to one of the following:

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Byron Center, MI 49315
Website: reformedbelieverspub.org
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COMING TO CHRIST

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

—Matthew 11:28

Many never came to Christ. Jesus uses a children's game played in the marketplace to describe the people of his generation and many others wherever the word of God comes. They are like these children in the marketplace who pipe a glad song to their fellows, but their fellows do not dance. They have an excuse: "We do not feel like dancing. Sing us a sad song." And so their fellows sing a sad song to them, but they do not mourn. They have an excuse: "We do not want to mourn. Sing us a glad song." When the word comes and many do not come to Christ, there are always excuses.

John the Baptist came, austere and different. He thundered repentance because the kingdom of heaven was at hand. "Repent, repent, repent" was the message of John. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand; the axe is laid to the root of the tree; make straight the way of the Lord!" John labored in the desert, an odd and strange man, a coat of camel's hair on his back and a leather girdle around his waist, eating locusts and wild honey and preaching the word of the Lord. And the people said, "John has a devil and is a crazy man."

Then Christ came. Beauty and loveliness came in Jesus Christ. The power of the Lord was present to heal the people! No mere man came, but God himself came; and with authority and power, he spoke the word full of grace and truth. Christ came into the very stream of their society and life. He lived and walked among the people, grew up with them, ate in their homes, went to their wedding feasts, appeared in their towns and villages, and preached the kingdom of heaven in their synagogues and houses. And they said, "He is a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners."

Always the people had excuses for their unbelief and rejection of the word of God. Always they found fault with the messenger in order to free themselves from the blame for their failure to repent at John's message and to come to Christ at his command.

"But wisdom is justified of her children" (Matt. 11:19)! Wisdom commends herself to her own children. Of course, it is true then that many excused their

unbelief. Not all were the children of wisdom. Thus wisdom did not commend herself to those unbelievers, and they passed on in their folly and perished.

How those who were in such need of salvation could reject salvation come in the flesh!

So Christ upbraids the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done because the people there repented not. The fault was not John's. The fault was surely not the Son of man's. It was not the fault of the gospel or of Christ, who was declared in the gospel. The blame for the rejection of Christ was the people's, despite their excuses and faultfinding. Woe unto you, Chorazin! Woe unto you, Bethsaida! Woe unto you, Capernaum! You had the Son of God come to you and to honor you with his presence, word, and miracles, and you refused him who spoke. How terrible was their unbelief! If Christ had gone to Tyre and Sidon and done among those cities all his mighty works, the people there would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. If Christ had gone to Sodom and declared himself with his wonderful works, that city would remain unto this day.

Yet Christ calls. He calls with urgency, with authority, and with grace. He calls, "Come to me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden."

Who are called to come?

This question does not mean, who are responsible to come? It does not mean, who will be judged if they do not come? This question does not mean, who hears the call to come? Surely, all who hear are responsible to come, and those who do not come will be judged for their failures to come.

But whom does Christ address in the calling with his powerful and efficacious voice in the depth of men's beings so that many are called, but few are chosen? Many hear the words but are not called. Many hear the words but are not chosen. So many who hear do not come, and they perish.

In the text there is no general invitation or general offer of salvation and rest. There is also no election-less call, which results in the possibility that some come and some do not come. How do not many so preach the calls of scripture! Never teaching the invitation or mentioning

the offer, but their teaching is election-less. Their explanations of the command do not proceed from God's decree! And so their preaching and teaching, not proceeding from election, leave the coming as a contingency that man must fulfill. God calls! Jesus Christ died! But—terrible *but*—you must also come to Christ! Your coming does not seamlessly flow out of the calling of God and the work of Jesus Christ, but your coming is the activity of man placed alongside the sovereignty and work of God, and thus that coming is the activity of man upon which the calling of God waits and without which his calling is of none effect! Double-track theology! So they hawk Christ: “It is not enough that God elected you; it is not enough that Christ died and arose. But”—terrible *but*—“you must also come to him.” The call is presented as an *offer*, a *condition*, and a *prerequisite*, although the words are never used! It is election-less and thus burdensome preaching that does not give rest.

How different is Christ! He calls the laboring and heavy laden, and they all must come! They all will come! Every one without fail will come!

So in the context Christ explains the fact that few came unto him. Did the word of God have no effect? Was the word of God without power to gather more? No, no, a thousand times no!

Christ explains: “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes” (Matt. 11:25). According to God's sovereign counsel of election and reprobation, he reveals secret, spiritual truths. No man can come unto Christ except the Father who sent Christ draw that man; no man knows the Father, save the Son and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal the Father.

According to his perfect will, the Father hides the truth from those who are the wise and the prudent according to their own estimation of themselves. Do not suppose that their being wise and prudent is the reason that the Father does not reveal the truth to them. No, no. Their remaining wise and prudent in their own eyes, and so remaining ignorant of the truth in their minds, is the revelation that God did not will their salvation. So they never labor or are heavy laden. Apart from the secret work of the Spirit, man cannot evaluate himself properly. Man deceives himself with his own goodness. He says in his damnable self-delusion, “I am rich and increased in goods and have need of nothing.” He does not know that he is wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked. And God, according to his counsel appointing them to destruction, leaves them in the ignorance of their sin, their guilt, and the impossibility of their own salvation apart from Jesus Christ.

It is not merely that man does not attain to the truth because of some moral or spiritual fault of his own. The truth must be hidden because the truth is so plain that when it comes it would impress itself upon the hearts of every man. The Father hides the truth! He makes the ears of some fat and their hearts dull, lest they be converted, and he heal them. For so it seems good in his sight.

And God reveals the truth unto babes. According to his sovereign and eternal good pleasure, he opens men's spiritual eyes, ears, and hearts, and they become babes. A babe can do nothing but is dependent upon another for everything. What condition can a baby fulfill for salvation? What work can a baby do for salvation? What obedience can a babe perform for a blessing? Absolutely none. In this way God describes his own children! Great men and rich men, obscure men and poor men, and women and children become nothing. When God reveals himself to them, they become nothing, and they labor and are heavy laden.

The spiritual reality of Christ's audience, as that reality flowed from election and reprobation, was that everyone standing there that day, hearing the voice of Jesus Christ, was not laboring and heavy laden. So it is wherever the gospel is preached—also in the church and on the mission field.

The wise and prudent are never laboring and heavy laden. Oh, perhaps they are bothered by the cares of this world. They are wearied with surfeiting and cares! The afflictions that are common to man and that make this world a valley of tears and sorrows also afflict them. They have troubles with their money, with their children, with their health, and with their futures. But labor they do not.

The laboring to which Christ refers is not like the toiling of the working man, who goes to his chores every day and sweats in his work. At the end of his day, he lays aside his labors for a time, conscious that he has accomplished something, no matter how small. And he lays his head upon his pillow at night in order to take up his labors again in the morning in the expectation that again he will make headway in his task.

To labor and be heavy laden is to toil under the unbearable and hopeless burden of a Sisyphean task. In these words there is no hope; there is no accomplishment; there is only going backward, a greater burden, a bigger debt. You must conceive of the man who labors and strives, who exerts himself in body and mind, who labors day and night without rest, whose ambition is to accomplish his task but who always fails. And he not only fails, but also the goal that he sets for himself recedes ever farther away from him for all his efforts.

And the Lord calls the laboring and heavy laden not

in any earthly sense but in the spiritual sense. Laboring is toiling that in its deepest sense is rooted in the desire of the heart to be right with God, to have peace with the Almighty, to understand and know the favor of the living God. Those who labor and are heavy laden have already been awakened to God, to the understanding that fellowship with God is the highest good and that to live apart from God is death.

To labor and to be heavy laden is to understand that a man cannot be right with God except on the basis of a perfect righteousness because God will not acquit the guilty. To labor and to be heavy laden is to be awakened to the lively sense of God's perfect holiness and to know that all who come to him must likewise be perfectly holy.

To labor and to be heavy laden is to understand at once that this righteousness of God is expressed in the law and that unless the demand of the law is fulfilled by God himself, one cannot have fellowship with God. Under that law there is only impossible labor and unbearable burdens. The law demands and is only satisfied with perfection. To labor under that law is to labor to fulfill it; to do it; to keep it; and with every day, with every moment, and with every effort to hear only, "Cursed, cursed, cursed is every one who does not continue in all things that are written in the law to do them." Oh, yes, if one labors under the law and supposes that the law is satisfied and thus God is satisfied, then he has never labored! If he labors under the law and never experiences the damnation of all his efforts, he has never been heavy laden. For the burden of the law is God himself in his perfect justice, and laboring under that law is the impossible task of bearing that divine weight. As one toils and labors under the law to satisfy the law, he daily only increases his debt. Every day the burden becomes greater; every day the debt increases; every day, longing to hear from the law that he has done enough, he hears instead that he is only an unprofitable and a miserable servant.

Christ made this call to the laboring and heavy laden in the context of the church of his day and its doctrine of the law. The scribes did not labor! They bound heavy burdens, grievous to be borne, and laid them on men's shoulders, but the scribes did not move a finger to lighten the loads. To the weary and heavy laden, they provided no relief! When the weary came to the synagogue laden with sin and guilt and the hopelessness of their tasks under the law, they heard only, "Do this, and you shall live; do that, and you can have fellowship with God; do more and more, and you can have more fellowship with God." And the burdens became monstrous indeed, the labors hopeless, and their toiling pressed them down yet further into debt.

Burdensome teachers!

"Come to me, all ye that labor!"

Laboring with the burden of sin and guilt.

Laboring and finding the burden of the law too great to bear.

Laboring under the oppressive teacher who substitutes Moses for Christ.

Have you toiled with that law, and have you found its burden crushing?

Do you know with grief the greatness of your sins, miseries, and guilt?

"I will give you rest, blessed rest!"

Rest is not merely to cease from toil, to stop work, or to have the burden lifted. Then that burden can come back! Rest does not mean that having been given rest by Jesus, now that terrible task of working to receive God's blessing can begin again but only this time under God's grace. The contrast is not between working for rest apart from grace and working for rest under grace! This is a corruption of the rest!

Rest is to live in the conscious experience that all the work is done, the laboring is finished, the task is accomplished, and the burden is lifted never to return. Rest is to live in the enjoyment of finished work.

So it is naturally. The man who builds his house finishes his house, and he enters into the enjoyment of living in that house. The man who has planted fruit trees enters into the rest of enjoying the fruits of his labors.

And so is rest spiritually. Rest is the conscious enjoyment of the finished work of Jesus Christ, standing before God in perfect innocence and walking before him at liberty all our days.

The burden of sin and guilt must be removed in the most comprehensive sense of the word. The work to bring peace is the task of taking away that burden forever.

There is a mountain of sin and guilt in our actual walk. Sin with all the members of the body: sin in our thoughts, in our planning, and in our desiring; sin in what we say; sin in what we do; sin in what we wish. There is even sin in what we do not do, do not say, do not wish. There is sin in all of our existences here on the earth. Sin is in our pasts. Sins of youth, O Lord, remember not! Sin is now in the present! Everywhere we look in our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies, in all our walk. In every aspect of our existences, there is only sin, sin, sin. The more that you examine yourself, the more thoroughly you expose yourself to the searching light of the law of God. So the more you search, the more you will see sin. The law will scream at you that you have not kept the commandments of God and that you have broken every one of them. And from that testimony of the law, you cannot escape.

Weary and heavy laden you will be!

If you are not wise and prudent!

If God has revealed these things to you!

But we must understand that looking only at our deeds is a superficial view of sin. Then it is easy for the wise and prudent to convince themselves that they have no sin. Where do all those sins come from? Sin in us is not merely a matter of the deed, but sin is also a matter of the nature. Sin issues from man's nature like waters from a corrupt fountain. By nature man is so corrupt and vile that there is in him no good thing, and the loathsome stench of death and corruption hangs all around him.

And still more, our labor and burden are that we inherited these natures. We received them from our parents, so that we were conceived and born in sin and thus belong to a mighty stream of foul transgression that runs all the way back to its source in our first parents, Adam and Eve. We are guilty for their transgression in the garden. We are worthy of death because of that transgression. And unless that stream can be cleansed, we cannot be cleansed.

What an utterly impossible task. How hopeless to know that there is no rest, no peace, no relief, no comfort, and no joy for the troubled soul unless the task is finished. A perfectly clean nature must be brought out of that foul stream of transgression and iniquity. In that nature the law must be perfectly obeyed, not only outwardly but also with a perfect nature. The stain of guilt must be removed completely by the satisfaction of the justice of God. Perfect righteousness, holiness, and satisfaction must be accomplished, and that fountain of iniquity must be changed into a pure and perfect stream of love for God and love for the neighbor.

Hopeless!

Only a heavier burden comes!

Only more guilt is incurred, no matter how hard the labor!

“Come, and I will give you rest.”

This means that the impossible is finished. This means that clean has been brought from unclean, that all guilt has been washed away, that all obedience has been performed, that perfect righteousness and holiness and satisfaction has been made. This means that there is no more burden and no more labor and that they can never return.

“Come, and I will give you rest” means that perfect fellowship, peace, joy, comfort, and eternal life with God has been made a reality and that there is blessed communion with the living God, so that we may stand before him and live with him and walk before him without fear and in love all the days of our lives and to all the endless eons of the new heaven and earth.

The work is finished. Salvation is accomplished. There is rest now and rest for all eternity.

“Come to me,” Jesus, the only giver of rest.

He has rest stored up in himself, and he gives that rest because he accomplished the impossible task. He did that because he took our labors and our burdens on himself. The Father gave to Jesus a people from before the foundation of the world, for so it seemed good in God's sight.

When God gave to Christ that people, he gave to Christ the responsibility for all their sins, guilt, and iniquity; he gave to Christ the responsibility for all that mighty stream of foul transgression that was theirs and under which they should have perished everlastingly.

When God gave that people to Christ, then God made Christ their head and their redeemer; God put them in connection with Christ so that Christ might stand in their place and represent them, so that he might take that terrible burden of theirs on his shoulders. He carried those burdens all his life long in this sin-cursed world. He bore those sins all the way to the cross of Calvary and from there all the way down into hell to bury those sins forever.

And what mighty shoulders those were!

God in the flesh! What a mystery. Who can know it? Immanuel. The Word made flesh. Truly of our flesh and one with us, he is the seed of the woman, of Abraham and of David, and Mary's son. He was a man tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin. Without sin! He is the perfectly righteous man. The man who could come out of Adam's stock but who came out having cleansed the terrible fountain of sin in man's nature. Who came out of Adam's stock without Adam's guilt for his transgression in the garden on account of which all the other children of Adam are worthy only of death. Because Christ was not guilty of Adam's sin, Christ was worthy of a perfectly clean human nature. Thus he came out of the foul womb of Mary as one taken from the corrupt nature of Mary, perfectly clean, perfectly righteous, and wholly without sin.

All of Christ's life was perfect obedience, perfect obedience out of his perfect nature. He loved the Lord his God, and his zeal for God and for God's glory abounded. The law had nothing against Christ, but he fulfilled the law in its inward and outward demands. And in perfect love for God and in perfect love for his people, Christ laid down his life as a sacrifice for them.

Because Christ is God in the flesh. This Christ must be, or he cannot redeem us. God was the subject of all Christ's actions. As God in the flesh, Christ was able to shoulder our sins and guilt, to accomplish our impossible tasks for us, to make himself the object of the wrath of God, to be made sin and a curse for us, to enter into the dark and terrible abyss of the wrath of God, and there to toil and labor until the whole burden of sin and guilt was gone. And conscious that he had accomplished the

impossible task, Christ shouted from the accursed tree, "It is finished!"

And ratifying Christ's perfect work, God raised Christ from the dead. It was impossible that death should hold him. He had taken away the cause of death. He had satisfied the justice of God. He had accomplished perfect righteousness and brought rest in the enjoyment of his finished work.

The rest-giver he is too because he lives. He ascended into heaven and received of God the promise of the Spirit. By the power of his Spirit, Christ enters into his people; and by the operations of the Spirit, Christ causes his people sovereignly and irresistibly to enter into his rest according to God's will for their peace. They would never seek it. They would never desire it. They would never know that it existed and that it was for them. They would never know except he had revealed it to them and brought them into it.

Christ enters their hearts by his Spirit and joins them to Christ as his members; and in living connection with the living Christ, he makes them weary and heavy laden. Suddenly, when he speaks there is unrest in them. Before, they were wise and prudent, satisfied with themselves, and comfortable in their vain self-righteousness. Suddenly and mysteriously, they understand the greatness of their sins, the abomination of all their own righteousness, and the absolute impossibility that by any obedience they might come to God, stand before God, and fellowship with God. And that great question arises in each soul: How shall a man be right with God? Christ speaks and tears away every confidence that the sinner has in himself; and in their weariness and under that terrible burden, Christ causes each one of his elect to cry out, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner! Lord, enter not into judgment with thy servant!"

"Weary toiler, come to me! I have finished the task; the work is done; the labor is completed. I will give you rest!"

"Come to me," and they come. Surely, infallibly, according to the will of God the Father. You have to understand this coming properly. This coming is not a means to the end. This coming is not the means to the rest. This coming *is* salvation, and this coming *is* the rest. To come to Christ is to be with Christ, to have Christ, to be one with Christ, and to enjoy all his blessedness.

"Come to me," and they come. Surely, infallibly, according to the Father's drawing because no man can come to Christ unless the Father who has sent Christ draw that man, that woman, or that child to Christ. That drawing is the love of the Father, and the fruit and consequence of the drawing is the coming in faith that relies on that love of the Father revealed in Christ.

"Come to me," and they come. Surely, infallibly, according to the work of the Spirit of Christ in them, so that they cast away all confidence in themselves and in their empty righteousness. They come as those who are utterly empty, who are poor, wretched, and naked to be enriched, enlivened, and clothed with Christ.

"Come to me," and they come. Surely, infallibly, to enjoy Jesus Christ as their all in all, as the fullness of wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption; to have Jesus Christ as their rest and their peace, their joy and their happiness above all the joys and pleasures of this world.

"Come to me," and they come. Surely, infallibly, to have Christ and to know that in him all their burdens are lifted, all their guilt is gone, the whole law has been kept, and God has forgiven them all their trespasses, so that they rest in him completely for all their salvation now and forever.

"Come to me," and they come, and Christ gives them rest. He sheds abroad in their hearts the love of God in which there is no fear but confidence in God as their God. Coming to Christ, they come to God as their God. In Christ they stand before God as perfect in his sight. In Christ they walk before God as innocent. Infallibly, he realizes in their hearts the rest that he promises. All through their lives he constantly gives them rest. When they return to their burdens and exhaust themselves in their labors under sin and then the excruciating toil of being right with God by works, then always Christ addresses them as the weary and draws them to himself and speaks to them again the words of comfort: "I have finished it; I have completed the task; I have accomplished your salvation. Come to me, toiler, and I will give you rest." In the midst of the storms and battles, the troubles and afflictions of life, this word Christ constantly speaks to them: "I have finished the task. I have accomplished your salvation, and your sins are forgiven." And he gives them rest, a peace that passes all understanding.

And when they lie at death's door, when they face the last enemy, Christ calls them to himself, "Come to me, and I will give you rest," and he draws them infallibly and irresistibly heavenward to their eternal home.

And still more, at the last day when Christ appears, while his people lie prostrate and dead in the grave, still yet he will say to them, "Come to me." Surely and infallibly, they will come to him, and he will give them the fullness of their rest, with body and soul in the presence of God, world without end in a new heaven and earth free forever from the groaning and laboring of this age.

—NJL

October 2023 will be the seventieth anniversary of the doctrinal reformation of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), known simply by the year in which it came to a head: 1953. Nineteen fifty-three was a doctrinal controversy in the PRC between two competing covenant views. It was a covenant controversy. The covenant is the doctrinal heritage of the Reformed churches. Always there are two views of the covenant: whether it is strictly unconditional or whether it is in some sense conditional. The covenant controversy that has always been among Reformed churches is simply a variation of the age-old controversy between salvation by man's works and salvation by God's grace. The controversy in the PRC broke out in the late forties and early fifties. In 1953 God used faithful ministers of the gospel, especially Herman Hoeksema and George Ophoff, to defend the truth of the covenant of grace as unconditional. It is not an exaggeration to say that that controversy defined the PRC post-1953 for good and evil.

Why is 1953 important and worth remembering? I emphasize that it *is* worth remembering. There are many in the PRC today, whose history this is, who do not believe that 1953 is worth remembering. There are many in the PRC who hate 1953. Either their families stayed in the PRC out of loyalty to the denomination and not because they believed Hoeksema's doctrine, or they married into the PRC, or they are Protestant Reformed church members who are products of their doctrinally indifferent parents who likewise loathed 1953. There are some who will remember 1953 in the same way that the Pharisees remembered the prophets: garnishing their tombs in a showy but empty sign of honoring the prophets, all the while being thankful that they had died.

Nineteen fifty-three is worth remembering because all truly Reformed people love the truth of God's unconditional covenant, and that controversy was perhaps one of the most important in church history regarding that doctrine. If you love and have as your theology the unconditional covenant of grace, then you probably have 1953 to thank for that.

Nineteen fifty-three is worth remembering for the readers and supporters of *Sword and Shield* because the controversy about the covenant in 1953 simply could not have taken place apart from a free paper operated by an organization that was free from ecclesiastical control.

Much of the significant writing during the controversy was done on the pages of the *Standard Bearer*. Friend and foe wrote in to the *Standard Bearer*, and a real battle unfolded on its pages. God used that doctrinal battle in a free paper to deliver the church from false doctrine and to preserve the truth in the churches.

I remember a Protestant Reformed minister who, in defense of keeping controversy off the pages of the *Standard Bearer*, complained that when the doctrinal issue of 1953 came to the broader assemblies that the issue had already been "cooked and dried," in his pejorative terminology. That man hated a free paper, and he believed in censorship controlled by the supposed ecclesiastical experts, who also conveniently left the common people out and allowed a select few to control decisions behind the closed doors of the broader assemblies. A free paper allowed the doctrinal issue of 1953 to be aired and led the people along, so that everyone was well informed about what the issue was and where the sides were.

Sword and Shield exists because of that belief regarding a free paper and a free organization by the men who founded the magazine. The PRC hated that. In her effort to throw off the yoke of 1953, she also dispensed with free papers. The *Standard Bearer* was put into the hands of censors who hated the truth and the heritage of the *Standard Bearer*. They showed that hatred by their vicious and unbelieving responses to *Sword and Shield*, which represented a serious threat to their control of information and thus of the direction and outcome of the controversy in the PRC.

One wonders how the issues in the controversy of 2015 to 2021 in the PRC would have turned out had there been such a lively debate and battle in a free paper. But such is foolish thinking. Divisions must happen in order that those who are approved might be made manifest and those in whom God had no pleasure might be cut off. Surely, we can say with the prophet and the apostle, "God's judgments are unsearchable, and his ways are past finding out."

Further, 1953 is worth not only remembering but also worth studying and analyzing because the present-day Protestant Reformed denomination is the product of a rejection of 1953. To know Protestant Reformed doctrine, you must know the false doctrine of the heretics of 1953. The Reformed Protestant Churches of today really cannot be understood apart from 1953. God gave

to the Reformed Protestant Churches not only 1953 but also an advance in understanding about the truth of the covenant that had not been emphasized as it should have been or had been overlooked or shunted aside in 1953 by those who were intent on bringing that false doctrine back into the Protestant Reformed Churches.

What is the difference between the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Reformed Protestant Churches? This is a question that some ask. Some ask it in unbelief to belittle the reformation of the churches that took place in 2021. Some ask it with a genuine desire to learn what the difference is. To know you must go back to 1953 and examine what Rev. Hubert De Wolf and his followers were really teaching, in their own actual words. Their words are haunting. They sound just like the PRC of today, only the ministers today are more subtle. The

devil had learned his lesson, and he was not going to make the same mistake twice.

And so for these reasons and others that I have no space to recount, we remember 1953.

Perhaps God will yet use this issue of *Sword and Shield* to undo the bewitching spell that has been cast over many; perhaps to give those who have been heretofore cowardly new courage to forsake the lies that they have been taught; perhaps to take away the excuses of others, who have used those excuses to stay in a false church. Apart from these expectations, we hope that God will use this remembrance to give glory to his name and to give encouragement to those who confess the truths that were defended in 1953 and that are the doctrinal heritage of every truly Reformed believer.

—NJL

ANNOUNCEMENT FROM REFORMED BELIEVERS PUBLISHING

Notice of a Change in Date

The date of the fourth annual meeting of Reformed Believers Publishing (RBP) has been changed to Friday, **October 27, 2023**. This is one week later than previously announced. The meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m. in the Wonderland Tire shop located at 1 84th Street SW, Byron Center, Michigan 49315.

The board encourages those who live outside the West Michigan area and parents with their children to attend this meeting. It is the highlight of the year for RBP and also a time to enjoy fellowship with like-minded believers who are committed to the glorious privilege of publishing the truth of the sovereignty of God in salvation.

Rev. Luke Bomers, pastor of Zion Reformed Protestant Church in Yucaipa, California, will deliver the keynote address on the topic “The Covenant Controversy of

1953.” There will also be remarks by our editor in chief, Rev. Nathan Langerak, and by the chairman, secretary, and treasurer of the RBP board. If you are unable to attend the meeting in person, there are plans to livestream the meeting. The livestream address is <https://reformedbelieverspub.org/2023-annual-meeting/>.

The annual meeting is also an opportunity to join Reformed Believers Publishing as an association member. Membership is open to all Reformed believers wherever they live. If you are interested in becoming a member, submit your request for membership to the board by using the website (reformedbelieverspub.org) or the other information on the masthead of *Sword and Shield*. New members will be received by vote of the current RBP members at the annual meeting on October 27, **so submit your requests soon!**

Highlights of 1953 Events

Fall 1947: Dr. K. Schilder, theologian in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated), visits the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) at their invitation. Schilder speaks at ministers' conferences, lectures to large audiences, mostly of Protestant Reformed people, and preaches in congregations throughout the denomination. Schilder promotes his distinctive doctrine of a conditional covenant.

Protestant Reformed minister Rev. A. Petter begins a series of articles in the Protestant Reformed periodical *Concordia*, defending Schilder's and the liberated churches' doctrine of a conditional covenant against the established Protestant Reformed doctrine of an unconditional covenant. Thus Petter launches the controversy over the covenant in the PRC that will culminate in the adoption of the Declaration of Principles and in schism.

1948: The PRC begin working in missions with mostly liberated, Dutch immigrants in Ontario, Canada, with a view to organizing them as Protestant Reformed congregations.

May 1, 1949: Prof. G. M. Ophoff, professor of theology at the Protestant Reformed seminary, begins his public response to Petter's defense of a conditional covenant. Ophoff's response in the *Standard Bearer* is titled "Open Letter to Rev. Andrew Petter." In the fifth installment of his response to Petter in the July 1, 1949 issue of the *Standard Bearer*, Ophoff writes that the truth of the unconditional covenant is established doctrine in the PRC. He writes also that the difference regarding the covenant "between the Protestant Reformed and the Liberated... is fundamental." And he calls the conditional covenant doctrine of Christian Reformed theologian Prof. W. Heyns and of the liberated "heretical." Thus the controversy over the covenant heats up.

June 1950: The synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches adopts, provisionally, a document called "A Brief Declaration of Principles of the PRC." Synod composes and adopts the document in response to the request of the denominational mission committee for a "form" to be used in organizing a "Protestant Reformed congregation." The occasion of the request is the work of the mission committee with liberated immigrants in Canada. The Declaration establishes from the creeds the basic truths of the covenant doctrine of the PRC, a covenant doctrine that the PRC have confessed and preached from their founding. All churches organized by the PRC or affiliating with the PRC must be in heartfelt agreement with this

doctrine of the covenant. Synod decides that, after being examined by the churches for a year, the Declaration will be adopted, decisively, by the synod of 1951.

January 1951: The recently organized Protestant Reformed church in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, whose members are almost entirely former members of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated), summarily deposes its pastor, Rev. H. Veldman, and Elder S. Reitsma and severs relations with the PRC. The reason is the commitment of the consistory and congregation to the liberated doctrine of the covenant and their detestation of the Protestant Reformed doctrine of the covenant.

April 1951: Rev. H. De Wolf, one of the three pastors of the large and influential First Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, preaches a sermon promoting the doctrine of a conditional promise of the gospel, thus taking up the cudgels on behalf of the liberated covenant doctrine in the controversy that is ongoing in the PRC and contradicting the covenant doctrine of the Declaration of Principles. Members of the congregation protest the sermon, but a bitterly divided consistory cannot render a verdict on the protests.

June, September, and October 1951: A lengthy and recessed synod of the PRC adopts the Declaration of Principles, decisively, as had been envisioned by the synod of 1950. Synod revises the Declaration somewhat, without changing the doctrinal content of the document as provisionally adopted by the synod of 1950. As a synodical decision, the Declaration is official, binding confession by the PRC that the covenant of God, having its source in God's eternal election, is governed by election and is therefore established unconditionally with Jesus Christ as head of the covenant people and with the elect in him. It condemns the doctrine of a conditional covenant as heretical.

November 1951: Schilder writes an article in the paper of the liberated Reformed in the Netherlands stating that the relations between the PRC and the liberated churches are now at an end, because of the adoption by the PRC of the Declaration of Principles.

September 1952: De Wolf preaches another sermon teaching conditional salvation, in support of the liberated doctrine of the covenant and in opposition to the doctrine of the Declaration of Principles, which the synod of the PRC had decisively adopted in 1951. This sermon causes still more strife in First Church and in the denomination. Also this sermon is protested by members of the

congregation, but a divided consistory is unable to pass judgment. Half of the elders support De Wolf.

April and May 1953: Classis East of the PRC judges appeals against the refusal of the consistory of First Church to condemn the statements and doctrine of De Wolf in his sermons in April 1951 and in September 1952. Classis condemns the offensive statements and the doctrine of De Wolf as heretical. Classis advises the consistory to demand a public apology from De Wolf for the statements on penalty, for refusal, of suspension from office. Classis also advises that the elders who support De Wolf in his false teaching are to concur in his apology.

June 1, 1953: A committee of Classis East meets with the consistory of First Church to deliver, explain, and urge adoption of the decisions of Classis East concerning the heretical statements of De Wolf and concerning the action to be taken by the consistory, including requiring their pastor to make a public apology. The consistory takes a decision acquiescing to the decisions of classis.

June 21, 1953: In a worship service of First Church, De Wolf gives what he presents as the public apology advised by Classis East and required by his consistory. In fact, his statement from the pulpit of First Church is not an apology. De Wolf does not read the apology that had been drawn up for him by the consistory of First Church. Against De Wolf's pseudoapology, there are objections by members of the congregation.

June 22, 1953: The consistory of First Church fails on a tie vote to reject De Wolf's purported apology.

June 23, 1953: The consistory of First Church (consisting of Rev. H. Hoeksema and Rev. C. Hanko and of the elders who, having voted to carry out the advice of Classis East, also voted to reject De Wolf's pseudoapology) suspends De Wolf from office and deposes the elders who support De Wolf, rejecting the advice of Classis East. Because De Wolf and the elders who support him are not informed of this consistory meeting and are not present at it, this meeting and the actions taken at it come under severe criticism both in First Church and throughout the denomination. Present at this meeting of the consistory are the committee of Classis East that had been appointed to help First Church with its difficulties and a neighboring consistory, which approves the suspension of De Wolf and the deposition of the elders who supported him.

June 28, 1953: The now-divided congregation of First Church holds separate worship services. The smaller part of the congregation worships under the auspices of the consistory whose ministers are Hoeksema and Hanko.

The larger part worships under the auspices of a consistory whose minister is the suspended De Wolf. This congregation does not recognize the suspension of De Wolf. The group meeting with De Wolf temporarily retains the church building. This is fully developed schism in First Church.

June 1953: The annual synod of the PRC meets in the charged atmosphere of the developments in First Church, which are common knowledge. On the agenda of synod are a number of protests against the adoption of the Declaration. Classis West, one of the two classes of the denomination, informs synod that it supports the protests against the Declaration and that it "considers the Declaration to be illegal." In view of the fact that the Declaration was adopted by majority vote at the broadest assembly of the denomination, the statement by Classis West is revolutionary. Synod is deadlocked. Every vote concerning the Declaration is a tie. For this reason and in order, if possible, to avert the impending schism in the denomination, synod recesses until March 1954. It puts the matter of the protests against the Declaration into the hands of a study committee, which is to give advice to the reconvened synod in March 1954. The study committee consists of three ministers who are avowed foes of the Declaration.

September 1953: Classis West of the PRC decides that it will not recognize the suspension of De Wolf and the deposition of the elders who support him. Thus the churches and members of Classis West, with a few exceptions, separate from the PRC, making themselves guilty of schism in the body of Christ. Classis West, of course, has no jurisdiction over a church in Classis East. Interfering in the disciplinary work of a church in Classis East, the churches of Classis West make themselves guilty of hierarchy. Article 84 of the Church Order of Dordt reads: "No church shall in any way lord it over other churches, no minister over other ministers, no elder or deacon over other elders or deacons."

October 1953: Two delegations appear at the meeting of Classis East, both presenting themselves as the lawful delegation of First Church in Grand Rapids. Classis East recognizes and seats the delegation from the consistory whose pastors are Hoeksema and Hanko. Classis rejects the delegation from the consistory whose pastor is De Wolf. Upon this decision of Classis East, a number of pastors and elders, supporters of De Wolf and foes of the Declaration, withdraw from the classis. Thus schism now occurs also throughout Classis East. The schism is denomination wide.¹

1 David J. Engelsma, *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant: The Declaration of Principles* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2013), 189–93.

THE CALLING OF THE PHILIPPIAN JAILOR

In July 1953, at the height of the controversy in 1953, Rev. Herman Hoeksema traveled to the Northwest Iowa area to give a lecture in Hull entitled “The Situation at First Church.” The audience was hostile; and in response to one of the questioners, Herman Hoeksema promised to preach a sermon on the Philippian jailor the following Sunday, July 5.

What follows this introduction is a transcript of that sermon. The sermon is magnificent. It is the finest exegesis of Acts 16:30–31 anywhere that I have found. The sermon is a strenuous and moving defense of the Reformed faith and that in a hostile environment by a man who was worn down by the care of the churches. A Reformed believer thrills with the message. It is one of the sermons where I learned what it means to be Reformed.

This sermon is printed in *Sword and Shield* not only because it was an important part of the history of 1953, but also because the sermon was an important part of the controversy that led to the formation of the Reformed Protestant Churches. A doctrinal controversy was taking place in the Protestant Reformed Churches, though most people were asleep as the thieves and robbers came before Christ.

When the controversy exactly started is hard to say. We can go back at least to 2015 and the sermons of Rev. David Overway. But the subtle shift toward the doctrine of his sermons started probably shortly after 1953. The controversy came to a head in 2015–18. In 2018 it seemed that everyone was finally paying attention, and the Protestant Reformed synod made its decision. It was a bad one.

Just how bad the decision was Rev. K. Koole made clear in his wretched *Standard Bearer* articles regarding the Philippian jailor passage.¹ You could drive a freight-train load of heresy through the synodical decision, and Reverend Koole drove a huge Arminian train through it. His articles were a wholesale rejection of Hoeksema’s exegesis of Acts 16:30–31 in 1953 and with it Hoeksema’s theology that he was defending in that sermon. By rejecting Hoeksema’s exegesis, Reverend Koole was also siding with Rev. Hubert De Wolf and his theology of man’s activities performed before one can experience the blessings of God.

Reverend Koole was out of the closet. Others came out after him.

It was Koole’s articles that made clear to any Reformed men left in the Protestant Reformed Churches that her 2018 synodical decision was thoroughly corrupt and that she was hell-bent on bringing in the theology of De Wolf. It was those articles regarding the text that Hoeksema preached on in 1953 that in 2018 galvanized opposition to Reverend Koole’s Arminian doctrine. How history repeats itself.

—NJL

Introduction

The words of our text you may find in Acts 16, the last part of verse 30 and the first part of 31 or the whole of 31. These words: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.”

I will not take time, beloved, this afternoon to elaborate upon the context of these words of my text. They are very well known. As you know, Paul and Silas at this time have labored in Philippi and preached the gospel there. And while they so labored, a certain damsel followed

them and called after them, “These men show unto us the way of salvation.” And, finally, Paul, getting wearied of this damsel and her calling the apostles, cast out that spirit of divination which she possessed. And the result was that her masters, who became rich through the damsel, became enraged at the apostles because of their financial loss and put them into prison after having scourged them. And we read in the context, as I read to you, that at midnight Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises to the Lord. And at the same time, there was an earthquake, and that earthquake in connection with what followed,

¹ Kenneth Koole, “What Must I Do...?” *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 1 (October 1, 2018): 6–9; “Response” [to Andy Lanning, “Obedience to the Call of the Gospel”], *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 11 (March 1, 2019): 252–56; “Response” [part two, to Andy Lanning, “Obedience to the Call of the Gospel”], *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 12 (March 15, 2019): 278–82; “Response [to Professor D. Engelsma],” *Standard Bearer* 96, no. 4 (November 15, 2019): 87.

through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, had the effect of the calling of the conversion of the jailor. It is on that calling of the jailor that I wish to speak to you especially in this afternoon hour. And I call your attention, first, to the question as to how that jailor was called; in the second place, unto what he was called; and thirdly, with what fruit he was called.

How the Jailor Was Called

This text, beloved, like many other texts, of course, has been distorted and misinterpreted so as to become almost a simple human story instead of what it really is—the astounding wonder of the grace of God. Oh, it's so easy to read scripture and to speak about scripture as if it were a common storybook or a common book of doctrine. Scripture, however, is nothing of the kind. Always the scriptures are the record of the revelation of the God of our salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord. And so also these words must be understood in the light of the wonder of the grace of God.

These words have been used, indeed, in my own experience in the ministry to emphasize that *we must believe*. People have so often told me that, even in my first congregation, and I had only two. Even in my first congregation, people often came to me and said, “Yeah, dominie, yeah, dominie, you could talk about sovereign grace and talk about election and reprobation, but.” And notice that *but*. Whenever people come with that *but*, beloved, be careful. “Yeah, dominie, we believe very well in sovereign grace and we believe in election and we believe in reprobation *but, but we must believe*.” And although, of course, there is truth in that statement, you must believe, when those people, people of that kind, that want to contrast, that want to make a contrast or a distinction or rather a contradiction between we must believe and election, on the other hand; I usually express myself very strongly, beloved, in saying, “No, that isn't so. You must not believe. You must *not* believe. *We must not believe*.” And they are astounded, usually, or they are astounded because usually they think I'm all off when I talk that way. And yet the fact is, beloved, that they are off, not I. That's a fact.

Listen. We must believe? Oh, that's true. But is that the gospel? Is that the gospel, *we must believe*? *We must believe*? If that were the gospel, beloved, the gospel could never be realized. I say once more, to be sure, we must believe; but there is no hope in that statement, and there is no salvation in that statement because if you only say that we must believe, which means, of course, that nobody has the right not to believe and nobody has the right to be an unbeliever. That we are obliged before God to believe, yes, yes, yes. There's no hope in that. That's not the gospel.

“*Believe*,” my text says. “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ,

and thou shalt be saved.” I said last Thursday, beloved, as you probably remember some of you, it does not help one bit whether *I* say that to you. Even though it is mentioned in the words of my text, it does not help one bit. It has no effect when *I* say that to you. “Believe, believe.” It has no effect even though I twist myself into all kinds of shapes, as many do in our country. Even if I do not say, “Believe,” they must believe; but even if I say, “Oh, please believe! Please believe and be saved! Please believe because otherwise you go to everlasting damnation,” it doesn't make any difference. It has no effect on any one of you, not when *I* say it. But when *Christ* says that, beloved, Christ—not *I* but Christ, as he does here, as he did here through Paul and through the apostles—when Christ says that, then, indeed, you do not answer, “Oh, I *must* believe.” But then the fruit, the inevitable fruit, the sure fruit, is that you say, “I *believe* in the Lord Jesus Christ.”

That is my text throughout here. This is not a story, beloved, that anyone can tell or that anyone can read and probably copy and can repeat. This is evidently very plainly, emphatically, the revelation of the wonder of God's grace whereby he, *he* saves a sinner from sin and death and causes him to enter into the everlasting glory and blessedness of his covenant. A wonder. A wonder it is. A wonder it is throughout.

And to make that plain to you, let us consider four elements in the question, how was that jailor called?

Usually, people like to say instead of the calling of the jailor, the conversion of the jailor. It's all right, but it's better to speak of the calling because it was the calling, beloved, that is emphasized in the words of my text. And there are four elements in that calling of the jailor. First of all, there was the earthquake. Secondly, there was the despair of the jailor. He lay on the brink of hell. He wanted to commit suicide. Thirdly, there was the outcry of the jailor, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Then fourthly, there was the answer, the preaching of Paul and Silas, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.”

These four elements all belong to the calling of the jailor. And, mark you, all these four elements were not of men but were of *Christ*. It was Christ that caused the earthquake. It was Christ that caused the jailor's waking out of his sleep to lie on the brink of hell. And it was Christ that called him back through the words of the apostles, “Do thyself no harm.” It was Christ that caused the jailor to cry out, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” That's Christ. And it was Christ that caused him to be called by the gospel, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” It's all of Christ from beginning to end.

Now, let us note, first of all, there's the earthquake. What's an earthquake? What's an earthquake in scripture? An earthquake, beloved, is, in general in the word of God,

a wonder. An earthquake is a wonder, and this earthquake surely was a wonder. Don't overlook that. This earthquake was a wonder; it was not a common earthquake. In the first place, it was not common because of the place and the time. This was an earthquake that caused exactly the foundations of the prison to shake. I think it was even very doubtful whether the earthquake was felt in the rest of the city. It was right at the bottom of the prison. But even if that is not the case, the earthquake was also very striking and strange because the prison was not destroyed. The prison wasn't destroyed. What happened was that the prison doors were opened. Strange earthquake. The doors of the prison were opened. Not only that, but besides what happened by the earthquake was that the bands of the prisoners were loosed. The shackles and the blocks on their feet were loosed, and the prisoners were free. That's all that happened by the earthquake.

A wonder it was, and a wonder, beloved, a wonder in general, a wonder in the scriptures, is that work of God's grace whereby he raises and lifts the sin-cursed world out of sin and death and corruption into his everlasting glorious covenant and kingdom. That's the wonder. Remember this because it's important. It's important to remember, beloved. Any individual wonder in the Bible is always a part of that marvelous work of God's grace whereby he lifts the world of sin out of sin and death and destruction and corruption into the everlasting and glorious kingdom and covenant of God.

That is *the wonder*. You can take any individual wonder in scripture, and it's always that. Take, for instance, the wonders which Christ performed. He healed the sick. He made the blind to see. He made the deaf to hear. He made the lame to walk. He raised the dead. He cleansed the lepers. All wonders and all those wonders, every individual wonder is a manifestation of *the wonder* whereby God lifts the sin-cursed world into the glory of his everlasting covenant and kingdom.

For that reason we must know one more thing. For that same reason a wonder is always a sign. A wonder as such is really not effective. Not as such. You must always understand that the wonder is meant to be a sign. You know, it doesn't help any to open the eyes of the blind. That doesn't help any. The man that had his eyes opened was going to die and become blind again. It doesn't help any to open the ears of the deaf. Not as such. That man would die and become stone deaf again. It doesn't help any to raise Lazarus from the dead and cause him to go back. It didn't help any. That wasn't even a blessing. I wouldn't like if I died once, I wouldn't like to be raised from the dead back into this world. I wouldn't like that. I wouldn't even like my children if they should happen to die to come back. Lazarus had to die again. It didn't help any. It wasn't permanent.

But those wonders which Christ performed, beloved, were signs. That you must remember. When Christ opened the eyes of the blind, it was a sign that he opened his eyes spiritually. And when your eyes are opened spiritually, your eyes are opened forever. They never become blind again. When Christ opened the ears of the deaf, it meant that was a sign, a sign that his ears were opened spiritually. And when your ears are opened spiritually, it means that you will never be deaf again. When Lazarus was raised from the dead, beloved, it meant that it was a sign that Lazarus would be raised spiritually even in his body. And if a man is raised through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, he shall never die again. "I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in me shall never die."

It's a sign, so it was also with the earthquake. Don't you forget that. This was an earthquake. And an earthquake, beloved, is a sign of that wonderwork of God whereby he causes the power of his grace to pierce through the present world, to break through, to let the kingdom of God break through the present world. The earthquake means that the form of this world passes away to make room for the kingdom of God. That's the earthquake.

If you asked, therefore, "Why, why the earthquake here? Why the earthquake here?" It wasn't because the Lord wanted to free the prisoners, Paul and Silas. That was not the reason. They stayed in prison. Even after the earthquake, they still stayed in prison. It wasn't, although that may have been one of the effects, it wasn't because the church in Philippi must be vindicated or the apostles must be vindicated after they had been jailed and scourged, that the cause of Christ was vindicated to a certain extent. That was not the main purpose, however. The main fact was, beloved, that there was one elect there in the jail of Philippi. One elect. One elect and his house. And for that one elect, that that one elect might be called and might be called in such a way that it would be forever a revelation of the power of grace to you and to me. That's why the earthquake was there.

The earthquake, beloved, therefore was a sign, let me say, a sign of the earthquake that took place in the heart and soul of the jailor. That was the real earthquake. The real earthquake was not the quake in the ground, but the real earthquake was the quake in the heart and soul of the jailor. There was a tremendous earthquake in that heart, a tremendous earthquake in that heart of the jailor. That's evident from all that you read here, beloved. Everything. The earthquake in the heart and soul of the jailor was caused by the Spirit and word of Jesus Christ. It was caused by the fact that by the Spirit and word of Jesus Christ the jailor was regenerated and called unto salvation.

Now look, the jailor was sound asleep. He was sound asleep before the earthquake, and Christ woke him up, woke him up by the earthquake. And when Christ woke

him up by the earthquake, and *Christ* woke him, beloved; when Christ woke him up in such a way that the earthquake was caused in his own soul, the earthquake of regeneration and calling piercing through his heart and mind and soul; when Christ so called him and woke him up, and Christ said to him, *Christ* said to him (that's why there was an earthquake in his soul), "Awake, thou that sleepest and arise from the dead," that was the real earthquake, and that was the real cause of the earthquake.

Because Christ said to him, "Awake, thou that sleepest and arise from the dead," the first effect was that the jailor, waking out of his natural sleep, found himself on the brink of hell. That was the first effect. He wanted to commit suicide. And when a man commits suicide, beloved, it means that he's on the brink of hell. That was true of the jailor. That's true of you and me. Whenever Christ calls, not when I call. When I call, it's nothing to you. My call has no effect. When I say, "Awake, thou that sleepest and arise from the dead," it makes no difference to you whether you're elect or reprobate. It makes no difference. But when Christ calls, when Christ brings this spiritual earthquake into your heart, that earthquake has the same effect as it had on the jailor.

Oh, I know that you don't have that experience as vividly as the jailor had it here. You were born in the church. Probably, you never found yourselves vividly and strikingly on the brink of hell. Probably, you never had an experience of despair as the jailor had. That's very well possible, very well possible. It's very well possible that you never had, in fact, it's almost impossible, I would say, that you and I have a certain conversion like the conversion of the jailor, or that you and I are so certainly called as the jailor was called. That's hardly ever possible in the church of Jesus Christ. Hardly ever. But that makes no difference. Whether that comes suddenly or whether that comes gradually, whether you are called from your very infancy on or whether you are called when you come to years of discretion in a sudden sense, sudden way, it makes no difference. The fact remains the same. When you are called by Christ, the first experience is that you find yourselves outside of Christ on the brink of hell. No question about that.

You must experience that. You do experience that. Outside of Jesus Christ, you have no hope. When Christ does not call you, when Christ does not call you through that spiritual earthquake through his regenerating grace and Spirit and word, then, of course, you cannot realize this. But as soon as Christ calls you, one of the inevitable effects and one of the inevitable signs of being called by Christ is exactly this: that without Christ you find yourself without hope.

That's true today. Oh, yeah.

Unto What the Jailor Was Called

Don't you think that was a tremendous wonder that, in the second place, the jailor called and gave that cry of despair, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" How in the world do you think that that jailor ever came to ask that question? "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" He didn't hear the gospel, never before. It's not very likely that he ever heard Paul speak even or preach. Not very likely, not before then. It's possible that he heard that the damsel cried, that damsel in which the spirit of soothsaying cried, "These men are the servants of the most high God, which show us the way of salvation." That's possible, but even that was not the gospel. Yet, it is not so that, as some have it, the jailor meant, "How can I get out of this predicament?" The word *salvation*, beloved, and the word *to save* always means the same thing in scripture, as is the common definition of *salvation*, which is not so bad: *to save* is to deliver from the greatest evil and to make us partakers of the highest good. That's salvation.

What's the greatest evil? Sin. Death. Fear. Fear of death. You know, really all fear is fear of death. You analyze your fear. You have all kinds of fear and all kinds of anxiety and all kinds of anguish of soul. You analyze your fear, and you find that principally all fear is fear of death. You're afraid of death. Every one of you is afraid of death. If there were no death, there would be no fear. One of the four freedoms of which President Roosevelt boasted was the freedom from fear. But, beloved, there is no freedom from fear except freedom from death. And death is the cause of fear, not because, simply, death is the loss of all things. If death were a natural process, as animals die and plants die, so man must die; if that were death, we would not be afraid of death. But death is the cause of fear because we understand and we know and we feel that death is the expression of the wrath of God. That's why we're afraid of death. And *salvation*, *to save*, is to deliver us from the greatest evil—sin, guilt, death, the wrath of God, damnation—and to make us partakers of the highest good, the favor of God and eternal life.

That's what the jailor meant.

I don't know why the jailor ever got to say this. He certainly couldn't have said it of himself. Christ said that through him. When Christ said, "Awake, thou that sleepest and arise from the dead," the result was that he cried out, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And that same Christ preached to him, "This you must do: believe in the Lord Jesus Christ." That means, beloved, you must do nothing! Believe! Believe! Nothing! Do nothing but believe, believe, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.

What is that? What is that wonder of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? What is that?

First of all, you must remember that all faith is faith in God. All faith is faith *in* God. Faith can never be faith in man. Faith must always be faith in God.

In the second place, you cannot even believe *in* God as God. You can believe that God is, maybe. The devils also believe, and they tremble. You can never believe *in* God. God is a God of wrath. To believe *in* God means to trust in him; to rely on him; to believe that he loves you, that he saves you, that he gives you eternal life, that he makes you the objects of his favor. That's to believe *in* God. And for that reason, beloved, you cannot believe in God except through faith in Jesus Christ. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."

Christ is God. He is God. And because he's the Son of God come into human flesh, and he came into human flesh because he was ordained to be the revelation of the God of our salvation. Other gods—there are none in whom we can trust. The only God in whom we can trust is the God that has revealed himself in Jesus Christ our Lord. Otherwise, there is no revelation of the God in whom we can trust. Christ, born in Bethlehem, suffered, sojourned, having spoken to us the word of life, died on the cross, rose from the dead, exalted in the highest heaven. That Christ is the object of our faith.

"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."

And why? What is that relation, beloved? You no doubt have heard that this morning, but what is that relation between that Christ and our salvation? And what is that relation between that faith and our salvation?

Is it so that our faith is the *cause* of our salvation? Is faith in Christ the ground, or cause, of our salvation? You say no, of course. Is it so, perhaps, that faith is something which we must perform in order to receive salvation? When you read here, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved," may I translate that in this way: "Believe and on condition that you believe, you shall be saved"? Is faith a condition of salvation at all? God forbid, beloved. Faith is no condition. Faith is not something which *we* must do in order to be saved.

Faith is, in the first place, the means whereby we have a living contact with Jesus Christ, the God of our salvation. Living contact. As the Heidelberg Catechism has it, beloved, we are engrafted into Christ.

I can give you another illustration. Faith is, what I would say, the connection of this light bulb with the electric plant. You can have a light bulb here, but if there is no electricity in town, that doesn't help you one bit. You can never have light in the church as long as there is no electric plant in town or electricity in town. But there can be a light bulb here in the church and an electric plant; and if you have no wire to connect this light bulb with

the plant, you still have no light. One more. You can have a light bulb here and a plant and a wire connected with it; but if you have no switch, you still have no light. That's faith. Very crude illustration, I know. But that is a true illustration of what faith is, beloved.

There is Christ, Jesus Christ—Jesus Christ, the God of our salvation, born in Bethlehem, died on the cross, arose from the dead, ascended into the heavens, full of grace and truth—Christ. And here is my soul in darkness. If I am not connected with that Christ, my soul is in darkness, just as this church is in darkness when it is not connected with the electric power plant.

Faith is a condition? Must I preach to you, "You must believe. You can be saved on condition of your faith"? Then it's hopeless because you can never string the wire from your heart to Christ. You can never string the wire of faith from your heart to the Christ that is full of grace and truth. In Christ is all our salvation. It's all in him. In Christ is our righteousness. In Christ is the forgiveness of sins. In Christ is wisdom, truth. In Christ is eternal life. It's all in Christ. In my soul is death, nothing but death. I must be connected with him; but if I must string the wire of my heart and my soul to connect myself with Christ, it's hopeless.

Oh no, beloved, Christ strings the wire. *Faith* is that gift of God through Christ whereby he connects my soul and my heart with the living Christ—my righteousness, my light, my life, my wisdom, my all, my salvation.

That's faith.

But perhaps you say, "Yes, but, but. Although Christ must, indeed, string the wire and connect my soul with his salvation, I must, nevertheless, turn on the switch."

Is that it? Even then, beloved, I would never do it. It's not so that Christ connects my soul with him and that now I have the power to turn the switch. Oh no. The turning of the switch is the work of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel.

That's what happened here in the jailor's soul. The earthquake in his soul, leading him to despair, causing him to cry out, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" causing the gospel to come to him, Christ causing the gospel to come to him, "Believe, believe in me, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house." That moment when Christ turned, when Christ spoke that word of salvation to him, at that moment he was saved, and Christ through his Spirit turned on the switch. So it is with us, beloved.

Faith? Oh, you can analyze faith. It's not necessary to do that this afternoon. Faith you can analyze, as has been done, as knowledge—knowledge, spiritual knowledge—and confidence. That spiritual knowledge whereby I taste Christ and taste all his benefits and taste all his grace,

as well as that confidence whereby I rely on the God of my salvation through Jesus Christ my Lord, all that is implied in faith.

But the fact is, beloved, if you want a simple illustration of *faith*, remember faith is that spiritual power whereby God engrafts us with all our soul and mind and heart in Christ, so that we are connected with him and draw our all from him forevermore. That's salvation.

"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ."

And then, and then, people say nowadays, beloved, "But we must have the activity of faith."

I don't know how it is here, here in the West, I mean. But in the East in my church, I think elsewhere too, they like to speak of the *activity of faith*. "You must do something, nevertheless. You mustn't be so passive." That's what they say. "The activity of faith. We are responsible creatures." Responsible, yeah. Responsible. "And our Protestant Reformed preaching has gone too passive, don't you know? Too passive. And so it's all right to speak of faith as the gift of God, but let's forget that because what we really need to emphasize is our responsibility as Christians and the activity of faith. We must do something now."

What must we do? Oh, I don't know. They don't know either, I think.

You know, it's very strange, but it's my experience, and not so strange either. But it's my experience that those who jabber so much about responsibility don't know their own responsibility. That's my experience. In fact, it's sad to say, but it's always been my experience; and it's my experience now again, beloved, in the history which we are making that people that depart from the truth also depart from Christian ethics. The two are inseparable. People who depart from the truth of election and reprobation also depart in their own moral life. And although they speak much of love, love, love—we must love one another; we must love the brethren—they reveal the most corrupt hatred that you ever see in the church. That's my experience. That's *my* experience. Oh, you can talk about love, but please don't ever talk to me about love apart from the truth because my experience is that there is no more corruption than that love. I must have nothing of it. That's a fact.

It's all right, beloved, that we speak of the activity of faith. But, remember, the first activity of faith is the activity whereby through the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ we lay hold on him. That's the activity of faith, first of all. The activity of faith does not, first of all, mean that we do great things in the world or great things in the church, or that we witness for Christ, and that we save souls, and the life, and the like. That is never the activity of faith in its first manifestation. The activity of faith in

its first manifestation is that we cling to Christ. That's active faith. And by that active faith, we receive out of him all our salvation. That first of all.

The Fruit to Which the Jailor Was Called

And then, oh yeah, if you have that faith and you have that active faith, then I don't even have to talk about responsibility anymore. It is not even necessary. I don't even have to talk to you anymore about being active. Oh no. Then this is spontaneous, beloved.

Do you know what the fruit is? The fruit of the calling of the jailor? The fruit of the calling of the jailor was two-fold. He *rejoiced*, we read here. He rejoiced. He rejoiced, believing in God with all his heart. Rejoiced. That's the first fruit. Rejoiced with thanksgiving. Rejoiced to the glory of God. Rejoiced in God. Rejoiced in nothing else. Rejoiced in glorious glory, not self, not in himself, in Jesus Christ and the God of his salvation. He rejoiced in God. He rejoiced in God with all his heart and with all his house. That first of all. And when that is the activity of your faith, then this is also inevitable: that you bear fruit unto love. Then you love. Then you love. Then you love in the truth. That's inevitable.

Then I do not have to say to you, "Love one another." Oh, I may be able to admonish you because we are not perfect. Oh no. There is but a small beginning of the new obedience in our heart, a small beginning. And it is, indeed, true that you must be reminded of the word of God in Jesus Christ our Lord that we love one another, but we love nevertheless. It's not necessary to emphasize the responsibility of man. We are called by Christ unto this salvation, which he has wrought in him, because then we read that the jailor loved the brethren. He loved them. Oh yes, he loved them. He loved them. He washed their wounds. He set meat before them. He treated them. He cared for them. He loved the brethren, and there is no question of it. No question of it. It's inevitable that when we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ with the faith which he has wrought, that the activity of faith is sure—rejoicing in God with all our heart as the God of our salvation and loving one another and loving the brethren and loving God above all.

That, beloved, is the wonder of grace revealed in the calling of the jailor.

How about you? How about it?

I do not say that you have the experience as the jailor had in such a flashing, sudden experience of conversion. But nevertheless, beloved, if Christ calls you, three things are sure: you find yourself lost; you find your salvation in him only and by his grace only; and you bear the fruit in love, inevitable, and walk in sanctification of life.

Amen.

THE CHURCHES OF HUBERT DE WOLF

I knew the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). I was a faithful, loyal son of the Protestant Reformed Churches. I knew her doctrine. I knew her history. I knew her people. I knew her life. I loved the Protestant Reformed Churches. The line of God's true church ran through the denomination. What I can say will be the testimony of many others who left the Protestant Reformed Churches in 2021 in a secession from the denomination because of her doctrinal departure and hardness of heart in persisting in and developing that doctrinal departure. I know those churches no more.

It was that intimate acquaintance with, love for, and loyalty to the Protestant Reformed denomination that blinded me to her departure from the truth. From that knowledge of the Protestant Reformed Churches, I now say, without a shadow of doubt, "The Protestant Reformed Churches have become the churches of Rev. Hubert De Wolf." This fact impresses itself upon me with ever-increasing clarity every day that passes, with every article I read, and from every Protestant Reformed sermon I hear. Faithful these churches are no longer, and De Wolf has won.

As a child, as a young man, and as a new minister, I believed the lie that I was taught that the Protestant Reformed Churches had cast off entirely De Wolf and his theology. But the wolf went into his lair only for a time and then worked more like a snake, and the poison of that snake has completely overcome the Protestant Reformed denomination. This is as lamentable as the fall of Saul and Jonathan, and their song could be sung over the Protestant Reformed Churches.

I do not intend in this editorial to establish by quotations and analysis that the theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches today is the theology of Rev. Hubert De Wolf and the apostate ministers of 1953 who followed him. This has been demonstrated at length in the April 2022 issue of *Sword and Shield* and in other issues of *Sword and Shield*.¹ Anyone who is still interested in the PRC can read the articles cited.

There is not one Protestant Reformed man who has answered that charge. Where are the Protestant Reformed champions? The silence of the PRC is telling and damning.

The Protestant Reformed men do not answer because they do not have an answer.

De Wolf's theology was that there are activities of man that precede the blessing of God within the covenant of grace and without which activities the blessing of God does not come. De Wolf was an Arminian only in the sphere of the covenant. Everyone was in the covenant. Since they were all in the covenant, they were differentiated—made themselves to differ—by what they did. God did not make them to differ. They made themselves to differ, who were equally furnished with grace. De Wolf excused his rank Arminianism by appealing to grace: what is necessary for man to do to be saved, assured, or blessed is all done by grace. But such an appeal did not save De Wolf's theology, and neither does it save the theology of the Protestant Reformed ministers and professors today who follow De Wolf. The theology is conditional. Man must do something before God gives what he promises. The theology of De Wolf and the theology of the present-day Protestant Reformed Churches is an electionless theology, if I may be permitted to coin a word.

That this happened to the Protestant Reformed Churches is unsurprising, as any student of church history is aware. There have been very few times, and those times were very short, when the true church has stood strong in the truth. What was true of Israel and Judah has also characterized the churches of the New Testament: there is a time of faithfulness, but invariably the apostate and reprobate element in the church attains the majority and the ascendancy. The apostates and reprobate are always in the church, and they are always working their mischief to turn the church from the truth to the lie, from Jesus Christ to the world. That element, being the world and inviting the world into the church, works the doctrinal and spiritual destruction of historical denominations. Only because of the election and faithfulness of God and his having accomplished his purpose with that apostasy in the cutting off of many who are hardened in the lie and cannot hear the truth and hate it, the people of God after a period of departure are stirred up again by Jesus Christ and his Spirit to contend earnestly for the

1 For the copious demonstrations in *Sword and Shield* of that charge, see Luke Bomers, "Synod 1951 and the Promise," footnotes 6–8 in this issue of *Sword and Shield*.

truth that was once delivered to the saints. In the nation of Israel, this was typified in the falling of the nation with ungodly kings—who were all the corrupt and wicked ministers who led the people astray—and the rising again of the nation through the righteous king of David’s line, who is Jesus Christ.

The scene written in the Old Testament as an admonition to us, upon whom the end of the world comes, is played out repeatedly also in New Testament church history. The churches of Athanasius became the churches of Arius. The churches of Augustine became in time the churches of Pelagius. The churches of Luther became the churches of Erasmus. The churches of Dort became the churches of Arminius. The churches of the *Afscheiding* and of the *Doleantie* became, already in the lifetimes of their leading men and in some cases through their influence, the churches of conditions. So the history has played out in the Protestant Reformed Churches: the churches of Herman Hoeksema have become the churches of Hubert De Wolf. The ways of God are mysterious; and through them all, the truth marches straight on, victorious always in both the salvation of some and in the damnation of many others.

In this reappearance of the lie and its coming to ascendancy in a church after the lie was once defeated, there is also the subtle morphing of the lie in order that it might appear again in a new form. But it is the same old lie. The lie is always the same. The lie is that God is not God, but man is God. The lie always denies the sovereignty of God and makes man the master of his own destiny. The lie always denies that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh; that is, the lie is always an assault on the person, nature, and perfect work of Jesus Christ, denying that he did, in fact, once and for all *accomplish* salvation for God’s elect and for them only. Jesus Christ did not merely provide an objective basis for salvation, as many speak of his work in order to speak also about what man must do to be saved. Such Christ-denying theology is the theology that speaks of our fellowship with God as being on the basis of what Christ has done, through faith, and in the way of our obedience. The devil is in the details. And here we do not have fellowship with God unless and until we obey. And then Christ’s cross is of none effect. He actually and really saved at the cross, so that he said, “It is finished!” The elect have righteousness, holiness, satisfaction, redemption, and reconciliation with God; and the gospel must be sent to the ends of the earth to declare this fact to the people and to bring God’s elect into possession of that salvation by faith alone as the gift of God to them. The truth is that God justifies the ungodly. He gives them faith and saves them wholly apart from a consideration of their works and worthiness or of a consideration of their

disobedience and unworthiness. But the lie says that God justifies repentant believers who are active in faith and in repentance. It is always the same old form of the lie. The lie teaches salvation by works to the glory of man. The truth teaches salvation by grace to the glory of God. The worst form of the lie teaches salvation by grace and works. This form of the lie is a very vicious viper that, if you take it into your bosom, will bite and will poison and will destroy souls, families, generations, churches, and denominations. The raw contrast between grace and works that scripture speaks about is denied, and the two are combined; and that combination is designed by the devil to deceive the simple and the unwary.

However, in order to be accepted in the same churches after it has been first rejected, the lie must morph, change its form and language. The Pelagianism that Augustine defeated became the semi-Pelagianism of Rome. The conditional theology of the Arminians defeated at Dort became the conditional theology of the covenant that has troubled Reformed churches since Dort. This same thing has happened in the PRC. The lie that was once defeated by Herman Hoeksema and the other faithful ministers has morphed. It is the same old lie. Only now it wears different clothes and speaks in a slightly different dialect. But the same hiss of the serpent can be heard through the accent.

Through that departure from the truth, the Lord preserved a church, and he brought his church out of that departure and saved them. Through that departure and development of the lie, the Lord is cutting off many. They are deaf to it. They will not take the time to read and study the truth versus the lie. They are the blind who follow their blind leaders. And this too is in God’s sovereignty. For he did not determine the salvation of all but of some only, and the rest he hardens in many ways. The evidence of this hardening is all around. Protestant Reformed men make shocking statements now in their sermons and writings. The people are very comfortable with the snake that is in their bosom; they are overcome with its poison, and they will soon close their eyelids in a sleep from which they will never awake.

The Protestant Reformed Churches were the churches of Jesus Christ. They were the churches of Jesus Christ because they were the churches of the theology of Herman Hoeksema. Herman Hoeksema taught the truth of scripture, which is faithfully summarized in the Reformed creeds. Doctrine is what makes a church a true church. Doctrine is the only standard by which a church may be judged to be a beautiful wife or a disease-ridden, old whore in her relationship with Jesus Christ. Judged by her doctrine and over against her many enemies, the Protestant Reformed denomination was a true church of Jesus Christ.

Judged by her doctrine today as heard in her sermons, found in her synodical decisions, and read in her writings, she is an unfaithful and whorish woman. Garishly adorning the tombs of her prophets, she gives thanks that they are dead. Herman Hoeksema would have no place in the PRC of today. Over against the very same false doctrine that we face, he proclaimed the gospel, “Do nothing, beloved!” The PRC damns that as nonsense and antinomian. He taught salvation by grace alone, and the Protestant Reformed ministers and professors teach salvation in the way of obedience—which is the deadly poison of salvation by grace and works. They teach assurance in the way of obedience. Blessing in the way of obedience. Justification in the way of obedience to the command to repent and believe. Everything is in the way of obedience, whether that obedience is defined as man’s act of faith, man’s act of repentance, or man’s acts of faithfulness and obedience to the commandments of God. *Man is what matters.*

Rev. Herman Hoeksema, Rev. George Ophoff, and Rev. Henry Danhof were instrumental in the formation of the Protestant Reformed Churches in 1924–25 because of the ministers’ opposition to common grace adopted by the Christian Reformed Church, in particular the ministers’ rejection of the well-meant gospel offer. There were three points of common grace. The second and third points taught that the unregenerated, under the influence of the Holy Spirit and through a mitigation of man’s natural depravity, can do real good, good in the eyes of God. The first point taught that God has a general attitude of favor toward the reprobate. As evidence of this general attitude of favor, the Christian Reformed Church pointed to the supposed well-meant gospel offer. It was Arminianism officially adopted by the Christian Reformed Church. It was in essence an election-less theology that put salvation in the power of man’s decision. God’s offered grace and man’s believing response were the sources of salvation. Those faithful ministers rejected this election-less theology as denying that God is God, God’s sovereignty in salvation, and man’s spiritual inability on account of his total depravity. They condemned the theology as Arminian. The Christian Reformed Church proves the truth of that now as a thoroughly Arminian denomination. Out of that controversy the Protestant Reformed denomination was formed and stood for the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation. God is God. Man is not God.

The commitment of the Protestant Reformed Churches to this truth was put to the test in 1953 through her controversy with the theology of Rev. Hubert De Wolf, then one of three pastors serving the large First Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The controversy had been brewing in the Protestant

Reformed Churches since her contact with the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (liberated), the churches of Dr. Klaas Schilder. Through his visits to the United States in the late thirties (1939) and late forties (1947), Schilder infected the Protestant Reformed Churches with his particular brand of Arminian conditional covenant theology. For Schilder all the baptized children of believers were included in the covenant and received the offer of salvation. It was an election-less theology of the offer as applied to the covenant. The source of salvation in Schilder’s covenant was God’s offered grace and the child’s response of faith and life of faithfulness.

Many of the Protestant Reformed people and ministers were enamored of Schilder’s election-less theology of the covenant. Among them was Rev. Hubert De Wolf. It was his task, and he did it well, to make Schilder’s covenant theology palatable to Protestant Reformed people. It was the insistence of Hoeksema that the rejection of common grace and the well-meant gospel offer in 1924 was in principle the rejection of the theology of conditions in the covenant that Reverend De Wolf and his pack were trying to bring into the Protestant Reformed Churches. The controversy was long and drawn out. After the dust had settled, Reverend De Wolf’s theology was rejected and not without many casualties. After the controversy the Protestant Reformed Churches were smaller by two-thirds.

The word was that Reverend De Wolf and the lie had been defeated. In that controversy the Protestant Reformed Churches were supposedly inoculated against the theology of conditions. But the denomination was not. The theology—not the word *condition*—the theology of conditions never left. The theology of conditions is that man does something to get something; the theology of conditions is that there is that which man must do—man *must* do—to be saved; the theology of conditions is that A—what man does—is before B—what God promises; the theology of conditions is that without A—what man does—then B—what God promises—never comes about. The theology of conditions expresses itself often as blessing in the way of obedience. *That* theology of conditions never left.

I believe that there are at least three main reasons for that. The first reason is that the phrase *in the way of* was allowed to be a substitute for the word *condition*. Instead of using the offensive word *condition*, the ministers used the words *in the way of* as a simple substitute.

What the early users of the phrase meant by the phrase was simply that God deals with man as a rational and moral creature. God calls, admonishes, rebukes, and otherwise addresses man with regard to his calling. The phrase acknowledges that there is a preceptive will of God that points out man’s duty and calls man to the duty.

The phrase does not mean and cannot be pressed into the service of teaching that there is a certain order that God works, the order being that man is first (by God's grace, of course) and that God responds or follows with his blessing to what man did (by grace, of course).

What the modern-day users of the phrase do is to use it to express what man must do to be blessed, assured, or saved. They use *in the way of* as an apparently pedigreed way in which to introduce man as an agent in his own salvation. For the PRC it makes a huge difference whether you say, "Your act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter the kingdom," or if you say, "In the way of your act of repentance, you enter the kingdom." But there is no difference. It is one and the same theology. It is equally election-less.

This analysis can be demonstrated, but that is not the point of this editorial. Anyone can go to the home page of about any Protestant Reformed church and choose at random any sermon and listen, and it is highly likely that one will hear the phrase *in the way of* connecting some activity of man with the blessing of God. God promises. Christ died to merit. But you experience the blessing only in the way of your obedience, repentance, or act of faith. This is standard Protestant Reformed theology. The ministers and professors do not know and do not care to preach any other way. This is their gospel: there are activities of man that precede the blessing of God. The fact is that in sermons where *in the way of* is used, that phrase could be substituted with the word *condition* or *prerequisite*, and there would be no change in meaning to the sermon. The sermons are conditional through and through because they are election-less. *Man makes the difference* in the sermons.

But there is no legitimate substitute for the word *condition*. And whether the word is used or not, the theology sounds the same. *Condition* is a word that has come to embody a theology in which God and man—enabled by grace—function together for man's salvation. What man does must come first before God does what God has promised. God has promised to draw near? Man must draw near first. God has promised to forgive? Man must first repent. God has promised to bless? Man must first believe. God has promised to assure? Man must first obey. This is the theology of conditions. After De Wolf no one in the PRC could say, "God draws near to man conditioned on man's drawing near to God." The theology stayed, but it changed its tone and said simply, "God draws near to man in the way of man's drawing near to God." Or more boldly: "Man draws near to God first by God's gracious operation upon that man, and then God draws near to man in the way of man's drawing near to God." It is election-less theology. *Man makes the difference*.

Besides, this allowance by the PRC for a simple substitution for the word *condition* never dealt with the reason that the word *condition* was used in the first place.

The word *condition* was used because of a theology that rejected the sovereignty of God and placed the activity of man on a parallel track to the sovereignty of God. Conditions arise out of a double-track theology. A double-track theology views salvation as the result of God's sovereignty and man's grace-wrought activities. God promises, and man must perform his part in order for the promise to come into effect. This sort of theology can dodge and excuse itself. But when man's activities—also those by grace—come before the possession of God's promises, then you have such a double-track, conditional theology. Double-track theology is in the end a single track of man's deeds and activities as decisive in salvation. *Man makes the difference*.

Second, the theology of conditions never left because De Wolf himself gave the cleverest defense of his language. When pressed on his use of the words *condition* and *prerequisite*, then De Wolf simply made a distinction in salvation between salvation as objectively bestowed and salvation as experientially enjoyed. So he said during his exam when he was questioned about the promise being conditional,

Now, I do realize, Mr. Chairman, that the promise referred to here in question 22 [of the Heidelberg Catechism] may very well, and I believe it does, I think I would be ready to say that, and I haven't looked up my sermons that I preached on this particular question; but I think the usual interpretation is that this promise includes all that God has promised in his word, in the comprehensive sense of the word, from the very beginning, including the cross of Christ and his resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and all that God has promised; and that including also the gift of the Holy Spirit and faith.

Now, of course, Mr. Chairman, I have never contended that that would be conditional. Never. I wouldn't say that now. I simply don't believe that. That would be Arminianism. That would mean that the Holy Spirit and faith depends upon something that man does.²

Sounds very good.

Then De Wolf continued in his explanation of the promise:

But, Mr. Chairman, you do find in the Catechism that those who pray receive the Holy Spirit; that God gives his Holy Spirit only to those who

2 "Transcript of Reverend De Wolf's Formula of Subscription exam, given by Rev. C. Hanko," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 17 (April 2022): 13.

sincerely desire that Holy Spirit; and that for that purpose prayer is necessary. And so I would say, from that point of view, you could possibly say in the sphere, on the plane of our experience, as we experience these blessings of salvation as rational, moral creatures; and because God has instituted means with which he has connected his grace and Spirit, that, therefore, yes, you could say, in a sense, that the gift of the Holy Spirit is conditional upon the use of those means. I think you may say that, but in the sense that the Catechism means it here, my answer is no.³

And De Wolf said again in answer to a question about whether assurance is conditional,

If it means, on the other hand, that in the initial sense, the Holy Spirit cannot assure us unless we first do something—if that’s the meaning of this question—is the assurance of the Holy Spirit that we are—that our salvation is wholly in Christ—if that assurance depends on something in you and me, then it is not conditional. Couldn’t be. That would simply be Pelagian.

However, if you mean by assurance of the Holy Spirit the conscious personal assurance of our personal participation in that salvation, if that’s what you mean—but that’s really not what the Catechism is speaking of here. If that’s what you mean, then my answer is yes. It’s conditional. It is from the subjective point of view of our experience.⁴

De Wolf had two different doctrines. One mattered, and the other did not. He could with some umbrage parrot some truth when pushed on his theology of man’s conditional experience, as if he were insulted that he could even be questioned on his commitment to Reformed theology. He could speak about election and reprobation, and he could speak about salvation being unconditional. But it did not matter when it came to his preaching the gospel. His theology of preaching the gospel is what mattered; and in that theology, the conscious activity of the sinner and the conscious experience of salvation came in the way of man’s doing what God required first (of course, by grace) and before God did what he had promised. De Wolf was not condemned after his examination. I am not sure of the reason. Perhaps there were not the votes. The consistory of First Protestant Reformed Church was deadlocked by that time, and motions routinely failed on a tie vote. However, this distinction that De Wolf made was picked up and codified in May 1953 at Classis East in the infamous majority

report, which sought to explain how De Wolf’s two erroneous sermon statements could be understood properly as being Reformed. This report was never officially rejected by the Protestant Reformed Churches.

As a result the Protestant Reformed Churches were populated by ministers who could speak out of both sides of their mouths. On the one hand, they could speak about election and reprobation and deny conditions. Yet when it came to preaching the application of salvation and the commands and demands of the gospel, they taught conditions without ever using the word. For these ministers there were two tracks. For these ministers there were God’s works and there were man’s works performed by grace. It became almost a mantra: “But, of course, we do this all by grace, beloved.” Their theology was conditions fulfilled by grace by another name. De Wolf’s theology was an election-less theology, and the theology of the PRC today is the same election-less theology.

Third, the reason that De Wolf’s theology never left is that there were those who were enamored of his theology as a balance—corrective?—to Hoeksema’s theology of God. They stayed in the PRC out of loyalty to the denomination, to Hoeksema, to the other ministers, or for some other reason. To them De Wolf was definitely wrong when he said, “Our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter the kingdom,” or so they said. But Hoeksema was wrong when he said, “Do nothing!” They did not say that, but they let Hoeksema’s sermons rot on their desks, waiting for the right moment to come out of the closet. They could not say that because Hoeksema made it clear that the two positions were as antithetical as heaven and hell, Christ and Belial, and the church and the world. To them Hoeksema was too one-sided, emphasized the sovereignty of God too much to the exclusion of man’s responsibility. Not understanding either God’s sovereignty or man’s responsibility—which is forever hemmed in by the sovereignty of God and apart from that sovereignty can never be talked about—they sought to thread the needle between De Wolf’s conditions of man and Hoeksema’s sovereignty of God. They wanted to strike a balance. To them De Wolf was on to something about the experience of salvation. They were embarrassed by ministers whom they supposed played only a one-string fiddle of God’s sovereignty. They were afraid of the gospel and thought that it had to be guarded by a healthy dose of man’s doing things to get blessings (all by grace, of course). They were motivated by pride that they could reconcile these two emphases of God’s sovereignty, as it was supposedly represented by Hoeksema, and man’s responsibility, as it was represented by De Wolf. Looking back, I say that

3 “Transcript...,” 13–14.

4 “Transcript...,” 14.

Prof. David Engelsma falls into this category. There are others, but he led the way, and the Protestant Reformed Churches would not be where they are today without his leadership. The theologian led the way to the demise of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

But the two positions are incapable of reconciliation. And in the attempt to reconcile them, there was in reality the casting off of the truth. In the very attempt to reconcile the two positions, one must lose the truth because God does not play second fiddle to man, ever. Man's responsibility must in the end always mean God, God, God. God determined before he made the world who would and who would not be saved. God's decree as the living will of God determines all his commands, promises, admonitions, threats, and blessings. These commands, promises, admonitions, threats, and blessings cannot ever be preached from any other standpoint than that of the election and reprobation of the sovereign God. In the very attempt to reconcile these two irreconcilable positions, one must also adopt the election-less theology of De Wolf.

Those who teach an election-less theology do not deny election and reprobation in so many words. It must be remembered that election-less theology is also a theology without reprobation. Often in the rise of this election-less theology, the preaching of reprobation disappears first. The preachers of election-less theology pay lip service to the truth of election, but it plays no decisive part in their preaching of the gospel. The preaching is cut free from election and reprobation, and indeed those who teach this election-less theology really view the preaching of election and reprobation as an intrusion into the preaching of the gospel, the commands, demands, and warnings of scripture. For this theology the preaching of the gospel is the presentation of Christ crucified with the calling to repent and believe as that which man must do to be saved. For this theology in order to preach the commands, admonitions, and promises of scripture, one really cannot preach election, for it takes the edge off the urgency, and thus might make men carnally secure as well as careless and profane.

De Wolf stated as much in his December 14, 1959, letter to his consistory.⁵ De Wolf was working on taking the churches he led back to the Christian Reformed Church. His consistory objected. In response De Wolf wrote a letter to the consistory, in which he also stated his election-less theology:

From the point of view of the preaching of the gospel there is no a priori differentiation [of the

hearer]. When the gospel confronts a man it does not confront him first of all as an elect or a reprobate but as a sinner. He is certainly one or the other according to God's eternal predestination. But what he is does not become apparent before the gospel is preached to him. Mankind, therefore, becomes a *historically* differentiated mankind only after the gospel has been preached and its effect has been revealed in man's response to it. The gospel does not come to a man and say to him first of all, "You are an elect" or "You are a reprobate" but "You are a sinner who is in need of salvation. And here is the Christ standing before you in this word. Believe on Him and you will be saved." Only after he believes does he have the consciousness and assurance of election, and only through faith can he apply to himself what God declares to and concerning the elect.⁶

Having deceived many, De Wolf then let his loathing of election in connection with the preaching come out. He meant in this letter that when viewed from the viewpoint of the historic preaching of the gospel, one cannot proceed from the assumption of election and reprobation. The minister and the church cannot do its preaching from that standpoint. The audience before the minister is an undifferentiated mass of sinners. But what that does is make election a hypothetical and reprobation come about by result of failure to respond positively to the preaching of the promise. The undifferentiated mass of the audience becomes differentiated by man's response. Man's response, not God's election and reprobation, brings the blessing promised.

I maintain that this is also the way that Protestant Reformed ministers preach admonitions, callings, commands, and blessings in the covenant of grace with regard to man's experience. They will speak about election and reprobation (maybe). But when it comes to man's experience of salvation, his assurance of salvation, his blessing from God, and his hope in eternal life, then it is not election and reprobation that matter but man's response, his repentance, his obedience, and his acts of faith and faithfulness.

This is election-less theology. There is no mention of conditions. There is no mention of prerequisites. But the sound is unmistakable: it is Arminian to the core. Election and reprobation are from the viewpoint of the preaching—the preaching of Christ and the preaching of the command to repent and believe—immaterial. What

5 For the history see Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 306–8.

6 Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake*, 307–8.

is important is simply presenting Christ and calling on man to believe. This is the important thing because man's response is what differentiates elect men and women from reprobate. Then and only then do election and reprobation come in, if they ever get preached at all.

Among De Wolf's two heretical statements for which he was condemned, he said in a sermon on Matthew 18:3, "Our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter into the kingdom of God."⁷ De Wolf was not such an amateur and so unfamiliar with his audience as to teach that conversion was a prerequisite to enter the kingdom as an unregenerate. As he repeatedly insisted, he was not an Arminian. He explained what he meant.

CHAIRMAN HANKO: Do you maintain that our act of conversion is before we enter into the kingdom of God? That is, prerequisite?

REV. DE WOLF: In the sense of our consciousness of entering in and being in the kingdom, it is. I would say that you may say that it belongs to our act of entering into the kingdom.⁸

Note that in the question, *prerequisite* and *before* are simply synonyms. Whether you say *prerequisite* or *before* makes in the end no difference for the doctrine. Note also De Wolf's defense of his doctrine. He does not make a long appeal to explain how *prerequisite* might properly be used. But he speaks of our conscious entering. The natural man cannot enter the kingdom by conversion; but the regenerated child of God, by his act of conversion, by the power of grace, enters the kingdom. This is De Wolf's *prerequisite*. Before a man enters the kingdom, he must convert himself.

Let me put that in other terms. Before a man is forgiven, he must repent. Before God draws nigh to a man, man must draw nigh to God. This is De Wolf's theology in different terms; and as the pages of this magazine have copiously demonstrated, this is the theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches. The Protestant Reformed denomination has two different theologies. One matters, and one does not. Protestant Reformed ministers and professors might speak of Christ's death and God's election, but this is a ploy. It is the same effective ploy that De Wolf used and that fooled many of his followers when he denied that he was an Arminian and that he was strictly Reformed when it came to the doctrine of salvation. But that side of his theology did not matter to him, and it does not play any practical part in the theology of Protestant Reformed ministers and professors either. The theology

that matters is the theology of experience: the experience of forgiveness; the experience of assurance; the experience of consciously entering the kingdom; the experience of nearness with God. And for all of these experiences, man must do something before God gives the experience. All of this is the same election-less theology of De Wolf. In the matter of experience, what matters is not God's election, but what matters is man's activity. What differentiates the undifferentiated mass of sinners that make up the audience of the preaching is not election and reprobation but man's activities performed by grace.

But the Reformed faith knows of no different doctrine of salvation. Entering the kingdom according to the Heidelberg Catechism is the knowledge of the forgiveness of sin.⁹ Can you imagine that a man would say, "Before you are elect you must repent"? Or, "Before you are justified you must obey"? This is the rankest Arminianism and Pelagianism and modernism. So then are the statements that you must first draw near to God, and he will then draw near to you; that you have your assurance and blessing in the way of your obedience; and that in order for a man to consciously enter the kingdom, there is that which he must do. The churches in which this is preached are De Wolf's churches, and like him they are thoroughly Arminian.

The reformation of 1953 was continued in 2021. It needed to be. The line of the true church has passed out of the Protestant Reformed Churches into the Reformed Protestant Churches. There is no difference between the theology of Reverend De Wolf and company and the theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches as represented by men like Professor Engelsma, Professor Cammenga, Professor Gritters, Professor Huizinga, and the rest. They are teaching what De Wolf taught. When it comes to man's conscious experience of salvation, the appropriation of salvation, the enjoyment of blessing, the assurance of eternal life, the forgiveness of sins in his conscience, and his being a saint, man is first. Man must be first and must do many things; and without doing those many things, man does not receive the promised blessing. And if you believe this, then you are the same as those who followed De Wolf.

There was in the reformation that God gave in 2021 in the Reformed Protestant Churches a recovery of the Reformed doctrine of salvation in our experience by sovereign grace. And that begins by having the doctrine of the experience of salvation governed by election and not by man's activity.

—NJL

⁷ *Acts of Synod 1954*, 32.

⁸ "Transcript..." 20.

⁹ See Nathan J. Langerak, "Unforgiven (2): Handling the Word of God Deceitfully," *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 12 (March 2023): 14–19.

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

THE DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES: THEN AND NOW

Introduction

In the heat of controversy, “A Brief Declaration of Principles of the Protestant Reformed Churches” was forged.¹ In the crucible of ecclesiastical conflict, the Declaration decided the controversy over the unconditional covenant that had been raging in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). The Declaration made its clear, unmistakable stand on the word of God and the Reformed confessions. That document drew out the opponents of the truth and sent them into a fervor of hostility. And the official adoption of the Declaration by the Synod of 1951 was a harbinger of the inevitable schism that would result in 1953.

In reflection upon the seventy-year anniversary of the schism of 1953 in the PRC, it is entirely appropriate then to consider this significant document in the history of the church of Jesus Christ. The battle is the Lord’s in the preservation of his church that he might be glorified. Jahaziel said, “Hearken ye, all Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem, and thou king Jehoshaphat, Thus saith the LORD unto you, Be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude; for the battle is not yours, but God’s” (2 Chron. 20:15).

Today the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC) have the Declaration as part of her heritage. Although being a synodical decision of the PRC, in the providential care of God for his church, this document is “the expression of the Three Forms of Unity, with regard to certain fundamental principles.”² And if it is correct that the Declaration is the expression of the Reformed confessions, all Reformed churches, including the RPC, are bound to confess the doctrine of the covenant set forth in the Declaration.

It was this question of the binding character of the Declaration that the RPC wrestled with early in her history. It was an occasion for scoffing by detractors, but I

intend to set the record straight. The Declaration of Principles is binding upon the RPC, not by adopting it as her own at a classical assembly but by the fact that the document is a faithful expression of the Reformed confessions, which are binding upon Reformed churches, as the confessions “do fully agree with the Word of God” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 326).

A Brief History

The Declaration of Principles was provisionally adopted at the Protestant Reformed Synod of 1950 and officially at the Synod of 1951. But what led to the adoption of this document by the PRC? Why did the PRC need such an expression of the Reformed confessions? What doctrine was under assault from without and within the PRC? What effect did the adoption of the Declaration have upon the denomination and her relationships with churches outside the PRC?

In order to answer these questions, we ought to give a brief history of the events surrounding the adoption of the Declaration. In the late 1940s members of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated), affiliated with Dr. Klaas Schilder, began immigrating to Canada. Along with them they smuggled in the conditional covenant doctrine of the liberated churches, which was that the covenant promise of God is for every baptized member of the church. The grace of God is to more than just the elect. The subjective reception of the covenant for the baptized infant is conditioned upon the will and working of that baby. It was the doctrine of common grace applied to the covenant. It was “Arminianism injected into the covenant.”³ It was a doctrine of the covenant divorced from God’s decree of election.

In response to the influx of immigrants who were requesting membership in the PRC and organizing as Protestant Reformed churches, the Protestant Reformed

1 “Brief Declaration of Principles of the Protestant Reformed Churches,” *Acts of Synod 1951*, 148–54.

2 *Acts of Synod 1951*, 145.

3 Herman Hoeksema, “Arminianism Injected Into the Covenant,” in *Believers and Their Seed: Children in the Covenant*, rev. ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997), 14–28.

mission committee requested the Synod of 1950 for a “form that may be used by those families requesting organization into a Prot. Ref. congregation.”⁴ The synodical committee of pre-advice recommended that synod adopt a clear expression of the covenant. That proposed expression was one simple paragraph, which did express the distinctive Protestant Reformed doctrine of the covenant. The synod, not satisfied with that simple paragraph, recommitted the material and added Rev. Herman Hoeksema and Prof. George Ophoff to the committee. Synod then recessed for the weekend; the committee drew up the Declaration of Principles on Saturday; and on the following Monday, the committee submitted the material for the synod to consider. This resubmitted material was almost exactly what would later be officially adopted at the Synod of 1951, which added a section affirming the responsibility of man in a thankful life in the covenant.

The Declaration was provisionally adopted at the Synod of 1950 with little opposition. This document was to be a working hypothesis for the mission committee of the PRC. But in the time between the provisional adoption in 1950 and the decisive adoption at the Synod of 1951, a fervor of opposition had swelled against the Declaration. By the time the Synod of 1951 convened, controversy was raging in the denomination. Classis West of the PRC, almost unanimously against the Declaration, and Classis East of the PRC, almost unanimously in favor of the Declaration, packed the Synod of 1951 with delegates who would vote respectively either against or in favor of the Declaration. It was by the providential care of God that one member of Classis West was sick on the day that the recommendation to adopt the Declaration came to the floor of synod. The *secundi* delegate of Classis West, Rev. P. De Boer, voted in favor of the Declaration. The recommendation passed 9 to 7. The Declaration was officially adopted to be the expression of the three forms of unity on the doctrine of the covenant.

The immediate effect of the adoption of the Declaration was that it stopped the influx of liberated immigrants who were peddling their doctrine of a conditional covenant in the PRC. The adoption of the Declaration also ended any lingering hope of a relationship with Schilder and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated). Schilder said as much when he wrote an article in his *Reformatie* magazine entitled “*De Kous Is Af*”

(The Stocking Is Finished).⁵ The relationship between the PRC and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated) was decisively and definitely severed.⁶

The other effect of the official adoption of the Declaration in 1951 was the schism of 1953. Opponents of the document had repeatedly warned that officially adopting the Declaration would result in a split in the PRC. Opposition to the Declaration reached the pulpit of First Protestant Reformed Church via Rev. H. De Wolf, who preached two sermons that amounted to rebellion against and outright rejection of the Declaration and the doctrine of the unconditional covenant that the Declaration expressed.

At Classis East in April to May 1953, the two sermons that Reverend De Wolf had preached in First church were condemned as heretical. The first was a sermon preached in April 1951 on Luke 16:19–31, in which De Wolf declared, “God promises everyone of you that, if you believe, you shall be saved.”⁷ Classis East’s judgment follows:

In our opinion both the statements which the protestants condemn are literally heretical regardless of what the Rev. De Wolf meant by them, regardless of how he explains them because:

The first teaches a general promise of God unto salvation to all that externally hear the preaching of the gospel, head for head and soul for soul, limited by a condition which man must fulfill, while Scripture and our confessions plainly teach:

1. That, indeed, the proclamation of the gospel comes to all to whom God in His good pleasure sends it.
2. That, however, in our proclamation of the gospel, we may never say that God promises salvation to everyone of the hearers, on condition of faith, for the promise itself is particular, unconditional, of and only for the elect; for it is an oath of God which He, in His everlasting mercy and grace, swears by Himself to His beloved elect; which He, by sovereign grace, fulfills only to and in them, without any condition or prerequisite to be fulfilled by them; and which promise implies that, by His Holy Spirit, He causes them to receive

4 *Acts of Synod 1950*, 74.

5 A summary of Schilder’s article, which was written in Dutch, can be found in Herman Hoeksema, “The Stocking Is Finished,” *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 7 (January 1, 1952): 148–53.

6 David J. Engelsma, *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant: The Declaration of Principles* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2013), 142–43.

7 *Acts of Synod 1954*, 32.

and appropriate salvation by a true and living faith.⁸

The classis rejected the well-meant offer of the gospel that Reverend De Wolf taught, which was only a development of the conditional covenant theology of the liberated churches that the promise of God is for every baptized child of the covenant, conditioned on the faith of the child.

Between 1951 and 1953, protests were being lodged against the Declaration. Because the Synod of 1951 had met late into the year, protests against the decision to adopt the Declaration were allowed to be treated at the Synod of 1953 instead of at the Synod of 1952 to allow time for the protestants to compose their protests. In September 1952, as these protests against adoption of the Declaration were being prepared, Reverend De Wolf preached a sermon on Matthew 18:3, in which he declared, “Our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter into the kingdom of God.”⁹ The classis condemned that statement by judging that

the second teaches that our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter the kingdom of God, which means that we convert and humble ourselves before we are translated from the power of darkness into the kingdom of God’s dear Son, while Scripture and the Confessions plainly teach:

1. That the whole work of our conversion, regeneration in its narrower as well as in its wider sense, in virtue of which we humble ourselves,

is sovereignly wrought by God, by His Spirit and Word through the preaching of the gospel in His elect.

2. That this entire work of conversion is our translation and entering into the kingdom of God. Hence, it is not, cannot be before but THROUGH our conversion that we enter the kingdom. We humble ourselves IN the light, never IN darkness; we humble ourselves, whether initially or repeatedly, IN the kingdom, never OUTSIDE of it. Hence, our ACT of conversion is never antecedent to our entering in, but always is performed IN the kingdom of God, and there are no prerequisites.¹⁰

Simply stated, an elect child of God is already in the kingdom, and no activities of man are necessary to perform before he enters into the kingdom of grace.

The decision of Classis East that condemned De Wolf’s two sermons was brought on June 1, 1953, to the consistory of First church by an appointed classical committee. Rev. G. Vos, the appointed spokesman of the committee, gave a speech to First’s consistory during the meeting, which is recorded in Hoeksema’s editorial in the *Standard Bearer* entitled “What Happened at Classis East?”¹¹ Reverend Vos’ pleading with the consistory did not change a thing. Reverend De Wolf offered his false apology in a sermon on June 21, 1953. On June 23, 1953, the consistory of First church met and summarily suspended Reverend De Wolf and deposed the elders who supported him and his false doctrine. By October 1953 the split had become

8 As quoted in *Acts of Synod 1954*, 32.

9 *Acts of Synod 1954*, 32.

10 As quoted in *Acts of Synod 1954*, 32.

11 Herman Hoeksema, “What Happened at Classis East?,” *Standard Bearer* 30, no. 2 (October 15, 1953): 28–36. I include here part of the introduction of Reverend Vos’ speech. His speech was full of love and kindness toward his brethren, and he was also unwavering for the truth of the unconditional covenant and firm in his defense of the Reformed faith, confident that the matter had already been decided according to God’s eternal will.

While reading this speech I could not help but think that I had seen this before. I witnessed this same attitude in the consistory room of First Reformed Protestant Church regarding the matter of Rev. A. Lanning’s suspension from both the elders at First and the consistory of Second, who came in and concurred with the judgment of First.

Reverend Vos: “I said to my wife that this is the most difficult night of my whole career. I never had anything like this, that I, of all persons must come here. And I struggled with you. The truth must be told. You will hear it in the judgment day anyhow. I have lain on my knees night after night, Friday night, Saturday night, Sunday night struggling with you and have asked the Lord, ‘Lord give me those men...give them to me. Give me grace in the sight of these men and that they may listen to me as I plead with them.’ Maybe you know and maybe you don’t know but I asked Classis ‘Will you limit my mandate? Then tell me now because I am going to plead if you don’t.’ And they didn’t give me a single limit to the mandate. And the mandate itself is, of course, broad as you will hear when I read the first document.

What makes it so easy for me to sit here and talk after all these prayers is this. That’s really beautiful. It’s all decided. It is decided. Whether you hear or whether you forbear. Whether the Lord will move your hearts so that you will hear and unity will come and evil will be eradicated. It makes no difference for it is decided. And it is decided by the great Arbiter up there in heaven. And all I am is a puppet moving as a means in His hand, a mere tool. That makes it easy for me. That is my strength. All that I am doing is walking by His hand; He leads me...

I want to give you the full thrust of the Classis. And then especially the last ground, ground ‘d’ of the Classis. I told the Classis that there you find my heart more than anywhere else. ‘We should spare no efforts on our behalf, under the blessing of our covenant God, to save the dear brethren involved.’ That’s you!”

a reality and was spreading through the denomination like a disease. Reverend De Wolf and his supporters had withdrawn from the denomination, and Classis West had condemned the actions of Classis East.

Two-thirds of the members, ministers, and congregations left the denomination. Congregations were tattered. The Christian schools were decimated. Family relationships were ripped apart and divided. And by 1961 those who had left the denomination returned to the Christian Reformed Church, a mere seven years after leaving the PRC. Yet the truth of the unconditional covenant as expressed in the Declaration stood firm by the sovereign grace of God.

Unconditional Covenant Experience

The PRC today has rejected the Declaration, though not by any official decision, as the churches shrewdly “assume to themselves the name of the church” (Belgic Confession 29 in *Confessions and Church Order*, 62). But the PRC has rejected the Declaration by continuing to teach by preaching and writing that there are prerequisites for the enjoyment of the covenant. Protestant Reformed ministers and professors continue to teach that by the working and willing of man, by grace, he obtains the conscious enjoyment of the covenant. But the covenant is unconditional even its experience.

The covenant of grace is one of friendship and fellowship with God in the Lord Jesus Christ. “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). The Hebrew word for *covenant* in Jeremiah 31:33 is *berith*, which means to clasp or to bind, and it conveys the idea of two lovers clasping one another in intimate fellowship. Fellowship and friendship is communion. Communion is tasting, knowing, enjoying, and experiencing God’s favor as his friend-servant. How can this simple truth be openly denied by those seeking to introduce God-wrought activities of man into the covenant? God walked with Adam in the garden in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8). Noah and Enoch walked with God as his friends over against the world and the apostate church of the line of Seth (5:24; 6:9).

The great symbol of the covenant recorded in scripture is marriage between a husband and a wife, who share

intimate communion with one another as one flesh (Eph. 5:32). That marriage bond itself is fellowship and communion as a reflection of the divine truth of the covenant. Is it true that a man is married to his wife, but he does not intimately experience or enjoy that marriage bond? That a man is married (union), but there are activities of the spouse that are necessary for enjoyment of that marriage bond (communion)?¹² It is no wonder that the sin of spousal abuse against the sixth commandment is rampant in the PRC, not to mention sexual abuse of children. The PRC’s doctrine of the necessary way of obedience in order to experience God’s covenant fellowship breeds abuse and conditional relationships.

The other great symbol of the covenant is the parent-child relationship (Hos. 11:1). The Father unconditionally loves his children and does all things for the benefit of his children. He declares his love unto his children, even in their folly and sin, by chastising them in love (Prov. 23:13). Always the covenant is unconditional in its establishment, maintenance, enjoyment, and perfection. God is the covenant-keeping God (Deut. 7:9).

The work of conditional covenant theologians in the late 1940s and early 1950s was to divorce the covenant promise of God from election. That was the primary task of proponents of the conditional covenant and of those who opposed the Declaration: get election out of the covenant, because as soon as that was accomplished, a whole truckload of man could be introduced into obtaining the subjective reception of the covenant and its blessings. It is fundamental to the doctrine of the conditional covenant that election is denied as governing the covenant. The doctrine of election is hated because it takes man’s willing and working entirely out of the equation and places the covenant and its experience on the sovereign God who shows mercy (Rom. 9:16).

Election is the eternal source and fountain of the covenant and its enjoyment. This is exactly what the Declaration expresses and therefore is what our confessions teach regarding the issues involved in our controversy with the PRC today. Does election govern the experience of the covenant? Absolutely it does. Canons 1.6–8 especially teach election as the source and fountain of every saving good.

This elect number, though by nature neither better nor more deserving than others, but with

12 The former Rev. R. Van Overloop preached a sermon entitled “The Church of Laodicea” in Faith Protestant Reformed Church on June 23, 2019, in which he taught, “He is talking about not the condition to establish a union, but he is establishing a condition that deals with communion. Not union, that’s grace; it’s all grace, only grace, but communion, fellowship.” It should be noted that although Van Overloop was deposed, he was not deposed for his doctrine, and his theology still stands un-condemned in the PRC. That Classis East ruled Van Overloop’s statement “a case of misspeaking” and the “error of the heresy of conditional theology” was not a condemnation of his false doctrine (Summary of the Meeting of Classis East January 13–15, 2021). This idea of unconditional union and conditional communion is what the PRC teaches about the covenant relationship between God and his people. And because practice flows from doctrine, this is what the members’ earthly relationships will be patterned after.

them involved in one common misery, God hath decreed to give to Christ, to be saved by Him, and effectually to call and draw them to His *communion* by His Word and Spirit, to bestow upon them true faith, justification, and sanctification; and having powerfully preserved them in the *fellowship* of His Son, finally to glorify them for the demonstration of His mercy and for the praise of His glorious grace. (Canons 1.7 in *Confessions and Church Order*, 156, emphasis added)

This article of the Canons of Dort, expressed in the Declaration, teaches election as governing the covenant, which in its essence is fellowship and communion.

Canons 2.8 similarly teaches the truth of the unconditional covenant and its relation to election.

For this was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend to all the elect, for bestowing upon them alone the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation; that is, it was the will of God, that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby He confirmed the new covenant, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to Him by the Father; that He should confer upon them faith, which, together with all the other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, He purchased for them by His death; should purge them from all sin, both original and actual, whether committed before or after believing; and, having faithfully preserved them even to the end, should at last bring them free from every spot and blemish to the *enjoyment of glory* in His own presence forever. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 163–164, emphasis added)

All of the blessings of salvation are bestowed upon the elect alone by virtue of their saving union with Jesus Christ, the head of the covenant. God promises salvation to the elect sinner, and that promise is absolutely sure because of Christ's perfect work and Christ's perfect obedience. Covenant grace and covenant salvation are simply not conditional. The covenant does not depend on the sinner or on what that sinner must do. And to teach that faith is a condition for salvation or that activities of faith are prerequisites to enter into the kingdom is heresy and false doctrine. Grace by definition stands opposed to works, even works performed by grace.

Covenant life is salvation itself, and the elect are given the enjoyment of the covenant. The last clause of Canons 2.8 establishes the truth of the enjoyment of the covenant. In principle the child of God has that enjoyment of glory even now; and in the perfection to come, he will have that enjoyment in body and soul without blemish and will dwell, commune, and fellowship with God in Jesus Christ (Rev. 21:3).

Its Significance

The Declaration is a significant document. Its significance for the PRC in 1951 was that it decisively settled the internal controversy regarding the unconditional covenant, even though schism would soon follow. The synod, which was called to judge righteously, did exactly that by bringing the Reformed confessions to bear on the issue. The Spirit of truth led his church into all truth (John 16:13).

The more widespread significance for the entire Reformed church world is that the Declaration also settled the four-hundred-year controversy about the covenant that had been fought since the time of the Reformation. The Reformed doctrine of the covenant up to that point was the doctrine of the *pactum salutis*. The doctrine of the covenant was taught as a pact or contract hammered out between God the Father and God the Son in eternity, while the Holy Spirit essentially sat out on the sidelines.

The covenant of God the Father with the Son is a mutual agreement, by which God the Father exacted from the Son perfect obedience to the law unto the death which he must face on behalf of chosen seed to be given him; and promised him, if he gave the obedience, the seed in question as his own perquisite and inheritance; and in return the Son, in promising this obedience to God the Father and producing it in the literal act., demanded of Him in the turn the right to demand this seed for himself as an inheritance and perquisite (Heidegger XI, 12).¹³

And that pact or bargain between the God the Father and God the Son necessarily means that the covenant of grace is also therefore a contract between God and man in Jesus Christ. God requires faith and obedience as the conditions that God fulfills in man.

The covenant of grace is the gospel pact made in Christ after the fall with the first parents and their descendants. In his name it was renewed to the father of believers and to his posterity. And at length it was published to every nation, God

13 Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, rev. ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G.T. Thompson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 376.

fulfilling the condition required in the elect, in order that the credit for our salvation might be His entirely, and the inheritance of eternal life pass freely to those who walk according to the Spirit on account of the merit of the single Jesus Christ to display His glorious mercy.¹⁴

Early on in his ministry in the Christian Reformed Church, Rev. Herman Hoeksema had developed the idea of the covenant positively as a relationship of friendship and fellowship. And Reverend Hoeksema and Reverend Ophoff had been teaching this idea of the covenant to their congregations and to the seminary students since the inception of the PRC in 1924. The peculiar treasure and distinction of the PRC at that time, the reason for the denomination's existence, was her view of the covenant.

It [the PRC's particular conception of the covenant] teaches that God realizes His eternal covenant of friendship, in Christ, the Firstborn of every creature and the first begotten of the dead, organically, and antithetically along the lines of election and reprobation, and in connection with the organic development of all things.¹⁵

The Declaration expresses the teaching of the Reformed confessions. The Declaration is not a fourth confession, as was always charged. The significance and weight of the Declaration is that it demonstrates that the Reformed confessions teach a definite doctrine of the covenant. The Declaration brings the confessions to bear on this longstanding debate in the Reformed tradition over these two different and conflicting doctrines of the covenant.¹⁶

There is an important principle that was established by the adoption of the Declaration. A Reformed church can and must settle controversy with the Reformed confessions. An ecclesiastical body—whether consistory, classis, or synod—never needs to open scripture to settle controversy. The Declaration was, in the main, quotes from the three forms of unity, and a common accusation against the document was that it did not appeal to the scriptures for its doctrine of the covenant. In response to that accusation, Classis East advised synod to declare that

- c) ...when the Confessions are interpreted or applied, as was the case with the Declaration of Principles, appeal is made and should be made solely to the Confessions.

- d) When a question arises in Reformed Churches as to what is Reformed, no one is supposed to appeal to Scripture, but appeal is made solely to the Reformed Symbols. They and they only decide what is and what is not Reformed.¹⁷

It is not that a Reformed church only *may* settle controversy with the Reformed confessions, but a Reformed church *must* do so with confessions.¹⁸ Binding by the confessions is scriptural binding, because the confessions “do fully agree with the Word of God.” As Reformed churches we must stand on the Reformed confessions as our bulwark!

Our Heritage

The Declaration of Principles is our doctrinal heritage as members of the Reformed Protestant Churches. The Declaration was drawn up by a pre-advice committee of the Synod of 1950 and adopted officially by the Synod of 1951 to be the faithful expression of the Reformed confessions. All who subscribe to the three forms of unity—officebearers by their vows and men and women in the office of all believer by their membership in a Reformed church—are bound to confess the unconditional covenant as it is outlined in the Declaration. It is not optional for members of the RPC.

It was this question of the binding character of the Declaration that was posed by the office of believer at a congregational meeting of First Reformed Protestant Church on May 18, 2021. The purpose of the congregational meeting was to vote whether or not to federate with Second Reformed Protestant Church and form a denomination. The agenda included adopting the Act of Federation, which stated that the churches' common basis was the scriptures as the infallible word of God as summarized in the three forms of unity. The question brought to the floor was whether the churches would be bound by the Declaration of Principles or not. This question was a weighty and significant question, and it was brought to the Act of Federation meeting on May 28, 2021.

Article 16. The Chairman then discusses the agenda for the first meeting of classis. This agenda will include reports from the following committees: Ministerial training, Outreach, Finance, and Incorporation. First RPC also brings to the attention of the joint council that we will be investigating and bringing to classis advice

14 Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 382.

15 Herman Hoeksema, “Protestant Reformed,” *Standard Bearer* 26, no. 12 (March 15, 1950): 269.

16 Engelsma, *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant*, 29.

17 *Acts of Synod 1953*, 157–58.

18 Engelsma, *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant*, 175.

regarding the Declaration of Principles and its standing within our own denomination.¹⁹

The consistory of First Reformed Protestant Church took up this question and assigned a committee to work on answering this question. The committee of First wrestled with this question for months. What was the status of the Declaration in the RPC? A recommendation from the committee was finally brought to the meeting of classis that convened on May 13, 2022. At the classis the following decision was taken:

Article 24. Motion made to approve the recommendation of First Reformed Protestant Church to view the Declaration of Principles as a historical document that may be consulted as an orthodox declaration of the truth of the unconditional covenant (Supplement 9). Motion failed.²⁰

The decision of the classis was the correct one, although for failing this motion the RPC continued to be the object of scorn by detractors, who tried to use this decision as evidence that the RPC was not the true continuation of the churches of Herman Hoeksema. But one must correctly understand that for the RPC to adopt the Declaration as her own document would open up the denomination to examining and adopting every right

decision of the PRC since 1924. The classis also recognized that whether or not the Declaration was adopted by the RPC officially, the doctrine that the Declaration expresses is the doctrine of our Reformed confessions, which is binding.

The Declaration of Principles is a witness of great weight and significance for all Reformed churches. The Declaration is the expression of the Reformed confessions, and all Reformed churches that teach contrary to the truth of the covenant that the Declaration expounds live in disobedience to the teaching of the word of God. The Declaration is our heritage, and the truth of the Declaration continues to be faithfully taught in the RPC. The Lord preserves his church, and his Spirit leads her into all truth. God preserved his church in the year of our Lord 1953, he preserved his church in the year of our Lord 2021, and he continues to preserve his church today. He preserves his truth of sovereign grace. He preserves the truth of the unconditional covenant. He preserves the wonderful truth of justification by faith alone apart from works. He preserves the truth that he makes his covenant promise to the elect and he sovereignly carries out his promise to them alone. Glory be to God that the battle is not ours but belongs to the Lord.

—TDO

OUR DOCTRINE

Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.—1 Timothy 4:13

SYNOD 1951 AND THE PROMISE

A Connection to the Past

We are well familiar, I presume, with the pattern of the book of Judges.

The book opens with Israel's abysmal failure to drive out all the inhabitants of Canaan. Judah did not drive out the mountain dwellers from the tribe's allotted portion. Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites from Jerusalem. Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of

Beth-shean, Taanach, Dor, Ibleam, Megiddo, and their respective towns. Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites in Gezer. And the list goes on...

One asks, where did that holy zeal of the Israelites under Joshua go? They had slain mighty kings, trampled down impenetrable fortresses, wiped out the formidable coalitions of adversaries, and cut off the fearsome Anakim. Even the hornets mustered their forces together

¹⁹ "Joint Council Meeting Minutes," May 28, 2021, in *Agenda for the Classis Meeting of the Reformed Protestant Churches, September 14, 2021*, 2.

²⁰ *Reformed Protestant Churches in America Agenda of the Classis Meeting to be held September 15, 2022*, 3. Supplement 9 can be found in *Reformed Protestant Churches of America Agenda of the Classis Meeting to be held May 13, 2022*, on page 34.

and went before Israel to battle. The sun, moon, and stars joined with Jacob for the fight. Why did the Israelites not snuff out their foes altogether?

But it was at that point when the Israelites were strong and fierce that they laid down the sword and the shield. The desire for war against God's enemies was swiftly quenched by the weariness of the flesh. A generation of hardened soldiers waxed old, and in their place a generation of soft diplomats arose. It was easier to subject the Canaanites into servitude and to dwell among them than to wipe them off the map. Peace over blood. Tribute over heads. Nice homes over solitude. And the nation despised Jehovah's clear command to show no mercy but to utterly destroy.

Yet Jehovah God is sovereign, and his purposes are not thwarted by a rebellious people. His counsel stands forever, and he turns even gross disobedience for the advantage of his elect. Israel's apostasy could not thwart his good pleasure but rather magnified the grace of election and the truth of his covenant. It was God's eternal determination to use the peoples and nations remaining in Canaan to prove the Israelites and to teach the following generations to war.

All generations must war! They must war in behalf of God's name and covenant, for to be separated unto God by promise and drawn into his fellowship is to stand at enmity against the world. His people are in the world but are not of the world. They are of God's party to contend against and to destroy iniquity. Thus, as long as sons continue, they must war against the reprobate seed that stands over against God and his covenant. And God will teach succeeding generations in Israel. Until the consummation of all things, he will teach hands to war and fingers to fight, for the battle belongs to him.

The recurring pattern in Judges is this: there arose a generation that knew not Jehovah, nor yet the works that he had done for Israel. The Israelites did evil in his sight, serving idols that suited their lusts. They forsook Jehovah, the God of their fathers. And in judgment God delivered them into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them. He sold the people into the hands of their enemies round about, so that they could not stand any longer before their enemies. And then God raised up judges. He raised up judges, and he was with those judges all their days to deliver his people from their oppressors, to teach truth unto his people, and to cause the land to rest in him alone.

Israel was brought under the oppressive hand of Chushan-rishathaim for eight years, but God raised

up Othniel, and the land had rest forty years. The next generation rebelled and was brought under the oppressive hand of Eglon, but God raised up Ehud, and the land had rest eighty years. Israel rebelled again and was brought under the oppressive hand of Jabin and Sisera, but God raised up Deborah and Barak, and the land had rest forty years...

So the cycle went until the time of Samson's calling after Israel had been subjected to the oppression of the Philistines for forty years. *Forty years!* Two generations had arisen in Israel whose entire existence was under Philistine oppression. And lo! we never read of the Israelites' crying unto Jehovah their God for deliverance. Rebellious they were, and rebellious they would have continued to be until the world had swallowed them up. So deep was their apostasy that they did not want deliverance. But for the sake of his promise and covenant alone, God dragged them out as a firebrand from the fire by a deliverer they did not want.

Captivating history? Certainly. And for many today the book of Judges is filled with good tales and moral warnings. But the mere recounting of good tales and instruction in ethics is not the mind of the Spirit. If all that Judges tells us is how (not) to live, then we want nothing to do with the book.

Rather, the book is the perfect record of the Spirit, who gives us a word about the history of the church from the beginning to the end of time. In particular, the book is a typical record of new-dispensational patterns within the *church*. All these things happened unto Israel "for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come" (1 Cor. 10:11).

According to God's spiritual reality, permit me to draw the pattern of Judges into the early twentieth century, when the people of God were being oppressed by the Heysian conception of the covenant.¹ Prof. William Heyns' view of the covenant, which was more or less the representative view of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), was that the covenant is essentially a promise, a means unto salvation (and not salvation itself). Furthermore, Heyns taught that God's covenant was a *general* promise, objectively bequeathed to every child unconditionally at baptism. The covenant was a general promise that was concretely realized in its full blessedness when a child had reached maturity and accepted God's offer by grace.² This was the conception of God's relationship with his people that the Calvin Theological Seminary students were being taught. And God's people were being told that

1 The conditional covenant and promise of this present study could be traced back further: see chapter 1, "The Covenant Crisis," in David J. Engelsma, *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2011), 1–32. I am limiting this application to the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

2 See Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 268–69, 354–56.

salvation in its final analysis depended upon their cooperation with grace. The doctrine was a nasty, oppressive foe.

But Jehovah raised up his servants. And Jehovah was with those servants all their days to deliver his people from their oppressors and to restore his people to the truth of his covenant and salvation. God gave his people rest—not rest in the historical sense but rest for their souls. No, the battles remained fierce, particularly in the late 1940s and early 1950s. After the Heynsian head of the conditional covenant monster was lopped off, many more sprouted up in its place to endorse the Schilderian form of the covenant. In the end the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) split in two, and the schismatic faction returned like a dog to the vomit of the CRC. But God’s people had rest from their oppressors...

...for a time.

For a time? Yes.

The enemy was never completely vanquished. During the heat of the battle, the conditional covenant monster sprouted another particularly ugly head. The head developed into the form of a conditional covenant promise for the daily *experience* and *enjoyment* of the covenant. This head was discovered but was left alone.³ Subsequent history and recent ecclesiastical events in our own time have shed light on 1953. Nineteen fifty-three has become another case study in winning the battle but losing the war, for the enemy was never fully vanquished but found places of refuge in the land, in its mountains and in certain cities. Idols were not rooted out but remained in the high places and in the homes. And soon strange altars appeared in the tabernacles and on the rooftops and in the streets.

How did that happen? Perhaps the desire for war against God’s enemies was quenched by the weariness of the flesh. Perhaps a generation of hardened soldiers waxed old and in their place a generation of soft diplomats arose. Perhaps it was the mentality. Peace over blood. Tribute over heads. Nice homes over solitude.

But soon there arose a generation—I speak now *organically* and not head for head, just as scripture does—that knew not Jehovah, nor yet the works that he had done for them. The people did evil in God’s sight, serving idols that suited their lusts. They forsook Jehovah, the God of their fathers. And in judgment God delivered them into

the hands of spoilers who spoiled the people. And the people became sore distressed.

Some of the people cried unto God for deliverance. Others did not. I did not.

In a former time I wondered why Israel had endured the Philistines for forty years. How could they stand the oppression of the enemy for so long? Why did the Israelites never cry out to their God for a deliverer? I do not wonder anymore. For I was oppressed, and I never knew it. Oppression had become a mode of life. In fact, the rule of the oppressor was not so bad, for his strange altars appealed to the lusts of the flesh. Strange altars were erected in my own church, a church into which I was born and baptized and raised. I lived beneath those strange altars, and I worshiped willingly. I sought no deliverer. Then God came and dragged me out like a fire-brand plucked from the fire.

Such is the pattern of the new dispensation, written large on the pages of Judges.

Such has become the pattern in our own history, written large on the pages of *Sword and Shield*. I am bold to draw the pattern of Judges into the present because of how clearly this magazine has demonstrated the doctrinal connection between 1953 and 2021.⁴ The underlying doctrinal problems of 1953 remained festering in the PRC and finally came to a head in 2021.

In particular, there is a *Sword and Shield* article entitled “The Majority Report.”⁵ The thesis of this article is that “the doctrinal issue faced recently [in the PRC] is in fact an extension of the doctrinal issue of 1953.”⁶ And I consider “The Majority Report” to be one of the most important articles in *Sword and Shield* to date.

I consider this article to be one of the most important articles to date not because it explained the present doctrinal controversy in the PRC for the first time. The initial series of editorials in *Sword and Shield* laid out the controversy at length.⁷ Neither is it the case that “The Majority Report” spoke of 1953 for the first time on the pages of *Sword and Shield*.⁸ Rather, as far as I can tell, “The Majority Report” was the first time that a definite doctrinal connection between 1953 and the present was established. Since the publication of this article, the magazine’s analysis of 2021 in light of 1953 has developed rapidly.⁹ I consider

3 See especially the entire issue of *Sword and Shield* 2 no. 17 (April 2022).

4 I use this date for the sake of simplicity. The year 2021 marks the reforming of the church outside the PRC in the Reformed Protestant Churches. The actual controversy began in 2015 with the protest of Neil Meyer against Rev. David Overway’s John 14:6 sermon (“Mr. Meyer’s Protest to Hope’s Consistory,” July 7, 2015, as quoted in *Acts of Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches 2016*, 73–84).

5 Nathan J. Langerak, “The Majority Report,” *Sword and Shield* 1, no. 13 (March 2021): 12–18.

6 Langerak, “The Majority Report,” 13.

7 Andrew Lanning, “Our Present Controversy,” a series of seven articles that began in *Sword and Shield* 1, no. 2 (July 2020) and ended in *Sword and Shield* 1, no. 13 (March 2021).

8 Andrew Lanning, “Our Present Controversy (3),” *Sword and Shield* 1, no. 4 (September 1, 2020): 7.

9 The connection was again drawn in Philip Rainey, “Faith and Repentance as Conditions: A Return to the Mire,” *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 6

this article a major factor to the reason for this issue of *Sword and Shield* that you are reading now.

It is not my purpose now to reiterate what “The Majority Report” set forth. You may reread it yourself. But I do point out that the article’s analysis was—and remains—invaluable.

For, first, by tying the past to the present, this article has made unmistakably plain that the present controversy with the PRC is nothing but a continuation of a previous battle against an old foe. The language of today—that the covenant *experience* and the *enjoyment* of salvation is *in the way of* good works—is not the theological apparition of some man’s mind. Conditional theology did not arise out of nowhere. But it has been deeply entrenched in Protestant Reformed church history. Even after that monumental struggle of 1953, conditional covenant theology remained in the mountains. The conditional theology retained a place in some cities of the land. And the conditional theology quietly grew in the shadows, even while some in the PRC were busy taking the federal vision to task and hacking away at its root of a conditional covenant. “Take heed to that foe over the Jordan!” cried the watchmen. “Beware, lest it intrude itself into the land!” But all the while there was a more deadly threat within the PRC’s own camp.

Second, the analyses of “The Majority Report” and all similar articles remain invaluable, for they bring the fathers’ methods of warfare, the strategies of battle, into today’s fight. Our fathers have crafted weapons for us—a whole storehouse of ammunitions—and we must take them up against the enemies who remain in the land. Our generation must war! God will have it so. “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed” (Gen. 3:15). God will have our hands to war and our fingers to fight, for the battle belongs to him. And the weapons of our fathers—the truth of scripture as it is systematically set forth in the Reformed confessions—are not carnal but mighty to the pulling down of strongholds.

The Centrality of the Promise in 1951

And now I ask, dear Reformed reader, do you insist that the covenant of grace is unconditional? Unconditional in

its establishment with the elect, that is, with Jesus Christ and—by virtue of God’s decree to give him a body—with all his members? Unconditional in its maintenance with the elect? Unconditional in its perfection with the elect? Do you likewise insist that the elect *experience* the covenant unconditionally?

Indeed, I trust that you do.

Then, dear reader, I urge you to pause and to reflect upon these following questions. What is the *experience* of Jehovah’s unconditional covenant? What is *it* that you experience?

I ask this not without reason. I ask these questions in all seriousness on account of my own vague understandings—yea, misconceptions—about the covenant experience while under the intoxicating drink of Protestant Reformed preaching. Over and over again in the preaching, I heard about the *experience* of the covenant and the *enjoyment* of salvation. This terminology became the language of the day.

This was the language of the doctrinal statement that a classical committee drafted and offered to Hope Protestant Reformed Church’s consistory in order to “settle” the doctrinal debate around Reverend Overway’s sermons:

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...

When the Scriptures, therefore, emphasize the need for a holy life of obedience to experience the fellowship of God, it does so to emphasize the necessity of a living, sanctifying faith for such fellowship.¹⁰

This was the language of Synod 2018:

Though we may lose the experience of covenant fellowship by continuing in disobedience, we never gain it by our obedience, but it is restored by faith in Christ and in the way of repentance.¹¹

Properly expressing the relationship between obedience as the necessary way of the covenant and the experience of covenant fellowship is: We experience fellowship with God through faith

(September 2021): 14–23; Nathan J. Langerak, “Chanticleer,” *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 8 (October 15, 2021): 11–19, dealing with Professor Engelsma’s critique of the call of the gospel; “Slippery McGeown (2): Active Faith and Justification,” *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 13 (February 1, 2022): 13–20; “Apology of Rev. Kenneth Koole,” *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 15 (March 1, 2022): 14–23; “Engelsma’s Order,” *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 16 (March 15, 2022): 32–43. See also the entire *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 17 (April 2022); Nathan J. Langerak, “Humpty Dumpty (2): Which Is Master,” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 1 (June 2022): 25–32; “Slithering Around Again (2): Afraid of the Decree,” *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 5 (October 2022): 17–23. And Berean Reformed Protestant Church had a special Bible study on this topic, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LbU8zEzCpg>.

10 “Doctrinal Statement: RE: Experiencing Fellowship with the Father (November 17, 2017),” as quoted in the “Appeal of Connie Meyer,” in *Acts of Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches 2018*, 194–99.

11 *Acts of Synod 2018*, 73.

(instrument), on the basis of what Christ has done (ground), and in the way of our obedience (way of conduct or manner of living).¹²

This was the language of Synod 2020, which Synod 2021 championed:

The fact that an activity of the believer may occur temporally *prior* to the *experience* of a blessing from God does not automatically make such activity a condition or prerequisite for earning, gaining, or meriting the blessing from God.¹³

And this was the language that apparently sent the PRC into the uncharted territory of profound theological constructions. The *Standard Bearer* emphasized this:

Let it be stated at the outset—these are some deep theological waters, for many of the terms in the controversy have not been defined in Protestant Reformed theology or even discussed in the Reformed confessions. The experience of covenant fellowship? The enjoyment of covenant fellowship? Are these the same as simply “covenant fellowship”? How is our experience of or enjoyment of fellowship with God related to a life of obedience?¹⁴

This terminology of the *experience* and *enjoyment* of covenant fellowship had sent us into deep theological waters, so we were told. Yet we lay folks were supposed to receive the preaching of these terms, understand what they meant, and obtain this experience. But what was it that we were supposed to experience and enjoy?

Speaking for myself, the experience of covenant fellowship became synonymous with good feelings. Do I feel good? I must be enjoying God’s fellowship and my salvation. Do I feel bad? Well, since fellowship with God is in the way of good works, I had better get doing. Thus my experience of God was reduced to warm, fuzzy emotions and lots of good works.

Perhaps you say, “That sounds a little crass.” Perhaps you say, “That is not what Synod 2018 intended by its mantra that covenant fellowship is *in the way of* good works.”

Well, this is what Protestant Reformed preaching impressed upon me. And that is because the Protestant Reformed denomination has given up the doctrine of the covenant promise that was defended by her fathers during Synod 1951.

What is it that we experience in God’s unconditional covenant? It is the promise! God’s promise is the covenant

experience, and the covenant experience is God’s promise. Yea, to speak more precisely, our experience is the realization of *what* God promises and nothing less or more.

This is simple. And now let us put this in the doctrinal formulations of the day:

Scripture and the confessions also emphasize the necessity of the exercise of faith *in a holy life of obedience* [for the realization of the promise]...

When the Scriptures, therefore, emphasize the need for a holy life of obedience [for the realization of the promise], it does so to emphasize the necessity of a living, sanctifying faith for [the realization of the promise].

We [have the reality of the promise] through faith, on the basis of what Christ has done, and in the way of our obedience.

The fact that an activity of the believer may occur temporally prior to the [realization of the promise] does not automatically make such activity a condition or prerequisite for earning, gaining, or meriting the [promise] from God.

Let it be stated at the outset—these are some deep theological waters, for many of the terms in the controversy have not been defined in Protestant Reformed theology or even discussed in the Reformed confessions. [The reality of the promise]? [The reality of the promise]? Are these the same as simply [the promise]? How is the [realization of the promise] related to a life of obedience?

All that we were dealing with in 2021 was how God realizes his promise in his people. Or, if you will, the subjective sense of God’s promise. And all of this had already been settled in 1951.

The controversy on the floor of Synod 1951 was all about God’s promise. This is evident by the countless articles found in the *Standard Bearer* that dealt with the nature and content and efficacy of the promise. This is evident by the adoption of the Declaration of Principles, which dealt extensively with the promise. The document opened with an assertion about the promise—proclaimed in the preaching of the gospel¹⁵—that it is

not a gracious offer of salvation on the part of God to all men, nor a conditional offer to all that are born in the historical dispensation of the

¹² *Acts of Synod 2018*, 74.

¹³ *Acts of Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches 2020*, 81.

¹⁴ Russell Dykstra, “Synod 2018: Obedience and Covenant Fellowship,” *Standard Bearer* 94, no. 18 (July 2018): 415.

¹⁵ The original document provided by the synodical committee to Synod 1951 contained the words “preaching of the promise” instead of “preaching of the gospel” in I. D. 2., but the wording was changed by an amendment. For the discussion about this point at synod, see Herman Hoeksema, “The Synod of 1951,” *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 6 (December 15, 1951): 124–25.

covenant, that is, to all that are baptized, but an oath of God that He will infallibly lead all the elect unto salvation and eternal glory through faith.¹⁶

And after Synod 1951 Hoeksema wrote that this synod was vitally important for the reason that the churches had

officially declared what according to their conviction is the truth as expressed in our confessions, especially concerning certain fundamental principles, all concentrating around the promise of God and the preaching of the gospel.¹⁷

It must be stated at the outset that the covenant is not essentially a promise. The essence of the covenant is an everlasting relationship of friendship between the triune God and his elect people in Jesus Christ their Lord. It is a family relationship. It is a marriage relationship. It is warm and intimate and living communion. As to its essence, the covenant is not a promise. This truth the PRC maintained over against Heyns in 1924 and Schilder in 1953.

Rather, the promise is an oath. It is “an oath of God that He will infallibly lead all the elect unto salvation and eternal glory through faith.”¹⁸

And the promise of God, which promise scintillates into rich variations of language in scripture but remains essentially one, has three irreducible or simple elements: (1) the content of the promise, (2) the good will of God to give what he promises, and (3) the fulfillment or realization of the promise.¹⁹ Since all of these elements came under attack in one way or another during the heat of the controversy leading to 1953, we examine these in their own historical context.

First, the promise has content. The promised content is expressed by Jehovah’s oft-repeated and marvelous words, “I will be a God unto you and to your seed, and you shall be unto me a people.” The content of the promise is, therefore, the covenant, the covenant in all its fullness. The covenant is perfect salvation as that salvation draws the recipient of the promise out of the lowest depths of hell and into the consummation of the covenant in the everlasting kingdom of God. Or in the words

of the Declaration: “God...will infallibly lead all the elect unto salvation and eternal glory.”

Leading up to 1953 the fathers contended with men who insisted that the content of God’s promise was strictly defined by Canons 2.5, which says, “The promise of the gospel is that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 163). That the content of the promise should be strictly understood as everlasting life, that is, a *final* realization of salvation, was the contention of Dr. Klaas Schilder. This narrow view of the promise also appeared on the floor of Synod 1951, for several Protestant Reformed ministers insisted that they were bound to this definition and none other.²⁰

Although the Declaration did not make its purpose to explicitly set forth all the rich content of God’s promise, the Declaration did make frequent references to articles in the Reformed confessions where the content of that promise is taught. And Rev. Herman Hoeksema spent a considerable amount of time on the floor of Synod 1951 laying out what the Reformed confessions teach regarding the content of God’s promise.²¹

The reason such clarification was needed was that Schilder and those sympathetic to Schilder in the PRC used the narrow understanding of the promise as defined by Canons 2.5 in the service of teaching a conditional promise. “The promise,” they said, “is to those *who believe*.” There in Canons 2.5 they found supposed proof that the promise is in the form of a condition. God demands something of man—faith. If man does not believe, then he does not receive the promise. If he does believe (by grace and the Holy Spirit), then he receives the promise. “This is nothing other than conditional language!” they insisted.

But Reverend Hoeksema had none of this.

For an examination of the entirety of the Reformed confessions prohibits such a limited view of the promise. God’s promise is not merely the *final* realization of salvation. The promise encompasses the whole of salvation and every aspect of covenant life.

If one is pleased, he may make a further study of Hoeksema’s thorough analysis of the content of the promise, which he presented both on the floor of Synod 1951²²

16 “A Brief Declaration of Principles of the Protestant Reformed Churches,” *Acts of Synod 1951*, 148.

17 Herman Hoeksema, “Our Synod of 1951,” *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 3 (November 1, 1951): 52. Hoeksema adds “and therefore around one aspect of ‘common grace.’”

18 “Declaration of Principles,” *Acts of Synod 1951*, 148.

19 David J. Engelsma, *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant: The Declaration of Principles* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2013), 41.

20 Herman Hoeksema, “The Synod of 1951,” *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 6 (December 15, 1951): 126.

21 Hoeksema, “The Synod of 1951,” *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 6 (December 15, 1951): 127–32; *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 7 (January 1, 1952): 154.

22 Hoeksema, “The Synod of 1951,” *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 6 (December 15, 1951): 127–32; *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 7 (January 1, 1952): 154.

and in a later series of editorials.²³ At this point I only highlight that the reverend continually emphasized that the content of the promise is nothing less than the whole blessedness of the covenant. One example will suffice.

Belgic Confession 35, dealing with the doctrine of the Lord's supper, teaches that

Christ communicates Himself with all His benefits to us, and gives us there to enjoy both Himself and the merits of His sufferings and death, nourishing, strengthening, and comforting our poor comfortless souls by the eating of His flesh, quickening and refreshing them by the drinking of His blood. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 72)

About this article Hoeksema wrote, "The full promise includes the whole of salvation, objective and subjective. It includes faith. And it includes the application of all the blessings of salvation in Christ to the elect."²⁴ The promise is not only that which is objective (outside us), but the promise is also subjective (within us).

In the context of 1953, this comprehensive view of the promise was necessary to contend with the liberated theology. The liberated wanted faith as the necessary condition unto the realization of the promise. But the fathers argued that the promise includes the Spirit! Since the promise of God includes the Spirit, the promise must also include the gift of faith, for the Spirit is the author of faith. If faith is included in the promise, then faith cannot be a condition for the realization of the promise—not in any sense. It is simply illogical to teach that God promises faith to those who will believe.

In the context of today, we also insist that the promise includes the whole of salvation, objective and subjective. We insist that the promise includes the application of all the blessings of salvation in Christ. We insist on this, lest there be any ambiguity as to what the experience or the enjoyment of the covenant is. The experience or the enjoyment of the covenant *is* comprehended in the promise. When God realizes his promise, man enjoys God's fellowship.

Second, the promise includes the good will of God to give what he promises. Space fails me to elaborate on this. I only point out that this good will of God is to be found in his decree of election. God is favorable to the elect alone. He has mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he wills he hardens. In the Declaration this

element of the promise was subsumed under the second head, which refuted the liberated idea that God's good will extends to every baptized child, head for head.²⁵ Today, if one preaches the promise of God while failing to tie it to election, he leaves himself open to the charge that God's good will extends beyond the elect. That man has essentially taught a well-meant offer of the promise to all who hear.

Finally, the promise includes the realization or fulfillment of its content. God *infallibly* saves, according to the Declaration. God *swears* that he will infallibly save. God swears that he will infallibly save *through faith*.

It was this element of the promise especially that received vicious assaults. Along this line deep trenches were dug. Along this line the guns blazed.

On the one hand, this element was attacked by Dr. Schilder and the liberated, who maintained the idea that "the promise of the covenant is an objective bequest on the part of God giving to every baptized child the right to Christ and all the blessings of salvation."²⁶ Schilder insisted that the promise always comes with the demand of faith and repentance.²⁷ The promise is realized when man responds to God's demand for faith and repentance.

On the other hand, this element was attacked by ministers of the PRC who, under the influence of liberated theology, could not get past the demands of God that are found together with God's promise. Did not God say to Abraham, when God promised to make his covenant with Abraham, that Abraham must walk before God and be perfect? They said that God confronted man with his responsibility and duty. Man on his part must fulfill those demands—always, of course, by grace and the Holy Spirit—to enjoy God's promise. There are *conditions* in the covenant. There are conditions not in the objective sense of the promise, but there are conditions in the subjective sense. There are conditions not in the initial realization of the promise, but there are conditions that enter in afterward for the continued realization of the promise.

And understand what those Protestant Reformed ministers meant by *condition*: a preceding demand. That is all they meant by *condition* and nothing more. And that is very evident by the discussions that took place on the floor of Synod 1951.

Rev. L. Doezema wanted to make this amendment to the Declaration:

23 Herman Hoeksema, "The Promise According to the Confessions," *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 19 (July 1, 1952): 436–38; no. 21 (September 1, 1952): 484–86; no. 22 (September 15, 1952): 508–10; 29 no. 1 (October 1, 1952): 4–6; no. 2 (October 15, 1952): 28–30; no. 3 (November 1, 1952): 52–54; no. 7 (January 1, 1953): 148–50; no. 10 (February 15, 1953): 221–22; no. 11 (March 1, 1953): 244–45.

24 Hoeksema, "The Promise According to the Confessions," *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 21 (September 1, 1952): 484–85.

25 "Declaration of Principles," *Acts of Synod 1951*, 148–53.

26 "Declaration of Principles," *Acts of Synod 1951*, 153.

27 Herman Hoeksema, "Very Clear," *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 18 (June 15, 1952): 412.

There are conditions in God's Word, the confrontation of God's demand which God annexes to the promise, in order to bring out clearly His unconditional grace and mercy, as well as His just wrath and man's inability to fulfill them.²⁸

Reverend Doezema was then given the evening to submit confessional grounds for his amendment. The next morning he presented his grounds to synod, and I mention a few.

Doezema appealed to question and answer 86 of the Heidelberg Catechism, saying,

This question and its answer again mentions the confrontation of the law of God. According to the answer we can have the assurance of faith only by its fruit. Good works are required of us. The fulfillment of them is the condition to the assurance of faith.²⁹

Doezema appealed to question and answer 116, saying, "Here again we are confronted with the demand. Prayer is a condition for Christian living."³⁰

Doezema appealed to Canons 1.3, asserting that the article

speaks of the calling of the preaching to repentance and faith. These therefore come in the form of a demand. And again, therefore, you have a requisite or condition to the enjoyment of salvation in this article.³¹

Doezema also appealed to the third section of the doctrinal section of the baptism form, which treats our obligation to new obedience. He stated,

Here you have once more the confrontation of the law and the admonition and demands. This is all in a conditional form, so that unless we do this, there is no *enjoyment of salvation*... You see here the unbreakable chain according to which God gives His unconditional mercy *on condition* of our fulfilling the demands of His covenant.³²

Let us also hear from Reverend van Weelden, who insisted that he was convinced about the unconditionality of salvation, yet at the same time he felt

that there are conditions in Scripture in a certain sense... Faith is no condition to the covenant, but

a condition *in the covenant*. It is *the way* for the enjoyment of all the blessings of the covenant. The confrontation is very strong in Scripture. God confronts us, places before all who hear the demand to repent. This element we must keep. I agree that salvation is unconditional, and that faith is no condition unto salvation. But this idea in conditions we must retain.³³

We only want to do justice to what God demands when he gives his promise! We only want to maintain a sense in which man's activity precedes the realization of the promise. And we must keep that idea!

The consistory of Pella, in its overture to synod that objected to the Declaration, contended that the Declaration "expresses itself in re the promise and salvation, but leaves out of consideration entirely the pedagogical aspect or approach of salvation."³⁴

We only want to do justice to how a person engages with the preaching of God's promise!

Over against these doctrines of the promise, what did our fathers teach? That the promise was *absolutely* unconditional. *Absolutely* unconditional over against the idea that man must first do something for God to realize his promise with his people. The promise of the experience of the covenant, our fathers insisted, was unconditional through and through.

Those words—*absolutely unconditional*—are very purposeful.

Those words were formulated against the idea that God's decree of election is unconditional but that the promise is conditional. Reverend Gritters argued, "It is true that our Confessions condemn the term *conditions*. But they speak of conditions only with relation to election, and not in relation to the promise."³⁵

Perhaps it may not be clear what Reverend Gritters was trying to promote, but Hoeksema understood it well. And he replied,

I want to call attention to the statement of the Rev. Gritters that the Confessions speak of conditions only with a view to election. Election is unconditional. But the promise may be conditional. Now this certainly is not correct. Our fathers clearly maintained that the *application of salvation* is just as divine and unconditional as election itself... In

28 Hoeksema, "The Synod of 1951," *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 8 (January 15, 1952): 174.

29 Hoeksema, "The Synod of 1951," *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 8 (January 15, 1952): 175.

30 Hoeksema, "The Synod of 1951," *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 8 (January 15, 1952): 175.

31 Hoeksema, "The Synod of 1951," *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 8 (January 15, 1952): 175.

32 Hoeksema, "The Synod of 1951," *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 8 (January 15, 1952): 175, emphasis added.

33 Hoeksema, "The Synod of 1951," *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 8 (January 15, 1952): 176–77, emphasis added.

34 Hoeksema, "The Synod of 1951," *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 7 (January 1, 1952): 158.

35 Hoeksema, "The Synod of 1951," *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 5 (December 1, 1951): 103.

Canons II,8 we have the presentation of the counsel of God in its execution, that is, the application of the blessings of salvation...The unconditionality of salvation does not refer only to election, but also to the application of all the blessings of salvation to the elect only. And therefore also in this article of the confession the promise of God is sure, and for the elect, and unconditional.³⁶

In other words, the opponents of the Declaration were willing to grant that God's decree was unconditional, but *how* God realized his promise in time was conditional. God's unconditional decree also decreed a conditional experience of the promise. God decreed the realization of the promise in such a way as that God would give man grace for man to fulfill the demand of God's promise, and then man would enjoy his salvation.

But the promise is absolutely unconditional. The realization of the promise is absolutely unconditional. The promise, as it is realized in time, cannot differ from the promise as it was decreed by God. Said Hoeksema,

The promise in the decree is the same as the promise in its execution. If the promise in the decree is absolutely free and sovereign, only founded upon God's own sovereign will, it must be the same in its execution...If the promise in the decree is absolutely unconditional...it must

be unconditional in its application. For what God decrees He also fulfills. And He fulfills it in the very manner that He has decreed it.³⁷

And this:

Just as the beginning of the realization of the promise, namely, that the Holy Spirit will dwell in us, is sovereign and unconditional; just as in that realization of the promise in its beginning God is absolutely first, and man always follows; so also in all the rest of the application of our salvation by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the elect God is, and remains, first, and we follow...

The whole of salvation, therefore, from beginning to end, is absolutely unconditional and sovereign. God is always first, and man always follows.³⁸

What did *absolutely* unconditional mean to the fathers in 1953? That God is and remains first. God is *absolutely* first. Man always follows. That is the experience of the covenant. That is the promise.

And now, this is our heritage as Reformed Protestants. Now, armed for the battle, let us war and not grow weary in the fight! God has restored unto us his truth and has caused us to rest in him. God will have our hands to war and our fingers to fight, for the battle belongs to him.

—LB

CONTRIBUTION

“GIVE ME GOD”

We find ourselves in early June of 1953 as Rev. Herman Hoeksema addresses the members of the curatorium, candidates for the ministry, and the rest of what we assume to be a very packed audience in First Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.¹ By way of introduction Hoeksema begins his lecture by addressing the elephant in the room: the

“split.” At that point in the history of 1953, there was no official split in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC).

Hoeksema is careful to say that if there is no split, there may not be a split. However, if there is a split (and Hoeksema believed there was), then it must happen—immediately. There were those at that time who accused Hoeksema of forcing the split of 1953. In fact, members

36 Hoeksema, “The Synod of 1951,” *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 5 (December 1, 1951): 104, emphasis added.

37 Hoeksema, “The Promise According to the Confessions,” *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 21 (September 1, 1951): 486.

38 Hoeksema, “The Promise According to the Confessions,” *Standard Bearer* 29, no. 2 (October 15, 1952): 29–30.

1 Herman Hoeksema, “The Freedom of Man and His Responsibility,” the rector's address delivered on June 9, 1953, at the commencement exercises of the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, https://oldpathsrecordings.com/wp-content/uploads/sermons/2020/09/01-The-Freedom-of-Man-and-His-Responsibility-6_9_53.mp3. All quotations from Hoeksema in the article are from this lecture. There is a transcript of the lecture entitled “Man's Freedom and Responsibility” in *Standard Bearer* 29, no. 18 (July 1, 1953): 412–17.

in the PRC today still believe that. I can recall talking to one of my neighbors on Moelker Avenue in Walker a few years ago who told me that the split of '53 was a matter of personalities. In the minds of many, '53 never should have happened. If only Hoeksema and Ophoff were not so domineering and insistent, then we all could have stayed in the same church.

Not so for Hoeksema.

"If there is a split, it must come... And no one can ever prevent it."

What does Hoeksema mean by "split" as he addresses the matter in his introduction? He is very clear: there is a "different sound" being heard in the churches. What was that troublesome sound in 1953? That different sound, Hoeksema says, is "expressed in many different ways, but principally [it] concentrates around a new emphasis in our churches on *man* rather than on *GOD*."²

I can hear the unbeliever of 1953 say, "This is a very unfair and uncharitable description of what is going on in the churches. Really? Hoeksema wants to make this a matter of our ministers' emphasizing man? Our ministers do not preach man! They preach Christ and grace and election! Perhaps they do not preach as strongly as Hoeksema, but to say that they emphasize man is just not true."

Observe two aspects of what Hoeksema says.

First, the false doctrine of 1953 was expressed in "many different ways." In other words, there were many buzzwords to identify the "different sound." Those words included *condition*, *man's activity*, *what man must do*, *man's responsibility*, and the like. Those buzzwords are fundamentally the same ones used today in the PRC, except for the word *condition*, which was used explicitly and frequently back then. *Man's responsibility* today is what he must do to be saved.

Second, the difference was a matter of "emphasis."³ Do not be tricked by this. We hear today that it is okay to have preaching that places an equal emphasis upon man and upon God. We must be balanced in our preaching. Some even say that the difference between the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Reformed Protestant Churches is simply a matter of emphasis.

But the matter of emphasis for Hoeksema is the difference between the lie and the truth. Hoeksema presents two opposites: man and God. If man is preached, God cannot

be preached. And if God is not preached, the people perish. That is how serious this matter of emphasis was and is.

Reverend Koole of the present PRC is a fan of giving man his due. He writes,

Something was yet required of them [those who heard the gospel], namely, a response, the proper response to the call of the gospel, which is to say, heart-felt repentance to be expressed in the one instance and faith as believing in the other (two sides of the same coin). And such a response is not a nothing, it is something...

It is the solemn responsibility to be laid by the gospel preacher upon everyone who comes under the gospel call. And until one is willing to express this faith and believing under the promiscuous call of the gospel, one cannot consider himself to be saved.⁴

The clear emphasis of Koole's entire response, and particularly of this quotation, is man's moral responsibility to respond with repentance and active faith to the gospel. Man is set forth as the one who must choose whether or not he will believe the gospel. Man, not God, is made to be the deciding factor in salvation. "Until one is willing to express this faith... one cannot consider himself to be saved." This is that "different sound" that Hoeksema heard in 1953 at which he trembled.

Hoeksema connects the "different sound" heard in his day with what he remembers hearing in 1924 from the Christian Reformed Church. The charge that Hoeksema received for his repudiation of common grace and his biblical insistence on sovereign, particular grace was that he was one-sided. His theology did not give sufficient emphasis to man and what man must do. In 1924 the emphasis was on man. In 1953 the emphasis was on man. Today in the PRC the emphasis is emphatically on man. When she hears "GOD IS GOD" as proclaimed by the Reformed Protestant Churches, the PRC returns the same charges upon our doctrine. Consider the blatant fact that in all our exchanges with the PRC these past few years that whenever the PRC has heard our cry for GOD and GOD ALONE, the PRC always responds by writing and preaching about MAN. Her knee-jerk reaction to GOD is to kick and say, "NO, MAN."

2 The emphasis is Hoeksema's. All words of Hoeksema that receive italics and capitalization underscore Hoeksema's sometimes actual yelling emphasis in the lecture.

3 Professor Engelsma has repeatedly defended the PRC today in order to delegitimize the Reformed Protestant Churches by insisting that the PRC has no false doctrine on the books (even though she does), and therefore she cannot be a false church. For Engelsma what warrants a split is that the church must officially adopt false doctrine. By this line of thinking, Engelsma delegitimizes the split of 1953. In 1953 there was only true doctrine on the books, yet there still was a split. Hoeksema viewed splits differently. There is a split when there are two different sounds *in the preaching*, regardless of what is decided at synod.

4 Kenneth Koole, "Response [to Professor D. Engelsma]," *Standard Bearer* 96, no. 4 (November 15, 2019): 87.

This “different sound” Hoeksema says is “connected with my lecture.” Indeed, it was not merely connected with his lecture, but the “different sound” was also fundamental to his lecture. Without this “different sound” there would be no occasion for this lecture, no need to address his audience with rebukes and warnings. Over against this “different sound,” which is also now the popular sound in the PRC today, we must hear the doctrine of God found in Hoeksema’s lecture, “The Freedom of Man and His Responsibility.”

Ironically, though Hoeksema’s title is about man, the content of the lecture is overflowing with God—to the exclusion of man.

With style, grace, and oratory excellence, Hoeksema lays out his subject most profoundly. The question answered in the first section of the lecture is simply, what is man’s responsibility in light of the sovereignty of God? Without a doubt, man is responsible. *Responsibility* means that it is man’s ability and obligation to respond to God’s no and God’s yes. Naturally, Hoeksema explores man in the state of rectitude, in his fallen state, and in the state of perfection.

Over against the notion that the relationship between man’s freedom and his responsibility is like two parallel lines, two tracks, where man acts on his side and God acts on his side,⁵ Hoeksema presents the Reformed view of the relationship thus:

The real and scriptural conception of the relation between man’s responsibility and man’s freedom to the sovereign counsel of God is this: that that freedom and that counsel of God and that responsibility of man are *hemmed in* from every side by the counsel of God.

What stands out in Hoeksema’s quotation is that the counsel of God is controlling. Man’s freedom and responsibility are completely controlled by God’s counsel. As a moral creature, man is *dependent* upon that counsel. Wherever man goes, whatever man does and says, the counsel of God hems man in. Therefore, man may not so much as think without that counsel. God’s counsel, therefore, is preeminent and must control whatever we say about man.

How may we then describe man’s freedom and responsibility? Thus:

Whatever God’s counsel and whatever God’s almighty providence determines with regard to

man, [man] is nevertheless always the conscious and moral and willing subject of all his actions.

To demonstrate this, Hoeksema quotes from Isaiah 10:15: “Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, or as if the staff should lift up itself, as if it were no wood.” Though the king of Assyria felt himself free as one who held an axe and was free to cut down any tree that he pleased, God describes the king and therefore all men as tools in his hand. The axe, the saw, the rod, and the staff are analogous to men. Man thinks himself free from God as though man may act apart from the Almighty. But it is not man who hews with the axe, cuts with the saw, or lifts up the staff. On the contrary, God holds the instruments, and man does God’s will whether willingly or unwillingly. Again, the eternal counsel of God hems man in and limits him.

Though the section of the lecture regarding man in the state of rectitude and in his fallen state is beautiful and full of profundity, I must briefly summarize. Man’s state as upright before the fall was more than what is described in Isaiah 10:15. Adam had the love of God and the willing desire to serve God freely. Adam possessed righteousness, knowledge, and holiness. In the state in which God created Adam, he always said yes to God’s yes, but Adam had the capacity to say no. He had the ability to sin. Adam’s freedom was rooted in himself and not in the higher freedom that all of God’s elect have, which freedom is rooted in the Son of God.

Man in his fallen state is responsible for his corruption, remains a conscious and willing agent in all of his actions, and has no ability or desire to love God or to believe his gospel. The whole human race is guilty before God: it remains under the law to love and to do God’s will but always refuses and is therefore liable to eternal punishment.

Throughout this section Hoeksema contrasts the Reformed faith with Pelagianism and Arminianism. Around the forty-minute mark, he summarizes what a Pelagian and an Arminian are. They are those who always put the emphasis upon man rather than upon God. Remember that earlier in Hoeksema’s lecture he has pointed out that this was precisely the “different sound” heard in the churches. This was an explicit charge to some of the ministers in Hoeksema’s own denomination

5 The then double-track-theologian Rev. Ronald Van Overloop supported the corrupt Christian Reformed view of God’s sovereignty in his sermon “Calling toward the Canaanites,” preached in Grace Protestant Reformed Church on November 29, 2020. Describing God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility, Van Overloop preached, “Two rails. They go side by side. In the wisdom of God—his sovereignty, our responsibility.” A protest against the litany of false doctrine found in this sermon never saw the light of day. And the sermon, especially this quotation, still remains un-condemned in the PRC and thus meets the approval of not only those who heard the sermon but also of the whole denomination.

that for them to emphasize man over God is to be Pelagian and Arminian. Makes no difference. And you must choose either-or: man or God. You cannot have both. Hear Hoeksema:

I always say, beloved, "Give me God." If I must make the choice, if I must make the choice to lose man or lose God, let me lose man. All right to me. No danger. GIVE ME GOD!! THAT'S REFORMED. And that's especially Protestant Reformed. Give me God. There's no salvation in man.

And with this quotation we condemn the entire apostate denomination that is the PRC. The members must choke on these words. Yea, Hoeksema's blood cries from the ground against them. But he being dead yet speaks today with the testimony that God is GOD, and man is nothing. I ask the reader to consider what is heard from Protestant Reformed pulpits and written in Protestant Reformed magazines. Are GOD and all his glory and beauty the only things about which you are hearing? One does not have to look far into Protestant Reformed preaching and writing to see how far the churches have departed from this thoroughly Reformed view that Hoeksema promotes in this quotation. And if God is not written in every article and preached in every sermon to the absolute abasement of man, then all you have is Pelagianism, Arminianism, and modernism.

Out of the backdrop of what Hoeksema calls the "problem" of man's moral responsibility and freedom as they are bound up in God's counsel, he begins to address the "problem" as it pertains to the Christian. For Hoeksema the "problem" is not solved when one talks about man as justified by sovereign grace. Indeed, that man who is justified by grace only is still totally depraved by nature.

Nor, beloved, is the problem solved when you simply speak of the counsel of God and the providence of God in relation to man's freedom and responsibility. Or when you speak simply of man's total depravity and corruption. There's still another fact. The problem still remains when you speak of sovereign grace and responsibility and moral freedom. Also, that problem remains. Don't you see, in all scripture *and against all scripture* has been raised the objection that God by sovereign grace justifies the *ungodly*? That's salvation. GOD justifies *the ungodly*. And he gives no account.

Understand what Hoeksema is saying here. Even when you speak of man as the object of God's favor, his elect, God does whatsoever he pleases. Man's fallen state as

totally depraved is not changed when God saves him. God justifies *the ungodly*. God does not justify the godly. That ungodly man has only sin. And even after being justified, man remains ungodly. God does all this by pure, sovereign grace without giving any reason or account for his verdict to declare his elect as righteous, even as he is righteous.

This position, that even the Christian is totally depraved post-justification, is explicitly denied by the PRC today. Bruinsma, McGeown, Cammenga, and many others have stated their views contrary to scripture in so many words. Why do they deny that the elect are totally depraved? Because they want to emphasize what "He, *the Holy Spirit*, is able to make of a man."⁶ And they want to have man active in performing all kinds of good works that please God and which are the way unto his fellowship. If the elect are still totally depraved, then they are completely dependent upon Christ. If the elect are no longer totally depraved, then they have some ability to do the good, something with which to cooperate with God, and thus to be their own party in God's covenant.

Hoeksema goes further. He says,

Don't you see that justification means exactly that the justified ones are not responsible for their sin? That's justification! I am not responsible for my sins. I AM NOT! CHRIST IS! CHRIST is responsible for my sin. I cast them all on him by faith.

And don't you ever tell the congregation they are responsible for their sin. God forbid. You're a bad shepherd if you do. You must tell the congregation to cast their sins upon Christ! Tell them they are no longer responsible for their sins, tell them that by all means.

You say that's a dangerous doctrine? Of course it isn't. Seems that way. It isn't. Seems that way. That will always be the objection. That was always the biblical objection against justification...

What will you tell your congregation? "Yes, yes, yes, but, but, but"? God forbid! Will you tell your congregation, "Ohhhh, you're not responsible for your sin; Christ is responsible. BUT, but, but you must do something too"? God forbid. YOU KILL 'EM! You'll kill the people of God by such preaching...

The Heidelberg Catechism says, does not this doctrine of absolute free justification that casts all the responsibility of my individual sins upon Christ not make me careless and profane? [The Catechism gives] this answer: it's impossible. Why is it impossible? Because he that is justified by grace is also sanctified by grace. And,

⁶ Kenneth Koole, "What Must I Do...?", *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 1 (October 1, 2018): 6.

therefore, [he] says spontaneously when you tell him, “Now you can sin as you please,” “GOD FORBID! How shall I that am dead to sin live any longer therein?” That is the answer, beloved. That’s the Christian’s responsibility, if you please. The Christian is free in the highest possible sense because his freedom is no longer rooted in his own free will but is rooted in the Son of God. If the Son of God shall make you free, then you are free indeed. That is freedom!

Don’t you ever give the congregation a moral lesson. What you must have is the freedom of Jesus Christ our Lord. When you preach that gospel, the gospel of the cross, there’s no danger of leading the congregation in ways of laxity and passivity.

Included within the corrupt “different sound” of Hoeksema’s day in 1953 was a pollution of the doctrine of justification. That is why he brings up justification at the close of this lecture. No longer was it heard off the pulpits that we are not responsible for our sins. The opposite was heard. Moral lessons were preached. The clamor was to get instruction on how we must live, practical preaching. Justification was lost.

I ask the current Protestant Reformed member, “When was the last time you were told in the preaching that you are not responsible for your sins?” More than likely, you have never even heard this off the pulpit. And if you have not heard it, you have never heard the doctrine of justification. You have never heard the gospel. This beautiful doctrine that Hoeksema expounds has been buried in Protestant Reformed history. Justification cannot be heard anymore. It is not wanted anymore. The clamor again today is for practical preaching. Moral lessons. Preaching that stimulates activity. Christ is displaced, and man gets pride of place.

The then Rev. Ronald Cammenga was not only a stranger to this doctrine of Hoeksema, but Cammenga was also an ardent opponent of that doctrine. Hoeksema’s position was that justification means that the elect are not responsible for their sins. Christ is. Cammenga’s position in 1997 and still today is that the elect *are* responsible for their sins.⁷ Christ is not.

Unashamedly, Professor Cammenga says in his protest to the Protestant Reformed Synod of 2017, “We must confess our sins and that begins with taking responsibility for our sins... We must take responsibility for our sins...”⁸ Although Cammenga mentions in this protest that his 1997 sermon on Proverbs 28:13 was preached as a “preparatory sermon,” this is not correct. Professor Cammenga thinks he can take refuge in the imagination that it was a preparatory sermon because apparently it is okay to preach more about man’s responsibility in a preparatory sermon rather than in a Lord’s supper sermon (which his colleagues today all agree with). A loving defender of Hoeksema’s theology, especially as it is found in his lecture, recalls more accurately as a living witness to that atrocity that Reverend Cammenga’s sermon was preached as a Lord’s supper sermon. Yet his error was all the worse on the occasion of the Lord’s supper. In the preaching prior to the celebration of the sacrament, which literally screams “Christ is responsible for all my sins” (see Matt. 26:28), the congregation at Southwest Protestant Reformed Church in 1997 was told, “You are still responsible for your sins.”

Hoeksema says, “No, sir.” The Catechism says, “No, sir.” Scripture says, “No, sir.”

God’s people were slaughtered by Cammenga’s sermon. Their eyes were taken off Christ’s perfect atonement and were fastened upon themselves and their own sins. The members of the congregation went to their homes that day unjustified. And it is no wonder that the issue was raised again in 2017 in order to show that the doctrine of Hoeksema and the beautiful truth of justification were no longer the doctrine of the current ministers of the PRC.

To the lost sheep still found in the house of Israel, let Hoeksema’s lecture be a warning to you. The ancient landmarks have been removed. The truth perishes in the streets; there is no cry for the gospel. God solemnly testifies to you to get out! Join yourself to the true church where the gospel of sovereign grace is maintained and where GOD is heard to the utter abasement of man.

Soli deo gloria.

—Elijah Roberts

⁷ Proverbs 28:13 is the text Cammenga appealed to in 1997, 2017, and 2023 for his false doctrine. In Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church at the Lord’s supper service on August 13, 2023, Professor Cammenga preached a man-centered sermon about man and man’s responsibility. The sermon on Proverbs 28:13 entitled “True Repentance” can be found at <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=813231944414568>. Instead of preaching the gospel of free justification (which Proverbs 28:13 teaches), Cammenga preached man and what man must do to be forgiven. What stands in the way of forgiveness is all of the sinner’s sin. Rather than forgiveness being first and the work of God in Jesus Christ controlling the sermon, all the congregation heard that morning was sin and how man’s works of confession and repentance are the way unto God’s fellowship. Cammenga finds himself in the group of “bad shepherds” that Hoeksema condemned in 1953.

⁸ “Protest of Prof. Ronald Cammenga,” in *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America 2017*, 270.



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Byron Center, MI 49315

FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL

And [Jesus] said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. — Matthew 18:3

Yes! Serious! Urgent! “Except ye be converted...ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” So said the king of that kingdom. So he addressed all his hearers. So all must become!

To be converted our Lord defined as becoming as little children. To be converted is to humble yourself as the little child whom the Lord had set in the midst of his audience. There before the people’s very eyes, he had given to them a living picture of what it means to be converted. To be converted is to humble yourself as a little child.

Oh, you will say to me, and you would have said to the Lord, “But, Lord, to be converted means to turn from my sins! To be converted means to be sorry for my sins. To be converted means to actively turn from those sins. To be converted is all about the conscious activity of man.”

And Christ would tell you, “To be converted is to humble yourself like that little child and to become as a little child.”

Oh, please, do not misunderstand the Lord when he said to humble yourselves and become as little children. He did not mean that children are the picture of humility, and you must likewise imitate the humility of little children. No, no. You must *become* as little children. When you talk about conversion, you want to talk about what man must do. You want to talk about man’s obligations, responsibilities, and callings. When you come to the subject of conversion, you are thrilled to be able to talk about man’s activity. And when you talk about conversion, you say that man *must* do these things *first* in order to experience the blessings of God, and you say that man *must* do these if he would experientially enter the kingdom. Then you are very far from the kingdom, as far as many in Christ’s audience were far from the kingdom.

That little child was already in the kingdom. Whether the Lord took an infant or a child, it really makes no difference. The child could not discern the Lord’s body! And Christ said that children believe in him. They have faith. They have faith because they are in the kingdom. They are in the kingdom without their acts of conversion, without their acts of repentance, and without their fulfilling any responsibilities. They are in the kingdom because of God’s election. They are in the kingdom because Christ would die for their sins, their sin in Adam and their own actual sins, many of which they still had to commit. They were in the kingdom by sovereign grace alone and without any activities being first performed on their part.

And except you be converted and become as little children, you shall not enter. Oh, yes, you must realize that you do not enter by your repentance either. You do not enter experientially or in your conscious experience by your repentance or your act of conversion. You enter because of the grace of God alone; because he chose you; because he regenerated you; because he brought you into the kingdom and made you a citizen of that kingdom according to his eternal choice of you. When you are brought to that knowledge, you have been converted. Then you delight in the God of your salvation. Then you weep for your sins. If you enter consciously into the kingdom by your repentance, then you have not been converted, and you will not enter into the kingdom, for you are yet an adult. And except you become as a little child, you will perish as an adult outside the kingdom.

—NJL