



SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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

Deuteronomy 33:29

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NAZARENE

And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene. — Matthew 2:23

The Christmas story as it is related in the gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke is beautiful and cause for rejoicing by the church of Jesus Christ. It is not a story that is beautiful because the details of the story are appealing to man. Man can only find that story appealing if man gives the story a bit of air freshener and a makeover. Man must make the barn smell good. He must make the hay clean. He must wash the animals and brush them. He must ignore the sign of the manger. And he must make the baby Jesus mute—as no baby ever was—so that “no crying he makes.” That story as remade by man can be proclaimed as peace and goodwill to all men.

The details of the Christmas story all speak—every one of them—of the lowliness of Jesus’ birth and the wretchedness into which he was born, a wretchedness that came upon him because of man’s sin. In order to save us, Jesus had to be judged guilty by God for the sins of all his people. And because Jesus had been judged guilty, he was born into the worst of circumstances so that there in the ugliness, in the stench, and in the uncleanness of the barn, of the manger, and of the animals, was revealed the beauty of the grace of God. The only thing that is beautiful about the Christmas story is the beautiful grace of God that is solely responsible for the coming of that babe of Bethlehem and the grace of God that is shining brightly against the dark backdrop of the ugly scene of the manger.

So it was also for Christ his whole life. He was the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He went all his life from the manger to the cross; from the deep humility of the barn, he passed into the deep darkness of his hellish agonies on the cross. And this descent began as soon as he returned with Joseph and Mary from Egypt. God brought them back to Nazareth so that Jesus might be called a Nazarene.

What men call you, how they refer to you, expresses what they think of you and the honor that they either bestow upon you or that they withhold from you. And I ask you, does not what men call you affect you very deeply? What men call you can damage you for the rest of your life. What men call you sinks deeply into your soul and lodges itself in your heart. And though many years later the pain of what men called you is not so sharp as it

was when they first said it, the remembrance of what they called you never goes away.

They called Jesus a Nazarene.

That Jesus was called a Nazarene refers very simply to the city of Jesus’ origin. Like the Bible calls Elijah the Tishbite, Amos from Tekoa, and David from Bethlehem, the Bible calls Jesus a Nazarene. He was from the town of Nazareth.

When Jesus was born, it did not appear at first that he would be called a Nazarene, but it appeared at first that he would be called a Bethlehemite. He was born in Bethlehem, and the prophet wrote, “But thou, Beth-lehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting” (Mic. 5:2). Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not in Nazareth. God moved a whole world so that his Son could be born in Bethlehem. God moved Caesar Augustus, the emperor in Rome, to give a decree that all the world should be taxed, and that decree was made in Judea when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. God moved Joseph to take his espoused wife, Mary, being great with child, from Nazareth, their hometown, down into Bethlehem, the city of David, because Joseph was of the house and lineage of David.

There in Bethlehem the angels sang of the glory of God at the birth of the savior. They sang of peace on earth and goodwill toward men. There in Bethlehem the angels appeared to the shepherds, and the shepherds went to Bethlehem to see the baby lying in the manger. And the shepherds returned from Bethlehem, and they noised abroad to the entire countryside that a savior had been born in Bethlehem—the son of David, which is Christ the Lord.

Some two years after Jesus had been born, he was still living in Bethlehem, this time in a house. And there in that house, wise men came from the East, having first gone to the palace of Herod. Having been guided by the star to the house in Bethlehem, they arrived and worshiped—not Mary—the baby. And they gave him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

It was only after the wise men came that the baby had to flee from Bethlehem. Joseph, being warned of God

in a dream, took the baby and the mother and fled into Egypt because Herod sought the child's life. And it was there, out of Egypt, that God called his Son. And Joseph came into the land of Israel, but being afraid to go back to Bethlehem and being told by God in a dream, he went to Nazareth. And so Jesus was called a Nazarene.

His parents were born in Nazareth. They lived there. They were married there. It was their hometown, and it would be Jesus' hometown too. He grew up there. He learned there. He attended the synagogue there. And that is, too, what the Jews called him: Jesus the Nazarene.

You understand, it is not merely the point of the text that Jesus was from Nazareth. That was plain enough. But the point is that Jesus shall be *called* a Nazarene.

What was Nazareth? Nazareth was not a town of any distinguished history. Nazareth was not like Bethlehem, about which the prophet Micah spoke with such glory: out of Bethlehem would come the governor, so that if he came from Bethlehem, everybody would know that he was the governor, whose goings forth were from everlasting! Nazareth was not like Bethel, where the patriarch Jacob had made his pillow of stones and where God had appeared to him in a dream of heaven opened and of the ladder with angels ascending and descending. Nazareth was not like Jerusalem, the city of David and the home of the temple. The city was Nazareth—a town of apparently recent origin, a town of no particular importance in the history of the nation, and a town of no significance either in the current life of the nation. Nathanael, the Israelite with no guile, said it best, "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). In Nazareth there was no religious university. There was no important synagogue. There were no great teachers. Nazareth was a forsaken collection of hovels in the hill country of Galilee, economically depressed, the epitome of the basic, crude, or backward life.

"He shall be called a Nazarene."

A label.

A stamp.

A label or a stamp is intended to summarize one's entire character or in a few words to characterize a person. The purpose is to be able with that label or stamp to discount and to dismiss you. When Jesus was called a Nazarene, that was not merely intended to express Jesus' origin or to express the distinction between this Jesus and some other Jewish boy in the nation of Israel who may have been given the name Jesus. *Nazarene* was intended to be a stamp to express in a single word the hatred and the loathing for *Jesus*. *Nazarene* was a label, a stamp, that was intended to be the answer to all that he said and all that his mighty works declared him to be in order to discount and to dismiss him.

When someone labels you, that is called an *ad hominem* argument. *Ad hominem* is a Latin phrase that means

against the person. That is a rhetorical trick in the realm of debate and theological argument that is used to answer someone whose arguments and words you have no interest in answering and whose arguments and words you cannot answer. And that *ad hominem* comes from a bad spirit.

On the one hand, the label is designed to give cover to the one who uses it. It is true, after all, that Jesus was from Nazareth. But on the other hand, behind the label *Nazarene* stood the hatred, the dismissiveness, and the loathing of the one who used it.

People do that with last names. They do that with physical characteristics. They do that with tendencies. They do that with origins and with races. Men have done that all through history. It is the old, old trick. They did that with the name Christian in the beginning. They did that with Luther and Calvin. They said of Hoeksema that he was one-sided, an Anabaptist, and a hyper-Calvinist. And they say today, "Antinomian." They did that with Jesus too. It was their answer to him, and it expressed their hatred for him.

Jesus was not born in Nazareth. The Jews all knew that. They knew who Joseph and Mary were. They knew that this precocious, young boy was a theologian of the theologians, who at age twelve could debate with all the lawyers and the rabbis in the temple and who could ask and answer all the hard questions. They knew that Joseph was a righteous man and that Mary was a believer. The angels proclaimed baby Jesus at his birth. The shepherds noised abroad the announcement of the coming of the Christ. John the Baptist was Christ's herald, and John declared before all Israel that Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Christ declared by his authoritative words and mighty deeds that he was the Christ, so that he needed no other announcement.

Jesus Christ made the blind to see. He made the lame to walk. He healed the sick. He preached the gospel to the poor. He set at liberty the captives. He said, "If you do not believe me for my words, believe me for my works' sake." And when he came into Nazareth, he read a prophecy in the synagogue:

18. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,
19. To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.
20. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him.

21. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.
22. And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. (Luke 4:18–22)

Yes, such gracious words. The law came by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ! All these things declared plainly that Jesus was the Christ. All these things declared plainly that a man must believe in him; that a man must eat and drink him, or that man has no life in him. All these things testified that a man must become united to Jesus Christ. All these things plainly said that Christ alone is the way, the truth, and the life. These things all declared that a man who believes in Jesus lives and will never die.

And over against all of Jesus' gracious words and all his wonderful works, the Jews dismissed him with the label *Nazarene*. All his life that contemptuous sobriquet dogged him. Some would say, "He is Isaiah" or "He is Jeremiah" or "He is John the Baptist come back from the dead." But mostly they said with a sneer, "He is a Nazarene."

They even said that in Jesus' own hometown. They were too proud of their forsaken collection of hovels in the hill country of Galilee to use the word *Nazarene* itself, but they said the substance of it. They showed all the contempt and the loathing and the hatred that stood behind that label *Nazarene* when they said after his testimony that God had anointed him, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

When the soldiers sought Jesus in the garden, and in order to express all their wicked intentions and to excuse all their evil deeds and their treacherous and traitorous planning, they said that they sought "Jesus of Nazareth" (John 18:7). Even the worldly, unbelieving Pilate understood what *Nazarene* meant; and when he made his accusation to be hung over Jesus' head, he wrote, "Here is Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

If Jesus was from Nazareth, he was *not* from Bethlehem. And if he was not from Bethlehem, he could not be the Messiah. If he was from Nazareth, all he could ever be was the offspring of an adulterous relationship between two scions of the disgraced house of David. He never could be the Christ. And with a single word, the Jews dismissed the babe of Bethlehem, the son of David, and the Son of God, as a hick, a rube, an imposter, a fraud, and a blasphemer. And they nailed Jesus to a tree to curse him.

By that name *Nazarene* they declared that he was worthless for salvation, worthless to bring the promise of God, and worthless to establish the kingdom and the covenant. And though men do not use the word any longer, they still in deed call him a Nazarene whenever they displace him and his perfect work as the only work necessary for salvation.

Of this the prophets prophesied. There is no trouble in determining what it means that he was called a Nazarene, but what does it mean that it was "spoken by the prophets" that he shall be called a Nazarene?

Anyone who is acquainted with the Old Testament knows that one will not find anywhere in the Old Testament the words "he shall be called a Nazarene." They are not in Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel. The words are not in any of the minor prophets, the law, the psalms, or any of the writings. The words are not found in the Old Testament.

There is one passage. It is Isaiah 11:1: "There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots." The word "Branch" is a translation of the Hebrew word *Nazareth*. If you would translate this verse the way it sounds to the ear, you would translate it this way: "There shall come a Nazarene out of the root of Jesse." That word *Nazarene* in Isaiah 11:1 means a little shoot out of the stump of a tree that has been cut down and left for dead.

Have you ever seen a tree in the woods or maybe on your property, and that tree has no canopy left? The bugs have gotten to the canopy and devoured it, and the tree is rotten and dead. So the owner of the property cuts down the tree and leaves only the stump in the ground. After a few years of sitting there with the rain falling on it and the snow covering it, a little shoot springs out of the stump of that hacked-down tree. That is a *nazarene*.

When someone sees that little shoot come out of the stump, he looks at the shoot and says, "That will never amount to anything." And the man despises that little shoot—that *nazarene*—that comes out of the stump of that cut-down tree.

So with the word about the branch that would come out of the stump of Jesse, not only Isaiah prophesied that Jesus would be a Nazarene, but also all the prophets prophesied that "he shall be called a Nazarene." For all the prophets prophesied that Jesus would be despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

Men, who glory in appearances, would despise Jesus. They would dismiss all his words. They would ignore all his works. They would only repeat that little label that they had invented in clever unbelief to characterize Jesus and to stamp him as contemptible. All the prophets prophesied that. Man does not accept his savior. Man loathes his savior. In loathing him, man ridicules him. In ridiculing the savior, man dismisses Jesus in a single word. The prophets, from Genesis to Malachi, all said that. And they said that because God said that.

The main thing about the fact that Jesus was called a Nazarene is not that man called him that but that God called Jesus a Nazarene. Men used that label to express their contempt of Jesus. But God called Jesus a Nazarene because a sinner must be shamed. A sinner must be

dismissed. God dismisses the sinner with a single word. It does not matter what that man's life says outwardly as men can see it. It does not matter how great that man may be or what that man's accomplishments may be in this life. All the works that a man does, his accomplishments, words, church membership, and outwardly pleasing life in the world do not matter, and the last word about him is *sinner*. With that single word, man must be dismissed. He must be dismissed in this life, and he will be dismissed in eternity. God calls man as God called Jesus—a Nazarene—because the sinner can only be despised. And God called Jesus a Nazarene, and God controlled all the despising of Christ and ultimately the cross because God had judged Christ guilty for all the sins of all his people.

And that little *nazarene*—that little shoot that comes up out of the hewn-down stump—has one other meaning. It means head or representative. Out of that stump came that little shoot, and that little shoot represented the only thing that was living in the whole nation of Israel, the whole line of Adam, and the whole race of mankind. Only Christ had life. He had life of himself, and he gives that life to whomsoever he wills. There is no life in man, in an Israelite or in a Gentile; there is no life in a man or a woman or a child; there is no life in all the world apart from that little branch out of the stump of Jesse.

God called Jesus a Nazarene because God had judged Christ guilty for all the sins of all his people, so that Jesus Christ could pay for those sins of all God's people as their head. God had made Christ responsible for all those people. God had identified Christ with those people. And God had identified those people with Christ. He was one with them. They were Christ's. And because they were his, their sins were his. Because their sins were his, God judged Christ guilty. Because God had judged Christ guilty, God called Jesus a Nazarene. Because God called Jesus a Nazarene, God dismissed Jesus Christ. That is what Christ said in his agony on the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

By that death, the death of the Nazarene, God also accomplished salvation. Christ is worthless to men, but he is precious to God. Christ lives, and he poured out his life unto death. He made himself of no reputation and took on himself the form of a servant, and with his life he made the perfect sacrifice in obedience to God.

And having dismissed Jesus on the cross and raised him from the dead, God still says, "Jesus is a Nazarene." He was the only thing living in all the house of David and in the nation of Israel and indeed in all the world. And there was no life apart from Jesus Christ. It was because of him that the line of David still existed and that nation of Israel was still around in the world.

That is true historically. The root of David, of Jesse, of Israel, of Abraham, and of Adam also is Christ. He

was before all things. By him all things consist. And he appears as that little shoot in history. There was no life in Israel and in the whole line of the patriarchs apart from Jesus Christ. And also now that is true. There is no life in the whole world apart from Christ.

So the apostles preached Jesus. He was crucified and arose the third day; and fifty days after that, when all the Jews had gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost, Peter stood up and said, "I declare unto you Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God, whom ye took, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain, but whom God has raised up and made head over all!" Most glorious proclamation. The name that the Jews had sneeringly used to dismiss Jesus is declared to be the only name in which salvation is found.

The apostles raised a lame beggar, saying, "Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk" (Acts 3:6). That is man's salvation. *In Jesus' name* means union with Jesus Christ. Man's salvation consists in being joined to Jesus of Nazareth.

And when God joins you to Jesus of Nazareth by faith, forgives all your sins, and sanctifies you by his life-giving Spirit, then you, too, become a Nazarene. Not now in the eyes of God, but in the eyes of men do you become a Nazarene. This means that men will dismiss you. This means that when you speak the word of God and you live the word of God and you represent the word of God in the world by word and deed, so that the word that you speak clearly testifies the truth of the word of God, then men will despise you and in hatred will dismiss you with a label.

The false church stoned Stephen for preaching Jesus of Nazareth. The false church wrote off the whole Christian church before the Roman governor as the sect of the Nazarenes. If you are a Nazarene who is joined to Christ by a true and living faith, let that mind be in you that was also in him, a mind that will willingly and joyfully endure reproach for his sake. It is his reproach. When Jesus Christ converted Paul, the persecutor of the sect of the Nazarenes, on the road to Damascus and stood before Paul in his exalted glory in heaven, Jesus said, "Paul, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest." As Paul was dragging the Christians off to their trials and to their jail cells and to their deaths, he did that to Jesus of Nazareth. Because we are one with him who is the Nazarene, we become Nazarenes. And as Nazarenes we become the objects of men's ridicule and scorn and hatred. And men will label you with nasty, evil labels.

You cannot avoid that. Oh, I am not saying that you cannot avoid the reproach of the name. You can. It is possible for you and for me to avoid the reproach of being called a Nazarene. But we cannot do that without

denying Jesus Christ. If we can sit comfortably with those who have cast him out and those who have reproached his name or with those who by their silence and connivance are partakers of that sin in others, then it is because we are embarrassed of Jesus the Nazarene, and we say by our actions that we do not know that man. If you rebuked the unbelief of those who have cast out Christ or those who connive at that wickedness, would they sit with you? Would they not likewise cast you out? Yes, yes, you can avoid being a Nazarene but not without denying Jesus Christ. If you confess him, then you are associated with him. And then his reproach becomes yours.

And when unbelieving men show their hatred of Christ by dismissing those who confess him, then Jesus says, “Rejoice and be exceeding glad!” We celebrate

Christmas properly then, as a people who remember the birth of the Nazarene, by becoming Nazarenes ourselves. Not by trying to overcome the division and the hatred and the reproach that God put between the church and the world, between Christ and Satan, and between faith and unbelief but by bearing it. Bearing it as Jesus did, as a badge of honor. So that when the Jews said to Jesus, “We seek Jesus of Nazareth,” he said, “I am he!”

Our Father in heaven, we thank thee for the birth of Jesus, the Nazarene. And, Lord, we thank thee for joining us to him and making us glad with his salvation. So, Lord, make us glad when we suffer for his name’s sake, that we may bear that suffering as a badge of honor from our risen and exalted Lord. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

—NJL

EDITORIAL

PETE WON! NOW WHAT?

Introduction

In the unfolding demise of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), the Lord has yet again confronted the denomination with her false doctrine. I want to make that very clear. The Lord has confronted the Protestant Reformed denomination—her ministers and professors of theology, both current and emeriti; her elders; her deacons; and her people—with her departure from the truth. Both her clergy and her people were deaf to the warnings that had been given to them during the course of the doctrinal controversy that shook the Protestant Reformed Churches from about 2015 until 2021. They hardened themselves against every admonition, and they cast out Christ and his truth when they cast out faithful ministers of the gospel. They show themselves to be deaf to all the warnings that are still being issued on the pages of *Sword and Shield* against them, and it seems as though the ministers and professors in their sermons and writings are being driven down the steep slope to preach and write more and more of man.

The error of the Protestant Reformed Churches is that of conditional covenant fellowship. This error and its wide-ranging consequences for all of doctrine have been demonstrated on the pages of *Sword and Shield*. The Protestant Reformed denomination has corrupted the idea of

the covenant, justification, sanctification, the work of the Holy Spirit, repentance, faith, and the decree of God. That corruption is a wholesale abandonment of the truth that will continue.

How far the denomination will actually go in her reconstruction of theology is evident in an appeal to Classis East and Classis East’s decision, which are the occasion for this editorial. The Lord never leaves himself without a witness. And he has witnessed against the Protestant Reformed Churches yet again, no matter how compromised were the instruments of that witness. What the denomination has yet again revealed is that she is set on the course of apostasy, and she will not be turned from it. She is a very stubborn, old strumpet with a brazen forehead and a deeply entrenched spirit of apostasy.

That the Protestant Reformed denomination shows that she will not be turned is unsurprising. Church history testifies that the word of God runs like a stream that passes a place and does not return again. The word of God comes to churches, and it works the works of God—never returning to God void—and having accomplished God’s purpose, the word passes on, going to wherever God in his good pleasure sends it, there again to accomplish his sovereign will. God had raised up the Protestant Reformed Churches to stand in an evil day and to

confess God's sovereign, particular, and irresistible grace. The denomination stood over against common grace and the well-meant gospel offer and over against the idol that God loves all men, blesses all, and offers salvation to all. And now she bows down to an idol herself. She has forsaken her heritage. She is enamored of man and what man must do to be saved. And she is going to perish with that doctrine of man. It is also clear that with her false doctrine she has no right to exist as a separate denomination any longer. She is essentially no different from any number of Reformed denominations in the world that also teach what man must do to be saved. With that doctrine she is also being destroyed in the judgment of God. The word of Abijah to Jeroboam is the word of God to the Protestant Reformed Churches: "We keep the charge of the LORD our God; but ye have forsaken him...ye shall not prosper" (2 Chron. 13:11–12).

Necessary Background

What makes this abundantly clear is the recent decision of the Protestant Reformed Churches at the meeting of Classis East in October 2023 regarding an appeal by Mr. Peter VanDer Schaaf against a decision of Grandville Protestant Reformed Church's consistory to charge its emeritus minister, Rev. Kenneth Koole, with the sin of false doctrine. I was of a mind to publish the classical decision, but it has so little substance to it and is so full of politics and falsehoods that it would be a waste of space and paper.

A little history is in order for the reader. The Protestant Reformed Churches from 2015 until 2021 were in a doctrinal controversy over fellowship with God in the covenant. The issue was settled in 2021 when the Protestant Reformed Churches cruelly cast out those who had rebuked her for her errors. Every reader should know that in the Protestant Reformed Churches, the issue of fellowship with God in the covenant is settled. In the Protestant Reformed Churches, fellowship in the covenant is conditional. There is a sense in which man is first in repentance, and God responds to man. There are vital activities—believing and good works—that man performs before God blesses. I could go on, but the point has been made. The covenant of God in the Protestant Reformed Churches is a bilateral covenant in its maintenance and perfection. This issue is settled. If the protest and appeal and the decision of the Protestant Reformed Classis East that form the occasion for this editorial make any point at all, then they make that point.

In 2018 the Protestant Reformed Churches took a

synodical decision that at first appeared to solve the problem of the covenant and of God's fellowship and blessings. Many thought that the issue had been settled. I, for one, will freely admit that I said I could live with the decision. I thought at the time that the decision was weak, but I could live with it. Subsequently, two things about that decision have been revealed.

The first is that the decision was a compromise. The key compromise of the decision was the little phrase "and in the way of good works."¹ We have fellowship with God on the basis of what Christ has done, through faith, and in the way of good works. That little phrase relegated Christ to only one factor in our fellowship with God and made Christ's contribution merely the *basis* for fellowship. Christ was not actively by his Spirit giving to us fellowship with God, but Christ was a mere basis of fellowship. The fellowship with God came to the believer by the believer's act of faith—*active faith* is the code word—and through his good works. The 2018 synodical decision, in the end, was a bad decision. That decision allowed for the doctrine that is currently developing in the PRC: a fully bilateral covenant in its maintenance and realization.

The second thing that came out about the 2018 synodical decision is that the majority of the clergy did not want that decision, and the ministers and professors openly militated against it. The appellant, on whose appeal Classis East had to rule in October 2023, throughout his appeal openly militated against the Protestant Reformed synodical decision of 2018. The consistory of Grandville, to which he first protested, took note of that:

Of most significance, the Consistory maintains the fact that you are protesting the wrong body. Do you agree with the decision of Synod 2018, which states the following: "If we are truly justified by faith in Christ alone, then true faith cannot look to its works to help find or maintain assurance that is found in Christ alone"...If you do not agree with this statement, you must not protest the Grandville Consistory decision. You must protest the decision of Synod itself.²

The protestant did not agree with the decision of Synod 2018 and neither did most of the Protestant Reformed clergy, and they militated against the decision and are doing so to this day. This began shortly after the 2018 synod with a *Standard Bearer* editorial by Reverend Koole, in which he taught that "if a man would be saved, there is that which he *must* do."³ What he must do is faith.

1 *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* 2018, 74, 76.

2 Grandville Protestant Reformed Church, letter to Peter VanDer Schaaf, dated November 28, 2022, in response to protest dated August 15, 2022, in appeal to Classis East, 110, <https://www.prca.org/current/bulletins/finish/5-classis-east/654-appeal-of-pete-vds-sept-2023>.

3 Kenneth Koole, "What Must I Do?," *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 1 (October 1, 2018): 7.

This militating against the 2018 synodical decision continued with a series of *Standard Bearer* editorials by Reverend Koole on the theologian Herman Witsius, in which Reverend Koole presented Witsius and his conditional theology of the covenant as the solution to the doctrinal problems in the Protestant Reformed Churches.⁴

Shortly thereafter events unfolded that led to the formation of the Reformed Protestant Churches. It was Reverend Koole's writings on faith as that which man *must* do to be saved and his writings on works as that which man must do to be saved that directly led to the schism in the Protestant Reformed Churches, a fact that he has never admitted.

Don't Drown in a Mud Puddle

That series of articles about Herman Witsius spurred someone to protest to the consistory of Grandville Protestant Reformed Church, which had the oversight of Reverend Koole. The consistory condemned some of Koole's statements, and he issued a worthless apology in the *Standard Bearer*.⁵ It was this apology that spurred Mr. VanDer Schaaf to protest Grandville's decision. His protest finally made its way to Classis East of the Protestant Reformed Churches on September 13, 2023. The original protest to Grandville's consistory took almost two years to get to classis—not to synod but to classis. When the appeal finally got to Classis East in September, the matter was apparently so complicated that the classis needed another month so that its committee could prepare advice.

Beware, don't drown in a mud puddle!

Then in October, when the committee presented its advice to classis, the classis cleverly avoided the doctrinal issue and made the whole matter simply one of procedure. The committee wrote,

That Classis East sustain Mr. Peter VanderSchaaf's appeal that Grandville PRC's consistory erred when they made a judgment that Rev. Ken Koole was guilty of the public sin of teaching false doctrine *without proving this from Scripture or the confessions*.

Ground One: The decision of Grandville PRC's consistory to sustain a protest against Rev. Koole's writings in the *Standard Bearer* and to charge him with the public sin of false doctrine is based almost entirely on alleged contradictions by Rev. Koole of the decisions of Synod 2018, not

proven contradictions by Rev. Koole of Scripture and the confessions.

A consistory *may not* convict a minister of the sin of false doctrine solely on the basis of synodical decisions.⁶

Now that is a blatant lie. In the appeal that came to Classis East, Grandville in its letters to the protestant had appealed both to scripture and the confessions. Besides, the 2018 synodical decision, which Grandville used in its initial judgment, made appeals to scripture and the confessions. And still more, it is simply not true at all that in a Reformed church one cannot be convicted of false doctrine solely on the basis of a synodical decision. If synodical decisions are grounded on scripture and the confessions, then being convicted on a synodical decision *is* to be convicted on the ground of scripture and the confessions. Do you see the implication of what the committee wrote? Protestant Reformed synodical decisions are worthless. The ecclesiastical decisions do nothing and have no power, and that is particularly true with regard to the synodical decision of 2018, which was supposed to be the definitive statement about how believers have fellowship with God. The ministers in the PRC never wanted that decision, and now it is a worthless document that can never actually be used to convict anyone of false doctrine.

And what was Reverend Koole's fault? He had used "ambiguous" language. The classis wrote,

The decision of Grandville PRC's consistory to sustain a protest against Rev. Koole's writings in the *Standard Bearer* and to charge him with the public sin of false doctrine is based *only on certain ambiguous statements that Rev. Koole made in his writings*.

Rev. Koole may have used ambiguous and confusing language, which is unacceptable in a minister, which may warrant action by the consistory, and which may even warrant an apology to the readers whom he confused, but Grandville PRC's consistory did not prove that *by this* Rev. Koole was guilty of the serious sin of teaching false doctrine.⁷

Poor Reverend Koole. He can never seem to get his words right. He is always muddling about with ambiguous language.

But the classical committee lied. There was one thing that Reverend Koole was not in this instance and that

4 Kenneth Koole, "Herman Witsius: Still Relevant," *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 4 (November 15, 2020): 81–83. The series continued for four more issues and ended in *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 8 (January 1, 2021): 173–75.

5 Kenneth Koole, "Apology," *Standard Bearer* 98, no. 4 (November 15, 2021): 79–80.

6 Prof. R. Dykstra, Rev. M. McGeown, Rev. D. Holstege, Jon VanDyk, Ed Stouwie, John Flikkema III, "Recommendations [re the 'Appeal of Mr. PeterVanderSchaaf']," 2.

7 Prof. R. Dykstra, et al., "Recommendations [re the 'Appeal of Mr. PeterVanderSchaaf']," 3.

was ambiguous. He was deceptive. He used the ploy of quoting another man to state his own views. But he was not ambiguous. Reverend Koole, having previously cast off the theology of Herman Hoeksema regarding faith as a doing nothing for salvation, in his series on the relevance of Herman Witsius, was pleading for the conditional covenant in the PRC. The specific form of that conditional covenant is a conditional covenant experience. Herman Witsius expressed that in very clear language. No one can be taken seriously who argues that Herman Witsius was not a conditional covenant theologian. The form of his conditional covenant was nearly identical to the form of the conditional covenant in the PRC at present. It is a conditional covenant experience, an experience that comes to the believer by his act of faith and by his acts of obedience. In their promotion of this conditional covenant, Protestant Reformed ministers are always being told that they are using ambiguous language—not false, heretical, and wrong language—but merely ambiguous. The Protestant Reformed Churches, you remember, cannot have a false teacher or a heretic. The whole classical decision is laughable. It was just all about ambiguous language and bad procedure. The decision of Classis East was a clever avoidance of the doctrinal issue.

Doctrine Is the Issue

The issue before the classis was doctrine. Mr. VanDer Schaaf argued doctrine. He wrote, “I am convinced that your mistakes have raised important issues of doctrine and discipline.”⁸ The consistory of Grandville also argued doctrine:

Grandville Consistory’s primary concern was our own context as churches with regards to controversy that was (is) brewing at the time of these writings. Our present context was one which involved controversy with regards to the place and function of good works in salvation.⁹

The context was doctrinal; the appellant argued doctrine; the consistory argued doctrine. And the doctrine

could not be more serious: the covenant, faith, assurance, and really the entirety of the doctrine of salvation, and in the end the doctrine of God and his decree!

But the classis would not touch the doctrine with a ten-foot pole.

Though the classis faithlessly would not address the doctrine, there is in the PRC a doctrinal consequence of that decision. The doctrinal consequence is that the theology of Herman Witsius regarding the covenant is acceptable in the PRC. This means that the theology of conditional covenant experience as the doctrine of the PRC has been confirmed again. Pete won! His protest was a full-throated defense of Herman Witsius’ language and covenant doctrine. Herman Witsius to Pete is orthodox. And Witsius’ theology

should be the theology of the PRC. Grandville demurred. By classis’ not ruling on the doctrinal issue specifically and by making Grandville’s consistory take back its decision against Reverend Koole that charged him with false doctrine, that doctrine of Herman Witsius has received sanction in the PRC. The classis wrote,

The issue is *not* whether Herman Witsius in the three contested statements is orthodox or whether Herman Witsius is a generally ortho-

dox theologian or one who teaches a conditional covenant. Classis East is not in the business of making official condemnations or giving official commendations of theologians who lived centuries ago. The issue is rather this: did Rev. Koole, in quoting and in seeking to explain Witsius, teach false doctrine?¹⁰

The answer to the question is, yes, Reverend Koole emphatically taught false doctrine. If English words have meaning, he taught false doctrine. Since he taught the false doctrine in the words of Witsius, the classis also had the obligation to rule on the orthodoxy of Witsius’ statements and in condemning the statements to condemn those who used them to freight heresy into the church. But to do so the delegates at classis would have had to condemn themselves.

At the heart of Witsius’ covenant theology is the

Pete also shows what the current state of theology is in the PRC, and it is more serious than ever. If the synodical decision of 2018 is worthless, nothing proves that more than its fruits, and the fruits are bitter indeed.

8 Peter VanDer Schaaf, letter to Grandville Protestant Reformed Church dated May 19, 2023, in appeal to Classis East, 125.

9 Grandville Protestant Reformed Church, letter to Peter VanDer Schaaf dated June 15, 2022, in response to protest received on April 4, 2022, in appeal to Classis East, 78.

10 Prof. R. Dykstra, et al., “Recommendations [re the ‘Appeal of Mr. PeterVanderSchaaf’],” 4.

distinction between “a right to life, and the possession of life.” Let me explain. In the theology of Herman Witsius, God brings all of his people into the covenant by grace. And once they are in the covenant, they do not have the experience of the covenant except by many works of faith and obedience. No one can gainsay that this is what Witsius taught. He wrote,

We must accurately distinguish between a right to life, and the possession of life. The former must so be assigned to the obedience of Christ, that all the value of our holiness may be entirely excluded. But certainly our works, or rather these, which the Spirit of Christ worketh in us, and by us, contribute something to the latter.¹¹

This distinction amounts to the fact that we have a right to life by Christ alone through faith alone, but the possession of life we have by faith and through obedience, or as the Protestant Reformed Churches are fond of saying, “We have fellowship with God by faith and in the way of obedience.” For the men of Classis East to condemn Witsius would be to condemn themselves. This is the theology that many in the PRC wanted for years. This is the theology that Synod 2018 supposedly condemned. This is the theology for which Reverend Koole was contending. And this is the theology that Classis East refused to condemn and by doing so gave the theology a sanction, making sure, of course, to issue a lame warning to ministers not to be ambiguous—a sin seemingly very common for Protestant Reformed ministers these days.

An Open God

In his protest Mr. VanDer Schaaf gave a full-throated defense of the conditional covenant and made a fervent plea for this doctrine as orthodox and as the doctrine of the PRC. In his protest Mr. VanDer Schaaf stated the conditional covenant theology of the PRC as clearly as anyone has. He made a case for that theology on the basis of scripture and the creeds. Mr. VanDer Schaaf made perfectly plain that his god is an impotent, open, responsive god in the covenant. His god can give a right to salvation, but he cannot give the possession of salvation without man’s help.

Pete is right. The doctrine of the conditional covenant experience *is* the doctrine of the PRC. Pete never wanted the decision of Synod 2018. He was a delegate there. He argued against it. And he never accepted the decision, as his protest clearly demonstrates. Understand that I believe that the Protestant Reformed synodical

decision in 2018 was a rotten decision. It was written by men who were not valiant for the truth but at best were politicians. And all those who trumpet Synod 2018’s decision as a glorious decision—including Grandville’s consistory—must realize that if they accept the decision, then they will end up exactly where Reverend Koole, Pete, and the rest of the PRC are. The key to the decision is the little phrase “and in the way of good works.” If you accept that phrase as an explanation of our experience of covenant fellowship with God, then you end up where Pete and Reverend Koole and the rest of the PRC are. Grandville’s consistory should reevaluate its position on that decision and pitch it overboard. Then the consistory will stand on a firm foundation—the foundation of the truth that God’s covenant in its establishment, maintenance, experience, and perfection is *absolutely unconditional*. There is not that which man must do to be saved. Christ did all that must be done to be saved. Works are fruits and only fruits.

Pete also shows what the current state of theology is in the PRC, and it is more serious than ever. If the synodical decision of 2018 is worthless, nothing proves that more than its fruits, and the fruits are bitter indeed. Deep in the exchange between Pete and Grandville’s consistory, he wrote this:

The instruction that is given in the SB articles is consistent with the instruction of God’s Word on the nature of the covenant. The Scripture gives us pictures of the organic relationship that exists in the covenant between God and His people.

The relationship between a child and his parent and the relationship between a husband and his wife are used by God’s Word to show how God and His people respond to each other in their fellowship with each other. This is the way in which God receives all of the glory for our justification, our sanctification, and our perseverance, and his rational and moral people grow in grace and knowledge and work out their salvation...

Cannons [*sic*] 5.7. And 10. likewise demonstrates that God sovereignly works with His rational and moral elect that they experience His delight in a sequence of time and experience, in an organic way in which there is a mutuality of grace, obedience, and gracious reward.¹²

These are shocking words.

I have maintained that the PRC with her man-first, conditional-covenant-experience doctrine is one step

11 Herman Witsius, quoted in Kenneth Koole, “Herman Witsius: Still Relevant (3),” *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 6 (December 15, 2020): 127.

12 Peter VanDer Schaaf, letter to Grandville, dated August 15, 2022, in appeal to Classis East, 96–97.

away from open theism. Open theism teaches that God is responsive to the inputs of man, especially of man's decisions, works, and prayers, and that God actually changes what he is doing in response to man's inputs. And that is where the Protestant Reformed denomination is headed if Pete's doctrine is her doctrine. Just listen: "God and His people respond to each other in their fellowship with each other."

Is that who God is? That god does not have an eternal decree. That god is open to the inputs of man. That god is the god of open theism. He reacts to and responds to what man does.

And Pete continues, "God sovereignly works with His rational and moral elect that they experience His delight in a sequence of time and experience, in an organic way in which there is a mutuality of grace, obedience, and gracious reward."

Is that God? He works *with* man? This is how salvation and the covenant work—"a mutuality of grace, obedience, and gracious reward"? God is one party with his grace, and man is another party with his obedience, and the result is a reward? That is not the Reformed faith.

The baptism form states that God brings his people into the assembly of the elect in life eternal without one work on their part but by his promise. The calling of God's people is to cleave to God in thanksgiving. The man-first, conditional covenant experience of the PRC leads not only to corruption of the doctrine of salvation and salvation's experience but also to the corruption of the very doctrine of God!

Categorically Not Categorical

Grandville's consistory appeared to be alarmed, as well the men should be. They hamstrung themselves, however. In the consistory's reply to Mr. VanDer Schaaf, the consistory said one thing and then immediately took it back. Indeed, reading through all of the consistory's interaction with Mr. VanDer Schaaf, one wonders if the men know whom they believe. They halt between two opinions. Mr. VanDer Schaaf made plain that he had already decided that Baal is God. Peter VanDer Schaaf worships this open, responsive god. The word to Grandville is that if Jehovah is God, then worship him; but if Baal is God, then worship him.

I feel sorry for Grandville's elders and their minister. They are the products of their leadership and the schizophrenic preaching and teaching of that leadership for many years. They have been put into the ecclesiastical washing machine, and it was turned on the high-spin cycle, and they obviously do not know what end is up.

They are the people that the Lord warns about when he says that we must not be tossed about with every wind of doctrine. They are not skilled helmsmen who can guide the ship of the church on the storm-driven seas and bring her safely into the harbor. But the officebearers have been taken in by the sleight of man and cunning craftiness.

When I read through the response of Grandville's consistory to Peter VanDer Schaaf, I was initially surprised. The consistory sounded at certain points to be Reformed Protestant. They certainly did not sound very Protestant Reformed. It is worthwhile to quote the relevant parts. The consistory wrote to Pete,

Surely, the Consistory would never deny that "Scripture teaches that something must be done that we may be saved." Scripture absolutely teaches that something must be done that we may be saved, but Scripture also identifies and explains that something in the simplest, clearest, and most emphatic manner when it reveals the gospel! The gospel declares that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came into the flesh and rendered unto God a life of perfect obedience and suffering climaxing on the cross for the sake of his sheep. Jesus, and Jesus alone, performed the "something" that must be done that we may be saved.¹³

Later the consistory wrote,

Conclusion: we will state this bluntly and clearly: the consistory does not believe there is any biblical support for the statement "that something must be done that we may be saved" outside of the perfect work of Jesus Christ, and him alone! This statement is erroneous and must be categorically condemned.¹⁴

One wonders where these men of Grandville's consistory were when we were engaged in a life-and-death struggle with Reverend Koole and his allies over the teaching that faith is something that man must do to be saved. And in the consistory's document we find out: the consistory gave Reverend Koole a pass on his teaching that faith is something that must be done so that we may be saved. The consistory gave Reverend Koole a pass because the consistory glossed over Koole's teaching as though it is no great thing that faith is something that man must do to be saved. It is only when Reverend Koole added works to faith as that which man must do to be saved that the consistory became alarmed that salvation by works was being taught. So the consistory wrote,

13 Grandville, letter to Peter VanDer Schaaf, dated June 15, 2022, in appeal to Classis East, 79.

14 Grandville, letter to Peter VanDer Schaaf, dated June 15, 2022, in appeal to Classis East, 81.

This series of articles [on Witsius] did not only repeat what the author had previously stated [Koole had taught previously that faith is what man must do to be saved], but rather developed and advanced this idea because now the issue was no longer faith (as it was in the previous article), but the issue is works! In the original 2018 editorial, faith was the “something that man must do to be saved.” In the Witsius editorials, works became the “something that man must do to be saved.”¹⁵

And later the consistory added,

The final statement [of Koole/Witsius] is “Men drift in the direction of an antinomianism exactly because they fail to distinguish between what grants the right to life, and what has to do with the possession (the enjoyment and benefits) of that newness of life.”

Witsius is stating here that while the right of life with God is based entirely upon the perfect obedience of Christ, the possession and experience of salvation is obtained, at least in part, by the works a believer performs. This is taught when works are said to “contribute” to the possession of life and are said to “serve one’s own salvation.”

The Consistory will continue to maintain the fact that Jesus, and Jesus alone, performed the “something” that must be done that we may be saved. We will not be moved from that position.¹⁶

And the consistory continued,

You can impose whatever meaning you desire upon the statement “Scripture teaches that something must be done that we may be saved.” This statement must be categorically condemned.¹⁷

But then the consistory added,

The exercise of faith is necessary for the conscious enjoyment of salvation...

Faith is demanded. “Believe!” is the imperative that must be issued as the call of the gospel.

That said, when one packages these truths together and presents them under the formulation of “If a man will be saved there is that which he must do,” this points us in a new direction. It steers us away from the truth that faith is a gift of God sovereignly worked by the Spirit, and points

us in a new direction where faith is a work that we must perform in order to be saved.

Furthermore, when Rev. Koole used this statement again, in these articles, it was not a repetition of this statement but a development and advancement. This was alarming. The issue was no more faith but works. Works, in these articles, became the “something that man must do to be saved.” Again, this points us in the direction of salvation by works.¹⁸

What Grandville’s consistory categorically condemned, it allowed. What it allowed, it categorically condemned. Stop halting between two opinions! The consistory did not like it that faith is something that man must do to be saved, but the consistory allowed it. But if Grandville allows that faith is what man must do—with the appropriate caveats and cautions—then Jesus alone did not do that which must be done to be saved. And then when it came to saying that works are what man must do to be saved, the consistory categorically denied the phrase. But allowing the phrase in the one case of faith but disallowing it in the other case of works is not a categorical denial.

Besides, the consistory should know that if the proper explanation of the call of the gospel is that faith is what man must do to be saved—if the consistory allowed that and did not categorically condemn it—then the consistory must also allow that works are what man must do to be saved because the full call of the gospel is to repent and believe, in which case repentance is a whole new life—works.

Reverend Koole’s teaching about faith and works being what man must do to be saved did not merely point the Protestant Reformed Churches in a new direction of salvation by works, but it was also bold, persistent, impenitent, stubborn, and destructive teaching of the false doctrine over the course of years—years!

Consistorial and Classical Unrighteousness

Also, the consistory was either deceived or duplicitous in its assessment of Reverend Koole. The consistory did not seem to take seriously or was ignorant of the biblical description of a heretic and a false teacher. And if there ever was one in church history, it is Reverend Koole. Here also the consistory showed its unrighteousness: if Reverend Koole sinned in those statements that Grandville’s consistory condemned, then he is personally

15 Grandville Protestant Reformed Church, letter to Peter VanDer Schaaf, dated November 28, 2022, in response to protest dated August 15, 2022, in appeal to Classis East, 106.

16 Grandville, letter to Peter VanDer Schaaf, dated November 28, 2022, in appeal to Classis East, 106–7.

17 Grandville, letter to Peter VanDer Schaaf, dated November 28, 2022, in appeal to Classis East, 107.

18 Grandville, letter to Peter VanDer Schaaf, dated November 28, 2022, in appeal to Classis East, 107.

responsible for the split in the PRC that resulted in the formation of the Reformed Protestant Churches. Deliberately, over against every warning, he has taught and publicly defended his false doctrine; and then in the *Standard Bearer*, he patched it all up with a lame apology, which was no apology.

How can you know that Reverend Koole is insincere? He never once has militated against his false doctrine. He has never claimed responsibility for the grievous split in the Protestant Reformed Churches that he with his false doctrine caused. Besides, his error was public, yet for some reason—to spare an unrighteous man—the announcement about his repentance was read only to the congregation in Grandville Protestant Reformed Church. This was raw unrighteousness. He sinned! He taught false doctrine publicly! He wrecked a denomination. But the thought of Grandville’s consistory seemed to be: “Let us get past this thing!”

Listen to Grandville’s consistory address the protestant:

Finally, taking into account the current state of the denomination, the time that has elapsed (close to three years), and all that she is and has gone through, is this wise? What good is going to come from it?

Pete, for the sake of all involved, with all sincerity, we again implore you to lay this matter to rest.¹⁹

Pete responded: “In continuing to assert my objections to the Consistory’s decisions, I am seeking the unity of our churches in the truth.”²⁰

The question for the church and for a consistory in a case of alleged false doctrine is, what is the truth? Nothing more and nothing less! But Grandville’s consistory mingled in all kinds of carnal considerations.

And I believe that it is these kinds of unrighteous actions on the part of Grandville’s consistory to spare an unrighteous, false teacher that showed Classis East that despite whatever supposed doctrinal disagreement there was in Classis East, Grandville’s consistory and the men of Classis East are not all that different. They are united in their doctrine that there *is* that which man must do to be saved—at least the doctrine can be tolerated—and they are united in tripping over themselves to save men’s names and honor and in ignoring and sweeping under the rug the schism of which Reverend Koole is guilty.

The consistory was also unrighteous in that it did not suspend Reverend Koole. Some may ask, “What should Grandville have done?” The answer is to suspend him immediately and then depose him. But Grandville

charged him with violating his oath in the Formula of Subscription and yet let him keep preaching! Reverend Koole is still preaching! And he will keep teaching his false doctrine that faith and good works are what man must do to be saved. He believes that false doctrine. He will change his language. False teachers always play cards with their words. But the substance of his false doctrine will remain.

Others may ask, “Well, what could classis do?” The answer is to recommend Reverend Koole’s suspension and deposition. But the classis cleverly avoided the doctrinal issue that was before them and gave Koole a slap on the wrist for being ambiguous. He was not ambiguous. He was clear and clearly is a false teacher.

The men of the committee of Classis East understood that Grandville’s consistory, despite its bluster, was not that far from them. And all these differences can be patched up, and the unholy peace of the denomination can be preserved.

I am sure Pete is happy because he got what he wanted in the end. The electionless doctrine of conditional covenant fellowship has once more been confirmed in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Pete won!

Now what?

Decisions, Decisions

Grandville’s consistory has its decision to make.

I am not a prophet, nor the son of prophet, but it does not take a seer to understand that in the PRC the truth is not what controls men’s actions, but what controls their actions are carnal considerations of outward peace, men’s reputations, and preserving the denomination, no matter how corrupt. I believe that the officebearers of Grandville’s consistory will see that they have too much to lose, and they will knuckle under. I have seen it happen time and again in the PRC. There will be some huffing and puffing. But I do not believe that any reformation will come out of the recent classical decision. Maybe some will flee to the United Reformed Churches or to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as many already have, jumping from the frying pan into the fire, but they will not stand for the truth.

If after this decision the ministers did not go home and preach off their own pulpits against the decision, then they do not have any great zeal for the truth, whatever their words might be in their decisions. Maybe they will write a protest, and it will take another two years to wind its way through the church courts, where it will be either cast out on a technicality or the whole point of the

19 Grandville Protestant Reformed Church, letter to Peter VanDer Schaaf, dated April 13, 2023, in response to protest dated January 10, 2023, in appeal to Classis East, 111.

20 VanDer Schaaf, letter to Grandville Protestant Reformed Church, dated May 19, 2023, in appeal to Classis East, 125.

protest—if it is doctrinal—will be cleverly sidestepped. The main task of ecclesiastical bodies in the PRC is not anymore to judge right and wrong but to keep problems from happening. And the majority of the people yawn and go about their lives. “Let the theologians figure it out,” they say.

I would like to warn the men who were at Classis East and who disagreed with the recent decision that they have now been shown yet again that the Protestant Reformed denomination is set on her course, and she is going to travel it to complete destruction. If these men believe that Christ’s work is the only thing that must be done for us to be saved, then they must also reject the decision of Synod 2018; they must reject Reverend Koole’s articles that faith is what man must do to be saved; and they must reject Koole’s articles on Witsius and the theology that stood

behind the articles—that there is a distinction that must be made between a right to life and the possession of life or between the covenant and the experience of the covenant. In their pulpits they must publicly militate against the false doctrine and start a magazine to write against it. And we shall see how long these men last. If they believe that Jesus’ work is the only work that is necessary for salvation, then they do not belong in the PRC. The denomination does not believe that and has not taught for some time that Christ’s work is the only work that must be done to be saved. If they believe that Jesus’ work is the only work that must be done for our salvation and they continue to remain in the PRC, then they deny Christ, and they will also share in the terrible destruction that is coming on the denomination which so faithlessly forsook the truth.

—NJL

FROM THE EDITOR

We have received numerous submissions for the new rubric *Insights*. This is a new rubric that is filled by you, the reader, with interesting tidbits, quotes, commentary, and whatever else you might deem worthy of publication. This influx of new material is very welcome. Of course, the editor, regrettably, must of necessity pick and choose, so do not be discouraged if your submission is not published right away. Keep the submissions coming. It is better to have too much than too little.

The submission for *Insights* included in this issue is from Ally Ophoff and concerns a sermon preached by Rev. Bill Langerak. Full disclosure for the reader: he is my older brother. The sword of the gospel, wielded by the sovereign Christ, has divided between us. In this season in which we remember Christ’s incarnation, let us be reminded that Christ did not come to bring peace but division and to set a man at variance with the members of his own household. The divide deepens daily. I agree wholeheartedly with the assessment of the writer: “Rev. Bill Langerak is afraid of the gospel.” His sermon is what passes for gospel preaching in the Protestant Reformed Churches today: a gospel that is no gospel. And the people who sit under no gospel languish and die.

We could multiply examples from other ministers.

Sometimes it is difficult to find up-to-date examples. It seems that many Protestant Reformed consistories are ashamed of what their ministers preach and will not publish their sermons online. That is strange behavior for those who are supposed to sound out the truth in all the earth. Maybe by not publishing their ministers’ sermons online, these men are revealing that they know they do not have the truth preached in their churches. Or perhaps they are afraid that their ministers’ sermons will be reproved by the light, so they put their lamp under a bushel.

For the rest, in this issue there is a contribution from Mr. Aaron Lim from the Berean Reformed Protestant Church in Singapore, a small church maintaining a witness to the truth and against the lie in that island nation and who is not ashamed that her sound goes out into all the earth. In light of that contribution, we remind our readership that we encourage submissions from friend and foe. The rest of the issue is filled with articles from our regular staff of writers in their regular rubrics.

May the pen—mightier than the sword—be blessed by the Lord to instruct in the truth and to put to flight the lie for the coming of Christ’s kingdom and the destruction of Satan’s.

—NJL

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

THE OFFICE OF ALL BELIEVER (2): JESUS CHRIST

Introduction

The elect child of God partakes of the anointing of Jesus Christ by faith and therefore holds the office of all believer. The child of God is anointed and equipped by the Holy Spirit in that office. We read of this in Lord's Day 12, question and answer 32: "Why art thou called a Christian? Because I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus am partaker of His anointing" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 96). Holding that office, the believer confesses the name of God, presents himself as a living sacrifice of thankfulness to God, and represents the cause of the living God in the midst of a sin-cursed world in his fight against sin and Satan. The office that the believer holds is his right, his calling, and his glorious privilege as the friend-servant of God.

For us to understand this office in all of its implications and power, we have to consider our head, Jesus Christ, of whose anointing we partake as his elect body. Jesus Christ is the chief officebearer as the mediator of the covenant. He is the chief prophet, chief priest, and chief king. This corresponds with the Old Testament offices of prophet, priest, and king and with the New Testament special offices of minister, deacon, and elder. There is some overlap in those offices. David was a prophet-king. Melchizedek was a priest-king. Samuel was a prophet-priest. In the Old Testament all three offices are found only in Moses, as Moses was the great type of the coming mediator. In the New Testament a minister is a king as well as a prophet, a deacon is a prophet as well as a priest, and an elder is a priest as well as a king. And in the New Testament, the believer holds all three offices by his partaking of the anointing of Christ by faith.

In the old dispensation there was no office of all believer because the Spirit of Pentecost that Christ received of the Father was not yet poured out upon the church. The salvation of God's people and the knowledge of God and his word were inseparably tied to the special officebearers in the Old Testament. These special officebearers were indispensable for the people of God. There were certain men who were prophets; and to know the Lord's word, one had to take hold of the skirt of a prophet

(Zech. 8:23). Only certain men were priests, and the people of God could not bring sacrifices and could not know atonement and forgiveness and consecration to God's service without those priests (Lev. 16). And God had made his covenant with King David as a type of Jesus Christ, the one true king. As king, David was typical of the Messiah: David was the Lord's anointed, and David was the man after God's own heart. As king, David stood at the head of the nation of Israel, so that the covenant was tied up with the king. And that is what made the rebellion of the ten tribes so abominable. They rejected David and the covenant; they rejected God's promise; they rejected the Messiah; and they rejected God himself.

The Old Testament was a dispensation of types and shadows that pointed to the one true prophet, priest, and king, Jesus Christ, the great mediator. In him all the types and shadows were realized and fulfilled. All throughout the Old Testament, true Israel was pointed to her deepest need of the redeemer, the savior, the Messiah, and the mediator. And the greatest need of the church today is the gospel, which sets forth that mediator and all his work on behalf of the covenant to save his people from their sins.

Eternal Appointment

Jesus Christ is the officebearer *par excellence*. He is the perfect officebearer. And his person, works, and office were eternally *ordained*.

Q. 31. Why is He called Christ, that is, anointed?

A. Because He is ordained of God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Ghost, to be our chief Prophet and Teacher...and to be our only High Priest...and also to be our eternal King. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 95–96)

The word translated as *ordained* in the Old Testament means *to appoint*. In Jeremiah 1:5 God told the prophet Jeremiah that before Jeremiah was ever formed or conceived in his mother's womb, he had been consecrated and appointed as a prophet of the Lord to the nations. In the New Testament the word *ordain* has a similar

meaning, which is that one is placed, set, or appointed to an office (Titus 1:5). Titus was to appoint elders in every city as Paul had commanded him.

Jesus Christ is ordained to an *office*. What is an office? An office is the position in which one is authorized and qualified to function on behalf of God in God's covenant. And so Jesus Christ is an *officebearer*. An officebearer is the official, visible representative of the invisible God who accomplishes God's purpose in the world. The officebearer realizes God's purpose, which is the glory of God's name and the establishment of his kingdom, the gathering of the church, and the perfecting of the covenant.

Adam in the garden was an officebearer. When God created man in God's own image and breathed into man's nostrils the breath of life, God gave man dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26–27). Adam was the official, visible representative of the invisible God in the garden. Adam was God's officebearer, God's friend-servant, and Adam lived in covenant fellowship with God. Adam's nature was wholly in harmony with the will of God according to God's judgment, and Adam was capable of doing God's will and delighting in God's will. Adam was wholly consecrated to God with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength. Adam knew God immediately and spontaneously both through God's revelation in creation, in which Adam saw the name of God as a most elegant book, and as God revealed himself directly and spoke to Adam.

But it was not the purpose of God for Adam, as an officebearer, to remain in this original state of rectitude. Adam, as the head of the human race, fell into sin. He plunged the world and all mankind into sin and by sin brought death into the world (Rom. 5:12). Adam was a bad officebearer. As a prophet, all of Adam's knowledge became darkness. He was a false prophet who knew only the lie. As a priest, Adam's consecration of himself to God with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength turned into rebellion and the service of sin. And as a king, Adam's rule turned to one of darkness. All of Adam's and man's functioning by nature as officebearers must be characterized as disobedience. By nature man stands as an enemy of God and as a friend of Satan and the kingdom of darkness.

Christ is the perfect officebearer of the covenant. All of his work in his office must be characterized as obedience and faithfulness to God. Christ is the officebearer who delights in God's will, and the law of God is within his heart (Ps. 40:8; Heb. 10:7).

Adam fell as God had decreed that fall and because of Adam's own willful disobedience, so that Christ, whom God had eternally ordained from before the foundation of the world, would be revealed as God's servant *par excellence*, the firstborn of every creature, the first-begotten from the dead, the head of the church, so that all the glory of God might be revealed in Christ. God decreed Christ to unite all things in him. The last Adam, Christ, is first in God's counsel.

Christ was eternally appointed to his office in God's decree. "I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee" (Ps. 2:7). Christ did not enter this office by his own will, but he was appointed by God. Jesus Christ, as touching his human nature and his office, eternally existed. There was never a time when Jesus Christ was not. "Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you" (1 Pet. 1:20). Jesus Christ was always in the bosom of the Father, and now he is revealed for his elect.

The name *Christ* means *anointed one*. The name *Christ* is the same as the Old Testament name *Messiah*. Christ's appointment, calling, and election are all implied in this title. Jesus Christ was anointed by God to his office as mediator. The Holy Spirit anointed Christ and equipped him to his office. At Christ's baptism the Holy Spirit descended and lighted upon Christ, and from heaven the voice of God was heard: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17).

Christ's anointing signifies that He was ordained from eternity by God the Father, and qualified by the Holy Ghost to be God's officebearer, the Servant of Jehovah, representing His cause in the world, that He might reveal unto us the full counsel of God concerning our salvation, fight the battle against sin and death, and having overcome all the powers of darkness, might occupy His place as the Firstborn of every creature in all the universe. That exalted position, according to which He has a name above all names, and is King over all, He now occupies. He is made Christ and Lord.¹

1 Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1972), 1:569.

The official titles of Christ's office are the mediator of the covenant and the servant of Jehovah. As the mediator, Christ comes from God, and he is God. Christ is not a third party that stands between God and man. God must reconcile his people to himself, and he sent Christ into the world to bring his people, who had plunged themselves into sin and misery, into the highest life in Christ. As the servant, Christ comes doing the will of God in perfect service, love, and devotion to the Father. "Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles" (Isa. 42:1). Jesus Christ is God's elect, and Jesus Christ is God's perfect officebearer. Christ serves the purpose of the glory of the name of God and the realization of God's covenant.

Jesus Christ is the eternal officebearer of God. Christ's dominion is an everlasting, eternal dominion over all things. At his incarnation the Word became flesh, and that human nature of Christ in his office can never be torn from his divine person. He will reign forever as the one uniting the heavens and the earth. His reign will never end or cease even in the eternal kingdom. And being brought into the covenant by our head and officebearer, Jesus Christ, we stand before God now and will stand everlastingly before God in eternal service, consecration, and love.

His Faithfulness and Obedience

Christ is the perfect officebearer of the covenant. All of his work in his office must be characterized as obedience and faithfulness to God. Christ is the officebearer who delights in God's will, and the law of God is within his heart (Ps. 40:8; Heb. 10:7). Christ's meat is to do the will of God, who sent Christ, and to finish his work. Christ made himself of no reputation, took upon himself the form of a servant, humbled himself, and became obedient unto the death of the cross. In that obedience and faithfulness to God as the mediator, Jesus Christ reconciled his people to God.

And this perfect obedience and faithfulness of the perfect officebearer is the comfort of the children of God. Our whole lives are lives of sin, disobedience, and unfaithfulness. In our natures we stand opposed to God and are at enmity with him. We are incapable of doing any good, and we are inclined to all evil. We are false prophets who love the lie. We are false priests who stand in the service of sin with our bodies and souls; with all our faculties and powers; with our minds, souls, and strength. We are false kings: by nature we stand in line with Satan and his hosts against the living God. And so the confidence of the believer is in the perfect obedience

of the mediator, that Christ suffered and was obedient as the servant of Jehovah to the death of the cross. That cross is my salvation. At that cross my sins were forgiven, and I am declared righteous and worthy of life eternal because of the mediator and his perfect obedience in his God-ordained office.

It is Christ's faithfulness and obedience to God that is our salvation. All false doctrine that teaches man's obedience and faithfulness as a part of his salvation is an attack on Christ as the mediator. It is an attack on Christ's office. For then man makes himself his own mediator. Man makes himself his own savior when he teaches that man must believe as the hinge on which the experience of salvation turns. Man makes himself his own mediator when he says that he experiences covenant fellowship in the way of obedience. Man's works! Man's faithfulness! Man's obedience! That is the lie that attacks Christ and displaces his perfect work. Christ is ordained as our mediator and as our chief prophet, priest, and king. All his work is obedience and faithfulness, and that work alone is sufficient to save us from our sins.

Prophet

Jesus Christ is our chief prophet. The prophetic work of Jesus Christ is the first aspect of his office as mediator. *Prophet* generally means one that has the true knowledge of God, speaks in his name, and declares his praises. The basic function of a prophet is to receive and speak the word of God. The Hebrew word for *prophet* in the Old Testament is derived from a word that means *to overflow* or *to boil over*. The idea is that the word of God boils or bubbles up within the prophet. The true prophet is so filled with the true knowledge of God that his mouth overflows. He must speak. He cannot help but speak of God, his covenant, and his will. The prophet must show forth God's praises. God puts his word in the prophet's heart, and that word becomes a fire in his bones. The prophet eats God's word, and that word consumes the prophet.

This word for prophet is found in Deuteronomy 18:18:

I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.

In this text the ultimate reference is to Jesus Christ, the one true prophet, and derived from him are all the true prophets who received a word from the Lord. Thus the words that a true prophet speaks are the very words of God put in the prophet's mouth.

In the New Testament that word for *prophet* means *to speak forth*. The prophet ceaselessly and strenuously speaks in the name of God the word of God. In Acts 3:22

the words of Deuteronomy 18 are quoted and applied to our chief prophet: “For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you.” Christ, therefore, is our chief prophet and teacher, and he is the true subject of all the prophets. He is the one who declares the name of God unto his brethren, and Christ reveals unto us the full counsel of our redemption.

Jesus Christ received and speaks the full knowledge and will of God because Jesus Christ is the eternal Word. And Christ is the content and subject of his own message. The scriptures are they which testify of him. He knows God because he is God (John 8:58). Christ is the only-begotten Son of God and the second person of the Trinity. He received the full revelation of God, which God gave unto Christ (Rev. 1:1). He revealed the will of God and God’s eternal plan of salvation. Christ is the chief prophet, and there is no other prophet necessary. And the Lord God raised up Jesus Christ to speak and to reveal God unto his people.

Jesus Christ carried out his work by his Spirit throughout the Old Testament. Although the Holy Spirit had not yet been poured out, we read that the Spirit of Christ was given to the prophets to proclaim the gospel.

10. Of which salvation the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you:
11. Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.
12. Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into. (1 Peter 1:10–12)

Jesus Christ spoke in and through all the prophets in the old dispensation by his Spirit. Without Jesus Christ there was no prophecy. He was anointed from before the foundation of the world to be the chief prophet, and he carried out his office from the beginning to reveal to his people the secret counsel and will of God concerning their salvation. Christ functioned in his office as prophet in visions and dreams and in types and shadows. Christ functioned in that office directly as the angel of the Lord. Jesus Christ also executed that office by inspiring men to

write down the sacred scriptures. Men were so moved by the Holy Ghost that what they wrote down was the very word of God and not the word of man.

And Christ, our chief prophet, came personally in the fullness of time. Jesus Christ executed his office when he came personally preaching the gospel of the kingdom. He came with divine authority, being anointed to his office and given the Spirit without measure. Christ was the master preacher. He spoke of heavenly things and declared the words of eternal life. He was the true and faithful witness. His doctrine was not his own but the Father’s. Christ spoke of the things he had seen with the Father, and Christ glorified not himself but God. He is the Christ, the great prophet of the covenant.

Christ’s office of prophet did not terminate at his death, and his office was not limited to his ministry on earth as the great teacher. He ascended and sat down at God’s right hand; and having received the Spirit, Christ poured out that Spirit and gave to the church apostles to more fully reveal the counsel of God to his people. And Christ functions in his office as chief prophet powerfully to this day by his Spirit in and through the true church as the word is preached according to the sacred scriptures. In the preaching of the gospel, Christ himself executes his office as prophet, and he speaks to his people. There is no preaching or instruction in the church except Christ himself preaches and speaks to us. And he will continue to speak in his church until all of his sheep are gathered into one fold.

Priest

The second aspect of Jesus Christ’s office as mediator of the covenant is that he is ordained as our only high priest. “The central idea of the priestly office is that of consecration of oneself and all things to the living God.”² As the high priest, Christ consecrates himself and his elect people to God. He makes his people holy, sanctifies them, and separates them unto the living God. God’s people cannot bring themselves to God, atone for their own sins, intercede before God’s throne, or enter into the covenant of their own will. They need a mediator. They need the perfect high priest to bring them before God and give them an introduction before the Holy One.

The priestly work of Christ involves a twofold work. Answer 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism teaches this twofold work of Christ the high priest:

He is ordained of God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Ghost...to be our only High Priest, who by the one sacrifice of His body has

2 Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), 1:543.

redeemed us, and makes continual intercession with the Father for us. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 95–96)

Christ's high-priestly work of sacrifice and intercession was typified all throughout the Old Testament. God ordained the entire priestly order with all of its laws and rites for the worship of him, which was dedicated to the sacrificing of bloody animals, which pictured the remission of sins and the salvation in the Lamb that was to come. The priests went before God to sacrifice on behalf of the people. And the priests took coals from off the altar and stood before the altar to offer sweet incense before God. The priestly office reached its highest expression on the Day of Atonement. On that day the high priest would make an atoning sacrifice, and then the high priest would intercede on behalf of the people. It was the only day in which the high priest would enter the holy of holies. It was the height of Israel's worship of God. These types and shadows pointed the Israelites to look forward in hope to the promise of the one perfect sacrifice and the one who continually intercedes with the Father for his elect people.

At the heart of all this work of the priest is the covenant. For Old Testament Israel and for us to enter into covenant fellowship and experience that fellowship with the most high God, there must be a perfect sacrifice. Jesus Christ made that sacrifice of his body on the cross once and for all (Heb. 10:10–14). He perfectly obeyed the Father and consecrated himself to God. Christ was the appointed high priest as the head of a people who are by nature sinful, guilty, and damnable. And it was Christ's sacrifice that reconciled us to God. It was Christ's sacrifice that paid for all our sins. His sacrifice satisfied the righteousness of God against our sins. Willingly, this high priest entered into death and suffered the agonies of hell. He purchased for us freedom from the bondage of sin, obtained for us eternal and everlasting righteousness, and merited for us the favor of God. His sacrificial work as the high priest was particular. It was only for the elect, for those whom God gave to Christ to be their high priest.

And as our high priest, Christ intercedes before the throne of God.

He arose, and He entered into the glory of the Father, not merely in order to enjoy His own glory, but that the salvation he merited for His people by His perfect obedience might become the possession of all the Father had given him.

All of the work of salvation is accomplished and perfected through Christ as the Mediator. Out of God and through Christ we receive all the blessings of grace.³

Christ stands before the throne of God, continually presenting his perfect sacrifice before God. Christ petitions the Father on our behalf, presenting his shed blood and perfect sacrifice of obedience and faithfulness to God. Christ makes continual intercession before God for us, which God answers by blessing us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places. Christ prays, and constantly from the Father Christ receives the full answer to his prayer. His intercession has as its end the salvation of his people. Christ's prayers are not for himself, but our high priest is ever conscious of his covenantal, inseparable union with his elect. He is ever conscious of his headship over his beloved bride. With Christ we are one. He intercedes as our high priest that he might bestow upon us all the fullness of the grace that he received.

In the scriptures Melchizedek is the unique and wonderful type of Jesus Christ as our high priest. The Bible does not record much about Melchizedek, but what it does record reveals much to us about our eternal high priest. Jesus Christ was a priest after the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110:1–4). Melchizedek, as recorded in Genesis 14:18–20, was the king of Salem. He was also a priest of the most high God. Melchizedek's name and the country over which he ruled denote him as a king of righteousness and a king of peace. Melchizedek blessed Abraham at his returning from the slaughter of the kings; and Abraham, recognizing Melchizedek's royal priesthood, gave him tithes of all.

Melchizedek appeared suddenly on the scene of history. No genealogy is given to us regarding Melchizedek. Curiously, he was "without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually" (Heb. 7:3). Melchizedek pointed to the eternal ordination and everlasting nature of Jesus Christ as our high priest. Christ has neither beginning of days nor end of life but came from eternity and will continue to eternity.

The priestly and kingly offices that Melchizedek held were united in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the true king of righteousness and the true king of peace. He is the king who comes to establish everlasting righteousness, and therefore he is the king of peace who rules in mercy. By his righteousness, he gives eternal peace to his people.

³ Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge*, 1:547.

And the mercy of the priestly office governs the rule of the kingly office.

King

Jesus Christ, as God's perfect officebearer, is not only our chief prophet and high priest, but he is also our eternal king. He is "the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15).

In the Old Testament Christ functioned in his office as king through the kings of David's line. The fact is that there were many wicked and ungodly kings, which emphasized Judah's need for the one true king. That God gave any godly kings to Judah was because of God's faithfulness to his promise. All of the godly kings were but shadowy revelations of Christ and his salvation.

In his life on earth, Christ personally exercised his kingly office. He fought the battle against the powers of darkness by his obedience and faithfulness to God. At the cross, toward which his whole life marched unstopably, Christ defeated all his enemies and the enemies of his church. He reigned victorious over his enemies. At the cross he laid the sole foundation for his gracious kingdom. Christ's ascension was his triumphant and royal procession into heaven as the victorious king. And today he sits as the exalted king at God's right hand.

This kingship of Jesus Christ as the mediator is not to be confused with his eternal power as the second person of the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the triune God possess all power in heaven and on earth from eternity to eternity. God is absolute power and authority in his being. Rather,

The kingship that [Christ] possesses as mediator is the authority and power with which the person of the Son according to his human nature is invested by the Father for the purpose of completing his kingdom, preserving and protecting his church, and leading his people on to eternal glory.⁴

The kingship of Christ that he received in his human nature according to the eternal appointment of God is called his bestowed kingship. There are two aspects of this kingship. The first aspect is Christ's rule by his sheer might and power over the creation and ungodly men. Christ rules them with a rod of iron. He reigns with all his enemies under his feet. All must bow to Christ. The

second aspect is Christ's gracious rule in the hearts of his elect people. Jesus Christ sets up his kingly throne in his people's hearts and rules in his people by his grace: by his word and Spirit. Christ's rule is a spiritual rule as God's kingdom itself is radically spiritual.

Christ as the mediator is God's eternal king who establishes the everlasting kingdom of God. Upon all of his subjects, Christ bestows the riches and blessings of the kingdom. And as king, he rules over all for the good of his elect. He defends and preserves his people in the redemption and salvation he obtained for them. He defends his people by his power and causes all things to work together for the salvation of his subjects.

This kingdom of Christ is opposed by Satan and all of his hosts, which opposition will culminate in the antichristian kingdom. But Christ will utterly destroy the kingdom of darkness. Christ will put Satan under his feet shortly and will destroy Satan and all darkness by the breath of his mouth. At Christ's final return he will come as the great king to forever establish that kingdom of righteousness where God is all in all. Christ will come again as king in great power and glory. And he will reign eternally over his church and his people as a royal priesthood.

Jesus Christ's kingship is everlasting. "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever." There is no end to his dominion.

Jesus Christ is our chief prophet who makes known unto us—who by nature are in darkness—the whole counsel of God concerning our redemption. Jesus Christ is our chief high priest who intercedes on our behalf with the Father, presenting before God his one perfect sacrifice on the cross. Jesus Christ is our eternal king; he fought the battle against sin, death, and the powers of darkness and gained the complete victory; and he preserves his subjects by his word and Spirit in the salvation he obtained for us.

Jesus Christ is God's perfect officebearer as the mediator of the covenant.

Next time, the Lord willing, we will turn to the office of all believer and the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ was anointed and equipped by the Holy Spirit for his work, and Christ received the Holy Spirit of the Father, which Christ pours out on his church. It is by that Spirit that Jesus Christ continues to execute his office in his church.

—TDO

⁴ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:563.

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

ONE DAY AS A THOUSAND YEARS: A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S PROMISE

Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation. But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. — 2 Peter 3:3–4, 8–9

The Question

“Where is the promise of his coming?” That question in verse four does not arise out of an earnest longing for the corporal and visible appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ on the clouds of glory, when he will bring the perfected kingdom of God to usher in the new heavens and the new earth.

That question is not asked out of an earnest hope for Christ's *parousia*—he who is faithful and true, who will descend from heaven in the glory and power of the living God to crush the head of the serpent; whose victory is certain; who arrives, as it were, on a noble and war-lusty steed with diadems crowning Christ's head, with garments already stained by the blood of his foes, with the title KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS emblazoned upon his vesture and thigh, and with a sharp sword issuing forth from his mouth to smite the nations; who comes to prepare a supper feast from the corpses of God's enemies for the fowls of the air.

That question does not come out of a travailing anticipation for the Son of man to take his seat upon the great white throne, his eyes blazing with holy zeal to reveal the righteous judgment of God; to take man's lying record of history and to rewrite it in the light of God's true and eternal counsel; to open the books and manifest the thoughts and judgments of the Holy One toward every man and spirit; to bring all the unspeakably vile works of the ungodly reprobate that were done in darkness out into the public sphere of every moral creature; and to open the book of life and speak peace unto his righteous elect.

Where is the promise of his coming?

Many times that question has been uttered by God's saints, suffering the reproach of Jesus Christ in this world that is hostile to his truth, panting for the refreshing streams of righteousness and life, and yearning for the time of deliverance when Christ shall cast all his and their enemies into everlasting condemnation and translate the chosen ones to himself into heavenly joys and glory.

Many times that question has been asked of angels, who throughout the ages have passionately looked into the prophecies of salvation, and who erupt in joy when the power of Christ's kingdom crushes the stronghold of Satan in the heart of an elect sinner and turns that sinner to repentance.

But that question in verse four is not born of faith and love of Christ's appearing.

That question is the ugly offspring of unbelief.

That question is the slanderous and blasphemous jesting of scoffers, who descend upon the church like vultures. These scoffers descend upon the church with the purpose of tearing into her flesh by their cruel words and stealing away her only hope in the midst of this crooked and perverse generation. Making light of the promise is the scoffers' wicked game. Scoffers want nothing to do with the promise. That promise for them is a savor of death unto death. That promise for them means that their portion on this earth shall melt away with fervent heat. Because they hate the coming of Jesus Christ, his appearing is the butt of their jokes.

Such scoffing at the promise might come by a literal

attack against the truth of the final coming of the Son of man in glory with all the holy angels to sit upon the throne of his glory. But that is not all that can or must be understood about such scoffing. This scoffing also attacks what that day of Christ's appearing is all about, and this scoffing detracts from the reality that whatever transpires in this world stands solely in the service of that final coming.

What scoffers deny is that this day of God is *the* event in all of history, the end that God has determined from the beginning, the *telos* or goal or purpose of this present age. What scoffers deny is that this day exists for God alone, to vindicate all his righteous judgments from the beginning to the end of the world, to exalt his name to abase all other names among men. What scoffers deny is that as Christ sits at the right hand of majesty, loosening the seals of the book of God's counsel and executing all of God's decrees in the power and authority of God, Christ bends every moment and every creature into the service of his coming. What scoffers say is that there is something extraneous, some secondary purpose in the world than the revelation of the kingdom of God from heaven, which shall burn up this world at its appearing.

These scoffers exist today when they preach and labor for an earthly millennial kingdom. "If only the church would get busy," they say, "infiltrating earthly politics and influencing earthly culture, then the whole world should come under the grip of Christendom, then the knowledge of God should fill up this earth from sea to shining sea, and then the church should have its golden age of carnal prosperity." These scoffers exist today when they teach two purposes of God in this world—the formation of the New Testament church *and* the reformation of the Jewish kingdom. These scoffers exist today when they preach the day of the Lord as if it was all about the good works that people do, stealing the day from God's glory and turning that day into a competition for who can get the best seat in Christ's court. These scoffers exist today when they preach without any reference to the coming of Jesus Christ, but rather give their congregations to the intoxicating drink of iniquity by refusing to call sin *sin*, to call false doctrine *false doctrine*, and to call the lie *the lie*. They cause people to forget what it means to lay down one's life for the truth. They cause people to be carnally minded, to labor for the meat that perishes, and to seek peace with the world and to join in its hedonism and debauchery.

Such scoffing at the promise might come in the literal form of that question: Where is the promise of his coming? But understand this: the *essence* of that scoffing is a denial of the *truth* and *doctrine* of the promise. Men do not need to ask that question verbatim to be reckoned as scoffers.

What scoffers deny is that the promise is the living word of the triune God, plowing through space and time like a ship carves through the sea at flank speed, racing through history toward its ultimate perfection, when all the ungodly are cast into outer darkness and when all the righteous are ushered into the great marriage feast in the New Jerusalem. What scoffers deny is that the promise plows through the realm of men, its bow pushing every elect starboard into everlasting glory and pushing every reprobate port side into everlasting damnation. What scoffers deny is that the promise of God is a most mighty, irresistible, and effectual word, bringing the seed of the woman to crush the head of the serpent. What scoffers deny is that the promise of God is absolutely sure apart from and in spite of the labors and efforts of men. That God swore by his own immutable and holy name to fulfill the promise, that all things, including God himself, must vaporize into nothingness if his word falls to the ground as null and void—this means nothing to scoffers.

Rather, what scoffers affirm is that the promise of Christ's coming—and all that is *caused* by his coming—must be subjected to their own carnal judgments.

How Scoffers Judge Things

"But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."

A puzzling assertion this is. It is a puzzling assertion not because the doctrine of this statement is unclear. That one day is with the Lord as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day means that God is eternal. A thousand years in his sight are but as yesterday when it is past and as a watch in the night. All things change and wax old as a garment; but God is the same, and his years have no end. That God is eternal means that change and succession of moments, that future and past, do not apply to him. God says, "I AM." Time is not a form for God's being and life. Time is God's creature, and he may judge time however he pleases.

It is a puzzling assertion because even the scoffers would acknowledge that God is eternal. No one teaches that time rules over God. Does the apostle actually believe that the church of Jesus Christ would forget this truth? that she would fail to expound upon it in her ministry of the word? that she would ignore it in her catechism instruction? Can the truth of God's eternity actually escape her remembrance?

Yes. Yes, indeed.

Oh, true it is that man gives cunning lip service to the doctrine of God's eternity. Man gives cunning lip service to that doctrine, just as he gives cunning lip service to the doctrine that we are saved by grace and not by works. Man may speak of God's eternity when it arises

in a passage of scripture or in a catechism book. Man just will not let the truth of God's eternity govern his carnal thinking and judgments. It is a doctrine that is best left in heaven or stuffed away in some dogmatics book. It is a doctrine that comes and goes like a distant memory and remains unapplied to the promise of Christ's coming. And the church is not immune to this.

"But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing..."

Do not be ignorant! Why? Because man who is corrupt flesh and of the earth earthy always takes heavenly truths and subjects them to his own carnal interpretations. Man cannot understand spiritual things spiritually. Whatever pure and simple doctrines that he elicits from scripture must first be rubbed around in the dust of the earth and dipped in the filthy swamp of his mind. He cannot help but subject eternal, timeless truths to his own carnal, temporal judgments. And no less does man do this to the promise of Christ's coming.

"Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation." All things continue as they were from the beginning—that is the argument of the scoffers over against the promised coming of Jesus Christ. It is an argument that finds its starting point from man's *experience*. It is an argument based not on the word of God but based on man's carnal interpretation of things. Christ's coming is analyzed and judged from the perspective of man, who today is and tomorrow is not.

The argument of scoffers might come in this literal form: "We do not see any evidence of his coming. Look how much time has expired since God spoke the promise of his coming in the garden! All things continue as they have from the beginning." But understand, when these scoffers argue this way against Christ's final coming, they also argue this way against all that Christ *causes* by his coming.

Let us hear the truth of the coming of Jesus Christ. When a man repents, what has happened? Christ, in the power of his coming, has delivered a man from the wrath to come! When the triumphant declaration of forgiveness reverberates in a man's soul, what has happened? The promise that plows through space and time has pushed a man into the joys of the everlasting kingdom of heaven! When a man loves God, even when God sends him grief and affliction, and when a man loves his neighbor, even when that neighbor limits his earthly way, what has happened? Christ has come with the new beginning of the life of God, which soon shall be revealed in all its glorious fullness! When a man enjoys the blessings of God's everlasting covenant, what has happened? He has been lifted up by the power of the promise unto the pleasures that are at God's right hand! Wherever there is the grace of God manifest in the earth, there are the impressions of

Christ's foot as he hastens to bring the end according to the truth of his coming.

But scoffers, who are ignorant of God's eternity, judge the coming of Jesus Christ—together with all that is *caused* by his coming—in light of what? Time.

Time. Time. Time.

Man is, of course, creaturely and subject to time. He says, "Today or tomorrow I will go into such a city and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain." He measures things according to the rule of the sun and the rule of the moon, which stand over him. He speaks in terms of minutes and hours and days and months and years. He is time-bound and creaturely.

The problem with man is that he cannot get enough of time, particularly when it comes to heavenly doctrines. When man arrives at the truths of soteriology, then he manifests his ignorance of the fact that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. When man arrives at the subject of how God applies salvation to the elect sinner and how the sinner appropriates salvation, then man leaves God's eternity behind. Man judges not in light of the fact that our God is in the heavens and has done whatsoever he has pleased, but man judges in light of his own experience of things. Rather than letting heaven speak, man constantly interrupts as a creature of the dust and expounds things from his own carnal point of view.

How does a scoffer teach salvation (that is to say, how does a scoffer teach the coming of Jesus Christ)? The scoffer maintains that the order of salvation is a strict, temporal process that cannot be violated. The scoffer teaches that there is a vitally important sense in which man acts first. There is an activity of man that is required, which when he performs it by grace and the enabling power of the Spirit, *then* God bestows some saving good. Scoffers drool over the word *then*. In time man first repents, and *then* man knows he is forgiven. In time man first performs his good work, and *then* man enjoys a covenant blessing. The scoffer teaches that the fullness of salvation, being treasured up in Christ, comes to the believer piecemeal according to some sacrosanct order of this then that then this then that. And if you transgress the scoffers' strict, time-governed theology, then they cry out in horror like the Pharisees did when a man was healed on the Sabbath. That is the only way that scoffers know how to judge the promise—from their experiences!

Now, I do not deny that there is a certain logical order in salvation. When Christ comes in the power and authority of God to bring a man the blessings of the kingdom, there is undoubtedly a divine relationship between all the riches that Christ bestows. God is not the author of confusion. Those whom he justifies he also sanctifies. A man who will walk in all good works must first be

regenerated. A man who will believe must first be indwelt by the Author of faith.

But the carnal mind cannot leave the matter here, unless he also subjects the truth of the promise of Christ's coming to time and his own personal experience.

How God Wills Things

"But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing..."

When the apostle deals with the promise of Christ—together with all that is *caused* by his coming—the apostle simply is not interested in the timebound reasoning of scoffers. It is hogwash. It simply falls away when you consider the fact that God is eternal.

That the promise of Christ's coming should not be considered in terms of time is evident in how scripture often treats the promise. Consider how the book of Revelation presents the whole unfolding of the new dispensation. It is not chronological or linear. Rather, what transpires in the new dispensation is examined in light of the seals that Christ loosens to execute the counsel of God. And upon the events caused by the opening of the seals is overlaid the events caused by the sounding of the trumpets. And upon the events caused by the sounding of the trumpets is overlaid the events caused by the pouring of the vials. In the book of Revelation, we encircle the whole new dispensation multiple times and from different points of view, observing how the heavens and earth quake to hasten the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But not only is this the case for the New Testament. Consider also the fact that time in the Old Testament is not measured from the beginning of creation, from 4000 BC. Rather, events are recorded from the viewpoint of the infallible effects of the promise as it plows through history. How are events recorded in the wilderness wanderings of Israel, but from God's realization of his promise to redeem Israel from her bondage in Egypt? "In the third month, when the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, the same day came they into the wilderness of Sinai" (Ex. 19:1). Or when did God's salvation of the eight souls and his judgment upon the ungodly world with a flood occur? There time is measured in terms of Noah's life, an heir and product of God's promise. "In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened" (Gen. 7:11). Or what about that peculiar phrase that occurs time and again in Holy Writ: "And it came to pass..." What does that mean? It means that Christ pushes all things into the service of his coming.

Scripture is not at all interested in subjecting the realization of the promise to time. It is the promise that *determines* time.

But if this is true, then how does the believer consider the promise of Christ? The believer must think of this word instead: *fullness. Pleroma.* There must be a fulfillment that is realized in the light of God's counsel.

That fullness is, above all things, the body of Christ. What does the apostle say? "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise...but is longsuffering to us-ward, *not willing that any should perish*, but that all should come to repentance."

No, this text is not teaching a well-meant offer of the gospel. The explanation of the text that God desires the salvation of all men is patently and egregiously false. Such an explanation ignores the "us-ward" in the text. Such an explanation ignores the fact that the reason God's promise of Christ's coming is not yet fulfilled is because not all have been gathered. If "all" means all men, then God's promise cannot and may never come until literally all men repent. Furthermore, if God wills the salvation of all men head for head, then there are two possibilities: God does not get what he wants, and he shows himself to be a liar; or God gets what he wants, and every single being—including the antichrist—will be saved.

Rather, the text is teaching that the promise of the coming of Christ is a promise that brings a perfect Christ, a full Christ. The church is his body and the *pleroma* of him who fills all in all.

God has not chosen an arbitrary number unto salvation but a complete whole. Christ has suffered and made satisfaction for a complete whole according to God's determinative counsel. God has willed that a church be gathered from every nation, tribe, and tongue, from the beginning to the end of the world. And so, when Christ appears, he comes to gather a complete body with all of its members to himself.

Because Christ is many members, that body must be fully gathered out of the world. It *must*. God has given to Christ, the master of God's house, the task of building his house with many lively stones, of which not one stone may be missing. All whom God wills to belong to Christ must also be called by Christ unto repentance. That corrupt plant of Adam must be given space to grow and to develop organically in the world. That plant must produce all of its corrupt stems and branches over the course of history, so that those who were predestinated and given to Christ might be cut out and implanted into him. Space must be given for all the elect to be born. Space must be given for all the elect to be called unto salvation and unto faith and repentance. This is none other than our confession in the Belgic Confession, article 37: "Finally, we believe, according to the Word of God, when the time appointed by the Lord...is come, and the number of the elect complete, that our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 76).

There must be fulfillment, a *pleroma* of Christ, for God does not will that any should perish. And for that fulfillment Christ comes. Christ does not dawdle in heaven. Where is the promise of his coming? We see its evidence in all who are called to repentance! The conversion of every elect sinner is one step closer to the day of God.

Not Slack but Longsuffering

Yet we must say more about fulfillment. The realization of the perfect body of Christ is not the only fulfillment that must come to pass in this age. When Christ appears corporally and bodily to slay all his enemies with the glittering sword of his mouth, he comes upon a world that has brought sin as far as sin can go.

There must also be a fulfillment of the ripening of the bitter fruits of Adam's disobedience, such that iniquity abounds in the world and has reached the terrible limits of corruption. Man must attain 666, man to the nth degree, man as far as man can go apart from God. And there must be such a fulfillment in order that God might display the infinite fullness of his fierce hatred of sin in its just condemnation.

And understand well, that development of sin is inseparable from the suffering that God's saints must endure. God has also promised that the seed of the serpent would bite the heel of the seed of the woman. Satan and his children are always persecuting Christ and his children. Throughout history Christ has been subject to suffering, both personally and through the attacks on his body the church. And the world becomes ripe for judgment only through that severe hatred of Christ in the world's persecution of Christ's church that has been called out of fellowship with the world. The world fulfills its cup of iniquity as the reproach of Christ is fulfilled in the sufferings of the church. Just prior to Christ's coming, there shall be the greatest tribulation and persecution that the church has ever known.

What must the church expect in her love of God's truth and in her testimony for that truth? What must she expect in her spirit-filled spouting of the truth over against the lies of men? The most bitter and cruel things imaginable. Words that make your stomach turn. Deeds that make you weep. And such persecution does not come primarily from the unchurched world but from the apostate church. Christ said that it will be *in the synagogues* where God's people are beaten. And such persecution does not come primarily from strangers but from family and former friends. Did not Christ also warn that brothers shall betray brothers to death? that fathers shall be set against their own sons? that children shall rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death?

And in this suffering, the church cries out with the saints of all ages, "How long, O Lord? How long until the time of our deliverance? Where is the promise of his coming?"

Do not the souls of those who were slain for the word of God and for the testimony that they held cry out with a loud voice, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10).

To suffer for the truth's sake is a glorious thing. "Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you" (Matt. 5:12). But it does not make the suffering any less grievous.

What is the response to those who cry out under the altar? "And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled" (Rev. 6:11).

Fulfillment. The believer does not judge the coming of Jesus Christ with respect to time. Rather, the believer looks for fulfillment.

Know this, ye who suffer for righteousness' sake, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward." God does not delay! No delay. But longsuffering! In contrast—bold contrast—to the idea of slackness in the coming of Jesus Christ is the truth of God's longsuffering.

Toward the church in Christ, the heirs of the promise, the longsuffering of God is that he constantly and unchangeably wills their final glory in all of its unspeakable richness. God constantly and unchangeably wills that the heirs of the promise dwell with him in the New Jerusalem and enjoy everlastingly the inheritance that he has prepared for them. Unwaveringly and without intermission, the triune God desires that his people be blessed, that they enjoy the goodness of his house with immortal life free from sin, free from fear of death, and free from any sorrow, in peace and contentment and joy that can never be lost.

Not slack but longsuffering!

That God is longsuffering magnifies the glory of God in this: that his love for his people and his determination to bless them is so deep and so great, that in spite of how much he hates sin and in light of the fact that he is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity and is a consuming fire against all that is profane, he only returns for judgment and final redemption when every last elect is saved. Those who assault and mock and torment God's people assault the apple of his eye. They repeatedly poke God in the eye. Yet God will lose none of his own. None can perish! His counsel must be fulfilled.

As the farmer longs to gather his precious fruits into the barn and would do so immediately to enter into the enjoyment of his labor but is longsuffering over his fields until the proper time of the harvest, so the Lord is eager to gather his people unto himself and to make them partakers of the final glory of his kingdom without delay, eager to deliver his church from her misery in this world, yet he is longsuffering as his counsel is fulfilled.

So let the scoffers laugh and sport all they please. The

promise of Christ's coming never fails. Let them giggle like children do when someone passes gas. Behold, Christ comes quickly, and his reward is with him, to give every man according as his work shall be. "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still" (Rev. 22:11).

—LB

RUNNING FOOTMEN

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

GAMALIEL'S FOLLY

Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people, and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space; and said unto them, Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men. And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.

—Acts 5:34–35, 38–39

Introduction

There is a stir in the city of Jerusalem. Though Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified, and though the hubbub surrounding his resurrection was quelled by the lies of the leaders of the Jews, there is nevertheless a new controversy that has set the pot to seething. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost, the Spirit of reformation is roaring; and no matter how the Jewish hypocrites try, they cannot silence him, for they cannot silence God.

Filled with the Spirit, called by Jesus Christ, and standing in their appointed offices as Christ's watchmen on the walls of Zion, the apostles had preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. For this they had been arrested again and again and were brought before the rogue courts of the Jews. Rogue courts they are because the Jews have no authority. The Jews have no authority as given by God (for all authority is in him and is his to give) because Israel is no longer a nation and no longer the church. The Jews are pretenders in church and state, imagining that the Lord has not carried out against them his prophesied

destruction of the nation. Defying him, the Jews maintain the appearance of an oppressive tyranny in Israel, but only according to the capricious tolerances of the Romans and only by what violence and force the Jews can muster.

Now, the stir in Jerusalem grows, and a keen edge of anticipation fills the streets. Violence and false accusations have become the favored tools of Caiaphas and his fellow pretenders in the Sanhedrin. By force they had imprisoned the apostles in the recent past. Somehow, inexplicably to the leaders of the Jews, the apostles escaped their bonds and were found preaching again in the temple.

Is it time for a more permanent solution?

Judging from the angry cries that ring out from the leaders of the Jews, there may yet be more blood. Jesus of Nazareth has unhinged them, so that it seems that there is no restraint to their reckless swinging of a sword and a duty too great for them. They hate these preachers, these so-called apostles. Especially the Jews hate the Christ these fellows are preaching and the salvation that they are promising in Christ's name to all of his elect—to them who work

not but believe! Is there a doctrine more antithetical to the Jews' doctrine of the covenant of works? Cut to the heart, say the scriptures, the Jews take counsel to slay the apostles.

Then Gamaliel rises to speak; and as his words drift over the court, they seem, as they had so many times before, to carry a great weight, so that a spell falls over all who hear him. Gamaliel! All the Jews know him well: he is a great teacher of the Jews, a scholar without peer, an expert in law, and he possesses unparalleled wisdom. Man—exalted, praise-worthy man—surely, in him the Jews' trust can rest secure. Surely, his words are words of the very wisdom of heaven.

But what is this? Gamaliel bids them not to push too far? Gamaliel advises caution? Gamaliel bids them to consider the possibility that these foul apostles of Christ could very well be of God? The whole court stutters and shudders, its confusion evident, its momentum uneasily stalled. Amazing, the power of Gamaliel's words. No, the court decides, agreeing with this great teacher, previous convictions siphoned away. No, we will not kill these filthy apostles, but we will do what we can to silence them and humiliate them, and then we will release them. That will be enough for our purposes. That is all we should do.

Right? That is what you said, Gamaliel, is it not? Caution—yes, that is what we will call it. Caution.

And yet, even to those Jews, something must have seemed a bit off with Gamaliel's advice. I pray that it seems off to us as well and for a better reason. Judging simply by effects, some have had a favorable view of Gamaliel's advice—what wrong can there be with caution? Surely caution is no great sin.

Well, then, call it caution. But Gamaliel's advice was unbelief, the unbelief of relativism. And as much as the effect of Gamaliel's advice was to swerve the Jews into a new direction, halting their murderous hands (by the will of God and for the good of the church), Gamaliel's unbelief lifts its stubborn, warty head as a persistent threat within the church, even—and perhaps especially—in times of reformation.

Relativism: Unbelief

Who is to say for certain?

Such was Gamaliel's question, and such is the question of all relativists. As with all wisdom of man, the fatal error of the question is that God is not in it. "The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God is not in all his thoughts" (Ps. 10:4). A relativist treats the judgment of truth as if the truth were entirely subjective (dependent on the varied experiences of the ones making the judgment) and not objective (true regardless of and independent of experience). This philosophy lies behind the modern-day trend of every man having "his truth" to speak. Man has equated experience with

truth to such a degree that when he says "truth," he means *experience*; and when he says "experience," he means *truth*.

This carnal philosophy of relativism arises also in the church. Unsurprisingly, when God reveals himself in his word, the relativist squirms away from that word's piercing truth. The relativist cannot see himself as he is, and he cannot see God as God is. If he can the relativist plays games with the word, using sleight of hand to make the word oppose itself and subjecting the word to his favored contortions. In the end *relativism* as a term can be a bit of a distraction from the root issue: a relativist is really opposed to the idea that there is truth at all; and if the relativist concedes that there is indeed something that can be called truth, he hedges his concession by treating the truth as if it were unknowable, and he guts the truth of any absolute meaning. Considering that God himself is truth, a relativist is really a kind of atheist. The relativist defies God to his face and tries to restrain God with the subjective experience of the creature.

Who is to say for certain?

The true answer to the question is as simple as it is wondrous: Jehovah God! He has given a certain testimony and a living, powerful standard of truth: the word. Scripture is the exclusive word of God, and the doctrine of that word is the exclusive doctrine of God. This exclusivity makes men uncomfortable because it means that the truth is an either/or proposition. There is a standard, and it is God himself. All things are judged and exposed in his light. All things are revealed to be what they truly are. The first and final word belongs to God and to God alone.

Relativism in the Flesh

There is something about man's nature that makes man wrap himself in relativism like a security blanket. Man, in his sinful nature, is a creature who loves to hide in murk and to lurk in shadows. He feels most comfortable in the gray, like a sleepy, darkness-dwelling catfish, slumbering under the riverbank. According to the flesh man is that miserable, twisted creature, hiding in the cold darkness of the mountain cave, living off blind fish that he finds in his filthy pond, and strangling other similarly miserable beings that stumble across his way.

When you stop man and ask, "Who is God? What is the truth of his word?" the miserable little creature that is man shrinks back and holds out his hands, muttering, "Who is to say for certain?" and slinks away into his precious shadows.

That picture cuts deeply, does it not? Such detestable little creatures we are in the flesh! All men are inclined to be relativists according to their natures. The gospel is declared powerfully in our midst, and we hesitate. The Spirit thunders in the pulpit and in our hearts, and we waver. The king of kings delivers from death and the

grave, and we shrug, unsure of how to react in front of others. Old friends and family become enemies of the gospel, who scoff and jeer and lie about God and about his anointed, and we hide away in our little corners and soothe our consciences with cowardly, faithless platitudes. “I don’t want to be too one-sided; there is such a thing as balance after all...Maybe God’s word is true, but maybe we have to do justice to man’s perceived experiences...Maybe God is sovereign, but there is also the will of man to contend with...Maybe to love the brother is to rebuke him, but maybe to love the brother is to remain silent and let him carry on...It is easiest to stay quiet. It is safest not to act according to confession. False doctrine will not really do what God says it will and must do. We can just wait this one out; the storm will blow over, the music will play again, and the game will go on.”

The folly of Gamaliel is natural to the flesh, pleasing to the flesh, and comfortable to the flesh because the folly of Gamaliel was unbelief. We might be tempted to call Gamaliel’s folly by another name. In the past I thought that the caution of Gamaliel was perhaps even a godly humility. I thought he was near the truth because of his apparent trepidation in opposing it.

But at its root Gamaliel’s advice to the Sanhedrin was unbelief. His ultimate confession was that the truth is unknowable and that judgment is really impossible. The Sanhedrin was gathered to judge the apostles and their doctrine. The calling of the Sanhedrin, such as it was before the Lord, was to vindicate the right and to condemn the wrong. Righteous judgment would have been to declare that Christ indeed had been slain by wicked hands according to the foreknowledge and predetermined counsel of God; that Christ was indeed risen, victorious over sin and death, exalted to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins; and that all these things were the fulfillment of God’s promised salvation. Righteous judgment would have been to aid and promote as much as the Sanhedrin could the furtherance of the glorious gospel of Christ and the protection of his church. When men gather to judge the gospel, this is always their calling before God.

However, Gamaliel advised, “Do not judge, but wait and see. We cannot know if this thing is of God or not until earthly circumstances prove it.” This advice of Gamaliel was a subtle lie and a tacit admission that God errs when he gives his people the word and that God lies when he promises the Spirit to lead the church in the truth and to abide with her always. Relativism, the folly of Gamaliel, is a refusal to judge as God judges and

according to his word, on the blasphemous basis that this truth cannot be certainly known. Gamaliel’s folly was the same as the historic unbelief of the Jews identified in 1 Corinthians 1:22. Gamaliel required a sign, an earthly demonstration, so that his judgment might rest not on the word of God but upon the observations of the flesh.

When Gamaliel opened his mouth and gave his advice, out came the same carnal wisdom of man according to which Pontius Pilate asked, “What is truth?”

Gamaliel’s folly was the antithesis of faith—it was unbelief.

The Confessions: Bane of Relativism

The unbelief of relativism is one of the primary ingredients in the stew that spawns the heretic and that rewards him with the followers he craves, who frolic in his wake along his evil way.

The false teacher becomes consumed by his own subjective experience, which inflates his ego, so that he comes to believe that he has some grand new thing to add to the old paths; accordingly, he will invariably butt up against the wide and unyielding stone that lies across his path and obstructs him from his goal: the confessions.

Rev. George Ophoff, warning the churches about those who demanded no creed but Christ, extolled the strength of the creeds in the face of relativism:

The creeds of Christendom may be called storehouses of truth mined through the ages from the word of God by the Christian church. They are the depositaries of the fruits of centuries of labor done by the Christian Church. It is these creeds that are making it possible for the church at the present time to be preaching on the great truths contained in Scripture as she does. Supposing that the minister of the Gospel enters upon his ministerial career, a total stranger to the teachings of the creeds of the church; that, so far as he was concerned, these creeds did not exist. Then he would be no further into the truth than was the church at the time of the death of the last apostle. But through the centuries the Spirit has been leading the church farther and farther into the truth. And what the church apprehended, she was also empowered to express in adequate language, to bring into being her creeds. And these creeds, being what they are, immediately lead into the truth as far as the church was led through the ages.¹

1 G. M. Ophoff, “No Creed, But Christ (?),” *Standard Bearer* 16, no. 3 (November 1, 1939): 71.

But the false teacher has the low view of the church's creeds that Reverend Ophoff described previously in his article—the creeds are no rich heritage to the false teacher. For hundreds and even thousands of years before that false teacher's existence, the church was led by the Spirit into a particular creed or confession. But the heretic becomes convinced that he is right to disregard this fact, drunk on the fermentation of his own insular thoughts. Ensnared by his false doctrine—and neglecting to judge it in the light of scripture and to submit to scripture's condemnation of his false doctrine—the false teacher proudly proclaims his heresy to the sheep, targeting their fleshly vulnerabilities and leading many astray.

Let us say that a hue and cry go up and the denomination of churches to which the false teacher belongs proceeds to examine him. The confessions outline the parameters of sound doctrine in the churches, clearly showing the false teacher the lines that he trespasses and steadfastly aiding the churches in their judgment of heretic and heresy. As soon as he feels that he has been cornered by the creeds, the heretic will abandon or oppose them or even slyly subvert them. And if the pressure of the creeds is applied faithfully by the churches, the heretic then will have no option but to openly oppose the creeds, even at times becoming so self-assured and clumsy in his opposition that he changes the very words of the confessions or disregards whatever they have to say that does not fit his relative "truth."

The false teacher will not suffer himself to be taught by the confessions, refusing to hear correction and refusing to heed admonition. To him the confessions are not a faithful summary of the word of God but rather a means to an end, and he will not submit to their yoke, no matter his vow before God and church. One so ensnared leaves the true church, for all his claims yet to represent it, and brings as many as he can deceive along with him.

Following such a false teacher inevitably brings one into a morass of confusion and conflagrations of conscience. The follower is tormented by the effects of relativism when he finds that he cannot articulate or understand the substance of the false teaching he has swallowed whole. He cannot bring with him a compass according to which he understands all of scripture, and every conviction he thought that he once had about God and God's word slips out of his fingers like so many grains of sand. The conviction of faith is completely lost to him. Thoroughly bewildered and adrift from the moorings of sound doctrine, he settles for following the man he has chosen and reasons within himself, adopting the folly of Gamaliel for his own: "If this counsel is of men, it will come to nought: but if it be of God, who can overthrow it? If I am wrong, I can always come back to the truth at some time in the future."

What folly! What unbelief! What carnality!

Understanding our own inclinations to consider God's holy truth to be relative and our inclinations to be cowards in judgment, it is clear what a great gift and trustworthy help the church has been given in the creeds. The creeds are the Spirit-wrought fruit of the battles of the church in past ages that lend steel to our spines in the battle against false doctrine. Though they can never stand in the place of scripture as God-breathed, the confessions are nevertheless the fortifications of the church built up by the Spirit through the ages. The confessions faithfully summarize the word of God; their doctrine is divine doctrine. As such the confessions aid the churches in exposing and condemning the lies that men pass for truth; the creeds are spring-loaded jaws of steel that hem in the way of the marauding wolf in sheep's clothing.

And perhaps just as importantly, the creeds give no room for our natural inclinations to treat the truth as relative and malleable. Considering the confession of the church through the ages—a goodly heritage marked out with gracious care—the Reformed church member will quickly and repeatedly find that he must have an opinion about the truth. By God's grace and the effectual working of the Spirit, the Reformed church member will find that he is made to love the sound doctrine of God and to hate the lies of men and the devil.

False Ecumenism: Churches of Gamaliel

Relativism has a pervasive presence in the nominal church world today. This church teaches that, that church teaches this, and the new church on the corner teaches something else altogether. All these churches lay claim to the truth. Granted, their teachings are mutually exclusive, so that if one church's doctrine is true, then the other churches' doctrines must be false. However, where we would expect to see clear lines of demarcation, instead we find that each church gives the others a wide berth so that their doctrines never come into contact with each other. The ministers, under the banner of collegial appreciation, never contend with each other's false doctrines. The members are happy to mingle together in the name of a counterfeit unity, despite the fact that their confessions are all discordant cacophony.

This phenomenon highlights the clamor for so-called positive preaching. Ministers are warned not to engage in polemics, for such warfare is negative, and negativity is a thing to be avoided—it makes people feel bad. Ministers who engage in polemical preaching and writing are dismissed as warmongers and quarrelsome. Often, all the angst of the churches is heaped on such misfit ministers, as if they were the troublers of Israel. These churches believe that it would be much better if pastors would merely preach positively and "leave people to make up

their minds for themselves.” Much better if pastors would preach positively, even ignoring and holding back portions of God’s holy word for the sake of supposed denominational unity. A noble sacrifice, these churches would have us believe. Much better for us all if we can get Gamaliel on our pulpits and avoid all controversy.

If there is one chorus these churches sing in unison, it is, “Who is to say for certain?” We are left with a perplexing mess of churches—institutions claiming to have the truth about God and man, while simultaneously claiming to know nothing for certain at all. If they do not use the words, their silence in warfare speaks volumes—much can be confirmed by what they do not say and preach. The ministers of these churches speak glowingly of the gospel of sovereign, particular grace while cuddling up to the soul-consuming harlot of contingent works. The ministers go on about how marriage is the mystery of Christ and the church and that marriage is for life, while they lead their churches to commit spiritual adultery against the bridegroom, Jesus Christ. When such crimes are uncovered under God’s hand of judgment, the ministers are offended that the harsh judgments of scripture are brought to bear on their crimes and that God’s pronouncement of woe is declared. The ministers proclaim the need to keep the sword drawn and ready, but they conveniently avoid engaging in any meaningful battles. They condemn the evils of the outside world, while they forbid rebuke within the churches and zealously guard the honor of their own names. They preach a form of the antithesis to the sheep, while at the same time they crave the prestige and respect that one can only attain in the broader ecumenical councils.

Such churches will never reform. Such churches can never reform. Such churches are not Reformed churches. Such churches do not have the Spirit of Christ in them.

When we find to our grief that a church trumpets the uncertain sound of a relative gospel, we should not think that such a church is just confused or in need of instruction or improvement. We are not witnessing a church in its death throes. We are not witnessing a church as *rigor mortis* sets in. But we are witnessing a church already issuing forth the decay of death. Unbelief is preached off her pulpits! Unbelief dominates in her pews.

Woe to the church that boasts of Christ in words but denies him in her actions! Woe to the church that shrinks back in the day of battle! Woe to the church that chafes under and ultimately abandons the confessions. Woe to the church that will not judge as God judges. She manifests her unbelief and exposes that she has long ago fallen from grace.

The Spirit of reformation roars, and the thundering of his voice is magnificent to behold. All those who belong to the Lamb rejoice in that roaring and dance in that

thunder. The true church of Christ races into the battle after her king, her heart alight with the certain victory of the Lion of Judah and his anthems rolling ceaselessly and shamelessly from her lips.

But the church of Gamaliel shrinks back. She wrings her hands, lisping her toothless lisp and scowling at those she considers fools, and—stuffing cotton in her ears to mute the dreadful racket—she shambles back into the shadows to drift off to sleep once more.

She never wakes up.

Relativism: Lawless, Loveless

“In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6).

This verdict of the Spirit captures the essence of Gamaliel’s folly, but its summary of the spiritual condition of Israel during the time of the judges directs our attention to a bitter fruit of relativism in the church. The spirit of relativism corrupts and even entirely subverts Christian discipline because if the truth is relative, there can be no such thing as judgment: “In those days there was no king in Israel.” And the spirit of relativism, as it consumes the believer’s knowledge of his God, also devours the believer’s love for his neighbor.

Relativism is a sly and shifty assassin, its presence often only apparent after the damage has been done. You think all is well; and then suddenly, there is only coldness where there should be fire, apathy where there should be zeal, and indifference where there should be love.

I heard this complaint many times when I was a member in the Protestant Reformed Churches: “The great threat to the Protestant Reformed Churches is dead orthodoxy. Doctrine, doctrine, doctrine. We know it so well, but we have to live it—where is that?” Many agreed that this was a great concern. What was the solution from the ministers’ studies, from the consistory rooms, and from the pulpits? Law, law, law: the law wickedly and falsely preached. There is that which a man must do to be saved. Christ and our obedience are the way to the Father. Man is not totally depraved; our works have some merit after all as regenerated believers.

Before we knew it, our beloved denomination had gone from claiming to uphold and to preach the whole gospel of sovereign, particular grace to being a carnal institution that manipulated the sheep into thinking that God would dwell with them in fellowship if only they performed some more good works. God raised up men to speak a word of rebuke—a word of love that sought the ultimate and everlasting good of their brothers and sisters—and those men were slain for it.

So where is judgment today? Where is love?

To this day that apostate denomination is riddled with the disease of the unbelief of relativism. Professors and

ministers proclaim false doctrine with no fear of reprisal. The same men write books and articles that stamp their false doctrine on the very forehead of the denomination. Ministers, elders, and deacons abandon the offices that they claim to have received from Christ by his Spirit's speaking through his churches to elect these men. Abuse and the corruption of righteous judgment run rampant, while the blood of wives and children runs in the streets. And tucked away in their safe little corners, the members and ministers who claim orthodoxy do nothing about the mockery of God that sounds forth from the mouth of their denomination, nor do they regard the peril to the souls of false teachers and sheep alike. Christ called all of his own to come out of that denomination, and no member can pretend to be of a neutral opinion about that call.

And God has brought the Reformed Protestant Churches to contend with the unbelief of relativism as well.

"The teaching of the school as a demand of the covenant is law threatening gospel."

Such was the claim of Rev. Martin VanderWal, Jeff Andringa, Darrell De Vries, and their followers. The whole school controversy in the Reformed Protestant Churches was a stunning display of the lovelessness that relativism condones and fosters. The relativist cannot understand how the law could possibly be a law of liberty, nor can he understand how love is the fulfillment of that law. He looks at the law, and he cannot concede that the law is good. He must add to the law his own inventions, or he must take away from the law that it is lovely and pure.

When the law teaches the relativist that love for the neighbor means that the child of God bears his fellow members' burdens and spends his life for their needs, the relativist cries out angrily, his precious threatened, "But what about me and my wants, me and my children, me and my money, me and my time? Oh, God may be love but surely not to that degree, surely not in that way! Surely we cannot be so precise in our confession of the keeping of the Sabbath! Surely here the Spirit erred! Surely my liberty in Christ is violated if I am not free to scorn the needs of the members of his body. No one may come into my home and tell me what I am to do with my children!"

Or the relativist says, "Well, no one denies that a school is a good thing. There are so many benefits. But for all that, you may do what you like, and I am free to do as I like. And if some of us like to educate our kids together, that is great. And if some of us like to live apart from the body, minding only our own things, with no thought for the rest of you, that is great too."

Or when questioned, "Would you rebuke those who have left a true church and now sit in their houses for worship?" the relativist answers, "I would encourage them."

Do you notice again and again the shying away from

the absolute standard and authority of God's word? notice the inability to make a biblical, confessional judgment? notice again and again, the careful protection of self and the things of oneself? notice the violent reaction against the requirement of love? What a world of iniquity opens to swallow the relativist whole! But perhaps that is yet a little too far away from us, the pew-sitters.

We have to look no further than our own offense at the judgments of Jehovah God.

Q. 30. Do such then believe in Jesus the only Savior, who seek their salvation and welfare of saints, of themselves, or anywhere else?

A. *They do not*; for though they boast of Him in words, yet in deeds they deny Jesus the only deliverer and Savior; for one of these two things must be true, either that Jesus is not a complete Savior, or that they who by a true faith receive this Savior must find all things in Him necessary to their salvation. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 95, emphasis added)

"We think that we have the truth, but so do they... Who am I to judge?"

"I don't like naming names. I know it may be true, but do I have to actually call anyone an unbeliever?"

"Do we really have to judge at all? Can't we just reform positively?"

"I like many of the people over there. It would be easy to judge them if I despised them, but I don't, so I'll just keep to myself. I can't really see how discipline is love—they don't need me preaching at them."

"I want to leave the door open, and judgment closes it. If I call sin *sin*, they will not hear me anymore. That will only make them angry."

God have mercy on us and set our hearts to wisdom's ways! The lawless, loveless folly of Gamaliel is not so far from home.

The Unshakable, Inerrant, Powerful Word of Life: Jesus Christ

What is the final word on this matter of relativism then? Is there any hope for us, or is there no hope?

Of course there is hope, and the hope of the Christian is always his Lord. Faith in Christ is not a matter of intellect, logical syllogisms, or rational deduction. Faith in Christ is not a matter of having the right answer and being able to tell everyone else how wrong they are. Faith is not a matter of studying many books and reading many theologians and getting a piece of paper that says that you are qualified to have an authoritative opinion.

Faith is none of those things, for then faith would be easily shaken as a weak and pathetic thing. Like science, faith would be dependent on the flows and gatherings of

data; the interpretations of data; shifting and changing understandings, perceptions, and observations; and the trending philosophies that shape the way that men think in any given age.

Q. 21. What is faith?

A. True faith is not only a certain knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also an assured confidence, which the Holy Ghost works by the gospel in my heart; that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sin, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are, freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 90–91)

Do you see, then, how faith is antithetical to Gamaliel's folly?

Before noting what the Catechism tells us about faith itself, note, first, faith's source: "True faith...the Holy Ghost works by the gospel in my heart." Faith comes from God himself, and the Holy Ghost works that faith in our hearts by the gospel. The working and the giving and the increasing of faith are all performed by the Spirit by the gospel. There is no contingency given in all of faith to the effort and striving and working of the believer. While relativism consists of all the uncertainties and doubts produced by the weak and sinful mind of man, faith is the working of the almighty, inerrant, unshakable one, whose will cannot be deterred and who is the truth, the way, and the life. While relativism is reflexively self-obsessed, faith is the gift of God: an alien gift uniting us with an alien righteousness. And the Spirit works by the gospel, that is, the Spirit works by the word of God (especially in the preaching), which word is brilliant, purely without shadow of darkness, lie, or uncertainty.

Second, it is easy to consider the "certain knowledge" of the Catechism's answer to be some kind of mere, rational assent to a convincing proposition. If we do so, we miss the point the Catechism is making. Read answer 21 again: the "certain knowledge" of the answer is the certain knowledge of God's revelation of himself in his word. God is not an idea: God is a someone—three in person, one in essence! The certain knowledge of faith then is not that I believe a bunch of facts to be true (though the believer believes all of scripture) but that I know and understand scripture to be the very name of my God, in all of his works and ways! And God shows himself to me by his gift of faith, by his work in my heart by the Spirit.

Consider your relationships, particularly the relationships you have where one reveals oneself to you. Those are rare, intimate relationships. The intimacy of the marriage relationship leaps to mind—the revealing of the husband

of himself to his wife and the wife to her husband. The two know each other so intimately and so lovingly that they cannot be indifferent to each other. When someone speaks a wicked word about the husband to his wife, she will not stand for it, and she does not assent to it for a moment but silences the evil speaker. When someone speaks a wicked word about the wife to her husband, his will to fight rises almost immediately in his breast, and his passion is stirred to protect her. Such is faith's knowledge of God as God reveals himself in his word by the operation of the Spirit: real, intimate, and true.

One might scoff and say, "Are we to trust subjective experience or are we not? He is speaking out of both sides of his mouth." Do not misunderstand—we do not arrive at the assured confidence of faith through subjective experience. The confidence of faith is not dependent on experience, even if by faith we are given the right understanding of experience. The assured confidence of faith is worked by God through the Spirit by the gospel. That is not subjective, dependent on our lived experiences, but it is an assured confidence that comes straight from the source of all that is true. Though it is extremely personal and intimate, it is nevertheless arrived at through an inerrant revelation of what is objectively, everlastingly true.

Finally, the "assured confidence" of faith strikes at the quivering, cowering heart of all relativism. This "assured confidence" is never severed from its source and object. As stated by Ephesians 3:12, which the Catechism explains, this assured confidence is confidence in the person and work of Jesus Christ! Faith is confidence because, by the Spirit and the word, I know it is true that all my sins are forgiven and that all working for my salvation is complete. Faith is assured because all of salvation depends on Jesus, my savior! He is not half a savior, but he is a complete savior, as his resurrection and exaltation prove.

Who is this Jesus? What does he reveal in his word, and what truth is made known by the Spirit to all the elect?

"I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6).

There is no other way. There is no other truth. There is no other life.

The devil, the world, and his own sinful flesh rise up to tempt the child of God. His own fleshly inclination to a relativist denial of God makes him wrestle with being ashamed of the gospel, to doubt it, to waver, to halt between two opinions, and to ask, "Who is to say for certain?"

The threefold enemy bears down on the Reformed church, howling at it to cloak the brilliant light of the word with all kinds of shadow; to bow to the ascendancy of the wisdom of man; to be enamored of man's ideas; to dissemble before the fearsome faces of angry scorners; and to be done with judgment, discipline, and love.

But, while we have good cause to be warned of the dangerous unbelief of relativism and to examine our own hearts with a view to this sinful inclination of our flesh, we have no reason to fear. Our faith is not of us but of Christ, and our continued confession of the truth is all dependent on our God and the working of the Spirit by the word. Therefore, it is certain that he shall preserve us unto the end. It is of this same Spirit that our savior spoke:

7. Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.
8. And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment:
9. Of sin, because they believe not on me;
10. Of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more;
11. Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.

12. I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now.
13. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.
14. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you.
15. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew it unto you.
16. A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father.
33. These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world. (John 16:7–16, 33)

—Craig Ferguson

INSIGHTS

Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things.—1 John 2:20

IN WHAT DOES OUR SALVATION CONSIST?

The Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) do not believe in justification by faith alone apart from works, and they do not believe that this justification is salvation. Ministers in the PRC cannot say that we are justified by faith alone and stop there. If asked if we are justified by faith alone, the ministers in the PRC answer, “Yes, but...” They cannot help but add, “But you must also do good works,” under the guise that whom God justifies, he also sanctifies—their definition of *sanctification* being *your* life of holiness, *your* life of good works, or *your* love of God.

The Protestant Reformed ministers’ insistence that we must also do good works alongside our justification comes out in varied ways in their sermons and writings, but it is perhaps most striking when it comes out in direct opposition to the creeds.

May we say that our salvation consists in our justification?

Belgic Confession article 23 answers,

We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ’s sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied; as David and Paul teach us, declaring this to be the happiness of man, that God imputes righteousness to him without works. And the same apostle saith that we are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 51)

Rev. Bill Langerak answers,

Everybody understands—or should understand—that our salvation doesn’t merely consist of God

forgiving me the many, many times I have not loved him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, but that God's salvation of me delivers me from that sin and evil in such a way that I, in fact, love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, and strength. Our salvation consists of that. Would we ever look at someone who hates God, who hates God with their heart and mind and soul and strength, and say, "Well, they're saved"? Now, I understand in our old man that's certainly true, and that must be emphasized and preached also—our depravity, our total depravity in our flesh—but may we and should we ever present that in such a way that my salvation of God through Jesus Christ is of this manner: that God forgives my sins and then leaves the rest up to me, whereby I may or may not in the end love God?

Now, that's done, and you must understand that's done from two different perspectives. Some present the gospel of salvation this way: that God does his part; God promises certain things and even works certain things—oh, he gives [the] gift of faith, but now whether you're saved or not depends on whether you accept that gift and use that gift rightly, whether you fulfill the condition of loving God. If you don't love God, then God's not going to love you in return. Or, after rejecting such a concept or gospel, the gospel still can be presented this way: Oh yes, God saves us. God freely gives us faith; he works that faith; he works that act of faith so that we know and trust in God; and chiefly we trust in him for the forgiveness of sins! And since salvation is not conditional and does not depend upon you, it has nothing to do with the law of God; it has nothing to do with loving God. In fact, you really mayn't preach what we must do, otherwise you're preaching man, preaching a gospel of man.¹

According to Rev. Bill Langerak, everyone understands that salvation does not consist in the mere forgiveness of sins. Everyone understands that salvation also consists in God's delivering me from sin so that I love God with my whole heart. Everyone understands that one's salvation does not consist in his hating God; therefore, one's salvation must consist in his loving God. Everyone understands that, except the Belgic Confession apparently.

The question is not whether we must do good works. The question is not whether God delivers and renews

us from sin in such a way that we do actually love God. The question is, in what does our salvation consist? The question is, may we say that our salvation consists in the forgiveness of our sins for Christ's sake and stop there?

The PRC says no, our salvation consists in the forgiveness of sins *and* our love of God; our justification is by faith alone, *but* we also must do good works. And at every turn her ministers add the works of man alongside the perfect work of Jesus Christ to save his people from their sins. But the Belgic Confession answers yes, we believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Christ's sake. Period. The Belgic Confession leaves no room in our salvation for our good works, our repentance, or our love of God. Those are but inevitable fruits of faith, performed out of thankful gratitude to God for justifying us freely by his grace.

And as well as being un-confessional, Rev. Bill Langerak is afraid of the gospel. He shows his fear of the gospel and misrepresents the gospel when he asks,

May we and should we ever present that in such a way that my salvation of God through Jesus Christ is of this manner: that God forgives my sins and then leaves the rest up to me, whereby I may or may not in the end love God?

He then explains what he thinks are two wrong ways to present the gospel—two ditches, if you will. The first is the Arminian presentation of the gospel, in which one must fulfill the conditions of faith and obedience to be saved. The second is the so-called antinomian presentation of the gospel, in which salvation is of God by faith alone (which faith is a gift of God and is worked by God) and has nothing to do with the law of God. It is not a huge stretch to infer that he is referring to the Reformed Protestant Churches with this second presentation. Rev. Bill Langerak is afraid that if the gospel of free forgiveness is preached without the requirement of loving God that the rest is left up to the people, whereby they may or may not love God, whereby they may or may not lead licentious and wicked lives. He forgets Ephesians 2:10: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."

The question is not whether a child of God who is forgiven "may or may not in the end love God." That is not even a question. The question is not whether the child of God must love God. The question is not whether the law has a place in the life of the child of God. The child of God must and will love God because that child has been saved

¹ William Langerak, "Love the Lord Thy God," sermon preached in Trinity Protestant Reformed Church on October 22, 2023, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=1022231510484694>.

by grace through the gift of faith and has been created unto the good works that God has before ordained for him.

But the question is, may the gospel be set forth in this way: that God through Jesus Christ forgives my sins? The question is, in what does my salvation consist?

And the Belgic Confession is clear: my salvation consists in the remission of my sins for Jesus Christ's sake, which becomes mine by faith alone apart from works. Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift!

—Ally Ophoff

CONTRIBUTION

THE PROTESTANT REFORMED OVERTHROW OF PROF. HERMAN HANKO'S THEOLOGY

Introduction

The Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) today have overthrown the theology of Prof. Herman Hanko. Professor Hanko—one of the theological giants in the PRC—has served the PRC as a minister of the gospel for ten years and as professor of New Testament and church history for thirty-three years.

Professor Hanko's successors at the Protestant Reformed seminary, however, have disavowed his theology. Together with their colleagues in the ministry, the professors come out in the open, mocking his theology as antinomian.

Forgiveness Is a Declaration not a Decision

In their departure from Professor Hanko's theology, the Protestant Reformed ministers and professors invent a new doctrine of forgiveness. This new doctrine defines God's forgiveness of sins strictly in terms of a declaration, not as an act or a decision. Prof. Barry Gritters invents this new doctrine by teaching that God's forgiveness of our sins is neither a decision nor an act of God. He claims that forgiveness is a "declaration not a decision."¹

God's forgiveness of us is a *declaration* He makes to us. To be sure, God's forgiveness has an *eternal source*—His decree; but this decree is not yet forgiveness. God's forgiveness has a *judicial*

ground—Christ's sacrifice to pay for sin; but neither is this forgiveness. Forgiveness is God's *declaration* to a man's consciousness, *in the forum of his conscience*, "I forgive you."²

Forgiveness from God is His declaration to repentant sinners based on the satisfaction of His justice in the cross: "I release you from responsibility to pay for your sin."³

Professor Gritters' teaching is that God's eternal decree to forgive his elect people is *not forgiveness* (the decree is only the source). Professor Gritters teaches that Christ's sacrifice on the cross is not forgiveness (the cross is only the judicial ground). Forgiveness is strictly God's declaration to a repentant man's conscience that God forgives that man's sins. Apart from that declaration, that man remains unforgiven.

Professor Hanko had a different doctrine of forgiveness. Professor Hanko spoke of forgiveness fundamentally as the payment of a debt. In forgiving his people on the cross,

Christ assumed responsibility for the debt which his people owed to God and took upon himself the payment of that debt...Christ paid all that debt when he endured the horrors of hell on the cross...It is paid so completely that not one small particle of that debt remains to be paid.⁴

1 Barry Gritters, "The Sin of Forgiveness," *Standard Bearer* 99, no. 3 (November 1, 2022): 54.

2 Gritters, "The Sin of Forgiveness," 54.

3 Gritters, "The Sin of Forgiveness," 55.

4 Herman Hanko, *The Mysteries of the Kingdom: An Exposition of Jesus' Parables*, 2nd ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), 103.

In forgiveness God also imputes the righteousness of Jesus Christ to the elect sinner.

In God's work of justification, imputation means that God declares the sinner to be totally without sin. Upon close examination and after a lengthy trial in which all evidence has been considered with care, God finds the sinner in the dock to be totally in conformity with his divine being. The sinner is therefore innocent of any crime, guilty of nothing, completely without sin.⁵

For Professor Gritters forgiveness is a "declaration not a decision."⁶

For Professor Hanko forgiveness is much more than a mere declaration. Forgiveness is the payment for the debt of sin. Forgiveness is the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner. Forgiveness is an act and a decision.

Eternal Forgiveness Is Antinomian

In their overthrow of Professor Hanko's doctrine of forgiveness, the Protestant Reformed theologians today condemn the doctrine of eternal forgiveness as antinomian. Professor Cammenga leads this charge in his recent series in the *Standard Bearer*:

The teaching that God forgives sin apart from and prior to repentance, that He forgives the sinner in eternity long before he sheds a single tear in sorrow over sin in his lifetime, has been the teaching of the antinomians in the past.⁷

To teach that forgiveness precedes repentance is historically antinomian.⁸

Professor Cammenga even makes the audacious but false claim, "No PRC theologian has ever taught that God's forgiveness of us precedes His work in us to bring us to repentance."⁹ Professor Cammenga must have forgotten that his own seminary professor taught exactly that. Professor Hanko was a proponent of eternal forgiveness:

From the viewpoint of God's counsel, this forgiveness is eternal. When Balaam was asked by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel, God changed Balaam's cursings into blessings. Balaam was

forced to say, among many things, "He [God] hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel: the LORD his God is with him, and the shout of a king is among them" (Num. 23:21). The idea is that God never sees iniquity in his people.¹⁰

To Christ were imputed all the sins of all the elect whom God had given Christ eternally. "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:21).¹¹

God has no need to be reconciled to man, because God is eternally reconciled to his people. God loves his people with an everlasting love (Jer. 31:3), and God's covenant is an everlasting covenant (Jer. 32:40).¹²

For Professor Cammenga the doctrine of eternal forgiveness is antinomian.

For Professor Hanko the doctrine of eternal forgiveness is Reformed and scriptural.

The Cross Is Not Forgiveness

Grossly departing from Professor Hanko's doctrine of forgiveness, the Protestant Reformed theologians today make the cross of Jesus Christ of none effect. Professor Gritters makes the claim that the cross of Jesus Christ cannot be equated with the forgiveness of our sins.

God's forgiveness has a *judicial* ground—Christ's sacrifice to pay for sin; but neither is this forgiveness.¹³

Others refer to the satisfaction made at the cross as forgiveness and see forgiveness as an event of 2,000 years ago. To speak so may be legitimate if the cross *represents* forgiveness in a figure of speech, as *hand* means *help* in "give me a hand," or *wheels* means *car* in "I like your wheels," or *the crown* means *the king*.¹⁴

Professor Cammenga echoes the same doctrine that the cross is only the basis for our forgiveness; the cross is not to be equated with forgiveness. Forgiveness takes places *only* after man repents.

5 Herman Hanko, *Justified unto Liberty: Commentary on Galatians* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2011), 128–29.

6 Gritters, "The Sin of Forgiveness," 54.

7 Ronald Cammenga, "Antinomians? Without a Doubt (2)," *Standard Bearer* 98, no. 20 (September 1, 2022): 469–70.

8 Ronald Cammenga, "Antinomians? Without a Doubt (3)," *Standard Bearer* 99, no. 1 (October 1, 2022): 12.

9 Ronald Cammenga, "Antinomian? Without a Doubt," *Standard Bearer* 98, no. 18 (July 2022): 420.

10 Hanko, *The Mysteries of the Kingdom*, 103.

11 Hanko, *Justified unto Liberty*, 128.

12 Hanko, *Justified unto Liberty*, 243.

13 Gritters, "The Sin of Forgiveness," 54.

14 Gritters, "The Sin of Forgiveness," 54.

On the cross, the Lord Jesus made satisfaction and atonement as the basis for God's forgiveness of our sins. Forgiveness actually takes place when by faith in Jesus Christ, God declares in our consciousness, "Thy sins are forgiven."¹⁵

Although God has eternally decreed our forgiveness, as well as our repentance, and although the basis for that forgiveness is grounded in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, God's decree is realized in time. This is the order that He has determined in time that His forgiveness follows upon our repentance.¹⁶

Professor Hanko's doctrine of the cross is a far cry from the theology of the current Protestant Reformed theologians. For him Christ's perfect sacrifice on the cross accomplished the forgiveness of our sins and the removal of sin.

God sees his people as those who belong to Christ. Their forgiveness was historically realized on the cross of Christ. Christ assumed responsibility for the debt which his people owed to God and took upon himself the payment of that debt. He was able to do this because he endured the punishment of eternal hell when he suffered and died. Though each sin we commit deserves eternal hell, and though the number of the people of God is very great, Christ paid all that debt when he endured the horrors of hell on the cross... Thus he paid the debt for all God's people. It is paid so completely that not one small particle of that debt remains to be paid.¹⁷

Peace comes only when sin is removed, and sin is removed through the cross of Christ... Thus peace is God's gift to the church through the Lord Jesus Christ, given by means of the forgiveness and removal of sin.¹⁸

That he gave himself for our sins means that he took our sins on himself, was made sin for us, assumed full responsibility for every sin, and did so in the full consciousness of God's holiness that requires even one sin to be punished by an eternity in hell. That meant that Christ had to pay uncountable eternities for the sins of an

innumerable host of elect. Only his perfect sacrifice could pay such a price. That he paid for our sins means that they are gone forever, erased from the mind and heart of God, and that we are no longer responsible for them.¹⁹

Christ died on the cross and made the perfect sacrifice for sin. He bore the guilt of sin for all his people. He endured the suffering of hell, where the wrath of God became a whirlpool of suffering, for it burned black and murderous. He suffered in the place of his own; he stood where they ought to have stood and accomplished what they could never accomplish. He paid for their sin and guilt and earned for them the perfect righteousness of God.²⁰

The current Protestant Reformed theologians teach that the cross is *only* the ground or the basis for forgiveness. The cross only *represents* forgiveness in a figure of speech. The cross did not accomplish the forgiveness of our sins.

For Professor Hanko our forgiveness was historically realized on the cross of Christ. Our "forgiveness is an objective fact in the cross of Christ and in the mind and heart of God."²¹ The cross accomplished our forgiveness.

A Corrupt Sister

The PRC's false doctrine of forgiveness and the cross has borne fruit in her sister church in Singapore, Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church. The cross and forgiveness have no effect until man repents.

Her Arminian pastor Rev. Josiah Tan openly teaches that there are conditions in scripture that man fulfills by God's grace. Reverend Tan disguises his conditional theology by explaining it as God's orderly way of salvation. In his doctrine of salvation, Reverend Tan teaches a certain order of God's salvation in which man's believing and repentance must precede God's salvation, justification, and forgiveness of sins.

Jesus Here is teaching, that for salvation/ justification/ forgiveness of sins to follow, something must happen prior, that is a man believing in Jesus. That is a man, abasing himself and casting himself completely on Jesus. Without this, salvation will not follow.²²

15 Cammenga, "Antinomian? Without a Doubt," 420.

16 Ronald Cammenga, "Antinomians? Without a Doubt (5)," *Standard Bearer* 99, no. 8 (January 15, 2023): 180.

17 Hanko, *The Mysteries of the Kingdom*, 103.

18 Hanko, *Justified unto Liberty*, 23.

19 Hanko, *Justified unto Liberty*, 30.

20 Hanko, *Justified unto Liberty*, 133.

21 Hanko, *The Mysteries of the Kingdom*, 107.

22 Josiah Tan, "Understanding the PRCA Controversy (Part 4): Doctrine of Synod 2018," 5, <https://bereanrpsg.files.wordpress.com/2022/04/cercs-4th-class-notes.pdf>.

Long ago Professor Hanks condemned this conditional theology in which man's believing precedes God's salvation of that man.

What is meant when the term "condition" is applied to the work of salvation?

When faith is made a condition, the meaning is that salvation will not be granted to anyone unless he fulfills the condition of faith. Man must first believe for salvation to be given to him.²³

"If a Man Would be Saved, There Is That Which He Must Do"

The current Protestant Reformed doctrine of forgiveness and repentance stands in the service of the doctrine that if a man would be saved, there is that which he must do. If a man would be forgiven, he must first repent.

Rev. Kenneth Koole has vigorously articulated and defended this doctrine.

I say again, "If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do." Which is to say, there is that which he is *called* to do. For *until* a man responds to the truth and call of the gospel by believing it, confessing it, he is not, and cannot be saved. Understood properly, a perfectly orthodox statement. "Repent and believe, or perish!"²⁴

Professor Hanks condemned the view that if a man would be saved, there is that which he must do. God's salvation of a man is absolutely not dependent on what that man does or does not do.

From God's point of view, He works all things sovereignly so that all salvation is given graciously as a gift. Nothing is left to us which makes His salvation dependent upon what we do. We can do nothing, for we are sinners, dead in trespasses and sins.²⁵

Arminianism and Pelagianism have always been plagues in the church. Ever and again attempts have been made to preserve some glory for man. Always trying to salvage some last remnant of

his sinful pride, man has tried constantly to take from God that which rightly belongs to Him alone and to give it to himself. Predestination stands in the way of all this. If God sovereignly elects and reprobates, then the whole work of salvation belongs to God alone. There is no room left for man and his work.²⁶

For the PRC today if a man would be saved, there is that which he must do.

For Professor Hanks God sovereignly accomplishes the entire work of salvation—nothing is left for man and his work.

Conclusion

Professor Hanks today condemns all who left the Protestant Reformed Churches for the Reformed Protestant Churches as rebellious schismatics, even though they remain faithful to the theology that he taught them. But then let Professor Hanks affirm what his theological successors are now openly teaching: God's eternal decree to forgive is not forgiveness; the cross of Jesus is not forgiveness; if a man would be saved, there is that which he must do.

If he will not affirm that theology, then let Professor Hanks condemn these evil doctrines being taught in the PRC. After all, Professor Hanks taught us that the "truth of the gospel was more important than any man and his reputation, more important than anything else in the world."²⁷

There is no room in Scripture for tolerance of wrong doctrine. A faithful minister and church are intolerant of corruptions of the truth, for these are corruptions of the truth of the God whom the saints love and serve.²⁸

Let Professor Hanks be

an Athanasius *contra mundum* ("against the world"), a Luther at Worms, a martyr burning at the stake, a slave of Jesus Christ. That was all that counted. He [Paul] was the kind of man the church so desperately needs today.²⁹

—Aaron Lim

23 Herman Hoeksema and Herman Hanks, *Ready to Give an Answer: A Catechism of Reformed Distinctives* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997), 189.

24 Kenneth Koole, "Response [to Andy Lanning, "Obedience to the Call of the Gospel"]", *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 11 (March 1, 2019): 254.

25 Herman Hanks, *God's Everlasting Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1988), 194.

26 Hanks, *God's Everlasting Covenant of Grace*, 138.

27 Hanks, *Justified unto Liberty*, 117.

28 Hanks, *Justified unto Liberty*, 43.

29 Hanks, *Justified unto Liberty*, 117.



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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL

We love him, because he first loved us. —1 John 4:19

We love God. To be a lover of God is the greatest and most glorious thing that you can say about a human being. It means that he is loved of God.

That is not what man is in Adam. Man in Adam is a hater of God. Man loves the darkness, and he hates the light; and God is light, and in him is no darkness. And whatsoever is light exposes the darkness, and the darkness hates the light. Man became darkness in Adam. That is not how God made Adam. God made Adam holy and righteous and therefore knowing and loving God. Adam talked with God as God walked with Adam in the garden in the cool of the day in sweet fellowship of love. But Adam gave ear to the devil—the original hater of God—and Adam became darkness. So did all Adam's posterity become haters of God. And all the haters of God shall perish.

But to love God!

The love of God is the affection of the regenerated heart toward the triune God, whom the believer knows to be his God in Jesus Christ. The love of God is the holy fear of God that causes the elect child of God to tremble before the glory and majesty of God, knowing that this God is for him and not against him. The love of God is the heart's deepest embrace of God as the believer knows him to be the God of his salvation. The love of God is the awe and wonder of the believer toward God as the believer stands in the light and beholds God in all his beauty and loveliness revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, his savior. The love of God is the definite choice of God by the will, which has been liberated from the bondage of sin and darkness, and from a heart enlightened with the light of God, a heart that knows that God is gracious to me, a sinner, in Jesus Christ. The love of God is to stand in the presence of God without fear and trembling and having the boldness of the sinner, who stands in the light forgiven for Christ's sake. Yes, love is the fruit of faith! We love God: the simple yet profound statement of scripture regarding the attitude of the regenerated heart toward God. The love of God that springs from the heart is ineffable in the end. The love of God is expressed in fervent prayers and joyful praises. The love of God is expressed in obedience to God's commandments. The love of God is expressed in the stubborn stand for the truth and the refusal to tolerate the lie. But the depths of the love of God, who can speak them? To the endless ages we will express this love.

We love God because he first loved us. Oh, herein is love, not that we loved him but that he loved us. He loved us with an eternal, unchangeable love. His heart ever burns with delight toward his people in Christ. God eternally esteems his people as most precious and dear to him. He ever, with unwavering constancy, wills their blessedness. With unflinching divine fervency, he decreed to have his people in his covenant fellowship and friendship. He loved them while they were yet his enemies, who with malice in their hearts and darkness in their minds hated him. Do you not see Christ? God commends his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. God loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. And when we see Jesus Christ crucified, then by his Spirit we know and believe the love that God has toward us.

And we love him because he first loved us.

—NJL