



# 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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# CANON

*As many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy,  
and upon the Israel of God. — Galatians 6:16*

**T**his verse is connected to the immediate context. It makes very little difference whether the connection is to verses 14 and 15, as some argue, or whether the connection is to only verse 15. The thought and purpose of verse 16 remain the same. In verse 14 the apostle shouts the battle cry of the believer: “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.” This is Paul’s trumpet blast that put all on notice that he glories only in the cross of Christ, by which the world is crucified to Paul and he to the world. This is the saving separation of the believer from his damning connection to the world in which he was conceived and brought forth. This saving separation happened at the cross of Christ, so that at the cross the believer was separated from the world. He was dead and buried with Christ and died to sin and the world. The believer is dead to the law, so that it cannot curse him. He is dead to sin and unrighteousness, so that they cannot dominate and control him. He was also raised with Christ to newness of life, an everlasting life untouchable by sin and evil.

The world to which the believer dies is both the ungodly world and the apostate church world. In the context of the false teachers and false Christians who plagued the church in Galatia, especially the false church is meant. The false teachers who came into the church taught their false doctrine lest they should suffer persecution. They rejoiced in the number of their followers, and they persecuted the church.

The antithesis, then, is not only do not listen to the world’s music, do not watch the world’s shows, and do not be friends with the world, but the antithesis is also come out from among the false church. What concord has the temple of God with the synagogue of Satan? The elect child of God was separated from these things at the cross, and he must be separate from them in his life, or he must give up his claim to glory in the cross of Christ. Instead of friendship with the world and the false church, the elect child has friendship with God in Christ. To be a friend of God is to be an enemy of the world, and to be a friend of the world is to be an enemy of God. That happened at the cross. That is the spiritual reality of the elect child of God.

When God brings that reality of the cross into the life of the elect child of God, a new creature avails (Gal. 6:15). In the heart of the child of God, God makes his child what Christ made him at the cross. The power of the cross and of the blood of Christ shed at the cross is to make the elect child of God a new creature in Christ.

*In Christ* is the crucial term. The elect child of God is in Christ; Christ represents the child of God. The elect child of God is in Christ in such a way that there is a close, spiritual, and an organic, inseparable connection between the elect child of God and Christ. Because the elect child of God is in Christ, he is already in heavenly places; in principle all things are become new. The child of God loves God and hates sin, loves Christ and hates the world.

You can try to overcome this reality, but you cannot. This is what your sin is. Your sin is trying to overcome the reality that in you a new creature avails. But you cannot overcome that. The new creature overcomes and is victorious in you; the new creature avails. In Christ the new creature has power, not power of himself but because he is in Christ. And the new creature avails until the perfection of your salvation in heaven. So you see that verses 14 and 15 are intimately related; they cannot be separated. In Christ the child of God is crucified to the world and the world to him, and a new creature avails in Christ.

And whoever walks “according to this rule, peace be on [him], and mercy, and upon the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16). The word “rule” in this verse is a translation of the Greek word *canon*. The canon is a life principle, a life principle out of which the Christian lives his whole life. Indeed, the canon is a life principle that dominates in the Christian, so that the Christian in all his life—in his thinking, willing, and acting—is conformed to and lives according to that life principle.

Our English word *canon* is most often used in connection with the canon of scripture.

First, the canon of scripture is all the books that carry the evidence in themselves that they are from God, and thus they impress themselves on the church by the work of the Holy Spirit as being from God. The rule is that the books must carry the evidence in themselves and that

they must impress themselves on the church as being from God. If books are going to be considered for that list, they must impress themselves on the conscience of the church as being from God. Then the church lists those books. They are the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. That list of sixty-six books became the canon of scripture.

Second, the word *canon* as used in connection with scripture means that these books form the only rule of faith and life. All things are judged by that standard, that rule, of the word of God. All must conform to that standard. It is the final judge, and it cannot be judged by any other book or person.

But only in the loosest sense is this the meaning of the word “rule” in Galatians 6:16. When the apostle speaks of this “rule” or canon, he is speaking about the Bible. He is speaking about what the Bible teaches. He is speaking about the heart of all divine revelation as it pertains to the salvation of men and women and as that truth brings peace and mercy on them and causes them to live in that peace and mercy. You can simply say that when the apostle mentions the canon, he means the truth as it is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

What specifically is this canon, this rule, this truth, this life principle?

The apostle points to it by the word “this.” This rule is what he taught in verse 15: in Christ Jesus neither circumcision avails nor uncircumcision avails but a new creature. This is the rule. This is “this rule” that brings peace and mercy on all who walk according to it. This is the rule that conforms men and women to it, so that from the depth of their hearts they have entirely new lives with entirely new directions. This is the rule by which all who are Israel must and do walk. This is the rule that brings peace on souls and hearts and causes all who are Israel to understand the mercy of God.

Throughout history man has come up with all kinds of rules and regulations by which to live. The Pharisees had their rules. Their descendants, the monks, had their rules. Every order of monks had its own rules and judged that the rules of the other orders were inferior. There are rules about fasting, praying, structuring one’s life, what to do, when to do it, what to eat, and when to eat it. Rules upon rules. Every strange sect and religion has its rules. You can really summarize all the rules this way: do this to live; do this to be blessed; do this to increase your blessing. This is the rule by which man lives. Man’s rule about blessedness, life, and salvation is *do!* There is no peace, joy, or salvation in any of these rules.

But this is the rule: in Christ Jesus neither circumcision avails anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature!

*To avail* means to be strong, to have power, or to be

of use. The opposite is that something is nothing, has no power, or is useless.

You must understand that rule because that rule utterly abolishes man’s works and deeds from consideration in the work of his salvation.

Circumcision and uncircumcision were the two great divisions of the human race from Abraham until Christ. Circumcision made man a debtor to do the whole law. Circumcision stood for doing. If you did not do and if you did not do perfectly, then you were damned. Circumcision also marked the circumcised person as being separate from the world and as consecrated to God. Circumcision obliged one to forsake the world, to crucify his flesh, and to cleave unto God.

Where did circumcision get Israel? Exiled! She could not be what circumcision demanded that she be. Circumcision did not avail for salvation, blessedness, joy, or peace. But circumcision brought with it condemnation.

Circumcision had to become nothing!

For circumcision to become nothing, the reality to which circumcision pointed had to be fulfilled. Circumcision was a shedding of blood that pointed to the great shedding of blood in Jesus Christ. Then the righteousness to which circumcision pointed was fulfilled. Then circumcision as a sign had to be abolished and become nothing. When circumcision became nothing, that pointed to the fact that the law was wholly fulfilled and kept and that there was no more doing for salvation. You do not have to try to do better for salvation! That circumcision does not avail means that all the work for salvation is finished.

Indeed, that circumcision became nothing meant that there was a better righteousness than the righteousness of the law. The righteousness of the law, such as it is, is that you must do the law to live. But the law can never bring you higher than this life. The law can only speak to one who is living and alive to the law. And the law can only say, “Do this, and I will not kill you.” The law can never bring anything but a continuation of a life already received. The law never brings with it a greater blessedness, more favor, or a higher happiness. The law belongs to the beggarly elements. The law has no power to lift one up, to restore, to redeem, or to bring one beyond this life.

For circumcision to become nothing, the righteousness to which circumcision pointed had to be brought to light. That righteousness is the righteousness of Jesus Christ. His righteousness made the righteousness of the law obsolete. It is the righteousness of the Lord from glory, who became flesh, who took on himself the sins of his people, who loved God with God’s own love, and who in love for God made satisfaction to God for all the sins of his people. That righteousness is beyond the power of sin and death; it is a righteousness that brings with it the power of an endless life; it is a righteousness that is worthy

of the re-creation of all things—of the heavens, the earth, the sea, and all the creatures—and the re-creation of God’s elect people too.

Christ’s righteousness made circumcision nothing. With the obsolescence of circumcision went all works because circumcision stood for the obligation to obey, to do this or that to live, and to do this or that to have the favor of God. Whatever you must do to have the favor of God, whatever you must do to have the assurance of God, and whatever you must do to have the blessing of God are all assaults on and denials of the righteousness of Jesus Christ as the only ground of all your blessedness, grace, and glory.

But circumcision does not count in Christ. No works or activities of man in Jesus Christ count for man’s blessedness.

Circumcision does not avail! Neither does uncircumcision avail. That is the apostle’s thought. Circumcision does not avail. Uncircumcision does not avail.

Ah, yes, uncircumcision is the sign of all the filthiness of the Gentiles! The uncircumcised are the dirty and filthy, the unwanted, and those who are aliens from the covenant of promise. God suffered the Gentiles to wander in their own ways and to fulfill all the lusts of their flesh. That uncircumcision does not avail either. It is nothing in Christ! None of those sins and none of that filthy background can keep the uncircumcision out of Christ and out of his kingdom. Uncircumcision does not avail to overcome, to wreck, or to destroy the works of God.

That uncircumcision does not avail is true also because of the righteousness of Christ, a righteousness in which perfect satisfaction to God was made for all sin—sins that you commit now, sins that you have committed, and sins that you will commit. Sins—big sins and little sins—cannot destroy the work of God and abolish the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The righteousness of Christ is above the power of sin, the power of death, and the power of the grave. Christ’s righteousness overcomes all guilt and makes one worthy of eternal life, the adoption of children, and happiness.

A new creature avails. The righteousness of Christ demands a new and an everlasting creation. In the heart and the life of the one united to Jesus Christ by a true and a living faith, Christ’s righteousness is worthy of and brings with it the new creature. Not circumcision avails; not uncircumcision avails; not your works avail; not your will avails; not your sins and iniquities avail; but a new creature avails. The new creature is strong, has power, and is what counts.

The new creature is the coming in of the first part of the new creation, the earnest of the eternal inheritance. The new creature consists of a new heart and thus of a whole new way of thinking and acting for those who are in Christ. The new creature is not such a creation that

everyone is the same. No, the branch that is brought into communion with Jesus Christ was created by God a unique branch with its own personality, its own mind, and its own will. But that was all corrupted. Now in Christ all things become new.

Oh, yes, you must be reminded that the new creature is in principle, a small beginning of the new obedience. But it is a new and irresistible creature who loves God and hates sin. Against that creature nothing—not Satan; not hell; not the grave; not death; not your own sins, weaknesses, shortcomings, and failings; not the whole world; and not your flesh either—can prevail against the new creature to overcome it or to destroy it. And your works do not add to the new creature.

Yes, yes, through the old man you easily fall into sin. But the new creature prevails. He certainly prevails. He does not prevail in that you become more holy during your life; so, for instance, you were a big sinner when you were a teenager, and now you are less of a sinner. No, the new creature prevails in that you sorrow for sin, you turn from sin every day, and your love for God can never be overcome in you.

This is precisely because the creation of the new creature rests on another, higher, divine, and glorious righteousness. Christ’s righteousness cannot be abolished, and so the new creature cannot be abolished. Your new creature does not depend on you. Your new creature depends on Christ.

And this rule establishes the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation, for who can join himself to Jesus Christ? To know this rule and to live by this rule and to love this rule, you must first be one with Jesus Christ. That only God can do; that only God does. According to his sovereign good pleasure, he chose the members of Jesus Christ, and he excluded others from being members of Jesus Christ. God joins dead branches to Jesus Christ, so that Christ is in them, and they are in Christ. This rule says that salvation is of the Lord. This rule says that salvation is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. This rule absolutely abolishes human works in salvation. This rule absolutely establishes divine sovereignty in salvation.

It is a rule for life. Yes, that is true, and I will get to that.

But it is a rule that marks the people of God. All who walk by this rule are revealed in their walk to be the Israel of God. And all who abandon this rule are shown thereby to be merely of Israel and not Israel at all. You abandon this rule by unbelief in the word of God. You abandon this rule when you add to Christ or displace Jesus Christ as the only ground of your righteousness.

In Christ are the Israel of God. The Israel of God are the objects of the promise. They are the heirs of salvation. They are the ones whom God calls a holy and peculiar

people. They are the true children of Abraham. This is the rule that marks them out and distinguishes them from all others. Not circumcision any longer, but this rule distinguishes who are of God's covenant and who are not.

Oh, many there are who feign to be children of Abraham. They feign to be part of Christ. They feign that they love God and that they seek heaven. But they are easily detected by the application of this rule: in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails but a new creature! Never would God's Israel in Christ say, "Christ is not enough!" They would not say that and maintain that position. Never would God's Israel in Christ add to Christ something that man must do for salvation. Never would God's Israel stay in their sins.

God's people can fall into sin; they can fall deeply into sin. But there they cannot stay, for in Christ nothing avails save a new creature. The Lord will bring out his people, the Lord will cause them to walk again in the way of his precepts, and the Lord will cause them to stand again over against the world as those who are crucified to the world and the world to them.

All of this is true because of Christ's righteousness!

There is no peace on those who try to overthrow this rule. A curse to them, and that out of God's everlasting hatred of them. When one adds to Christ, does not rest on Christ alone, and does not live by faith in the gospel, that one has no peace.

And do not leave yourself out of this. Surely the mercy of God always rests on his people. But when they do not rest in Christ, then there is no peace on them. But God does not let his people stay there. He wills peace for them, and he brings them certainly and infallibly to be conformed to this rule and to rest in the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone.

To as many who walk according to this rule, peace be on them.

There will not be an earthly peace on them. If you walk according to this rule, you will have war with the world, for you have been separated from the world and separated unto God. And that can never be undone. That can never be bridged. If you are able to bridge that gap, then you do not walk according to this rule. And if you stay in that course, then you are not the Israel of God, but you are the world. In the world the Israel of God will not have peace. You will have warfare: warfare with friends, warfare in the church, warfare with family, and warfare with the ungodly world. That is always true of the church. You cannot have peace in the world where the gospel comes; you cannot have the gospel and peace in the world. Peace in the world is a dangerous thing. You think that you have arrived, and you let down your guard. No, no earthly peace on you!

What did the apostle say about his whole life after his

conversion? "I have fought a good fight!" That is because in Christ nothing avails but a new creature. You too have been separated in the very depth of your being from the world and are now made a participant in the great war that God started in the garden of Eden. You are of heaven. Those of the world are of the earth. You are of God. They are of the devil. You are God's temple. They are the synagogue of Satan. You are God's sons and daughters. They are the generation of the serpent. And that cannot ever be overcome because Christ and his righteousness cannot be overcome.

Oh, you will say to me that I am being too harsh, too black and white, and too judgmental. And I say to you that there are only two kinds of people in the world: those who walk according to this rule and those who do not. The two kinds of people are clearly known and distinguished from one another because the one holds to the truth of this rule and the other does not but seeks to corrupt this rule in order not to suffer sorrow and persecution in the world and from the world.

But if you walk according to this rule, you will not have earthly peace. Your mother will hate you and your sister will hate you and your acquaintances will hate you. You will be hated of all men for Christ's sake. You can never have peace with the false church. Never again. The false church has shown itself to be the world. God has separated you from the false church not only in an outward way but deep in your heart. He has made you profoundly different, a new creature. That is why there is warfare, antithesis, and hostility.

Rather than earthly peace, what the apostle means by "peace" is all the blessed assurance, knowledge of salvation, joy in God, and hope in eternal life.

Peace with God!

Better war with the whole world and peace with God than war with God and peace with the whole world. Peace with God is salvation. It is to have God as your God and to be his child. And God will be with you and for you, and you will have the blessed assurance of your eternal inheritance in the glory of the new age and of the new heavens and new earth, where there is righteousness and pleasures forevermore.

There is no peace outside this rule. Outside this rule you have no sure way forward. You have no sure standing ground. You have no assurance. You will look to something else for peace, or you will look for some other peace. Then there is only a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries.

But to those who walk according to this rule, blessed peace on them and on the Israel of God both now and forever. For Christ's righteousness through which that peace comes can never be abolished.

And the deep, motivating power of that peace is the

mercy of God. Yes, the mercy of God that chose the Israel of God as his people in eternity. It was not because they were mightier, holier, or had some quality in them that commended them to God. But it was because of God's love and his sovereign good pleasure that out of the whole human race he would have mercy on whom he would have mercy. The mercy of God that chose his people also established this rule at the cross of Christ through his atoning death that they might have everlasting righteousness and eternal life.

The same mercy of God—mercy upon mercy—is upon the Israel of God daily and gives to them peace by this rule. Do not misunderstand; the apostle does not mean in the text that you achieve your own peace by walking in this rule. This rule, this principle, this power, lays hold on you. God brings this rule to you, and he conforms you to this rule. You can try to walk contrary to it,

but you will have no peace, and God will bring you back to this rule: nothing avails in Christ but a new creature, for the sake of Christ's righteousness alone.

And conforming you to it, God causes you to walk by it. This is not difficult to understand. This means that every day you live out of your righteousness in Jesus Christ. It means that every day it is not circumcision that avails and it is not uncircumcision that avails, but a new creature avails. You subject your whole life to this rule. By this rule all your sins are forgiven. By this rule you are separate from the world. By this rule you walk with God. And you will walk in peace all the days of your life until you enter everlasting peace in heaven. The new creature avails through the everlasting and indestructible and perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ received by faith only through the gospel.

—NJL

## FROM THE EDITOR

The issue in your hands is the beginning of *Sword and Shield's* fifth volume year. Many changes have happened at the magazine since it was first published in June 2020. What has not changed is the content of the magazine. It is Reformed. It is polemical. It is the truth. Because it is these things, the magazine is edifying to the people of God. In this issue and in this volume year, we hope, by the grace of God, to continue to publish the pure Reformed truth written polemically against the lie. *Sword and Shield* came into the world fighting, and it remains a fighting paper. This offends many because the spirit of the age is one of unrighteous toleration. *Sword and Shield* stands against that spirit and contends earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints. If it ever comes about that *Sword and Shield* is not a fighting paper, then it should be shut down quickly, and another fighting paper should be formed in its place.

In this issue we introduce a new regular contributor to the magazine, Rev. Jeremiah Pascual. He is the minister of First Orthodox Reformed Protestant Church in Bulacan, the Philippines. He will be writing monthly in the new rubric *Dry Morsel*. The reference is from Proverbs 17:1: "Better is a dry morsel, and quietness therewith, than an house full of sacrifices with strife." Yes, we certainly experienced the truth of that proverb in the years before the reformation of 2021: a denomination full of religion that was as dead as the people; a denomination grown fat on the Lord's gifts; a house of feasting and nothing but a house full of strife, a strife that finally cast out Christ. But to be

small and to have the truth and with it the peace of God is better. We hope that this new rubric serves to better acquaint the American churches with the doctrine of the Orthodox Reformed Protestant Church and that we also can be encouraged in our mutual faith. Reverend Pascual makes his appearance in *Sword and Shield* in this issue with an article about what it means to be Reformed Protestant.

You will notice that our regular contributors for *Our Doctrine* and *Understanding the Times* have a break this month. We had to make space in the magazine for Reverend Pascual's article. Besides, we are paring down the page count of the magazine for the summer months. We have been producing forty-page issues regularly. The smaller issues will give everyone—copy editors and writers—a little break for the summer months. This month we are publishing Lee Wiltjer's contribution, in which he takes on Reverend McGeown's Arminian doctrine of faith. Next month Garrett Varner will continue his series on the beatitudes with an article on the blessedness of the pure in heart, and Ashley Cleveland will fill the *Running Footmen* rubric.

I again put a plug in for submissions to the magazine. We love to have our readers send in material, whether it be a snippet that they believe is worth publishing or a contribution on some relevant theological subject.

We hope that the Lord blesses the content of the magazine to your hearts, both in this issue and in the volume year to come.

—NJL

## UNION WITH CHRIST (1): SALVATION OF THE LORD

### *Publishing the Truth*

With this issue *Sword and Shield* is starting its fifth volume year. This is by the grace of God alone. *Sword and Shield* is not our work, but it is God's work. The effect of *Sword and Shield* is God's effect. *Sword and Shield* publishes the truth. That is our conviction. It publishes the truth as that truth has been delivered to us as a precious inheritance. *Sword and Shield* publishes that truth especially as the understanding and the confession of that truth have been sharpened through controversy. As controversy continues, we desire that our understanding and thus our writing of the truth may be more and more sharpened. Herman Hoeksema understood and wrote the truth at the beginning of his many years of writing the truth. But who would deny that his statements about the truth later in his ministry could have come about in no other way than through controversy over the truth in the 1940s and 1950s? So we also desire that continued writing and controversy might serve for the sharpening of our understanding and our writing of the truth.

Based on our conviction that *Sword and Shield* publishes the truth, we also make judgments about the reception of the magazine. Many hate the magazine and no longer read it, or they curse it. This is because they hate the truth, do not want to read the truth, and curse it. Many love the magazine and cannot wait for *Sword and Shield* to come in their mailboxes. This is because they love the truth. The reception of the magazine and its publication of the truth is indicative of the spiritual state of those who receive or reject the magazine. Those who have the Spirit receive the Spirit's things. So said the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:11–16,

11. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.
12. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.

13. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.
14. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.
15. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man.
16. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.

Christ is not divided. He who has Christ receives Christ's things. Because he is joined to Christ by Christ's Spirit, he has Christ's mind; and by the power of that same Spirit, he receives and rejoices in those things that are Christ's. On that basis we also judge that because *Sword and Shield* publishes the truth, the rejection of *Sword and Shield* is the rejection of the truth as it is in Christ Jesus and as it is received by the power of his Spirit alone.

The truth is one harmonious whole. The truth has been developed throughout history and through controversy. It seems that the Lord determined that we would have a controversy about the application of salvation to the elect child of God and thus a controversy about the elect's possession, experience, and enjoyment of his salvation. This is the place that God has given to us in the history of his church.

The controversy is important. Let no one suppose that the controversy over the possession of salvation is any less important than a controversy over election or the cross of Christ. For the truth is that a controversy over the elect's possession of salvation must invariably involve in the end a controversy over election and the cross. This controversy over the possession of salvation has wide-ranging implications because the truth is one harmonious whole. One cannot tamper with and corrupt the truth of the elect's possession of salvation without corrupting the whole of divine doctrine.

We have witnessed this throughout our controversy



as well. And this reality has been pointed to on the pages of *Sword and Shield*. If man has a decisive part in the appropriation of his salvation, then whoever teaches that must end up with a different doctrine of election, a different doctrine of the cross, a different doctrine of man, a different doctrine of the church, and a different god. God is either sovereign and infallibly accomplishes his good pleasure in his elect and in all the world, or God is a god who engages in a mutually dependent relationship with man, so that there is a mutual interplay and interdependence among the grace of God, man's obedience, and gracious rewards. If man is first in his salvation, then one must end up with a dependent god. Since many will try to deflect the force of that judgment by saying that God's way is to enable man and graciously to give to man what man must do first, then we say that if man is first by the grace of God, then one must end up with a different god. So our judgment is that the god of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) with her man-first theology is a different god, who is no god at all. The God of the Reformed faith is independent, sovereign, and omnipotent. He is the God who brings to pass and performs all his good pleasure in both the elect and in the reprobate. The god of the Protestant Reformed Churches is dependent. He will not, he cannot, and he may not give certain aspects of the promise until man first performs his part. But such a conception is utterly foreign to the Reformed creeds and the Reformed faith. God is sovereign, and salvation is his work alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone, for the certain and inevitable salvation of the elect alone.

### *Rooted in God's Decree*

The Reformed faith roots salvation in God's eternal decree of election. This decree is not a mere blueprint of what God will do, but this decree is what in God's conception and purpose is perfect with him and what he unfolds, creating history. The Reformed faith's official statement about election is found in Canons 1.7:

Election is the unchangeable purpose of God whereby, before the foundation of the world, He hath out of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of His own will, chosen, from the whole human race, which had fallen through their own fault from their primitive state of rectitude into sin and destruction, a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ, whom He from eternity appointed the Mediator and Head of the elect, and the foundation of salvation.

This elect number, though by nature neither better nor more deserving than others, but with them involved in one common misery, God hath decreed to give to Christ, to be saved by Him,

and effectually to call and draw them to His communion by His Word and Spirit, to bestow upon them true faith, justification, and sanctification; and having powerfully preserved them in the fellowship of His Son, finally to glorify them for the demonstration of His mercy and for the praise of His glorious grace; as it is written: *According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love; having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved* (Eph. 1:4–6). And elsewhere: *Whom he did predestinate, them he also called, and whom he called, them he also justified, and whom he justified, them he also glorified* (Rom. 8:30). (*Confessions and Church Order*, 156)

This is the Canons' monumental statement on the doctrine of predestination. The Canons to this point had been leading up to this statement, and everything that the creed says subsequently follows from this statement. The Arminians hated particularly the doctrine of predestination and made it the object of their attack. The Synod of Dordt defended the doctrine of predestination, and from the confession of that doctrine followed the rest of the Reformed churches' confession of the truth of salvation.

I note at the outset, and this point cannot be lost or obscured: the Reformed faith connects the doctrine of election with the doctrine of the covenant. Canons 1.7 says, "This elect number...God hath decreed to give to Christ...and effectually to call and draw them to His communion...and having powerfully preserved them in the fellowship of His Son..." By the words "His communion" and "the fellowship of His Son," it is obvious that the article speaks of the covenant and views the covenant in essence as fellowship. To be saved is to be included in God's covenant. The fathers at Dordt saw that election controls membership in the covenant of grace. God decrees who will be brought into his communion and who will be included in the fellowship of his Son. This thought will be carried throughout the Canons. If the covenant is salvation, and it is, then the creed in teaching that election controls salvation also teaches that election controls membership in the covenant of grace.

In Canons 1.7 we see first that election is an eternal decree of God, which the article calls "the unchangeable purpose of God." The idea of the word "purpose" is that which God had settled in his divine mind. His works are not only known unto him from all eternity, but his works are also eternally perfect in him. In time God makes that manifest in all his works. In this connection

I am not going to trouble you with a dogmatics lesson concerning the decree. But we note briefly that scripture speaks of God's decree with many different words: *decree, counsel, appointed, determination, good pleasure, to know, foreknow, choice, election, predestinated, foreordained, and purpose*. Each word has its own emphasis. God's decree is a grand reality. One part of that decree is the settled purpose of God to save certain individuals.

The creed in 1.7 says that this is God's purpose "before the foundation of world." This is the biblical and thus creedal and a picturesque way to speak about eternity. God's decree is eternal. God can never be conceived of without his decree. The decree of God is the decreeing God. His decree is perfectly free, so that what he decides to do is decided by no necessity. Yet God in his very nature is the decreeing, willing, purposing God, and his decree is ever with him and is the eternal expression of the purpose of his will.

This eternal purpose of God is unchangeable. Of necessity God's purpose must be unchangeable. If the decree is the decreeing God, then all that applies to God must apply to his counsel. If God is immutable, then his counsel must likewise be immutable. There are many other adjectives or attributes that can be ascribed to God's counsel. It is omnipotent, sovereign, wise, just, holy, good, eternal, and everything else that can be ascribed to God. Among these attributes the Reformed faith emphasizes that God's counsel cannot be altered in any way, but that his counsel shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure.

Canons 1.7 also says that God has chosen "a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ" and says later that "God hath decreed to give to Christ, to be saved by Him, and effectually to call and draw them to His communion by His Word and Spirit, to bestow upon them true faith, justification, and sanctification...finally to glorify them for the demonstration of His mercy." There are no *ifs* or *possibilities* in these statements. They are statements of fact, the fact being what God will do. What he decreed he brings to pass. When I said earlier that the decree is the decreeing God and that his works are eternally perfect in him, then that is how we must conceive of the Canons' statement about the goal of election. The salvation of each individual elect and of the whole elect church is a reality in God from eternity. This reality he unfolds to the praise of his glorious name. The salvation of God's people is an unfolding, a revelation, a work of God in time that carries out God's working in the decree in eternity.

This is an entirely different conception from the Protestant Reformed conception of the decree. The Protestant Reformed Churches have God and man responding to one another—God and man in a mutual relationship of two parties in which God does his part, man does his

part, and by their cooperation man comes to the final realization of the promise and the covenant of God. It is two-track theology. The decree as it is taught in the Canons is a dead letter in the PRC. The PRC has no decretal theology.

I will give you a recent example of that and one that also proves my contention that the PRC with her Arminian doctrine of covenant experience has also the Arminian god of open theism. The Arminian god of open theism responds to man. The Arminian god of open theism engages with man in such a way that that god is open to man's decisions and desires and then changes along with man. In a recent protest that was treated at the October 2023 meeting of the Protestant Reformed Classis East, there is written the following:

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.

God's Word is so full of this instruction that passages could be multiplied.

- a. The reference to the fifth commandment and to Ephesians 6:1-3 are illustrative of these texts and should be decisive.
- b. Hebrews 4:9-11 points to the reward of grace and admonishes the believer to work with the purpose of entering into that reward. "There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God *did* from his. Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest,"
- c. 1 Corinthians 9:22-24 likewise teaches the believer to strive as he desires the experience of God's approval. "To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with *you*. Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain."
- d. Canons [*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.<sup>1</sup>

This is as full and as bald a statement of the Protestant Reformed covenant doctrine as I have ever read. God and his people respond to one another; and “there is mutuality of grace, obedience, and gracious reward.” “Mutuality” here can only mean interdependence. Any other meaning of “mutuality” leads only to nonsense in this case. There is an interdependency of grace and obedience, and then comes the reward. There is no election. Pete VanDer Schaaf even leaves faith out of consideration.

The Reformed view is that God brings to pass, unfolds, and reveals his decree of election not in dependence upon anything in man but according to God’s eternal and unchangeable purpose that is perfect in him from before the foundation of the world.

This election is a choice of God. What governs this choice of God is not anything in the creature. It is not even the misery of man that impelled God to choose man, as the misery of some beggar might pluck at your heart-strings and move you to help the beggar. You are moved by the beggar’s misery. The misery of man is in the sovereignty of God too. That misery is the way through which God reveals the wonders of his grace and the severity of his justice. What motivated God’s choice was his good pleasure. So Canons 1.7 says, “according to the sovereign good pleasure of His own will.” The will is the faculty to choose what the mind and heart present as good. God’s good pleasure is what delights him.

You must say here that at the heart of God’s good pleasure stands the glory of his own name, so that Canons 1.7 goes on to say about the salvation of the elect that issues from election, “finally to glorify them for the demonstration of His mercy and for the praise of His glorious grace.” What pleases God is the glory of his own name demonstrated in the salvation and damnation of sinners equally involved in ruin. What pleases God is the revelation of himself as the covenant God by establishing a covenant of grace with his elect in Christ. You must add to that the glory of God in Christ. God appointed Christ as the foundation of salvation through which God would glorify himself, and so God determined to glorify himself in Christ. You must say too that what pleases God is the salvation of his elect people, through which he is glorified.

This good pleasure that motivated God is sovereign. We mean by the word *sovereign* that God has the free and

unquestionable right so to decide and that his pleasure—his delight one way or the other—is not dependent upon the creature.

In God’s choice of certain human beings, God was gracious. In God’s good pleasure to choose certain persons, he was motivated by a free favor that was also not dependent on the worthiness or the unworthiness of the objects of God’s grace. God was favorably inclined toward them in distinction from others; and in that favorable inclination, he willed, appointed, decreed their salvation.

Key to the presentation of the Canons in its statement about election is Christ. In theology we must always contend with Christ. A Christless doctrine of election is a cold doctrine of election, and ultimately it is not faithful to the biblical revelation and witness. Scripture everywhere presents Christ as the elect one. He is specifically called that in the prophecy of Isaiah, and he is that typically in David, whom God chose. In Canons 1.7 Christ is first. This might not be so clear at first, but consider the phrase “God hath decreed to give to Christ.” Christ is the elect one in this phrase. He is already first, and the elect were chosen to be given to Christ, not merely in time but also in eternity. This eternal relationship between Christ and his elect is further explained in the phrase “to redemption in Christ, whom [God] from eternity appointed the Mediator and Head of the elect, and the foundation of salvation.” Christ’s relationship with the elect is as their head. Christ is the mediator of the elect, but he is their mediator as their head, so that the elect are included in Christ, and he is their Lord. His work as their mediator is to redeem them. This work of Christ to be mediator and redeemer has an eternal, God-ordained mandate. It is not a work that Christ came up with, but God gave that work to Christ, whom God appointed head of the elect. Christ is thus the sole foundation of their salvation. It is not merely the work of Christ as the sole foundation, but Christ *is* the sole foundation of salvation. All the truth of salvation is founded on Jesus Christ and is meaningless apart from him.

To prove its doctrine, Canons 1.7 cites Ephesians 1:4–6:

*According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love; having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.*

The article also cites Romans 8:30, the so-called golden chain of salvation: “Whom he did predestinate,

1 Peter VanDer Schaaf, “Response to Grandville, August 15, 2022,” in appeal to Classis East, July 15, 2023, 97.

*them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.”* While these passages when properly exegeted will give the doctrine of Canons 1.7, we must ask, what was the fathers’ purpose in citing these specific passages? Ephesians 1:4–6 is a summary of the whole article. The article is basically a brief exegesis of this passage. All the elements of the article are there. Regarding Romans 8:30, I believe that the purpose was to show that as God decreed, so he did. There are no conditions, no possibilities, and no probabilities, and no man first and then God does. Predestination, calling, justification, and glorification are in the same state of realization. God decreed the end from the beginning, and he brings to pass what he decreed. The elect are inevitably saved just as God decreed.

The whole of article 1.7 brings us back to the creed within the creed: the glory of God. This doctrine glorifies God in the highest. What particularly is glorified in God’s decree is his grace—marvelous, rich, and glorious grace. God eternally elected in Christ a people whom he also infallibly saves.

### *Uninterrupted Stream*

Salvation flows to the elect as a stream from God’s decree of election. This stream is never interrupted by the possibility that man will not perform his necessary part. This stream is never interrupted by a demand of God upon man, which demand man must perform to receive the next installment of salvation, even if man performs that by grace. God’s way is not that God demands of man for salvation, and then God gives to man what God demands. God bestows effectually what God decreed in eternity and what Christ accomplished for the elect at the cross. This is what Canons 1.9 teaches:

This election was not founded upon foreseen faith, and the obedience of faith, holiness, or any other good quality or disposition in man, as the prerequisite, cause, or condition on which it depended; but men are chosen to faith and to the obedience of faith, holiness, etc. Therefore election is the fountain of every saving good, from which proceed faith, holiness, and the other gifts of salvation, and finally eternal life itself, as its fruits and effects, according to that of the apostle: *He hath chosen us* (not because we were, but) *that we should be holy and without blame before him in love* (Eph. 1:4). (*Confessions and Church Order*, 157)

This article points out the Arminian error about election. Election is not founded upon foreseen faith, obedience, or any other good quality or disposition in man as a prerequisite. In his commentary on the Canons, Homer Hoeksema noted a major translation inaccuracy of the opening sentence of the article:

This election was not founded upon foreseen faith, and the obedience of faith, holiness, or any other good quality or disposition in man, as the prerequisite, cause, or condition on which it depended; but men are chosen to faith and to the obedience of faith, holiness, etc.

Hoeksema proposed the following substitute:

This same election was not accomplished out of foreseen faith, and the obedience of faith, holiness, or any other good quality or disposition, as the cause or condition required beforehand in the person to be elected, but is unto faith, and the obedience of faith, holiness, etc.<sup>2</sup>

Canons 1.7 is the heart of the creed’s doctrine of election. The article is the monumental statement of the truth of election as a creedal confession of Reformed churches. Canons 1.9 is really an expansion upon the thought of article 7 by attacking the main Arminian redoubt of election by foreseen faith. The Arminians taught that faith and other activities are the conditions of election “required beforehand,” and they are then what God sees beforehand (Canons of Dordt 1, error 5, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 161).

I remark here that when conditional theology makes faith a condition, that theology cannot simply stop at faith, but that theology keeps adding conditions. Added is condition after condition after condition. To faith the Arminians added holiness and perseverance. We had a perfect example of that Arminian necessity with Reverend Koole’s false doctrine. In October 2018 he taught that *faith* is what man must do to be saved, and by November 2020 he was teaching that *works* are what man must do to be saved. The error of conditions always eventually takes over all of salvation and finally all of theology, so that conditional theology reconstructs the doctrine of God too. So soon as faith is admitted as a condition, the God of sovereign election becomes the god of open theism. In theology, all of theology, we always are dealing with the doctrine of God.

The fathers at Dordt put the language of conditions in the mouths of the Arminians and condemned that

2 Homer C. Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers: An Exposition of the Canons of Dordrecht* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1980), 178.

language. In the Reformed churches after Dordt, there was no excuse for Reformed men to use the word *conditions*. And there are no conditions in a Reformed sense. There are no conditions that are fulfilled by grace. Nothing that man does is the condition or the cause of what God does. Note well here that the language “required beforehand” is also put in the mouths of the Arminians and condemned. Really with that phrase “required beforehand,” we have the Reformed definition of what a *condition* is. A *condition* is that which is “required beforehand,” so that an activity of man is required before God can perform what he performs.

This is very relevant. We are doing battle with a theology of conditions in the PRC that cleverly disguises itself as merely being interested in what comes before and what comes after. So, for example, it is necessary for man to repent before God can forgive his sins. But you must ask the men who teach this, why is it so important what is before and what is after? And they will expose themselves as Arminian and conditional when they say that such and such are *required before* God can do what he wants to do. The PRC can only talk about what is required beforehand. Repentance is required before forgiveness; faith is required before justification; a life of good works is required before blessings. This language is fundamentally Arminian and has completely lost sight of the eternal decree.

The Reformed language is of election as an inexhaustible fountain out of which flows from God to the elect all that he has decreed to give to them. This is Reformed language.

Flows.

Fountain.

It must also be pointed out that when the Canons opposes conditional election, when the creed makes all of salvation flow out of election as from a fountain, then the creed opposes conditions in any sense in salvation. This is the very essence of Reformed theology. Because salvation flows out of election, all of salvation is the sovereign gift of God from that election. This cannot be stressed too much. Reformed theology of salvation is a decretal theology of salvation, and whatever threatens or tends to obscure this fact must be rejected as a threat to the decretal viewpoint.

Heretics and false teachers always play hocus-pocus with words. The men whom we deal with in the PRC are always playing hocus-pocus with words too. So they mention *election, grace, Jesus Christ, covenant, repentance, and faith*, but they are constantly injecting new meanings into these terms. So one must ask, what do you mean by that term? For instance, they would say, “We are saved by grace alone.” We thought that everyone meant the same

thing by that statement. What I mean by “saved by grace alone” is that I am not saved by works at all. What the Protestant Reformed men mean by “saved by grace alone” is that God enables man to believe, God enables man to do good works, and man is saved by his act of faith and in the way of his obedience. The Protestant Reformed men—some of them—will howl that they do not teach that man *is saved* in the way of obedience, and they will say that they mean only that man *experiences his salvation* in the way of his obedience—period! But this is only more word games. Salvation in the decree, salvation in the cross, salvation in man’s experience, and salvation in heaven are all salvation and have one and the same doctrine. If man experiences his salvation in the way of his obedience, then necessarily he is elected in the way of his obedience too. There is only one doctrine of salvation.

The Arminians too played word games. The Arminians spoke of an election to faith. They spoke of faith as a gift of God, but they would never say that God gives faith to whomsoever he wills, and whom God wills he hardens. They would never say that faith flows out of God’s eternal decree of election. Rather, the Arminian doctrine is that election is *out of* faith. Faith is the cause of election; holiness is the cause of election; perseverance is the cause of election. These things are first before God decides to elect, and so God’s decision is based on and derived *out of* man’s decisions and activities. The lie, while claiming to be simple, makes theology a muddle. The Arminians multiplied conditions and multiplied decrees of election. It was all part of their hocus-pocus with words.

So also today the Protestant Reformed men multiply distinction upon distinction. If you would ask average members of a Protestant Reformed church what their church teaches, they would not be able to tell you, except to say, “We are saved in the way of obedience.” They catch the drift of their teachers; and without all the made-up distinctions to cover the lie, they state the lie baldly.

The Arminians made election out of faith, holiness, and perseverance. Very really, they made faith, holiness, and perseverance the causes of God’s election. God is dependent upon man. Man is first, and God responds to man. These things God supposedly foresees. But the whole Arminian concept of foreknowledge is a corruption of the scriptural teaching of foreknowledge.

Scripture mentions foreknowledge in Romans 8:29: “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.” In scripture the foreknowledge of God is his eternal love of his people. The scholar Thayer has a worthless comment in his lexicon in the entry on the Greek word for *foreknowledge*. He writes, “Whom he (God) foreknew, namely, that they would love

him, or (with reference to what follows) whom he foreknew to be fit to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, Rom. 8:29.<sup>3</sup> However the word *foreknowledge* might be applied to men in scripture, God does not know as men know, but God knows in connection with his decree as the expression of what is pleasing to him.

There are two passages of scripture that prove that the Arminian interpretation is false. The first is Romans 11:1–5:

1. I say then, Hath God cast away his people?...
2. God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew. Wot ye not what the scripture saith of Elias? how he maketh intercession to God against Israel, saying,
3. Lord, they have killed thy prophets, and digged down thine altars; and I am left alone, and they seek my life.
4. But what saith the answer of God unto him? I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal.
5. Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace.

The question of the apostle—hath God cast away his people which he foreknew?—makes no sense at all if the reference is to the people whom God saw would be “fit to be conformed to the image of his Son.” The question of the apostle applies to the nation of Israel as the nation that God loved (see Deut. 7). Then the apostle defined that people whom God foreknew, not as the nation head for head or the people whom God saw would believe but as “the remnant according to the election of grace.”

The other passage that proves the Arminian interpretation false is 1 Peter 1:20: “Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.” The Greek word for *foreknowledge*, the same word used in Romans 8 and in Romans 11, is translated in 1 Peter 1:20 as “foreordained.” Whatever issues we might have with that translation, what the passage establishes is not that God saw ahead what Christ would be or would do, but that God loved Christ from before the foundation of the world. Besides, as every decent Bible scholar knows, in the Hebrew *to know* someone is to love that one. Besides, I say that if God made decisions based on what he foresaw the creature would do, then you must radically alter your entire theology of God and his relationship to the world, which, of course, Arminianism does.

Over against the Arminians’ making faith the cause of election, the Reformed make election the cause of faith and of every saving benefit. The Reformed say in Canons 1.9, “Therefore election is the fountain...from which proceed faith, holiness, and the other gifts of salvation...as its fruits and effects.” The word “effects” is important. These things are fruits of election, so that election is a kind of root that bears fruits in the hearts and lives of the elect. Election is also a cause, the effects of which are every saving good mentioned by the Canons: “faith, holiness, and the other gifts of salvation, and finally eternal life itself.” Election is no mere dead decree, mere impotent will, or some divine blueprint. But election is the living will of the living God, and what he decreed is perfect in him. What he decreed he carries out, so that his will bears fruit and causes effects in the lives of the elect.

Remember those three kinds of expressions used by the Canons to express the relationship between election and salvation, and election and faith, obedience, holiness, and eternal life. Election *is a fountain*. Election *bears fruits*. Election *causes effects*. That may never be lost sight of, and that must be preached. Let us just speak, for example, about faith. Election is the fountain of faith, so that faith flows out of election to the elect like waters from the fountain. Election is a kind of eternal root that bears the fruit of faith in the hearts of the elect. Election is the cause of the effect of faith in the hearts of the elect. And then you must never lose sight of the truth that the decree is the decreeing God, so that the overflowing fountain, the deep source, and the divine cause of salvation is God in every respect.

It is simply impossible in light of Canons 1.9 to maintain that there are things that man must do before God can do something else. You simply have a different god, not merely a different doctrine of salvation but a different god, at that point. He is a god whose saving work is out of man, just as the god of Arminianism has the decree out of the activity of man.

Canons 1.9 grounds its attack on the Arminians and its positive statement of the truth that all salvation has its eternal source and cause in election in Ephesians 1:4: “*He hath chosen us* (not because we were, but) *that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.*” The fathers of Dordt felt it necessary to insert a parenthetical polemic against the Arminians. The Arminian doctrine, if it be true, must necessarily change this passage of scripture. Then God would have chosen us because we were holy. Rather, the apostle says that God chose us with the purpose “that we should be holy.”

3 *Thayer's Greek Lexicon*, electronic database, s.v. “προγινώσκω (proginóskō),” <https://biblehub.com/greek/4267.htm>.

## *Inevitable Possession*

This salvation decreed for the elect comes inevitably and infallibly into their possession. Regarding the possession of salvation through the cross of Christ, Canons 2.8 says the following:

For this was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend to all the elect, for bestowing upon them alone the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation; that is, it was the will of God that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby He confirmed the new covenant, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to Him by the Father; that He should confer upon them faith, which, together with all the other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, He purchased for them by His death; should purge them from all sin, both original and actual, whether committed before or after believing; and, having faithfully preserved them even to the end, should at last bring them free from every spot and blemish to the enjoyment of glory in His own presence forever. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 163–64)

This article in the Canons is the heart of the second head of doctrine. The article is a kind of mini-Canons within the Canons. The article really contains the whole scope of the doctrine of salvation from election to the death of Christ, to regeneration and faith, to preservation and glorification. Canons 2.8 could have stood as a one-article refutation of the whole Arminian corruption of the doctrine of salvation. And the article stands as a one-article refutation of the whole notion that there are activities of man that precede the blessings of God and is a rebuke of those who defend this Arminian doctrine as “the way in which God is pleased to work.” This article explains the way in which God is pleased to work in the bestowal of salvation. The way in which God is pleased to work has nothing to do with activities of man performed by grace preceding the possession and experience of his salvation.

The article indicates its central place in the second head when the article begins with the word “for,” which connects the article to all that precedes. It is as though the fathers at Dordt said, “Now, let us come to the heart of our explanation of the death of Christ and the redemption

of men by it.” Here the fathers tangled directly with the Arminian proposition on the death of Christ:

That, agreeably thereto, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, died for all men and for every man, so that he has obtained for them all, by his death on the cross, redemption, and the forgiveness of sins; yet that no one actually enjoys this forgiveness of sins except the believer.<sup>4</sup>

This is the doctrine described as general atonement or universal atonement. Over against that the fathers at Dordt taught the doctrine of the perfect and complete atonement for the elect and them only that accomplished salvation for them, purchased faith and every benefit of salvation for them, is bestowed infallibly on them, and preserves them to eternal glory.

The article breaks into two parts. The first part is the succinct statement of the doctrine of the atonement of Christ. The second part is a further expansion and elucidation of what is said tersely in the first part. The second part begins with the words, “that is, it was the will of God...”

The article roots the death of Christ in God’s eternal decree: “For this was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father.” And the article says, “It was the will of God.” The decree of God is the fountain of salvation and of every benefit of salvation. And the decree of God is the source of the death of Christ. Christ is the Lamb slain in the decree of God from before the foundation of the world. The decree is the source of all that Christ accomplished on the cross by his blood. I point out particularly and emphatically that the article notes that not only the death of Christ in some general sense is included in the decree, but also the death of Christ and the extension of its saving efficacy to all the elect are included in the decree. The article teaches that the will and counsel of God are that Christ die for the elect and them only and, having died for them and accomplishing all salvation for them, that the saving efficacy of his death be extended to them. There is no disjunction between God’s will for Christ’s death and whether the saving efficacy will come to man. There is no inserting of man anywhere in the will of God for the death of Christ and the will of God that the saving efficacy of Christ’s death extend to all the elect and to them only. God willed that Christ die. God willed that Christ accomplish all salvation and purchase every benefit of salvation. God willed that salvation and its benefits come into the possession of the elect. And this God infallibly carries out in full. Based on Canons 2.8, one cannot

<sup>4</sup> *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1953), s.v. “Remonstrants.”

insert man anywhere in his salvation, either as salvation was accomplished at the cross or as salvation comes into his possession and he experiences it. The article starts with the decree, flows through the cross, and comes to heaven and eternal life for all the elect, all without man's works and activities at certain stages along the way. Salvation is one seamless stream of grace. And salvation is all by God. Never does salvation wait on a willing or an activity of man. It is as the apostle says, "Salvation—its possession and enjoyment by the elect—is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy" (Rom. 9:16). The Arminians said that Christ died for a man, but whether Christ's death is effectual—the saving efficacy of his death—depends on the will and perseverance of that man. And remember this is Arminian language: God gives grace if and when man does his part. It is fundamentally Arminian to say that God will forgive if and when man repents. This is an Arminian conception because it does not proceed from the viewpoint of the sovereign will of God, who brings to pass all that he willed for the elect and all that he accomplished for them at the cross of Christ. God brings about their repentance, not so that he can and may forgive them, but because he willed their repentance as an aspect of their salvation, and God accomplished it at the cross of Christ. God forgives their sins, not because they repent, not in the way of their repentance, not if and when they repent, but because he willed that they be forgiven, and he accomplished that at the cross.

Canons 2.8 clearly and sharply teaches limited atonement. By *limited atonement* we mean that according to the will and the intention of God, Christ died for the elect. Note that in the article. Christ died for the elect "and those only." God's will and purpose were nothing else than that Christ die for the elect and that they alone experience the saving efficacy of his death. I mention in this connection that the counsel of God in the Latin and Dutch of Canons 2.8 is described as a "most free" counsel; whereas our English version has "sovereign" counsel. God is absolutely free in his choice. And further note that the article describes God's choice as "most gracious." That sole and exclusive source of the death of Christ is grace and not works. The election of God, the counsel of God, which is the source of the death of Christ and of all its saving efficacy, is a most sovereign, eternal, unchangeable, definite, and personal election. Any other conception of election renders the saving efficacy of the death of Christ null and void. Then the efficacy of the death of Christ must depend in some sense on man. But you must also take that to its logical conclusion. If the possession and enjoyment of the salvation of God are dependent upon man in the least respect, then in that respect one has also

made the cross of Christ of none effect and the will of God impotent and ultimately dependent on man.

Further, in Canons 2.8 you must recognize that the intention of God, the "counsel" of God, the "purpose" of God, and the "will" of God are all synonyms. There is no room for another intention of God alongside his sovereign intention that Christ die for the elect and them only and that the saving efficacy of that death extend to the elect and to them only.

Now notice that the death of Christ accomplished all of salvation. Christ saved us at the cross. He saved us completely. The death of Christ is effectual. Christ's death has a quickening and saving efficacy. The power of our salvation in its application too is the cross of Christ. Christ did not accomplish a mere basis for salvation. He saved us, and the saving power of that death extends to us, so that the power of the cross of Christ is to cleanse us from all sin and to bring us to heavenly glory. At the cross Christ actually redeemed, and we are saved to all eternity. Christ acquired for us every saving gift.

When the article teaches the saving efficacy of the death of Christ and that he purchased for his elect people and them only every saving gift of salvation, the article places the emphasis on "justifying faith." It was, in the language of the article, God's intention and purpose that the death of Christ be for the elect and extended to them, "for bestowing upon them alone the gift of justifying faith." First, note the designation "justifying faith." This is the same designation used by the Belgic Confession in article 24. True faith is the faith that justifies. And in that justification of the sinner, the sinner is saved. He is as saved in that justification as he will be saved in heaven in his justification. His justification is perfect. And if we are justified, then it can never fail that God will always bless us and give to us eternal life. Justification is by faith and not by works, and so salvation is by faith and not by works and comes to us for the sake of Christ's righteousness and not our own. Further, "justifying faith" is placed in Canons 2.8 as one of the gifts of God purchased by Christ. The Arminians made faith the contingency on which the saving efficacy of the death of Christ depended. The Reformed make faith the gift that Christ purchased and that God intended to give to the elect.

Finally, Canons 2.8 insists that the intention of God was that the whole of salvation in its accomplishment and application be the work of Christ. It is not that Christ accomplished salvation in an objective sense and now the work of man begins. Christ accomplished salvation, and God confers salvation on his elect people. One might even argue that this is the emphasis in the article. The possession of salvation is the work of Christ. From election, to redemption, to the actual bestowal of those benefits



purchased by Christ—faith, justification, sanctification, and preservation to eternal glory—salvation is all of God in Christ, and it all comes to us in the power of the cross of Christ extended to us.

## *One Salvation*

It is this salvation that I begin to examine in this series of articles.

We must begin that examination and conclude this article with an explanation of what we mean by *salvation*. It is a favorite tactic of the Protestant Reformed theologians and ministers to chop up salvation into all manner of different meanings. So they might contend that salvation can refer to Christ's death on the cross. Man has no part in that. But then they continue that there is also salvation in the sense of its application. When they come to salvation in the sense of its application, then man begins to be active. We should be mindful of the tactic of false teachers of every generation as that is pointed out in *Canons 2, error 6*. The Synod rejected the errors of those

who use the difference between meriting and appropriating, to the end that they may instill into the minds of the imprudent and inexperienced this teaching, that God, as far as He is concerned, has been minded of applying to all equally the benefits gained by the death of Christ; but that, while some obtain the pardon of sin and eternal life and others do not, this difference depends on their own free will, which joins itself to the grace that is offered without exception, and that it is not dependent on the special gift of mercy, which powerfully works in them, that they rather than others should appropriate unto themselves this grace.

Rejection: For these, while they feign that they present this distinction in a sound sense, seek to instill into the people the destructive poison of the Pelagian errors. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 166)

When I read this error that the fathers rejected, I immediately thought of Protestant Reformed theologians and ministers. They have distinguished the Reformed faith to death. The purpose of their distinctions is not sound theology. The purpose of their distinctions is to insert man and man's activities as crucial for the possession of his salvation. For Protestant Reformed men salvation is a discrete series of benefits; and at every point after regeneration, man has a role to play, which activity of man triggers the possession of a particular benefit. The result is the same as the error stated above: "These...instill into the people the destructive poison of the Pelagian

errors." The charge of the fathers at Dordt against the Arminians was that they taught Pelagianism. The charge of the Reformed Protestant Churches against the Protestant Reformed Churches is that they teach Arminianism, and thus they teach Pelagianism. Pelagianism is very simply a man-centered doctrine of salvation. Man accomplishes—by grace, of course—his own salvation.

But salvation is one as God is one. Salvation is one whole. Salvation is one concept. Salvation is one reality. Salvation is one truth. At every point along the way in the explanation of salvation, one truth stands out: salvation is of the Lord. This does not mean merely that the purpose of salvation is of the Lord or that the accomplishment of salvation is of the Lord. But it also means that along the whole line of salvation from the decree of predestination, to the cross, to the possession and enjoyment of salvation, and to the perfection of salvation in heaven and in the new heavens and earth, salvation is of the Lord. Never does man play a part in his salvation. The gift of salvation is exactly that from beginning to end, a gift. The application of salvation by God is never at any point dependent on what man must perform, not even on what man performs by grace and the Holy Spirit. God's act to bestow salvation is never interrupted by what man must do, but salvation is a golden chain, from election to glorification, uninterrupted by man's activities. To put a fine point on that concept: man is as little involved in his election as he is in his sanctification. One might contend that in sanctification man becomes active, that man repents, and that man performs good works. But these are simply fruits of the salvation bestowed. One can equally argue that in election too man will become active, he will repent, and he will perform good works. We are, after all, God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto good works that God before ordained that we should walk in them. But as that repentance and as those good works are fruits of election, so they are also fruits of sanctification. We are elected unto good works. We are sanctified unto good works. *Election* is the act of God to appoint men to salvation. *Sanctification* is the act of God to cleanse men from sin. Both are wholly of the Lord. Both have their inevitable fruits. From both man is excluded.

So it is with every benefit of salvation. God makes the elect child of God a partaker of Christ and of all Christ's benefits. God causes the elect child of God to experience the benefits of salvation, and those benefits of salvation bear their own fruits. Always the deed or activity of man that proceeds from the reception of the benefits of salvation is the fruit of God's work. Never does one activity of man as the fruit of God's work precede another benefit of salvation, such that the reception of that other benefit of salvation is dependent on

the activity of man, resulting from the prior benefit of salvation. To make that concrete, it is a fundamental corruption of the very concept of salvation as being of the Lord to say that man's repentance must precede God's act of forgiveness. That the elect child of God repents is the inevitable fruit of his election. Repentance is the fruit of God's act of converting the elect child of God. Because God chose him and because Christ died for him, God also converts him, and the fruit is repentance. That repentance does not then have the function of being necessary for God to be able to forgive a man. Repentance and forgiveness appear together, but not in a dependent relationship. They are distinct benefits of salvation, not installments in which one installment and man's activity with that installment are necessary for the next installment to be given.

In this series of articles, we are interested in the application of salvation. We do not have to speak about the application of salvation. We can just as well say that we are interested in the salvation of the elect people of God.

Their possession of salvation, or the application of their salvation to them, is their salvation. Salvation is of God. Salvation in the hearts of the elect is of God and excludes men's activities as much as those activities are excluded from their election and their salvation at the cross. The proof of this is that God gives to the elect, infant children of believers the full and complete possession of their salvation in Christ. The elect are conceived and born in sin. They are subject to all miseries, even to condemnation itself. They are children of wrath by nature who are born into the darkness of the world fallen in sin in Adam and lying under the curse. As babies, they are sanctified in Christ and thus possess their whole salvation. When we speak, then, of the application of salvation to the elect, we are not talking about salvation in a different sense from what we mean when we speak of salvation in the decree or salvation at the cross.

Salvation is one.

Salvation is of the Lord.

—NJL

## DRY MORSEL

*Better is a dry morsel, and quietness therewith, than an house full of sacrifices with strife.—Proverbs 17:1*

# WHAT IT MEANS TO BE REFORMED PROTESTANT<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

First Orthodox Reformed Protestant Church, Bulacan (the Philippines), is built upon the doctrine of the apostles. Every word of Christ came authoritatively to the disciples, and their teachings have become the strong foundation of the church of Jesus Christ. Unashamedly we are an apostolic church. The faith of the apostles is one with our faith. They infallibly wrote in scripture all things that are profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. That infallible foundation was built by Jesus Christ, and on that foundation the apostles organized churches. Our church is one

with those churches. By the grace of God, we have been standing on the sure foundation of the word of God.

The churches established before ours, as they were built upon the apostolic doctrine, clearly recognized the truth. The minds of the saints in those churches were one, and they had the same words of truth. They willingly offered their heads and necks for that gospel with unrelenting assurance that they would surely be accepted in glory. In heaven the apostles and the saints speak one truth. They confess with us the one gospel of Jesus Christ. Though there are many mockers of the truth in these last days (Jude 18), the truth of the gospel will firmly stand.

<sup>1</sup> This article is a translated and expanded version of a speech given in the Tagalog language to the Orthodox Reformed Protestant Fellowship in Santa Cruz, Laguna, the Philippines, on March 24, 2024. We print the speech here in English to reach a wider audience.

Our history as the church of Jesus Christ proves that the only thing that matters is the truth of the gospel. Christ's church has been experiencing many trials and temptations, but we are confident that God's work will endure even the gates of hell. No power can overcome the gospel. Through the power of our resurrected Lord, the church will always rise from the crumbles of an apostate church. No worries. The truth prevails in the church, and the truth has been preserved in the church throughout all history.

There is only one absolute gospel truth. There is only one apostolic doctrine, and we can state that truth in these words: "God is the only savior of his church through the person and works of Jesus Christ alone." Or more simply we could say, "Jehovah is salvation." Or we could just simply confess, "Jesus Christ." The apostles with the other saints in heaven confess that one doctrine because there is only one gospel *of Jesus Christ*. *Of Jesus Christ* is a genitive of possession. Christ owns that gospel, which he infallibly gives to his people through the faithful preaching in the church institute. Better yet, *of Jesus Christ* is also a genitive of source. The gospel that we have is given. The gospel of our Lord is a wonder of grace that we, prophets of the devil by nature, are caused to confess and believe. That very confession is given. And yes, even your believing is given. Nothing comes from us. We are taught and given to believe by God himself.

For us, as a Reformed Protestant church, we claim and confess that same gospel truth. We antithetically exist in the midst of many churches because of that gospel. We have no problem saying that outside this church there is no salvation. And we express antithetically that gospel in these words: "Salvation is by the sovereign grace of Jesus Christ alone." This is the only truth we know. By this grace all the covenant promises of Jehovah in Jesus Christ will be fulfilled. From the beginning until the culmination of all things, only the grace of God matters. Every jot and tittle of our salvation is accomplished by the sovereign grace of God. Oh, yes, we attribute every aspect of our salvation to that grace. Grace upon grace! Grace objectively and grace experientially. That is all we know as Reformed Protestants.

What does it mean to be Reformed Protestant? This is a fitting question, especially since we are still in a doctrinal controversy. You know well that we were formed in the wombs of two mothers: the Protestant Reformed Churches in the Philippines and the First Reformed Church in Bulacan (the then First Reformed Protestant Church in Bulacan). As those churches became whores, we were called by Christ, "Come out of her!" Our Lord was not inside those churches. He was already at the door of that apostatized denomination and that church institute. He was knocking to call his people. Therefore, as the captain of our salvation, Christ led us out of those

whore churches and formed the church anew. And in our formation, we called ourselves Reformed Protestant Church, and to distinctly identify ourselves from our former church, we added the word *Orthodox*. This to say that we are the true children of the reformation that happened in 2021. We are Reformed Protestants.

We have been in a Reformed church for many years. There are several Reformed churches in the Philippines. But I ask you, why are we in the Orthodox Reformed Protestant Church? Why are we here? What is it about the Reformed faith that we are still members of this church, even though God is not increasing our membership, and it has remained virtually unchanged for almost two years since our secession and reformation? Even though our small membership is not attractive, why are we still here? Have you thought about that?

Again, do we understand why we are Reformed? Are our hearts in this religion?

For instance, this year is the one hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America together with its sisters in the Philippines, Singapore, and Northern Ireland. The Protestant Reformed denomination was organized through the leadership of three great men: Herman Hoeksema, Henry Danhof, and George Ophoff. These fathers in the faith were used by God to defend and uphold the truth of God's sovereign, particular grace. Nineteen twenty-four was a time in the history of the church when God had such an important work for such men in the defense and development of the doctrine of grace. In the inscrutable wisdom of God, he so often uses a minority to defend his gospel against many adversaries, and in 1924 he used those men to battle against doctrinal errors in the Christian Reformed Church.

But do we know how God used the Protestant Reformed denomination in the service of his word? Can we still say that she remains in the truth of Jesus Christ today? Can we still recognize the Protestant Reformed denomination as a true church through the works of her officebearers, ministers, and professors?

### *We Are Reformed*

First, I want to emphatically state that we are Reformed. To be Reformed is simply to return to scripture. Through scripture God "makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word," and the prophets and the apostles were commanded by God to commit his word to writing (Belgic Confession 2–3, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 24). It is simply the dignity of the Reformed religion to revere scripture so highly. It is precisely the insistence of the Reformed faith on the authority of scripture that makes it so distinct from other religions.

Because of this insistence, every point of doctrine must be organically intertwined with other points of doctrine.

A clear and consistent doctrine can be easily applied to the people of God, simply because the Spirit who dwells in them sanctifies them by the truth. He always seeks the faithful presentation of the word. The believer is well preserved and nourished by the pure word.

The Romish church has totally departed from the truth. This church has done despite to the name of Jesus Christ and his gospel. There is nothing good in every word that comes from the monarchy of her bishops and priests. Their throats are like open, steaming sepulchers. Garnishing their words with fundamental truths of scripture never helps them hide from the scrutiny of the word. Every homily is rooted in their hatred of Jesus Christ. They are ever preaching that Christ is not enough and always defending that scripture is insufficient.

The reformers labored to bring back to the church the truth of God's sovereign grace. For instance, they insisted on justification by faith alone. Faith itself does not justify. Rather, the object of faith—Jesus Christ—justifies the ungodly before God. Christ's righteousness is imputed to his people, and they were declared righteous once and for all at the cross. God justified the elect sinners at the cross. *It is finished.* We are already forgiven. In the eternal counsel of God, we were already justified in Jesus Christ. Faith is instrumental to apply that finished work of Christ, the work that was done according to the eternal justification of God of us. John Calvin says, "Faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit."<sup>2</sup> God the Spirit alone applies the finished work of Jesus Christ to the believer. By faith we are given the peace of the forgiveness of sins. Faith says that we are already forgiven. Therefore, we are justified in our consciences. Faith alone justifies. Faith is the bond through which we receive all the blessings of salvation, including the assurance that we are already justified because of Jesus Christ. Faith never needs the working of men. Rather, faith produces works that are worthy of God. The reformers insisted on this "because many are dangerously deluded today in this respect."<sup>3</sup> The Romish church teaches implicit faith (simply a blind, ignorant faith) and the mingling of faith and works. Implicit faith, according to the Westminster Confession of Faith, is the destruction of the "liberty of conscience."<sup>4</sup>

The reformers held scripture in supremacy to battle against errors and heresies that were besetting the church. *Ad fontes!* Such was the battle cry during the great Reformation. The reformers were rallying with that cry: "To the fountainhead!" That is, "Go back to scripture." In

every doctrinal controversy the word of God is determinative. It is so certain that even the Reformed creeds can settle doctrinal controversies since they *fully* agree with the word of God.

Reformed churches never accuse the Reformed creeds of being against the *scripture alone* principle. Nothing comes equal to scripture, even the creeds. We insist that the authority of the creeds is derived from scripture. The creeds are subordinate standards of the church and never on a par with scripture.

But Rev. John L. Flores of First Reformed Church in Bulacan reacted negatively to the usage of the Reformed creeds in a doctrinal dispute on baptism and church membership. He sarcastically said to me during a council meeting on May 29, 2022, "So what? Are we now Catholics here that we now regard human tradition? So what if it is Reformed tradition? Will it affect the biblical tradition? or the apostolic tradition?" And in his Catechism preaching on the same day, he intently disjoined the Reformed creeds from the apostolic doctrine when he said,

And you must not forget this: When the Apostles' Creed was written, there was no Reformed yet. There was no Calvinism yet. There were no confessions of faith like the three forms of unity! Don't place forcefully something which is of this age but outside the intention of the Apostles' Creed!

These vile statements came from the lips of an unreformed man, a Biblicist at his very heart.

The three forms of unity are not forced into the apostolic doctrine, but their doctrine is in the Apostles' Creed and exists in the service of that doctrine. And in relation to Holy Writ, the Reformed creeds interpret scripture. Scripture has no obligation to interpret the writings of men.

When the Reformed creeds are being used to settle doctrinal controversies, no church should react negatively, as though the creeds are being put on par with scripture. Here is James Bannerman in defense of the Reformed creeds as a test of orthodoxy:

The Church may fairly and reasonably be entitled to make such human articles of faith the term of communion and the test of orthodoxy, because they embody her own belief of what the Word of God contains, the declaration of its meaning and import according to her understanding of it, and no more. Nor can the members and office-bearers

2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.1.4, 1:541.

3 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.4, 1:543.

4 Westminster Confession of Faith 20, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 3:644.

justly complain that they are tried by such a subordinate standard, and acquitted or condemned accordingly, and not rather tried by the Word of God; unless they are prepared to put the Church itself on its trial because of the unsoundness of these standards themselves. Proceeding on the joint and equal assent of the Church itself, and of the members or the Church, to its confession or creed, there can be no injustice, but may be obvious convenience, in testing the opinions of one or by such a standard.<sup>5</sup>

This is *sola scriptura*. This is simply Reformed.

Returning to scripture is love for truth and doctrine. It is impossible to be a Christian if you do not have holy affection for doctrine. The Spirit enflames our hearts with zealous devotion and love for the truth. Interest in doctrine comes spontaneously out of the heart of the believer. This is not something natural to the believer, but it is a supernatural work of the Spirit's dwelling in the believer.

Out of the love of the truth, we discern every spirit. Our Bibles remain open when a minister preaches. We make sure that everything he says comes from the Bible. This is the duty of every believer who sits under the preaching of the word. And it is quite helpful to have daily exhortation of the word of God in our homes. Through family worship we equip ourselves with the word of God. Week in and week out, members of covenant homes prepare themselves before the sabbath day by opening their Bibles during the week so that they remain open whenever a preacher says, "Thus saith the Lord." I know inordinate doctrine cannot be easily detected. We are sometimes blinded by our high estimation of a preacher, or even our unwavering trust in an institution. Nevertheless, it is our holy calling to discern every spirit with holy scripture.

This is Reformed. This is true Christianity.

I am aware that the term *Christian* is somewhat generic and has been corrupted by many evangelical churches to the point that we cannot know what that term means in its common usage today. If one asks if we are Christians, we hesitate to respond in affirmation because the term is somewhat generic and mixed with unorthodox notions concerning the doctrine of salvation. I personally have hesitation to affirm when asked if I am a Christian. I usually clarify my response to avoid misconceptions. Our gospel is so sure and certain that we want it to be expressed distinctly from all the other gospels that are not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, to be a Christian is to be enjoined always with doctrine. This is simply Reformed. Many churches have their members rely on experience rather than on the word of God. This is mysticism. Mysticism is the exaltation of one's experience rather than the objective truth of the word of God. Mysticism is also relying on what one feels and experiences as he fulfills conditions to the end that he feels blessed. J. Gresham Machen said that this error loves experience:

Mysticism unquestionably is the natural result of the anti-intellectual tendency which now prevails; for mysticism is the consistent exaltation of experience at the expense of thought...The experience upon which it is based, or in which it consists, is said to be ineffable; yet mystics love to talk about that experience all the same.<sup>6</sup>

The mystics have no interest in doctrine. They are afraid of doctrine. Christianity for them is blind belief as long as their emotions actively bring them into a trance of I-can-do-all-things-through-Christ theology. *It is all about obedience and doing something for God.* Lack of interest in doctrine has often contributed a lot to their ignorance.

But to be Reformed is to be wise doctrinally, not just being knowledgeable of certain dogmas but wise doctrinally. To learn is one thing, but to know with understanding is another. A Reformed man can give an account of his faith. Without hesitation a Reformed believer confesses the truth of the gospel. And no matter how fierce the scrutiny of others, the believer remains consistent because God himself teaches the believer the mysteries of faith. He is not afraid of doctrine. He loves doctrine, for Jesus Christ himself is the truth.

God is teaching the believers through faithful preaching. Every preaching has a doctrine. There can never be preaching without a doctrine. But not just some doctrine but *the* doctrine—that is, the absolute gospel of Jesus Christ. Through preaching we are taught by God, and we become wise doctrinally. You must not join a church if you are ignorant of the doctrine of Christ. Discernment presupposes assured knowledge. We cannot turn around without bumping into doctrine. Therefore, it is tragic if officebearers and the members in the church are sluggish.

But the love for doctrine is not the end of being Reformed. The fact that even the evangelicals and cults, such as *Iglesia ni Cristo*, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and the like, are all into doctrine and insist

5 James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960–2016), 322.

6 J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?*, <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/machen/What%20is%20Faith%20-%20J.%20Gresham%20Machen.pdf>, 18.

on biblical consistencies proves that love for doctrine is not what it means to be Reformed. No one in their right mind would call these cults and the Arminian churches Reformed. In fact, they are the opposite of the Reformed faith and religion.

To be Reformed is to be historic.

But an elder of First Reformed Church in Bulacan once commented, “Article 28 of the Belgic Confession of Faith will not stand the test of historic faith.” Prior to the statements made on May 29, 2022, this elder had mocked the authority of the Reformed faith. He had disagreed that outside the instituted church there is no salvation. He had made the statement to assert that article 28 is not of the historic faith. The Reformed Protestant Classis of January 2023 rejected this elder’s position and his council’s unreformed statements concerning the authority of the creeds.<sup>7</sup>

The elder must have been drunk. It will be impossible for him to sober up if he is inebriated by some wine of this age. The new wine of the Reformed faith is sweet, for it is the Lord who prepared the wine for the feasting of the children of the Reformation. But the wine of this age is bitter, prepared by Satan with much philosophies and sophistries. “What? Outside the church there is no salvation? I never heard that from my father. That is not historic.” Agreed. Only if your rightful father is the devil.

We are not a church that came out of nothing. We have a heritage and a history. Our faith comes to us as it was tried throughout history. We are one with the saints of all ages. We have the same Lord, baptism, and faith.

And in our own heritage, we are Dutch Reformed. Specifically, we are one with the faith of the *Afscheiding* and *Doleantie* churches. The three forms of unity have been the doctrinal standards in the churches until now. Aside from being classical Calvinists, we are historic Reformed.

If you do not agree with Calvinism and the Reformed faith, you should leave the Reformed Protestant Church. You are not part of this church if you cannot agree with the faith being held here. Problems will certainly arise if members are not convinced of our historic faith.

### *We Are Historic Protestant Reformed*

Second, we are historic Protestant Reformed. I say “historic” because the old Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) formed in 1924 have been lost in today’s PRC. That denomination cannot claim to be historic since the doctrine that was once recovered by the Protestant Reformed fathers is no longer maintained in that denomination.

She occupies an impossible position when the activities of man are being upheld to high esteem. The fathers consistently taught that in the covenant works are totally excluded, both in the establishment and maintenance of the covenant. But the PRC is imposing conditions in the experience of the covenant. So cunning is this imposition that Protestant Reformed ministers teach an unconditional covenant in the establishment and maintenance of the covenant, but when regarding the application or the experience of the covenant, then that is another thing. In that aspect of the covenant, they say that grace abounds when man does good works. This is not the historically Protestant Reformed distinctive.

The rejection of common grace and the well-meant gospel offer is no longer an exclusive Protestant Reformed distinctive. Even the so-called Reformed and Particular Baptists can share that rejection, and some Dutch Reformed churches like the Bastion of Truth Reformed Churches in the Philippines agree with almost all the doctrine of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Rejection of the theory of common grace and all its three points is becoming a big umbrella.

For grace is not just about being particular, but grace is most of all sovereign. Grace is sovereignly free to bestow blessings on the elect alone based on what Christ has done for them—only on that basis. This is grace. This is mere grace objectively and experientially (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 60, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 106–7). Blessings are not readily offered goodness of God to his people that can be acquired by being obedient.

Rather, the strong, distinct doctrine of the historically Protestant Reformed faith is the unconditionality of the covenant of God with his people.

In the 1940s the Reformed churches in the Netherlands (liberated) infiltrated the American and Canadian Protestant Reformed churches. During these years the PRC was living through a time of serious controversy. Little did the Protestant Reformed people know that the deposition of Dr. Klaas Schilder by the Synod of the *Gereformeerde Kerken* (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands) would greatly affect the communion of the PRC in the truth when the doctor went to America. He had been deposed from his office as professor and emeritus minister while he was underground during World War II. Like Herman Hoeksema, Schilder had been deposed without a hearing. The two men eventually became friends.

But Hoeksema’s theology stemmed from the *Doleantie*, while Dr. Schilder’s theology was from the *Afscheiding*. The latter was a wing of the Dutch churches that was doctrinally

<sup>7</sup> Reformed Protestant Churches in America, Minutes of the Classis Meeting on January 19–20, 2023, Article 83, Supplement 7, Recommendation #1 with grounds a, b, and c.

weaker than the former. Dr. Schilder led some to secede from the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, and they followed Schilder in the liberation from the denomination. Dr. Abraham Kuyper Sr. held to the presupposed regeneration of infants to answer concerns regarding the validity of baptism. Dr. Schilder and the liberated churches rejected the notion that the promise of the covenant to infants was a presupposition. They disagreed with Kuyper's position, but they imposed conditions in the covenant. They taught that the promise is given to infants on the condition of faith and obedience. This is the same with the theology of Dr. William Heyns, who was one of the professors of Herman Hoeksema. Though Dr. Schilder denied that his doctrine resembled Dr. Heyns' doctrine, his disagreement with Dr. Heyns was Heyns' incorporation of the theory of common grace, which Schilder rejected, into the giving of the covenant promise to all baptized infants—that is, even to those who are not elect.

In October and November 1947, Dr. Schilder lectured at doctrinal conferences of Reformed churches in the United States. The lectures were attended by members of several Reformed denominations, including the PRC. Sympathy for his theology was increasing among the Protestant Reformed ministers. Even confessing members were being attracted to the conditional theology of Dr. Schilder. This was a period when Protestant Reformed members were losing their zeal to be distinctively Reformed. This gave the spiritual members a sense of foreboding and tragedy. Tragedy is exactly what happened. Fully half of the Protestant Reformed churches and ministers eagerly followed the liberated churches' theology, especially when Rev. Hubert De Wolf enthusiastically preached the heresy in the PRC. He preached on April 15, 1951, "God promises everyone of you that if you believe, you will be saved."<sup>8</sup> He was expelled in 1953, and many Protestant Reformed churches, ministers, and members went with him. But in 1961 the schismatics decided to return to the Christian Reformed Church with willingness to submit to its unrelenting position on the three points of common grace.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the theology of De Wolf was deeply imbedded in the PRC.

But why did God allow this to happen? The controversy was so serious that it disrupted the communion of

the churches. Herman Hoeksema addressed Synod 1950 with these words:

God Himself by His providence uses these false doctrines in order to wake up the church and in order to set the church strongly against the false doctrine, and to cause her to develop the truth over against that doctrine.<sup>10</sup>

That same providence of God is operating yet today. In the PRC the false doctrine of conditional theology is being pulled out of the hellish doctrine of Heyns, Schilder, and De Wolf. It is quite difficult to think where the PRC of today is going. They have the doctrine of the unconditional covenant on the one hand and the conditional covenant on the other. It is quite impossible to walk straight with those two in both hands. That denomination is dead. You cannot mingle truth with anything. The denomination is dead because the heart of the churches is becoming weaker and weaker, and it is only a matter of time before the heart stops. Rev. Homer Hoeksema spoke these words in a gathering of pastors in Iowa: "The heart beats weakly or stops beating. Heart trouble may be caused by losing God and enthroning man."<sup>11</sup>

You cannot maintain an unconditional covenant while consistently preaching if-and-then theology of experiential subjective grace—that is, "God is going to bless you when you do this or that" or "God will forgive you if you repent" or "You will be saved if you believe." We are aware that the term *condition* had a Reformed pedigree. It was originally used to limit salvation to the elect and to define that they are saved only through faith. Nevertheless, such a meaning of the term has been abandoned. You cannot use that term for the defense of God's unconditional covenant. You cannot use that term to defend that the experience in the covenant is unconditional. It will not work. The term was abandoned because it is not found in scripture nor in the Reformed creeds. Also, only Pelagians use that word consistently and defend it to make man something in the work of salvation.

The (then) Rev. David Overway preached the same heresy many times in Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Walker, Michigan. It is the concept of obedience as a condition by which the believer experiences fellowship

8 Gertrude Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden: A Brief History of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1992), 176.

9 Herman Hoeksema, "A Sad End," *Standard Bearer* 37, no. 20 (September 1, 1961): 460–61.

10 *Acts of Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America 1950*, 5–15, or as quoted in Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden*, 168–69.

11 Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden*, 188. Rev. Homer Hoeksema was asserting that the heartbeat of Reformed religion is "God's eternal sovereign election, together with its corollary, reprobation. The heartbeat of the church is sovereign, free, independent election—not of a mob, but of Christ's church." The idea is that the church continues to live because all work depends on God according to his divine, sovereign, free decree of predestination. He ordained all the work, and the outworking of that determinative decree will depend on him exclusively. If that truth is despised, the church kills herself—after all, we, sinners, are good at it. We murdered ourselves by believing the lie that we could enthrone ourselves to the throne upon which only God can eternally sit.

with God. Overway preached consistently this idea that obedience is required to experience fellowship, which obedience is the active performance of the believer.

But we insist as historic Protestant Reformed that only the grace of God is determinative in the believer's experience of covenant fellowship with God. By grace, as it is directed by the eternal election of God, the believer experiences fellowship with God. By grace through faith, we receive all the spiritual blessings from Jesus Christ. That receiving by faith is a very passive word. It is exclusively making the application of salvation about God, *not* the conscious man.

Application of salvation is not about what you consciously feel in your heart. Application is simply the work of the Spirit, giving us all the finished work of Jesus Christ through the bond of faith. It is the irresistible work of the Spirit in saving us. Lord's Day 7 is so clear that only those who are engrafted into Christ are saved. They are not only saved, but they also infallibly receive all Christ's benefits. The Catechism limits salvation only to those who are engrafted into Christ and are receiving all his benefits. We can go on and on enumerating the benefits of being engrafted into Christ, and one of them is forgiveness of sins. David said, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile" (Ps. 32:1–2). David knew that forgiveness of sins or justification is first. When God declared us righteous before him, that happened when our sins were covered. That covering is another term for atonement through a blood-shed sacrifice, and that happened on the cross. Justification through the blood of Jesus Christ is the objective reality of our salvation, and that is applied by the Spirit through faith—through the bond of faith. We are totally passive in receiving all Christ's benefits. And in the case of justification, faith is always passive. I agree that according to Psalm 32:5, we actively confess our sins and God forgives our sins. But that is not the gospel. That is not the gospel simply because even our daily repentance is tainted with sin. That alone can be a ground for our condemnation.

But thanks be to God that we are not forgiven because we repent. We want Christ. David knew that. That is why repentance is in verse 5. The gospel is that we are forgiven because God has covered our sins with the blood of Jesus Christ. Our repentance is just a fruit of justification. God is always first. Repentance, in fact, is a gift of Christ, renewing us or converting us. And I should say that repentance (*μετάνοια*), a radical change of mind

or turning, is solely the work of God. No one among us can say that we turn ourselves from sin and humble ourselves before God. Conversion is simply the work of God. In fact, the original question and answer 88 of the Heidelberg Catechism synonymously identifies repentance (*Buße*) with conversion (*Bekehrung*). This is a wonder of grace that we are turned or converted. The turning is the work of God's sovereign grace converting our souls.

That is how we enjoy the covenant when God *alone* works in and through us.

Prof. David J. Engelsma beautifully summarized the historically Protestant Reformed position regarding the enjoyment of the covenant:

That the covenant is unconditional means that the establishment, maintaining, and perfecting of that blessed relationship of love and communion between God and man do not depend on the sinful man; that the blessings which the covenant brings to the man do not depend upon him; and that the final, everlasting salvation enjoyed by one with whom God makes His covenant does not depend upon that man. There is no work of the sinner that is a condition he must fulfill in order to have the covenant, or to enjoy its blessings.<sup>12</sup>

But Rev. Kenneth Koole wants something different. He wants man—the man who consciously works for his salvation. Koole wrote, "If a man would be saved, there is that which he *must* do."<sup>13</sup> Classis East has been exonerating this heretic. If David Overway was given a charitable and honorable exit, Reverend Koole is relishing the honor of being still one of the most trusted ministers, while Prof. Russell J. Dykstra wanted to silence the handful of protestants to Classis East.<sup>14</sup> For the sake of a man, God's people are being abused by political men, who now lead a century-old denomination. This is typical for an institution that puts man in high places, whether in theology or in office.

Rev. Hubert De Wolf was examined because of suspicion. But Reverend Koole is not being examined. This reflects how bad the PRC has become. But this is not about how bad she has become. This is about our Lord Jesus Christ, who has removed the candlestick from the PRC and is standing at the door knocking to gather the elect remnant.

Herman Hoeksema said on June 9, 1953, at the commencement exercises of the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches,

12 David J. Engelsma, *The Unconditional Covenant in Contemporary Debate* (Hudsonville, MI: Trinity Protestant Reformed Church Evangelism Committee, 2004), 4.

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

14 Nathan J. Langerak, "Christ on Trial," *Sword and Shield* 4, no. 11 (March 2024): 9.



I always say, beloved: Give me God, if I must make a choice. If I must make a choice to lose God or man, give me God. Let me lose man. It's all right to me: no danger there. Give me God! That's Reformed! And that's especially Protestant Reformed! Give me God: there is no salvation in man!<sup>15</sup>

So brave. Willing to die for the sake of the gospel. Willing to humble man to the dust! Total abhorrence of man. Man is nothing! But God is self-sufficient God.

That is historic Protestant Reformed: "Let me lose man. Give me God!"

In the establishment and maintenance of the covenant, "Let me lose man. Give me God!"

In the experience of salvation, "Let me lose man. Give me God!"

And that is simply Reformed Protestant. God *alone* in every aspect of the covenant and salvation.

### *We Are Reformed Protestant*

Finally, we are Reformed Protestant. My above treatment is enough to tell you how we are Reformed Protestant—simply because we are Reformed and we are historic Protestant Reformed. Our name intimates those realities as we commune together in the truth. It is imbedded in our history and religion. We are fighting for the truth because our heritage is being despised. And this is not some heritage that we fanatically defend. We are not sectarians. Rather, we are for the truth of Jesus Christ. This is the only heritage we have—our Lord. "Thy testimonies have I taken as an heritage for ever: for they are the rejoicing of my heart" (Ps. 119:111). Our heritage is the only heritage we know and treasure. It is the heartbeat that keeps our church alive. To despise it is to despise life. We cannot do that, by the grace of God.

For this reason, schism is against the sixth commandment, for it is an attempt to separate the church from Jesus Christ. Schism is an attempt, for it is impossible to do that. The church shall endure schism because she is always mystically united to Christ. *What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.* The Spirit always maintains that union even when others are so abusive that they always want to sever the church from her Lord. They always want man. Jehovah says, "Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the LORD" (Jer. 17:5). To depart from the Lord is schism, and the very effective way to do that is to trust in man rather than in God.

Therefore, it is such a blessing that our gospel as Reformed Protestants is the same gospel of old—of the apostles, of the reformers, of Dordt, of the Protestant Reformed forefathers.

We maintain that every aspect of salvation is worked by God *alone*. The intra-trinitarian decrees determine our salvation; that is, God chose us in Jesus Christ; and Jesus Christ suffered, died, and rose again for our justification; and the ineffable, sanctifying Spirit clothes us with all the righteousness and blessings of salvation through faith. The self-existent one has declared our salvation, and it is being fulfilled to the end that his name might be glorified as the justifier of the ungodly.

We also maintain, as Reformed Protestants, that we are still totally depraved. This truth is the reality of man. Our glory is found in the dust. Even in our regenerated state, we are still, by nature, organically one with all common men and are profane. We are still depraved. The Catechism in question and answer 8 asks the Christian if he is so corrupt and inclined to all wickedness. The Christian answers, "Yes." Without grace, the answer is an unqualified yes. That is our nature simply because our nature does not belong to God, and it is not united to Jesus Christ. A day will come when this nature will be destroyed by the fierce judgment of Jesus Christ. And that depraved nature is infuriated by the existence of the new man in us. That new man is perfect and cannot sin (1 John 3:9). We are given that new man, but our depraved natures are so active that we cry, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24). The old man is so depraved and corrupt that he always grabs every activity of faith to make it unworthy unto salvation or void of any spiritual blessings. This is why we Reformed Protestants confess that we always need the cleansing blood of our Lord. We have the will to fulfill his will, but we do not have the natural integrity to execute perfectly what we ought to do.

We consequently confess that we cannot attain salvation nor the blessings of it by our good works nor by any activity of faith. Rather, we confess that faith and its activities are all blessings themselves. It is such a wonder that there are good works, that there is faith, that there is repentance. Grace upon grace!

This is simply Reformed Protestant doctrine. Jesus Christ *alone* is sufficient in all things that he might have the preeminence over all things.

We only trust in Christ as the mediator of the covenant of Jehovah, for of him God established, maintains, and will perfect his covenant with us. In that final consummation, we will enjoy fellowship with Jehovah because he has drawn us to himself. Also, in this life we enjoy fellowship with him because he has drawn us to himself through Jesus Christ. "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36).

—JP

<sup>15</sup> Herman Hoeksema, "Man's Freedom and Responsibility," *Standard Bearer* 29, no. 18 (July 1, 1953): 415.

# MCGEOWN'S MANUFACTURED FAITH

Rev. Martyn McGeown has had much to say of late in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). So much is Reverend McGeown showing himself to be a leader in his churches, by his clear teaching of their doctrine, that one wonders why he has not yet been given an appointment to teach in the Protestant Reformed seminary so that he can thoroughly indoctrinate the students and thereby effectively snare the members in the pews of the PRC into his net, which is no doubt his endgame.

After reading a recent article titled “Saving Faith: Given to Believe”<sup>1</sup> in the March 1, 2024, issue of the *Standard Bearer*, which was once a glorious standard bearer of the truth of justification by faith alone, it becomes clear that McGeown is continuing to work hard to manufacture a way of salvation for those whose way of salvation by works God has cut off. McGeown also goes about trying to steal whatever little assurance is left to those who have true faith and are yet in the PRC, and he fills their minds with the spiritual smut that he writes. The believing reader must see McGeown’s twisting of scripture and the creeds as well as his unbelief, which unbelief is no doubt the powerful engine that drives him to manufacture and teach his wicked doctrine.

As many of you already know, McGeown has been fighting for and has accomplished his purpose in the ecclesiastical assemblies of his churches of exonerating Rev. Kenneth Koole from the charge that has been made against him of having taught false doctrine in the *Standard Bearer* and in his preaching. McGeown’s recent article assures the reader of the reason he has fought so hard for Reverend Koole to be relieved of the burden of being characterized as a false teacher or even as ambiguous. The reason is that both men teach the same doctrine that there is that which man must do to be saved.

I must admit to being disarmed somewhat when I initially saw the title of McGeown’s article: “Saving Faith: Given to Believe.” “Yes,” I thought, “that is the truth that I believe.” As I continued to read the article, I became

disabused of any notion that Reverend McGeown was going to teach the reader something Reformed.

## *Faith as “Our Activity”*

Reverend McGeown starts off in the introduction by quoting Philippians 1:29: “For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.” He then goes on to teach us that

faith is both the activity of the regenerated, called, converted sinner and the gift of God. We believe (our activity) because it was given to us to believe (God’s gift, cf. Phil. 1:29 above). (276)

Scripture clearly teaches us in this text, which McGeown so unashamedly quotes and misinterprets, that faith is not “our activity,” but it is “given in the behalf of Christ to believe.” “Our activity” and something “given in the behalf of Christ” are antithetical to each other.

I have a bit of sympathy for McGeown here because this is something that only a believer can understand. Paul puts it beautifully in Galatians 2:20: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” This is the definition of faith: Christ living in me—the union or bond of Christ with his elect. The believer understands that his life, which he now lives in the flesh, is lived by the faith of the Son of God. We live by the power of Christ. The believer has no desire to claim his life and works as his own. This is absolutely foreign to Reverend McGeown and to the PRC. Their lives are their own. Oh, yes, they need grace to help them along, but in the end it is “our activity,” as McGeown so clearly writes.

McGeown goes on in his introduction to summarize Lord’s Day 7 of the Heidelberg Catechism by saying, “Faith includes two activities: knowledge, the activity of knowing God; and confidence, the activity of trusting God” (277).

<sup>1</sup> Martyn McGeown, “The *Ordo Salutis* (5): Saving Faith: Given to Believe,” *Standard Bearer* 100, no. 11 (March 1, 2024): 276–79. Page numbers for quotations from this article are given in text.

The Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 7 makes clear that faith is not "our activity." In question and answer 21 we read,

Q. 21. What is true 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)

Lord's Day 7 teaches us that faith is a certain knowledge that God's word is the truth, as well as an assured confidence that remission of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are for me personally and that this is all "freely given" to me by the Holy Ghost through the preaching of the gospel, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits. What a beautiful, clear truth about faith! Something is done for me and is worked in me. Christ works belief in my heart! Where is the believer's "activity" in that? What believer would want to claim this as his own "activity"? Oh, yes, there is an activity in faith, but it is not mine. The Holy Spirit is powerfully active in the preaching of the gospel and in the hearts of the elect. This is the mysterious union of Christ with his people that only they can understand.

It is clear from his teaching that Reverend McGeown hates this truth because he has never tasted of it. He is the man spoken of in 1 Corinthians 1:18: "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God." The truth that faith is Christ's activity of working in his people is foolishness to Reverend McGeown and to the PRC. They are not given knowledge and assurance through the preaching of that gospel. The gospel of Lord's Day 7 angers them because they are not moved at all by the work of Christ, but they are moved only by the pride of man; and, therefore, they only take joy in their own works and activities. The way of free salvation is cut off to those who do not believe that faith is the activity

of Christ, and so McGeown goes to work to manufacture his own way of salvation. With his invention of a redefined faith, Reverend McGeown can begin to manufacture all sorts of counterfeit Reformed doctrines by seemingly using the creeds and scripture. All of this, just in his introduction.

I will now examine the rest of the article, point by point.

### *Faith as the "Activity of Knowing"*

First, Reverend McGeown manufactures man's "activity of knowing" (277). McGeown begins by emphasizing that we must believe the truths of scripture. Then he goes on to tell us that faith is not ignorance, a mere intellect of the truth, or doubt. He says that faith is not a mere emotional response to the truth. On the face of it, the believer would agree with these statements. After all, Lord's Day 7 tells us that faith is a "certain knowledge." Here is where we must be reminded that "Slippery McGeown" has a reputation to maintain.<sup>2</sup>

If this were all taken in the context that faith is the work or activity of the Holy Spirit, we would have no issue with these statements. The Spirit preserves his people and leads them into all the truth. There is no other way. It is inevitable. God's people will believe the truth of scripture concerning all things. God will not allow them to have only a mere intellect of the truth or to live their lives in doubt of their salvation. Neither will God allow his people to have a fake emotional response to the truth; but he will cause them to live in true joy, knowing their salvation.

The problem is that the activity of the Holy Spirit is not the context of McGeown's statements. He has already given us faith as "our activity." This activity of knowing, according to McGeown, is in the power of man, by grace, of course. This also sheds light on McGeown's interpretation of Hebrews 10:38–39, which reads,

38. Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.
39. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.

2 In response to Martyn McGeown, "Faith: A Bond, a Gift, and an Activity, but Not a Condition for Salvation," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 52, no. 2 (April 2019): 3–32 and Martyn McGeown, "Passive Faith?," November 15, 2021, <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/passive-faith>, see Nathan J. Langerak, "Slippery McGeown (1): What Man Must Do," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 12 (January 2022): 18–22; "Slippery McGeown (2): Active Faith and Justification," *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 13 (February 1, 2022): 13–20. In response to Martyn McGeown, "Preaching Repentance and Forgiveness," a seven-part blog series for the Reformed Free Publishing Association that began April 27, 2022 (<https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-1-repentance>), and ended June 1, 2022 (<https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/preaching-repentance-and-forgiveness-7-repentance-and-remission>), see Nathan J. Langerak, "Slithering Around Again (1): A Review," *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 4 (September 2022): 19–23; "Slithering Around Again (2): Afraid of the Decree," *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 5 (October 2022): 17–23; "Slithering Around Again (3): Notwithstanding," *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 6 (November 1, 2022): 12–16.

McGeown explains these verses this way: “Those who draw back from their profession of faith perish, but those who by God’s grace believe obtain the salvation of their souls” (277). Ah, there it is. Clear and concise. “Those who by God’s grace believe [our activity, according to McGeown] obtain the salvation of their souls.” The believer hates that statement. He understands that he is not capable of believing of himself but that it is Christ’s work alone by faith (the activity of Christ’s Holy Spirit) to preserve the believer unto the salvation of his soul. The believer finds great joy in this text because he knows that Christ is the one who did not draw back from the profession of his faith, and his righteousness and obedience are counted for the believer’s own unto the saving of his soul. McGeown’s doctrine is the old doctrine of Jacob Arminius rearing its ugly head in the PRC. Man’s activity of believing, by grace, obtains the saving of his soul.

The sad reality is that many of the members of the PRC are too spiritually asleep to care about such a doctrine. Or maybe some of them have believed this for years, and that is why they sit silently as it is taught. Either way, they ought to give up the claim of being spiritual sons of Rev. Herman Hoeksema and of the Reformed faith, which teaches that salvation is by the work of Christ *alone* without and apart from any activity of man. Our fathers would, no doubt, rise up in holy indignation against what is being taught in the PRC right now.

### *Faith as the “Activity of Trusting”*

Next Reverend McGeown begins to manufacture man’s “activity of trusting” (277). He starts by reminding us that Lord’s Day 7 defines faith as “an assured confidence.” He also reminds us that article 22 of the Belgic Confession teaches an “upright faith which embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, appropriates Him, and seeks nothing more besides Him” (277).

These are beautiful confessions of the believer’s faith. By the work of the Spirit of Jesus Christ in my heart, through the preaching of the gospel, I receive “an assured confidence.” The work of Christ in my heart, through the preaching of the gospel, also causes me to embrace Jesus Christ with all his merits, appropriate him, and seek nothing more beside him. Another very simple way of saying this is that the believer rests, knowing that Christ’s work alone has already accomplished all of the believer’s salvation and given him the benefits of it, without any work at all on the part of the believer. The believer seeks his salvation outside himself. The believer marvels at this truth. The depths of this truth are beyond our comprehension, and this truth is our greatest joy.

Now, take these same quotes in the context of McGeown’s definition of faith. He teaches that faith is our “activity of trusting” God (277). Now, instead of the Spirit of Christ in us and applying to us the benefits of salvation, such as assurance, comfort, and rest in Christ’s work alone, we have our “activity” of trusting, seeking, appropriating, and embracing Christ as that which gives us assurance of salvation. What a devilish twisting of the creeds!

What is more is that McGeown goes on to speak of this wicked, manufactured faith as being the faith of our spiritual fathers Abel, Noah, and Abraham. According to McGeown, their faith was their “activity of trusting” rather than the work of the Spirit in them. Really, Reverend McGeown? Abel, Noah, and Abraham were justified by their acts of trusting in God? They were not saved by grace alone apart from their acts of trusting? They were not saved only because God had elected them, brought them into his covenant, and blotted out their sins through Christ’s death on the cross? They also needed their acts of trusting in God? Their trusting was not simply the fruit of their being justified already by the work of Christ, or, to say it another way, of their being justified by faith alone?

There are many problems with Reverend McGeown’s assertion that our fathers were justified by their acts of trusting, not the least of which is that his teaching is not scriptural or creedal, but I am going to focus on one serious problem with that. What about when our fathers were not trusting in God? Let us consider Abraham. He and Sarah had been given the beautiful covenant promise by God that he would be a God unto them and to their children and that he would save them. Then a famine came in the land, and Abraham and Sarah had to go down to Egypt to get food. On this journey Abraham became afraid for his life because he knew the Egyptians would desire his beautiful wife for themselves, and he attempted to give her into whoredom to save himself. God then plagued Pharaoh’s house and caused him to send Abraham and Sarah safely home with much cattle, silver, and gold. How much “activity of trusting” on Abraham’s part was going on there? None. How about when God promised Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son in their old age, in whom the covenant would be fulfilled, and Abraham fell to the ground laughing in unbelief at the living God? Did Abraham lose his justification before God because of his unbelief? No, Abraham was inseparably bonded to Jesus Christ by the union of faith. Abraham was righteous in God’s eyes despite his unbelief, and God graciously delivered Abraham from his sins as God does for all his people daily.

Let us consider Noah for a moment. God had given Noah the covenant promise and delivered him and his

children through the flood of great waters. God delivered them from the destruction of the whole wicked world, and what was one of the first things Noah did when he got off of the ark? He planted a vineyard and got roaring drunk, exposing himself naked to his whole family. How much “activity of trusting” was Noah showing there? None. If the believer’s “activity of trusting” is what faith is, and we are justified by faith alone, then Noah lost his justification before God in that moment.

McGeown has a wicked doctrine of salvation by what man must do.

The truth is that our spiritual fathers took comfort in and believed the truth of 1 Corinthians 1:30–31:

30. But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:
31. That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.

The Corinthians believed that salvation is of the Lord!

### *Faith as a “Gift”*

Next Reverend McGeown teaches us about the gift of faith. There is not much I have to say here because in this section he strongly testifies against himself by citing many passages of scripture and the creeds that speak of faith as being the work of God alone. There are two things to note here though.

First, this section of his article serves to lull back to sleep any spiritually sensitive members of the PRC who are listening to him. “See, there is no problem here,” they will say. “He is saying that salvation is God’s work.”

Second, I must note how McGeown uses Philipians 1:29 here again, where we read, “For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.” McGeown told us in the beginning of his article that faith is a two-party activity, and he used this verse to prove it. He told us, “We believe (our activity) because it was given to us to believe (God’s gift, cf. Phil. 1:29 above)” (276). He was simply teaching there about what he believes to be God’s part in a two-party activity. He will get back to man’s part of this activity shortly.

Before I move on, however, I want to point out especially Reverend McGeown’s own quotation of Canons 3–4.14:

Faith is...in reality conferred, breathed, and infused into [man]...He who works in man both to will and to do, and indeed all things in all, produces both the will to believe and the act of believing also. (278)

McGeown, of course, quotes this article of the Canons as though it is just a description of God’s part in the two-party activity of faith. In reality, this is a beautiful passage of our confessions that teaches us in painstaking clarity that faith is not “our activity.”

### *Faith as a “Faculty”*

Next Reverend McGeown comes to faith as a “faculty” (278). At this point one can hardly contain his excitement about what McGeown is going to say. He starts by telling us, “Faith is the gift of God also with respect to its faculty, which is the ability to believe” (278). McGeown goes on to give the example of a man who is blind and cannot see versus a man who can see. This is a familiar biblical example to us. Jesus healed the blind as a living testament of his work of salvation, such as in John 9:6–7, where we read:

6. When he had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay,
7. And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, (which is by interpretation, Sent.) He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing.

McGeown does not stop there though. He cannot. He needs to get man involved yet and give him something to do to be decisive in his own salvation. McGeown writes, “A man with the faculty of sight might close his eyes, so that he does not see, but he still has the ability to see” (278). There we have it. As good as we anticipated. McGeown has God’s people as those who have the ability to see, but they might close their eyes. He is telling us that we are not like the blind who cannot see at all, even if we wanted to; but we are those who can see and need to consciously open our eyes (our activity of faith) in order to be justified. God, of course, gives us the ability, and all we have to do is open our eyes. McGeown writes, “As believers, we always have the faculty of faith, but we do not always actively believe” (278).

It gets better. McGeown goes on,

That we are united to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is certainly a biblical truth, but in the Bible and in the confessions the emphasis is on faith as the activity of believing. The Catechism defines faith not as a bond, and certainly not as a passive, lifeless bond, but as an activity: “What *is* true faith?...It *is* not only a certain knowledge...but also an assured confidence” (Q&A 21). Therefore, it is more accurate to call the bond with Christ “the mystical union,” and to call “faith

in Christ,” which is the activity of believing, the fruit of that union. (278–79)

The reader must stop here and ask himself, why does McGeown separate our bond with Christ from faith itself? The answer is obvious. If faith is a bond or union with Christ, faith cannot be a work or “activity” of man. McGeown absolutely cannot have faith as a bond. He must make union with Christ something other than faith because he has faith as “our activity.”

The truth is that faith is, in fact, your union with Christ and is not your “activity of believing.” Our confessions are clear on this. Article 22 of the Belgic Confession tells us that

faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him [Christ] in all His benefits, which, when become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 50)

In other words, faith is a bond that I have with the living Lord, whereby all the benefits of my salvation flow from him to me. Yes, I am passive in faith, which McGeown so viciously fights against. Oh, yes, there is one who is active in faith. Faith is the activity of God, whereby he gives me all of my salvation, and I am passive in it all. I have no say or decision in any of it. This is what we confess with the apostle Paul in Romans 9:20–21:

20. Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?
21. Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?

I am placed on the receiving end of all the blessings of salvation that God has decreed to give to me. Which is to say, I do nothing at all. If I needed my “activity” to receive any blessing of God, I would never get it. How blessed the believer is to receive salvation by faith alone!

### *Manufactured Faith’s “Role” in Salvation*

Finally, Reverend McGeown brings this soul-destroying article to a close by telling us the role his manufactured faith has in our salvation. He starts off, like most Protestant Reformed ministers these days, with an obligatory denial that he is teaching conditions in salvation. This is, no doubt, so we cannot charge him with abandoning the position his denomination has supposedly held for over one hundred years now, which is justification by faith alone. McGeown knows that to openly expose his doctrine would be to open the floodgates to members leaving

the PRC, since then there would be absolutely no public distinction between the PRC and the greater “Reformed” church world. He also knows that to deny justification by faith alone would be an open denial of scripture and the creeds, and that would, of course, be problematic too. He attempts to back up his denial that he teaches conditions when he writes,

Faith is not a condition, that is, an activity of ours on which our salvation *depends*. God does not save us on condition that we believe; God saves us by working faith in us, so that we believe. (279)

And then later he writes,

...the divine order: first, a sinner believes by the grace of God, who gives him faith as a gift; then, he is saved or comes into the possession and enjoyment of his salvation. (279)

For those of you who are trying to sort out and untwist that difference without a distinction, let me help you. Man must first believe (our activity by God’s grace, of course), and then God can and will save him. It is that simple.

McGeown makes one more attempt at denying that his doctrine teaches conditional salvation.

Faith is an activity of the regenerated, called, converted sinner, but it is not a work. The Bible contrasts faith with works, not because faith is not an activity, but because the activity of faith is very different from the activity of works. Quite simply, when we do good works, we are giving God something...When we believe, we give God nothing, but we receive blessings from God. Working is the activity of giving; believing is the activity of receiving. (279)

What McGeown is saying here is that he has found something for man to do for his salvation that McGeown is not going to call a work. This thing that man must do is to decisively receive the work of God in salvation as his own. This decisive receiving of salvation is the prerequisite that man must fulfill before God can save him, but McGeown declares that since this is a work of receiving and not a work of giving, then it is not a work at all. Yes, Martyn, that makes complete sense. We now fully understand how you think you can work for your salvation and claim to be justified by faith alone without works. The problem is that this is completely out of harmony with scripture, where we are taught that the gift of faith and man’s activity are antithetical to each other.

8. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:
9. Not of works, lest any man should boast.
10. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:8–10)

Man’s activity of receiving or resting in Christ is not what saves him. That too is a fruit of the free salvation that God has decreed to give to his elect people through the work of his Son’s death on the cross, which is the only ground of our justification. God has justified his people by faith alone, which is to say, through Christ’s saving work and apart from any “activity” of man. This text also repudiates McGeown’s teaching that our works are an activity of giving something to God. This text tells us clearly that we were “created in Christ Jesus unto good

works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”

Because I have been united to Christ, God decreed good works that I will walk in. Even my works have been given to me by God as a fruit of my faith. What a wonder! I am not responsible for my works either; Christ is.

I thank God daily that he has removed his people from the false church that Reverend McGeown is a part of and in which he freely teaches his false doctrine with many other ministers. God has reformed his church and given to us the Reformed Protestant Churches where the truth of justification by faith alone is faithfully heralded from week to week. I pray that God yet brings out whomsoever he wills from the apostate Protestant Reformed Churches and that he does it quickly.

—Lee Wiltjer Jr.

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### *Bound Volumes*

**N**ow that volume 4 of *Sword and Shield* is complete, it is time for readers to order bound volumes. Even though you are paying more for groceries and gas, there is no inflation in the cost of bound volumes this year. Bring your coffee-stained, underlined, and highlighted issues of volume 4 to the RBP office at 325 84th St SW, Suite 102, Byron Center, Michigan, or give the issues to a member of the RBP board. The bound volume cost is \$35. If you would like a bound volume of new issues, email your request to [office@reformedbelieverspub.org](mailto:office@reformedbelieverspub.org). The cost for this option remains \$45.

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The RBP board is excited to announce that it recently approved updates to the Reformed Believers Publishing

website. The updates will include searchability for all volumes, issues, and articles of *Sword and Shield*, so that website users can type in a search term or topic and relevant articles will be filtered and shown to the user. The grand benefit of this update is that the addition of all the individual articles on the website will exponentially increase visibility on search engines. For example, when someone searches *justification by faith alone* on Google, *Sword and Shield* magazine will appear with relevant articles. A digital PDF file of each issue will continue to be available on the updated website. The cost for the updates to the website is \$12,575. The “Donations” tab will remain on the updated website. The board anticipates that the renovated website will be fully functional by the end of summer.



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## FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL

*And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; and hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth. — Revelation 5:9–10*

**M**usic! It is second only to theology. God evidently so created man that music has a deep impression on him. Heaven has its music. The song above occurs in a vision of the ascension of Jesus Christ to the throne of God. The Lamb takes the book of God's counsel to bring God's eternal kingdom. A grand occasion. A grand song. A new song is heard in heaven.

All the singing of the world is old. The world's singing is the wail of the hopeless or the upbeat dance of the condemned, who eat, drink, and are merry, for tomorrow they die. All the singing is nothing more than the dirges of the damned. The singing of the world became old in Adam. There was a lovely song heard in the beginning when God made the earth. The morning stars sang for joy when God laid the foundations of the earth and heaven. It was also the song of Adam and Eve and of the whole creation as they gave praise to God the creator, who made all things for his glory. But the strains of that song died away in heaven in the rebellion of the angels. The song's melody fell silent when Adam fell, and all the singing of the world became old. The world's singing will end in the eternal wail of hell with its gnashing of teeth, the gnawing of the undying worm, and the heat of the unquenchable fire.

But there is a new song. No angel or man could have imagined the song's lyrics. It is the song that the church began to sing when God revealed the seed of the woman. It is the song of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, David, and the rest of the Old Testament church. You can read various stanzas of that song in the Psalms.

In John's vision the church in heaven sings another stanza of this new song. It is new over against the creation-song of Adam and Eve. It is new over against the old, old song of the world. The old song in the garden praised God the creator. The new song praises God the redeemer in Jesus Christ, God's Son, the Lamb who is worthy. At that moment in heaven, the glory of God was revealed in the Lamb, who took the book of God's counsel to open its seals and to bring God's kingdom. Heaven, which moments before had been silent when no one was found worthy to open the book, erupts into this new song. It is a song that glorifies the Lamb and his work of redemption and through him glorifies God and his incomparable grace. Always that had been the song of the church. The content is always the same: salvation is of the Lord through Jesus Christ. He redeemed his people. He established them as God's eternal kingdom of priests and kings. He will perfect that kingdom when the final seal is broken and the final page of the book is opened.

At the song of the church, heaven reverberates with the same song, only adding another stanza. The myriads of angels with the four creatures and the four and twenty elders shout, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing!" And then every creature in the whole creation is given its voice to add yet another stanza to the song: "Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever." Amen.

—NJL