

A stylized illustration in orange and white. A hand is shown holding a sword diagonally across the frame. Below the hand, a shield is depicted with concentric circles and smaller circles on its surface. The background is white, and the text is centered.

# SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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

Deuteronomy 33:29

AUGUST 2024 | VOLUME 5 | NUMBER 3

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

Editor in chief

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

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

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

*The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame. — Proverbs 29:15*

**H**ow shall we raise our covenant children in the home?

Rod and reproof.

How shall we prepare our children for school?

Rod and reproof.

How shall we ready our children to take up their callings in the world as God's friends and servants who know him and serve him in every area of life?

Rod and reproof.

How shall the foolishness that is bound in the heart of the child be driven far from him?

Rod and reproof.

How shall the soul of the child be delivered from hell?

Rod and reproof.

How shall the child receive wisdom in his heart?

Rod and reproof.

How do we show utmost love to our children in the covenant and with a view to their salvation?

Rod and reproof.

How shall our children give peace to our souls and be a delight to our eyes?

Rod and reproof.

How shall we be spared the shame of the unruly and rebellious child?

Rod and reproof.

How shall God be glorified, Christ honored, and the Holy Spirit obeyed in the rearing of the covenant seed?

Rod and reproof.

Such indeed is the Spirit's answer to these questions. Let me prove that. "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes" (Prov. 13:24). Deepest love for the child is in the rod. Hatred for the child is when the rod is spared. "Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying" (19:18). Chasten him before you spoil him, although your deepest natural affection, moved by his crying, tempts you to withhold such profitable correction. What is cute at the age of two is deeply set by age twenty-two and damning at age eighty-two. "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him" (22:15). Our dear children

have the same natures as we do, but the rod of correction drives foolishness from the heart of the child. Nothing gets to the heart of the child quicker and speaks to that heart more profitably than the rod of correction. "Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell" (23:13–14). A most salutary effect of the rod: a soul delivered from hell! "Correct thy son, and he shall give thee rest; yea, he shall give delight unto thy soul" (29:17). Indeed, the disciplined covenant child grows into the disciplined covenant adult.

Such is the Spirit's wisdom about raising the covenant seed. Such is the wisdom of Jesus Christ, who is the wisdom that comes into the heart of a covenant child to replace his foolishness. Such is the wisdom of God, our Father, who likewise chastens his own children.

5. And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him:
6. For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.
7. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?
8. But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons.
9. Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?
10. For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness.
11. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. (Heb. 12:5–11)

Yes! God disciplines his children so profitably all their lives to the yielding of the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who are exercised by that discipline. And God's discipline of his children begins in covenant homes by the means of parents to whom he gives the charge to use the rod and reproof.

Proverbs 29:15 is a statement of facts. "The rod and reproof give wisdom...a child left to himself bringeth his mother shame." These are facts in God's covenant. God gives wisdom to children through the means of the rod and reproof. God brings shame to parents who—with foolishness of heart and in hatred for their children and to the disturbing of the parents' own souls—ignore God's wisdom and God's facts for the raising of their covenant children.

For the school too! Discipline in the home is essential for instruction in the school. It is not the other way around; discipline in the school is not essential for the home. Discipline in the home is essential for the school. The task and calling to use the rod and reproof fall to the parents in the first instance. Discipline is only delegated to the school. Discipline in the home can be said to be the hinge on which the door of instruction in the school turns. The school is the place of instruction formed by parents for their covenant children. The main task of the school is instruction by teachers who stand in the place of parents.

Parents who send their children to school from the home undisciplined and unprepared to learn at school are unfit to have their children enrolled in the school. Parents whose children are forever disruptive and rebellious are not qualified to enroll their children in the school. For where there is no discipline, there cannot be instruction, and the whole edifice of the school is threatened by unruly and rebellious children sent to the school from disobedient and foolish parents, who have ignored the wisdom and facts of God for the raising of covenant children. "We discipline," the parents complain. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating. That children will not receive correction from teachers is proof that they are not receiving correction at home. That children come to school with the same rebellious attitudes and disruptive behaviors time and again is proof that correction is not being received in the home. For the lives of children at school are windows into the lives of the children at home. The undisciplined children are the window that allows everyone to see that the home is not Christian. For a home where there is no discipline is an unchristian home. Schools that include such parents cannot long endure as Christian institutions for the instruction of the covenant seed, for such a home will influence the whole school and every student in the school with its rebellious attitudes as the rottenness of the home pervades the attitudes of the institution. Sin that is overlooked and excused in the

home will soon be overlooked and excused in the school to the detriment of all the children.

The rod and reproof.

God's wisdom.

These words of the text are widely disregarded in unbelief today. I speak not only of the world. In the church too this is true. Man would be wiser than God. And thinking himself wise, man becomes a fool, and his children are a shame before the world.

The rod and reproof are scripture's summary of the will of God for raising the children of the covenant whom he gives to parents. Both the rod and reproof are negative. They aim at the correction of the wayward child. They both imply the positive calling to instruct. Both the rod and reproof are necessary because there has been disobedience to or rebellion against sound instruction. The rod and reproof are mentioned with a reference to instruction because without them there can be no instruction. In the home and in the school, the rod and reproof are the *sine qua non* of all instruction.

Reproof is the activity of the parent to rebuke the child for disobedience, foolishness, rebellion, or some other errant behavior. In this calling to the parent to reprove the child, the other meaning of the word *reproof* becomes important. Reproof also means to reason. Reproof, then, is not synonymous with flying off the handle, shouting hysterically, screaming emotionally, or threatening the child. Reproof is the controlled rebuke of the child that aims to bring the child to the knowledge and acknowledgement of his sin, to bring sorrow of heart for that sin, and to correct that errant behavior in the future. *Reproof* is the very same word that scripture uses for what the believer does when he rebukes his neighbor for some sin. The parent judges that what the child did was wrong, foolish, or sinful. The parent points out that what the child did was wrong and calls the child to repentance for that; the parent demands that the child change his behavior and do what is good and right.

The rod is the instrument used by the parent to chasten the child. Behind that chastisement, then, stands the activity of the parent to discipline the child for his disobedience or continued disobedience of the parent's instruction and reproof. The fastest way to the heart of the child and the surest way to drive out the foolishness of the child's heart is the rod. Such is the makeup of our covenant children. Such is the word of God concerning the correction of those covenant children.

Those who suppose that "rod" means the administration of discipline always and absolutely with an actual rod or stick are absurdly rigid in their interpretation of Proverbs 29:15 and similar texts because the meaning of "rod" is not first an instrument of discipline but a symbol of authority. The rod is a scepter, which represents the

authority of the parent over the child, both to instruct the child and to administer discipline to the child in harmony with that instruction. The analogy is the sword of the civil government. The sword is figurative for the power and authority of the state to punish a criminal by depriving him of his possessions, his freedom, or his life. So also here. The rod is a symbol of authority that the parents have in the discipline of their children. In the fifth commandment God gave to parents the right to teach and to discipline their children. The matter of the raising of children and especially of their discipline is not a matter of the parents' might but a matter of the parents' right that God gave to them.

Second, to reduce the word "rod" absolutely and at all times to a spanking with a stick conflicts with the purpose of wisdom. Wisdom is the use of the best means to achieve the highest end. No doubt the best means includes the stick. Scripture says that parents must smite the child with the rod. The child who will not receive instruction and further will not receive correction is worthy of the rod. The rod is an instrument for the correction of the child, along with negative verbal correction and reproof and positive verbal instruction, to enforce the wisdom of that instruction and correction. No doubt, in many instances there is a physical rod of some sort. There is an instrument that is taken out, used, and then put away. The relationship of the parents and the child is not characterized by that rod, so that the rod is a continual threat that hangs over the relationship. The rod is used, and it is put away. So God also characterizes his relationship with the king of Israel, his son, in 2 Samuel 7:14: "I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men." Men and the children of men were God's rod to chasten. So there is a stick or an instrument for the chastening of children.

Both the rod and reproof imply that the foundational calling of parents is instruction. The text defines the content of that instruction when it says that "the rod and reproof give wisdom."

Wisdom is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ and the truth of Jesus Christ are the content of the instruction of the parents. Wisdom is the whole range of positive instruction and nurture in the fear of Jehovah that is the parents' responsibility toward their children and which they promise to do for their children when they bring their children for baptism. Parents are to instruct their children in the fear of God through Jesus Christ and to bring them up in the fear and nurture of Jehovah. Parents are to teach their children to know Christ—who he is, what he has done, and what he does yet. Parents are to give to their children the knowledge of God, which is above all things most precious. Parents are to teach their children

to be God's friends and servants in the world according to their baptisms.

That knowledge of Jesus Christ is summarized by the Reformed Form for the Administration of Baptism in the phrase "the aforesaid doctrine." We promise to teach our children "the aforesaid doctrine." This promise by the parents is not a promise to raise their children in ways that they see fit. It is not a promise to give to their children a generically Christian or even a nominally Reformed upbringing. This promise is very specifically and carefully defined for the parents. The "aforesaid doctrine" is defined in the baptism form as "contained in the Old and New Testament." The Old Testament and the New Testament are nothing else than the doctrinal teachings of the truth of God's promise in Jesus Christ. But since many claim to teach the Bible, the creed defines that doctrine as what is taught "in the articles of the Christian faith"—that is, the doctrine taught in the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed, the ancient creeds of the church, and the doctrine as developed and summarized in the Reformed three forms of unity. And since many claim to be Reformed and Christian without actually being either Reformed or Christian, the baptism form adds, "as taught here in this Christian church" (An Exhortation to the Parents, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 260). This means that doctrinal content is actually preached and actually believed as the living faith and official confession of this Christian church. It is concretely a Reformed Protestant upbringing.

It must be added that instruction is of that doctrine as it bears on the entire lives of the children, so that the doctrine determines and governs all their instruction in math, science, and reading, and as that doctrine determines their entire lives. Part and parcel of that instruction is the requirement of obedience to the fifth commandment. This is no small part of the children's upbringing. It is the test of the children's faith in the truth of the word of God that they obey their parents and submit to their parents' good instruction and correction. The children from their earliest years are taught the authority of the parents under God to guide the children, and the children are taught the demand of God that they are to obey. The requirement, for instance, that the child eat his dinner is not as such part of the aforesaid doctrine except in this regard that his parent requires it of him. The requirement that the teenager be home by eleven o'clock in the evening is not as such part of the aforesaid doctrine except that his father requires it of him, and God requires the child to obey.

And that instruction is guarded by the rod and reproof so that the instruction, the parents, and the God who requires instruction are not despised.

Rod *and* reproof. It is not rod *or* reproof. Neither is it *only* rod or *only* reproof. It is not *without* both the rod

and reproof but only so-called positive reinforcement or very mild reminders. It is rod *and* reproof. This rebukes the thinking that virtually reduces the upbringing of children to corporal discipline. The rod without reproof is only a beating, and reproof without the rod is neglect and empty words. Rod and reproof are necessary because they establish order, without which there cannot be effective instruction. Rod and reproof are necessary because they tame the unruly flesh of children so that they can be instructed. And the rod and reproof remind in a painful way the calling to obedience and are instruments to bring children to repentance.

Rod *and* reproof imply that parenting is a hands-on work. They imply the parents' presence. The work is not and cannot be accomplished by a series of rules and regulations, no matter how carefully crafted, however just, and however equitably arranged to substitute for the presence of parents. There are absentee parents who rule their house by rules. There are fathers who are frequently gone from the home for days at a time over many weeks of the year, and their solution for their absenteeism are rules and harsh discipline when they return. Such fathers leave their children to themselves as much as fathers who will not discipline, and the results will be the same.

The rod and reproof are motivated by love. This is implied negatively in the text in the words "a child left to himself." This refers to the child who is without the rod and reproof and so is left to his own foolishness. One certainly does not love what he abandons. And so love is the motivation for the use of the rod and reproof. The parent who "spareth his rod hateth his son" (Prov. 13:24). The parents' love out of which they use the rod and reproof is not the natural love of parents for their children. This is clear because the mother who did not use the rod and reproof and upon whom now comes the blame for her child's unruly and undisciplined life certainly loved her child after a natural manner, and it was her natural love that kept her from using the rod and reproof. She let her soul "spare for his crying" (19:18). The love implied in Proverbs 29:15 is the love of the covenant of grace whereby parents do not abandon their children but embrace and receive them as gifts of God in the covenant and in thankfulness, for the covenant with the parents and their children follows God's wisdom and God's facts in his home with his children.

God requires the rod and reproof because the rod and reproof give wisdom. Wisdom as to its content is Jesus Christ. Wisdom as a virtue is the spiritual good sense whereby the believer is able to adapt himself, his thinking, and his whole life to the end of the glory of God and Christ Jesus, God's son. Wisdom is not basic common sense or even worldly savvy, even though wisdom is both sensible and savvy. But wisdom is fundamentally a

spiritual concept and a spiritual virtue. The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom; and after the wise preacher had searched out all wisdom and cunning things, he concluded that the whole duty of man is to fear God and to keep his commandments.

Wisdom is faith's application of what it knows. Faith receives the instruction, the reproof, and the correction and adapts one's life to it. Faith apprehends Christ in all the instruction and in every area of life, and wisdom adapts oneself in every area of life to the truth of Christ.

That the Holy Ghost says that the rod and reproof give wisdom implies the child's condition by nature. The child naturally is foolish. Indeed, the child's condition by nature is much worse. By nature the child is not only devoid of wisdom, but he is also immune to sound, spiritual instruction and hostile toward wisdom. Being foolish, the child will profess himself to be wise. Who has not had that experience with a child! The rod and reproof give wisdom. The rod and reproof take the instruction given and see to it that it is not so many empty words.

Now let me make the teaching of the text very simple. Teach your children the truth that is taught in the Reformed Protestant Churches, which is the truth of the word of God and of the Reformed creeds refined, sharpened, and developed through struggle and controversy; teach them that and discipline in light of it, and God will give to the children that truth as their own—that is, God will so work in their hearts and in their minds that they receive that truth, hear it, embrace it, confess it, love it, and die for it.

Do not covenant parents rejoice in that promise of God? Is that not what John said was the greatest joy of parents? They see their children walk in truth.

The rod and reproof give wisdom. That is not the power of the rod and reproof themselves. They are simply instruments. Instruments are always controlled by the purpose of the one who uses them. The rod and reproof give wisdom according to the sovereign working and gracious promise of God in the covenant of grace to believers and their seed.

If I were to discipline with the most tender care a rebellious child, he would not receive wisdom. He would refuse the instruction and hate the correction. If I were to instruct an unbelieving child with the eloquence of the angel Gabriel or with the power of Moses, that child could not hear it. He would not hear it, but he could not hear it because he lacks the ears to hear and the heart to understand. He does not have faith. And he does not have that according to God's sovereign will. The instruction, the rod, and the reproof would serve only for the driving away of that child from the covenant in which he has no part.

The only way in which the rod and reproof are useful for the child is if God has already worked regeneration

and faith in the heart of that child by God's amazing work of grace and according to his sovereign decree of election.

This is God's word—indeed, his promise—to covenant parents about the rod and reproof. The rod and reproof give wisdom because God ordained those means and uses those means to give wisdom to his children. Because God elected the children, because Christ died for them and paid for all their sins, and because the Spirit operates in their hearts, the rod and reproof give wisdom.

That speaks to the children for whom chastening is not pleasant but grievous. Jehovah God intends their profit by chastening, even if their parents sinfully go beyond the bounds of what is right and just in the administration of reproof and correction. That is sin on the part of the parents to be repented of and not to be excused. But God uses chastening for the children's profit. The parents may be evil, yet God uses that chastening for their children's profit. Especially then is this true regarding the loving, howbeit imperfect, discipline of believing parents. God intends that and works that for the children's profit to give them wisdom.

Is wisdom then not a vital part of the instruction that parents must give? They are not called merely to administer the rod and reproof but also to teach their children the purpose of the rod and reproof. Parents administer the rod and reproof not because their child embarrassed them, inconvenienced them, or made their lives difficult but for the purpose of giving *wisdom*.

That God uses the rod and reproof to give wisdom ought to humble parents in thanksgiving. It is not the parents' excellent administration of the rod and reproof that gives the wisdom. No, parents are rebuked in their many sins, shortcomings, and failings in this regard. It is God's promise and his work that use these weak means. They are a means, as are the parents, in his grand work of the salvation of believers and their seed.

That ought to comfort parents too. If parents teach their children all those things and the children reject them, then that is the parents' greatest sorrow, but they can rest in that sorrow in God's sovereignty and marvel at his works. Parents take comfort that God gives and God withholds, that he has mercy on whom he will have mercy and whom he will he hardens. Blessed be the name of Jehovah. It is of God who gives wisdom according to his eternal and sovereign good pleasure in the line of believers and their seed.

By faith in God's promise, the mother and the father use the rod and reproof. The use of the rod and reproof is a matter of faith or unbelief. Do the parents believe the word of God that the rod and reproof give wisdom? Do they instead believe the lie of the world, Satan, unbelieving psychologists, and their own flesh that the rod and reproof will injure the child and turn him into an

unfeeling monster? It is a matter of faith in the word of God and his promise or unbelief in that word and promise and listening to the word of man, listening to one's own flesh and one's own natural desires.

For this is also God's fact in the covenant: "A child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame." The text says "mother" not because it is only mothers who are brought to shame, but because it is mothers who are frequently at fault for excessive indulgence, just as fathers are frequently at fault for excessive severity. The fault in view in the text is indulgence by a failure to use the rod and reproof. Leave the child alone, and he will bring his mother to shame.

Further, the text says "mother" because in their most formative years, children are with their mothers far more than they are with their fathers, so that, to change the saying, the hand that rocks the cradle has an enormous influence in the raising of children. God honors the Christian mother here by recognizing the honorable place that he gave to her in the rearing of his children.

The text also exposes the pretension of the mother—parent—who unbelievably rejects this word of God. "It is not loving," she says, "to use the rod and reproof." Perhaps she maligns that as barbaric, old-fashioned, and ineffective. Perhaps she is not so obviously unchristian in her approach to discipline, but she reads many Bible verses to her children, though she never picks up the rod. Perhaps she fights the discipline of her husband and sows dissension in the house. He is always the discipliner; she is always the comforter, and she never tells her children that they got what they had coming to them. The text says that the mother—parent—who will not use the rod and reproof abandons her child. She does the same thing as those mothers who in the old days had babies and left them on a hillside to die. She preens herself as a very good mother; but she is, in fact, no better than if she would abandon the child on a hillside or send the child out of her house to fend for himself on the streets. A mother who abandons her child certainly does not love that child.

And God is not mocked. What you sow is what you reap. The child shall bring the mother to shame. The parent says, "I will use only reproof and not the rod." That child will bring his mother to shame. The parent says, "I will use only the rod and no reproof," so that the whole upbringing of the child is virtually only the rod. That child will bring his mother to shame. The mother says, "I will not use the rod," and like Eli she does not restrain her children.

Understand that shame is the judgment of God upon the parent's unbelief. It is understandable, of course, that a foolish child left to himself lives foolishly and embarrasses his mother. But there is more. Inasmuch as the giving of wisdom is the work of God, so the foolish child is

likewise the judgment of God upon the parent who did not receive God's word and left that child to himself.

This is not a word directed against the parent for every foolish child. Surely there is the foolish child, the child of the flesh, the Esau in the covenant, who despite all instruction, the rod, and reproof carries on his wicked course of life and is destroyed. Rather, this is the word of God to the parent who left the child alone, who did not administer the rod and reproof because she thought she had a better way. She does not believe God's word; she supposes herself to be wiser than God; she trusts her own wisdom and not God's word; or she indulges her own natural love for the child. That will bring her to shame.

The idea of "bringeth his mother to shame" is a kind of public disgrace by events that turn out differently than

expected. What goes on in the home is by and large hid from the eyes of fellow saints. The mother did not believe that her poor child needed all that reproof and discipline. She indulged him. She ignored and tolerated his tantrums, his demands, his disobedience, and his rebellion. Oh, probably not entirely! Maybe, like Eli, she gave him a good talking-to or a timeout, read a Bible passage to him, told him that he really had to think about what he did, or gave him what he wanted to make him be quiet. But she never laid hold on him as though God himself came to that child through her in righteous anger and offense at the child's rebellion. And what goes on in the home is revealed through the child. The foolish child exposes the foolish mother—parent—who did not believe God's wisdom and God's facts in the covenant.

—NJL

## FROM THE EDITOR

Summer is in full swing, and the writing staff and copy editors of *Sword and Shield* have been hard at work to put into your hands another edifying issue. Perhaps you will read it on the beach, by the pool, or in the comfort of your favorite chair in the refreshing cool of the air conditioning. Wherever you choose to read the magazine, we trust that you will find that this issue is full of useful, informative, and edifying Reformed material to soothe the soul, to sharpen the mind, and to refresh the spirit. This editor is back from a brief break; and in preparation for the upcoming school year, I wrote a meditation on the profit of good discipline in the raising of our covenant seed.

The editorial is a kind of meditation as well concerning the state of the leadership in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) in light of her recent synodical decision that makes official dogma in the PRC that good works of obedience to the law of God contribute to the believer's assurance of his justification. The decision is a naked denial of justification by faith alone and another step on the road of the PRC, now deeply set and well developed in apostasy from the truth of the Reformed faith. I have it on good authority that one of the ministers involved in the decision went home and had the temerity to preach to his congregation that the people should not trust in their works. I wonder if anyone laughed! Which is it? No doubt, the decision was a whore's or a dog's offering, which are an abomination to the Lord (Deut. 23:18).

Having prostituted himself on the altar of the PRC, that minister had a guilty conscience. His words were also just so many more good words and fair speeches to deceive the simple (Rom. 16:18). Maybe some people of God yet in the PRC will finally at this late and terrible hour in the destruction of that Jerusalem come out for the salvation of their souls and those of their children.

Reverend Bomers concludes his analysis of what happened at Zion, the now-disbanded congregation in Yucaipa, California. Reverend Bomers also has a contribution titled "But What Does God Require?" Mr. Garrett Varner is finishing his treatment of Christ's beatitudes with an explanation of the blessed peacemakers. Mr. Earl Kamps, a seminarian in the Reformed Protestant Churches who has recently started an internship for the summer and fall, gives us an edifying piece on the Holy Spirit. Reverend Pascual, minister in First Orthodox Reformed Protestant Church in the Philippines, explains in his rubric what happened in the Protestant Reformed Churches in the Philippines (PRCP) during the doctrinal controversy in the PRC and in the withdrawal of the Bulacan congregation from the PRCP. We welcome his articles as a help to our readers in getting to know the goings-on in the Philippines a little better and thus to acquaint us with our brothers and sisters in First Orthodox Reformed Protestant Church.

Enjoy!

—NJL



## A SNARE ON MIZPAH

### *A Failure of Leadership*

The title of this article is taken from Hosea 5:1–2:

1. Hear ye this, O priests; and hearken, ye house of Israel; and give ye ear, O house of the king; for judgment is toward you, because ye have been a snare on Mizpah, and a net spread upon Tabor.
2. And the revolvers are profound to make slaughter, though I have been a rebuker of them all.

The occasion for this editorial is recent decisions of Synod 2024 of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). The truth of these verses applies to these decisions, the men of that synod, and the denomination that the synod represented.

Through the prophet Hosea, God prosecutes his case against apostate Israel. At first God dealt mainly with the infection that had plagued the whole nation. If we are to characterize the infection that plagues the whole Protestant Reformed denomination, then we must say that she is inebriated on the doctrine of man. She cannot get enough of man and man's works and man's abilities. If we are to characterize the recent synodical decisions that are the occasion for this article, we must characterize them in the same way: man! Do not slight man! Do not slight man's works!

Earlier during the prophet's exposure of the people, God had addressed the false prophets and the alien priests only in passing in order to blame them for the failure of the people and to let the false prophets and the alien priests know that they had not escaped the Lord's notice and that he would hold them accountable. They were the proverbial wicked judges in the earth. Now, however, in Hosea 5:1–2 God through the prophet turns on the leaders in full fury and notices the people only in passing in order to show what the leadership of these men had begotten.

The state of the church is the result of her leadership. In this text God through Hosea addresses the people—the house of Israel—to show them who their leaders are and that those leaders have not escaped God's notice. But his main address is focused on the leadership of the nation of Israel, upon whom he lays the blame for Israel's apostasy from him and the people's stubborn pursuit of their own evil doctrine and way of life.

The apostasy of the church of Christ from Jehovah God is to be blamed on the leadership. God put the

leaders in positions of authority and gave to them the calling to lead. God lifted the leaders up and gave to them from the height of their offices a viewpoint or vantage point from which they are to warn, exhort, and rebuke with all longsuffering, so that by these means God saves his elect people.

And in that calling to lead, God gave specific instructions to the leaders about how they are to lead and what they are called to do in that leadership. It is not up to them to decide what good leadership is. God defines and has defined what good leadership looks like, what good leadership is, what failure in the leadership is, and when there is failure in the leadership. When there is failure and apostasy in the leadership, then that has its inevitable fruit of the apostasy of the church. The church cannot go in a different direction than the men in positions of leadership. Thus also in the text God directly and pointedly puts the blame for the church's departure on the leadership.

God through Hosea begins his accusation of the leaders of Israel by a characterization of all their work. Ungodly men in positions of leadership when the church is apostatizing preen themselves on their abilities as leaders and on their great wisdom to know what is and what is not good for the church. It is very natural to man to suppose that he is what he is not. So the priests and princes of Israel prided themselves on their abilities as leaders. They were wise; they were looking out for the best interests of the church; they were concerned for the church's holiness; and especially they were concerned for the peace and unity of the church. Thus they had presented themselves and demanded that the church follow them.

Those men would have become very angry if someone had told them that they were unwise and wicked. And God does exactly that in Hosea 5:1–2. He says, as it were, to the priests and princes, "All your leadership—indeed your whole existence in and involvement with the work in the church—is a snare and a net by which many people are captured by all manner of evil and are led down to hell." This is the main thought of these verses: the leaders, the very best of them and the most highly praised of them, are snares and nets by which men are destroyed. Instead of being the instruments to save men, they are the instruments for men's destruction.

Understand that Jehovah addresses by means of the prophet all Israel as Israel is represented in her heads.

Jehovah's main rebuke here is not addressed to the people as such. We would say that his main rebuke is not addressed to the man in the pew. The man in the pew the Lord calls to have a seat in the Lord's judgment, to listen in and pay attention to the Lord's accusation against the leaders.

Into that judgment Jehovah arraigns the priests and the household of the king, or the princes and all the king's counselors. Jehovah addresses them as they have led Israel astray, so that the current state of Israel is the result of their leadership and decisions. God deals with the church corporately. The judgment of God falls on the whole church when there is sin and iniquity. And yet the leadership is particularly to blame. If a household is full of iniquity, the judgment of God does not spare the children; nevertheless, God particularly blames the father and the mother. So here God says to all the people that they must listen to him, yet his focus is on the leadership of the nation.

When God says "priests," he means the false priests of the calves. They were not priests. They were rebellious and revolters from God. But he calls them priests according to their own confessions and according to the honor that the people gave to them. The people called those intruders into the office—the false, deceptive, and lying men—ministers, and so God deals with them according to the office that they held in the nation. And God addresses them as priests, as those who were charged by God to instruct. According to the law the priests' lips should drop knowledge. And the priests were charged particularly with warning everyone about transgressions of the law. When someone had transgressed the law, the priest was to make a sacrifice for him, to make intercession for him, and to assure him of the forgiveness of his sins for the sake of the Lamb that was slain. The priests were to be concerned with the law of God. The task of the priests was to condemn and convict of sin by means of the law, and they were preciously and gloriously tasked with justifying believers from that condemnation of the law. Further, the priests were to point believers to the fruits of thankfulness that they were to render for all God's benefits unto them. The priests were to seek the glory of God and the salvation of God's people in all things. In a word, the priests were to consecrate God's people to God in the fellowship of the covenant. The priests were charged with bringing God's people to God that they might be his peculiar and special heritage, his dwelling place, and his family. And the priests were to do that especially by justifying the people through the sacrifices of Christ from all those things that they could not be justified from in the law.

When Jehovah through the prophet speaks of the priests, then he means the ministers of the word. Hear, O ministers of the word, who were charged by God with both the government of the church and especially with preaching the word of the gospel that reveals the

righteousness of Christ, so that he who is just by faith shall live! Listen up, O people, as God shows you who your ministers are.

And right along with the priests went the princes. God calls them "the house of the king." This refers to the whole entourage of the king and includes all the mechanisms, meetings, and functions of government. The princes too were false, and the whole kingship was an instrument of rebellion against God and Christ, God's Son. The princes had rejected Christ and made themselves lords over God's heritage. And the people accorded those displacers of Christ all sorts of honors. Thus God addresses them as princes, calling them the king's household. They were the overseers in the church. They too had been charged with seeing to it that the word of God was not despised and that God received all the glory in the church. In the language of the Old Testament, they were watchmen. In the language of the New Testament, they were to watch out for wolves, especially those who would come out of their own midst. In the language of the Reformed Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons, the princes are to guard the purity of doctrine and to caution every one against his ruin. They represent, in short, the government of the church with its consistories, classes, synods, committees, and all the decisions that are taken and made in that capacity as rulers of the church.

### *A Terrible Charge*

God's charge is that the leadership of Israel, the church, was "a snare on Mizpah, and a net spread upon Tabor." Tabor and Mizpah were place names. Tabor and Mizpah were mountains or mountainous places. Mizpah means to watch. It was the place in Gilead where Jacob and Laban made their covenant that the Lord would watch while they were apart and that they would never pass that place with the intention to harm the other. But the key word is *watch*. Mizpah was a lookout, a high place, from which one had a commanding view of the whole country of Gilead. Gilead was the rich pastureland on the east side of the Jordan River, a place well worth defending. Tabor was the strategic hill in the Jezreel plain. Tabor was a high and distinct conical mountain that arose strikingly from the surrounding plain. Barak had holed up in Tabor before he defeated Sisera. If one controlled Tabor, he controlled the Jezreel plain; and if one controlled the Jezreel plain, he basically controlled the west side of the Jordan River and any travel to the north and south. Tabor was strategic for the defense of the whole promised land.

In mentioning Tabor and Mizpah, the Lord says, as it were, to the priests and the king's household, "I set you in a high and strategic place for the purpose that you watch over all Israel and keep Israel safe, so that you be the instruments for the salvation of my people and the glory of my

name. You are to watch, and you are to warn of any danger. You have a controlling view of all the people, and the whole nation is before you. You are to be vigilant watchmen.”

But the priests and princes were not diligent watchmen, so Jehovah accuses them of being “a snare upon Mizpah, and a net spread upon Tabor.” A snare is a trap for catching animals, and a net refers to netting or mesh in which little birds are captured. The priests and princes were not consecrated to the glory of God. They were not instruments to save men, but they were a snare and a net: instruments for the destruction of men. Instead of warning the people of danger, they ensnared them and trapped them. Understand that Jehovah is saying that the officebearers—the ministers, the elders, the deacons, and the professors of theology—were not watchmen. They did not instruct, correct, rebuke, and warn. They trapped and ensnared the people. The officebearers were not watchers for souls. They were hunters of souls. They hunted men; they made sport of the ministry and their offices to hunt and to capture souls.

And they did so to keep those souls.

And do not miss the point that Jehovah does not say merely that those men put snares in the people’s way and spread nets upon Tabor, but he says also that *those men were* together and in conspiracy with one another a snare and a net. In their very existences in the church; in the very ways in which they thought, talked, preached, worked, and wrote; in all that they were and in all that they did, they were collectively and in league together a snare and a net. One could not be around them without being ensnared, and one could not go near them without being entrapped. They were a snare and a net.

They were that in the very high and lofty places that God had given to them. It is one thing if a man has no position or influence. Very few will be ensnared and entrapped. But those men were a snare upon Mizpah and a net spread upon Tabor. They used the very voices, the offices, the positions, and the influence that God had given to them to trap and to ensnare men.

And God says to Israel to listen up that the people might know with whom they were dealing. They had as their officebearers—their priests, their elders, and their ministers—men who were a trap and a snare for the destruction of the whole nation.

And there is something sinister in Jehovah’s description of the officebearers as a snare and a trap, and at the same time there is something pitiful in the people who were led by such men. It is the mercy of Jehovah to so point them out to the people. The sinister thing about the men is that they did this deliberately. They had an agenda. They were hunters who deliberately set out and set their traps. That description of them describes the subtilty of their work too. They were devious; they were subtle; they were crafty; they were intentional. The hunter goes to hunt

and to capture; he is intent on his prey; his thoughts are how to catch the prey and how to make sure the prey does not escape. And the people are taken as wild birds or as wild beasts. The people hardly see what is coming. They are trapped, and before they know it, they are damned.

When the minister sees the doctrinal error that threatens the church and he hears in that the judgment of God knocking, but the minister does not expose the error or fight against it and instead writes about the exact opposite error, then he is a snare and a net. For example, if the error is about justification, then the minister writes that the error is antinomianism. Or, while men are denying the grace and sovereignty of God, the minister writes that the trouble is that men do not do enough good works. He is a snare on Mizpah and a net spread upon Tabor. When a minister labors with might and mien to talk straight false doctrine, then he is a snare on Mizpah and a net spread upon Tabor. When the elders will not take false doctrine and heresy into hand—they will not condemn those who teach false doctrine and remove them from the ministry for their wicked doctrine, but the elders excuse the false doctrine—they are a snare on Mizpah and a net spread upon Tabor. When a minister teaches false doctrine and he does so to test the waters to see what he can get away with, then he is a snare on Mizpah and a net spread upon Tabor. When the minister—who is charged to preach the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ for the justification of God’s people so that the one who is righteous by faith lives—displaces Christ and corrupts the truth of justification, then he is in his very existence in the church a snare and a net for the destruction of men’s souls.

And when God’s people finally flee the destruction to come, then the elders who come to talk straight the dreadful situation in the church and to dissuade the people from leaving by making excuses for the evil or giving false assurances that the elders are going to labor to make things right are a snare on Mizpah and a net spread upon Tabor.

When apostasy takes root in the church, then that did not come out of nowhere. That is not the result of one unfortunate error or several unfortunate errors on the part of some ministers. That is the work of men who lived and worked in the offices as hunters of men instead of as pastors of souls.

But even more, God is the hunter who set his snares and his traps. In God’s anger and as judgment, he gave that church men who would ensnare the people and destroy them rather than to warn them and save them. These are men by whom God is judging the church that did not please him and judging a people to whom he did not give the love of the truth so that they might be damned. These men cannot be anything else. They might say, “But I am going to work hard to save souls.” They are nets and snares and cannot be anything else. In all their

efforts to save souls, they destroy souls. Men use their high and lofty positions to capture men and souls and to entangle them in an error from which they cannot be extracted apart from the grace of God.

### *Personal Wickedness*

The men in office are nets and snares because they personally are wicked. Are they good and spiritual but misguided men? Are they right and honorable but mistaken men? No, they are wicked men. They demonstrate that by the very activity of entangling souls in their false doctrine. The hunter is intentional in what he sets about to do. He does his work with all the skill he can muster.

Those men in Israel were intentional in what they did. They deliberately corrupted their offices; they used all the power of their positions and persuasion in writing, speaking, and ruling to ensnare men and to trap them in a net from which they could not escape.

God does not identify the officebearers' motivations for trapping and ensnaring the people. Undoubtedly, many motives were involved in their actions. The motives were idolatry, outward adherence to the nation of Israel, addiction to their self-chosen lifestyles, and love for their free and easy lives. They tried anything and everything to ensnare the people in the false doctrine and false worship of the calves. There even may have been something to the suggestion of one commentator who said that the priests and princes used fear and intimidation to keep men from going up to Jerusalem and to the worship of God in the temple. Those officebearers tried with all their might so that the people did not go to Jerusalem and thus that they would not go to Christ and to worship God in the temple.

Undoubtedly, there was a strong element of self-preservation. This was one of the reasons that Jeroboam made the golden calves at Dan and at Bethel. He understood that if the people went up to Jerusalem, then they would soon return to David. Jeroboam then would be revealed as the rebel and an imposter and a wicked man, and the people would kill him. And so too those ministers, elders, deacons, and professors of theology whom God calls priests and princes had a strong element of self-preservation in what they did. They had to trap the people because if all the people left and returned to David, all the officebearers' means of support, all their honor, and all their positions would disappear, and that they would not tolerate. They had to snare the people not only because the princes and priests *were* snares and nets but also because that was the only way they could retain their honor, their livelihoods, and their positions. If the people left, the priests and princes would be exposed as frauds, imposters, and ungodly men.

When a doctrinal controversy comes into the church, the snares and the nets must be spread. The controversy

must be downplayed. The good must be called evil and the evil called good. The lie must be promoted as the truth and the truth rejected as the lie. Cunning and crafty words must be used, whereby men lie in wait to deceive. Smooth and oily words must be employed to mollify concerned spirits. Good words and fair speeches must be used to deceive the hearts of the simple. In those activities the men are revealed to be exactly what God calls them: a snare and a net.

God not only accuses and exposes the priests and princes, but he also gives the deep and underlying cause of their behavior in the church when he says, "Though I have been a rebuker of them all." God was in his church. God worked in his church by his word. God was to preach through the priests. God was to rule by the princes. God was to rebuke and to instruct and to correct by those means. God was. God rebuked. God rebuked in his word. God rebuked by the prophets. God rebuked by applying that word to his people's hearts. The priests and princes worked for God, and as such they were supposed to be God's visible representatives and to defend his glory and honor. But they served themselves. They would not suffer God to rule in his own church. They would manage the church. They would tell everyone what was wise, what was best, and the way forward. They would not do this from the word of God but by their own means and by being wise in their own conceits.

Understand that God says not only that he *was supposed* to be the rebuker of them all, but also that he *was* the rebuker of them all. God was the rebuker of them all. He did not leave himself without a witness. He rose up early, and he instructed them. The charge against the priests and princes becomes even more grotesque and their own wickedness becomes more vile when we understand that though those men were not bringing the word, God did bring the word. He brought the word by the mouths of his servants, the prophets. Hearing that word and understanding that word—perhaps better than any others, for God had given the priests and princes their high places—they fought against that word and labored to steal it from the people. The prophets came preaching, and at their Sunday coffees, ministers' lunches, and officebearers' conferences; in their studies; in their emails, letters, sermons, and speeches; in their decisions in consistory meetings, classes, and synods; and in all that they did and said, the priests and princes labored deceptively to steal the word away from the people. The entire message of the priests and princes over against the rebuke of God was that it was not the rebuke of God. Their word to the people over against the word of God that had come to them was that it was not the word of God. And they hardened the people not only in the people's sins but also against the word of God. The priests and princes ruled by their whims and commandments, and they justified them all with a Bible text, a neat turn of phrase, or a

captivating or an intimidating demeanor. But they would rule. God would not rule.

### *A Sure Judgment*

That is why the church can only be ruled by the word. It is the word of Christ alone, or it is rule by hunters of men. You have the word of Christ alone, and you have a faithful church. And that word of God keeps and saves the church. Or you have rule by these kinds of fowlers and hunters of souls, and you have apostasy as the result, and many are destroyed by these instruments of destruction.

For with their deceitful existences and cunningly crafty words, whereby they lie in wait to deceive, the hunters and fowlers turn the church of God into a slaughterhouse of souls. So God says, “The revolters are profound to make slaughter.” God calls the whole lot of them “revolters.” They are rebels from God and his word. They are a pack of rebels against the word of God, and in their rebellion they make a slaughter of souls, generations, whole churches, and denominations.

The word “slaughter” can mean sacrifices. And more pointedly what God does in his accusations of these men and their deceitful behaviors in the church is to take aim at their doctrine. That is the test of whether you are dealing in the church with a pack of fowlers and hunters who are a snare and net in their offices, or whether you have God come to you through a minister of his word. Doctrine is the test. God is aiming at their doctrine. If one had called those men wicked, then the whole nation of Israel would have risen in defense of them to say how holy they were and what great pastors and teachers and ministers they were and what good elders they showed themselves to be. But God says that all their sacrifices are a great slaughter when men who are ensnared by them are destroyed. God points out that all their religion; all their sermons, speeches, and articles; and all their professions of love for the church—let us just say all their piety, all that one heard coming from them that sounded religious—was a net to capture men. And they did not make sacrifices in which men were justified through the justifying blood of Jesus Christ, but denying that they turned the church into a butcher house in which souls were slaughtered.

And this slaughter the priests and princes made large—“profound.” Far and away the majority of Israel was carried away with those men’s deceptive presence, their false piety, and their fake religion. Many were deceived. Many simply followed the crowd like a flock of birds driven into the net. And such was the power of those men, that if it were possible all Israel would have been ensnared and destroyed by them.

But such is not the will of God.

For the corruption of their offices, for their ensnaring of men, and for their destruction of souls, they will have

their judgment. God does not suffer them to continue in wickedness until they have swallowed up all his people. He says, “There is judgment to you, O priests, and to you, O princes, because you have been a snare on Mizpah and a net spread upon Tabor. You used your high and lofty positions to ensnare men in your own errors.” The priests and princes were supposed to judge righteously according to the law; they were supposed to uphold the law and instruct in it; they were by sacrifices to justify men from the law through the blood of Christ. They were to point men away from their works to the mercy of God, who promised a sacrifice for sin. The priests and princes were supposed to be the instruments of men’s salvation, but they were instruments for men’s damnation. And they will destroy. Many will follow the pernicious ways of the priests and princes, by whom the way of truth will be evil spoken of. And they will be judged. They and the people whom they snared will be destroyed.

For his people God will cut a hole in the net, so that they will be like little birds that escape free. God will. Such was the power, such was the danger, of these men, and such was their cunning craftiness that if it were possible the very elect would be deceived. Unless God cut a hole in the net, all Israel would have perished under the leadership of those men. God does not will that his people are forever enslaved and so held captive by these snares and nets. And so we stand here today.

### *Thoroughly Apostate*

The truth of Hosea 5:1–2 applies to the recent Synod 2024 of the now thoroughly apostate denomination of the Protestant Reformed Churches. The thorough apostasy of the denomination is evident in the recent decision that she took in the doctrinal case involving the false teacher, Rev. Kenneth Koole. Kenneth Koole had been weakly and ineffectually charged with the sin of false doctrine by the consistory of Grandville Protestant Reformed Church for teaching that there is that which a man must do to be saved, that good works contribute to the possession of one’s salvation, and that good works likewise contribute to the assuring of souls of their justification. The case finally came to the Protestant Reformed synod. The recent synodical decision is the naked denial of the doctrinal truth of justification by faith alone, and as such the decision is the evidence yet again, if more evidence were needed, that the ministers of the PRC along with the other officebearers, the lot of them, in cahoots together, are a snare and a net. The men who wrote the advice, put their names to it, and brought the advice to the floor of synod and the men who voted for it are enemies of the gospel of grace and deniers of the truth of justification by faith alone. The church that adopted the committee’s advice is false, and the people

who stay in that church will be destroyed by the lie, having been ensnared by these men.

Committee three of pre-advice took nine pages to say in effect that there is not that which man must do to be saved, but in fact there is that which man must do to be saved; good works do not contribute to the possession of salvation, but good works do contribute to the possession of salvation. One can hardly believe that seemingly intelligent men adopted and presented to synod such a piece of wicked nonsense. One would be inclined to write off the advice as a farce. But the men at synod were serious.

The first piece of advice was to reject the appeals of three appellants against the February decision of the Protestant Reformed Classis East, which had ruled that the consistory of Grandville church had “erred when they made a judgment that Rev. Ken Koole was guilty of the public sin of teaching false doctrine *without proving this from Scripture or the Confessions*.”<sup>1</sup> The point was not that Grandville’s consistory did not appeal to scripture and the confessions absolutely, as though the consistory had high-handedly sucked its judgment of Rev. Ken Koole out of its thumb. But the point was that the decisions of Synod 2018, to which Grandville did refer, are not equivalent to proof from scripture and the confessions. The advice read,

Although Grandville does use the decisions of Synod 2018 in its judgment, which decisions made reference to Scripture and the confessions, the decisions of Synod 2018 are not the equivalent of biblical and confessional proof. (1)

No one is arguing that the decisions of a synod are equivalent to scripture and the confessions. What Grandville did was to show how the decisions of Synod 2018 applied in the Koole case and thus that the biblical and confessional foundation of the decisions applied in that case. This is all very simple and clear to men who are not hell-bent on saving the retirement and the reputation of a false teacher. Because, remember, there cannot be false teachers in the PRC. No. No.

Then the advice continued and gave this rich piece of nonsense:

A minister is certainly called to “live up to” the decisions of Synod; his failure to do so would make him liable to the charge of schism or a charge of false teaching, but that charge of false teaching would have to be grounded in Scripture and the confessions. (1–2)

What this piece of hocus-pocus did was to make the supposedly settled and binding decisions of the PRC worthless. Every case must be tried and argued anew from scripture or the confessions. The synod created the condition in which false teachers and their teachings flourish. Then the committee also lied when it said that if a minister does not live up to a decision of synod, he makes himself liable to the charge of false doctrine. If a synodical decision cannot be the ground of a minister’s condemnation, then he will never be charged based on that decision. For all her shouting about settled and binding, the PRC’s official decisions are dead letters, including the decisions of Synod 2024.

But the reality of committee three’s advice according to Hosea 5:1–2 is far worse. The advice was the work of those who, as judgments from God, in their entire existences and in all that they do in the church, are a snare and a net to hunt, capture, and destroy the souls of men by entrenching them in believing the lie, so that they who receive not the love of the truth might be damned. The advice—the whole thing—was doublespeak and deception. Under the appearance of right, the office-bearers at synod did the wrong. Under the appearance of truth, they promoted the lie. The ministers who were involved in bringing the recommendation to the floor—Rev. Joshua Engelsma, Rev. Daniel Holstege, Prof. Cory Griess, and Prof. Brian Huizinga—have shown themselves by this piece of advice to be adept at ensnaring and entrapping men. They made the show that they want the gospel of salvation by grace alone. But their show was empty, and in the end their show was deceiving, ensnaring, and damning. Cunningly and with crafty words, they insinuated the lie into the minds of men and presented it as the truth. Appearing to defend the truth, they promoted the lie. Appearing to desire the salvation of the church, they will be for the damnation of many. Employing smooth words and fair speeches, they deceived the simple.

### *Tricky Words*

Their lie could not be more serious. Their sacrifice—their doctrine—is a charnel house of souls. For that doctrine is the wicked doctrine of justification by faith and works.

The second piece of advice was the following:

That synod sustain the appeal of Grandville PRC consistory regarding Statement #1 (“Scripture teaches that something must be done that we may be saved”) and make the judgment that: a) Statement #1 by itself is erroneous, and b) Rev.

1 Rev. D. Holstege, Rev. J. Engelsma, Elder Rick Gritters, Elder Jeff Krosschell, Prof. C. Griess, Prof. B. Huizinga, “Synod 2024—Committee 3 Advice,” II. Recommendations, 1. Page numbers for subsequent quotations of committee three’s advice as presented to synod are given in text.

Koole's explanation and use of Statement #1 was erroneous. (2)<sup>2</sup>

The men at synod do not believe this advice.

The fact is that every minister in the PRC subscribes to Koole's explanation of Acts 16:30–31 regarding the Philippian jailor, who asked the apostles in prison, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." Koole applied the phrase "if a man would be saved, there is that which he *must* do" first to *faith*.<sup>3</sup> He wrote that in October 2018 with the approval of all the ministers who defended the idea that there *is* a sense in which one can say that faith is what man must do to be saved. They supported Koole all the while he savaged Herman Hoeksema's exegesis of the same passage, in which he taught that when the apostles said to the jailor, "Believe," that meant do nothing because that is what faith is in its very nature. Faith is passive in the reception of salvation. The theology of Koole that faith is what man must do to be saved lurked behind the committee's piece of advice too. In response to Koole's contention that "when the Word is preached, there must be a response...in a positive, submissive, obedient way...a 'responding' to the word in a willing, active manner," the committee wrote that this does not refer to works but "is the call to faith" (3–4). Faith is man's willing, obedient, active response to the call of the gospel. Grandville's consistory itself, for all its categorical denials that there is something that man must do to be saved, allowed for Koole's teaching that faith is that which man must do to be saved—by grace, of course. It was categorically an uncategorical denial. The advice did not even address this crucial issue that was staring the men in the face. If the statement "if a man would be saved, there is that which he *must* do" is erroneous in itself, then what of the regnant teaching in the PRC that *faith*—by grace, of course—is what man must do to be saved?

What Koole did later was to develop that theology with perfect logic and apply it to works. The call of the gospel is repent and believe. If there must be a response to the gospel, and if in that response to the gospel a man may teach that faith is what man must do to be saved, then it follows, indeed, is demanded, that repentance—works—are what man must likewise do to be saved.

And the men on the committee, too, showed that they do not believe what they said, for they added a bunch of useless twaddle:

While Reformed theologians hundreds of years ago used language similar to this and carefully

clarified and explained it in an orthodox manner...the statement as such without explanation and qualification should be rejected and not used. (3)

Here the men on the committee, who a few sentences ago had proposed that the statement by itself is erroneous, showed that they did not mean that the statement as such is erroneous. They meant that there can be a proper explanation and qualification. What could possibly be the explanation and qualification that would allow the phrase to be used? Is it erroneous as such or not? It is erroneous as such. Scripture does not teach that there is that which man must do to be saved. Faith is not what man does to be saved. Repentance is not what man does to be saved. Good works are not what man does to be saved. Scripture, in fact, in its answer to the question, what must a man do to be saved? categorically denies that there is anything that a man must do. Scripture does this when its answer to the question is to believe! That believing is the work and doing of God, who works in his elect both to will and to do of his good pleasure and all things in all.

Further, when the men on the committee were dealing with Koole's explanation of the phrase that there is that which man must do to be saved in its relationship to works, they made a distinction without a difference. Koole wrote that good works are necessary to have "the personal experience of one's own salvation and one's enjoyment of it" (3). This is what he meant by the "'possession' of salvation." The committee condemned Reverend Koole for writing that and then distinguished Koole's position from the committee's: "Our personal enjoyment of salvation is received by faith and enjoyed in the way of the good works which are the fruit of true faith" (4).

What? Koole wrote that good works are necessary to have "the personal experience of one's own salvation." The committee said nothing different. The men just sugar-coated their poison pill with the phrase "in the way of good works." Koole wrote nothing different, as the committee admitted when it said, "Rev. Koole appealed... to the language of 'in the way of.'" There is no difference between these two positions at all. What Protestant Reformed lay person, let alone a Protestant Reformed clergyman, can possibly distinguish the two positions? The clergy and people cannot distinguish the two positions because there is no difference. The committee said that the personal enjoyment of salvation comes in the way of good works. Reverend Koole wrote that good works are necessary for the personal experience of salvation. The point of both is that without good works of obedience to

2 For a close analysis of the three statements considered by the Protestant Reformed Synod 2024, see Nathan J. Langerak, "Christ on Trial," *Sword and Shield* 4, no. 11 (March 2024): 10–14.

3 Kenneth Koole, "What Must I Do...?," *Standard Bearer* 95, no. 1 (October 1, 2018): 6–9.

the law there is no enjoyment or experience of salvation. Faith is not enough. Christ is not enough. God's election is not enough. But one must also obey!

But the committee, seeming to slam the door shut on the idea that there is that which man must do to be saved, in fact, left the door open a crack. The trickers, they must have had something up their sleeves.

### *Subterfuge*

The third piece of advice was the following:

That synod sustain the appeal of Grandville PRC consistory regarding Statement #2 (“We must accurately distinguish between a right to life and the possession of life. The former must be assigned to the obedience of Christ, that all the values of our holiness may be entirely excluded. But certainly, our works, or rather these, which the Spirit of Christ worketh in us, and by us, contribute something to the latter”)... (4)

The synod judged statement two to be erroneous.

It is important to note for future reference that the committee in its rejection of the statement latched onto the word “contribute.” The committee defined the word as to “give...in order to help achieve or provide something” and to “help to cause or bring about” (4). The main point was that it is very bad in the PRC to say that good works *contribute* to the possession of life. Note well that the advice did not say that good works do not contribute at all. In fact, the committee found that good works do *contribute* if that contribution is, of course, carefully defined:

Rev. Koole's explanation of the language “contributes to” as referring to the “various ways God is pleased to bring manifold blessings...to self and others,” was not erroneous doctrinally. (5)

So good works do not contribute to the possession of salvation, but good works do contribute something—by grace, of course. Many blessings come by the contribution of good works. According to the committee's definition of “contribute,” good works help to cause those blessings, to bring about those blessings, and to help achieve and provide for those blessings. Good works do not have a “place of contribution to some element of our salvation,” but it is orthodox to explain that good works contribute something (5).

The jokers, they must have had a trick to play yet.

In the fourth piece of advice, we catch the tricksters in their legerdemain when they advised this:

That synod not sustain the appeal of Grandville PRC consistory regarding Statement #3 (“Hence,

I conclude, that sanctification and its effects, are by no means to be slighted, when we treat of assuring the soul as to its justification”). (6)

There is not that which man must do for salvation, but there is that which he must do.

Good works do not contribute to the possession of salvation, but they do. There is one vital aspect of salvation, the possession and enjoyment of salvation, to which good works do contribute. Indeed, good works are *not to be slighted* in considering that contribution. That one vital aspect of the possession and enjoyment of salvation to which good works do contribute is the assurance of justification. And make no mistake: the assurance of justification is justification. They are one and the same. Good works contribute to justification. Indeed, good works are not to be slighted in this regard.

All the other statements were only so much subterfuge. Here is the prize: good works contribute—help—assure souls of justification!

There is no room for justification by faith alone in the committee's advice. The committee quoted some Bible passages and cited a couple of articles from the creeds, but the committee never harmonized its advice with the clear teaching of the creeds that one is justified by faith alone without works.

Acting like so many unscrupulous defense attorneys throwing up dirt to cast doubt on the obvious guilt of their client, the committee kicked up some possible meanings for the offensive doctrine of statement three. The committee wrote,

Statement #3 could be read as saying that works may serve as a confirmatory evidence to one who already has the assurance of his justification that he is in the faith, and thus that he is justified by faith. (7)

The fact is that this is just a deceptive restatement of what Witsius and Koole wrote clearly. Good works are not to be slighted when assuring souls of justification. Do not worry about slighting the perfect work of Christ. Do not worry about slighting the grace and the glory of God. Do not worry about slighting the work of the Holy Spirit. But do not slight the works of man in assuring souls of justification.

The committee gave all its caveats and warnings about this doctrine, but its doctrine begs the question: If good works are not to be slighted in assuring souls of justification, then how much do the good works contribute to that assurance? And if one has the assurance of his justification, why would he need to find additional assurance in his works? And still more, the men on the committee should know as good church historians that this doctrine of Witsius that Koole resurrected has a history of use. The



doctrine was used to point troubled souls—not assured souls—to their justification, which use only troubled those souls more, except they were unbelievers.

Giving evidence that the men on the committee know all this are their cautions regarding the use of statement three. The committee advised synod, “While this statement is not necessarily in error, we ought to be cautious about how we use it” (7). All their cautions are a joke. Caution regarding the usage of a doctrine is the refuge of heretics everywhere. If you must caution about the use of your doctrine, your doctrine is wicked and a lie. You do not have to caution about the use of the truth. The truth is beautiful and lovely beyond description. The truth is beautiful and as gracious as God himself and as Christ himself. The truth is as lovely and pleasant as the Holy Spirit who teaches truth and comforts men with it. The doctrine of the men on the committee is wicked because they cautioned men about it. Their “truth” is a lie because they warned men about it.

Knowing their doctrine to be a lie, they believe their own lies. Such is God’s judgment of the men of the PRC. Such is the way of God with those who hold the truth down in unrighteousness. Professing themselves to be wise, they become fools, and God darkens their foolish minds. With the heathen they make an idol; and knowing that the idol is not God, they worship the idol as God, and they believe their own lies. In the church they know that their idol god who saves in the way of good works is not God, and they worship that idol god as God.

And these men, who are themselves a snare and a net, have been set by the Hunter, and they have captured souls. I am sure that there might be some handwringing regarding synod’s decisions. There might be a futile bleat here and there. But the handwringers and bleaters will stay in the PRC. When the committee cast its net to ensnare souls, the men made sure to give everyone a little something.

—NJL

## OUR DOCTRINE

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

# WHAT HAPPENED AT ZION? (4): NO COMFORT

## *The Charge*

This article will conclude my response to Mr. Meelker’s letter that he sent to the congregation of the now-disbanded Zion Reformed Protestant Church in Southern California. Having had asserted at the beginning of this series that Mr. Meelker’s letter was nothing but a cloak for his unbelief in the doctrine of sovereign reprobation in the sphere of the covenant as that doctrine was preached from a sermon series on 2 Peter, I also promised to elicit from Mr. Meelker’s own letter three proofs that what he wrote was not in zeal for God’s truth but in hatred of the God of scripture, who makes his eternal counsel and good pleasure very sharp in the second chapter of 2 Peter.

The first evidence of unbelief was Mr. Meelker’s wresting of the profound and holy words of scripture that were preached, so violently twisting them in his letter so as to make them appear perverse and impure.<sup>1</sup> The second evidence of unbelief was Mr. Meelker’s gutting of the doctrine of the antithesis of any real substance, so as to make room for his rejection of the preaching at Zion.<sup>2</sup> In closest connection with his rejection of the truth of the antithesis, Mr. Meelker also cast away any concern for the glory of God, who decreed the antithesis as the way of highest wisdom to magnify his holy name. The third evidence of unbelief remains to be discussed.

This final matter concerns Mr. Meelker’s charge against the pulpit that it brought no word of comfort to

1 Luke Bomers, “What Happened at Zion? (2),” *Sword and Shield* 4, no. 12 (April 2024): 28–33.

2 Luke Bomers, “What Happened at Zion? (3),” *Sword and Shield* 4, no. 13 (May 2024): 28–35.

wearied souls. After having expressed in his letter his disagreement with the pulpit's polemics and antithetical preaching, Mr. Meelker wrote the following:

Many in the congregation feel beaten and are exhausted. Some have cried out to the consistory for help. Others have told the pastor directly. The consistory's response has been this. "The truth hurts. It cuts as a sharp sword, and our flesh needs this cutting. Our flesh doesn't like to be cut but we need it, and if they don't believe it, it is because they don't love the truth!" (This is a paraphrased quote, not verbatim)

Mr. Meelker went on to write,

The consistory knows the pushing of this antithetical view is what is dividing our congregation. What the congregation hears after bringing their grievances is not a word of comfort for their wearied souls. It is not what Isaiah brought to a downcast people. Isaiah 61:1-3 "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; [2] To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; [3] To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified."

Before I proceed to respond to Mr. Meelker's charge, I must first digress and comment on the first excerpt from Mr. Meelker's letter.

On the one hand, the paraphrased quote that Mr. Meelker ascribes to the consistory is substantially accurate. It was I who in the consistory room on December 12, 2023, said something along the lines of "The truth hurts. It cuts as a sharp sword, and our flesh needs this cutting. Our flesh doesn't like to be cut but we need it, and if they don't believe it, it is because they don't love the truth!" Mr. Meelker offers a good paraphrase of what I said, and I stand behind my statement.

On the other hand, in this same excerpt Mr. Meelker woefully misrepresents the circumstances in Zion that preceded this statement in the consistory room. First, even I do not know what he is referring to when he writes that "some" members of Zion cried out to the consistory for help. Is he referring to complaints that the officebearers of Zion received during the family

visitation that began on December 4? If this is what he is referring to, then he must acknowledge that I was not present for those family visits and that I did not receive any reports from those family visits until after his public disagreement with my December 10 sermon. The other possibility is that he refers to private complaints from "some" members of Zion who spoke to him. If this is the case, then Mr. Meelker fails to tell the congregation in his letter that he kept all private complaints against the preaching to himself. He did not bring them up in the consistory room prior to his letter. Second, Mr. Meelker is not correct when he writes that "others have told the pastor directly" that they felt beaten and exhausted. The truth is that there was only one member who talked with me directly, to tell me that my sermon series on 2 Peter was troubling him/her (although he/she also told me that my catechism preaching was comforting). God is witness that these are the facts.

Why does Mr. Meelker construe these events at Zion in such a dishonest way? I could offer my own opinions, but I will let the Lord make this manifest in his day of vindication. And I cease to digress.

The purpose of this final article is to consider Mr. Meelker's charge that the pulpit brought no word of comfort to wearied souls—a most serious charge. In fact, no weightier charge could be leveled against the preaching, for this charge implies one of two things: either there was no comfort ministered to Zion at all because the preaching from her pulpit was the word of a man and not the Word of God, or there was no comfort ministered to specific members in Zion because God, who *did* speak by means of the preaching, did not will that those members be comforted by the preaching. Rather, God willed that those members be hardened and left comfortless. A most serious charge.

If the preaching at Zion was emphatically not the Word of God but the word of a man, then it stands to reason that many in Zion were not comforted but remained wearied, for man is a miserable comforter. Oh, yes, man can communicate thoughts to you through his speech. Oh, yes, man can try to console you if you are downcast. But even if through years of experience that man has built a most credible ethos and possesses an illustrious record of encouraging the most dejected of spirits; even if through years of practice that man has perfected a most appealing pathos and utters inspiring orations; even if through years of study that man can put forward a sound logos and reason with impeccable logic—in the end, when that man speaks a word of comfort to you, it is a word that waits upon your judgment. In the end you will be comforted only if by an act of your own will you assent to his word. In the end your comfort depends on you.

Besides, man can never impart true comfort to you.

Man is a liar, and his idea of comfort is vain. True comfort belongs to what eye has not seen nor ear heard. True comfort belongs to what has not entered the heart to conceive. True comfort is this: that one belongs, body and soul, to his faithful savior Jesus Christ. And no mere man possesses the ability to convince you of such a reality.

If Zion truly heard the word of a man from the pulpit, then there was every reason to protest and to reject what was taught from the pulpit. If Zion heard the word of a man, then her minister was a liar of the worst sort. He came to the pulpit, declaring, "Thus saith the Lord!" but he brought his own private interpretation of scripture. If Zion heard the word of a man, then that minister taught the lie as the truth and corrupted the holy worship of the living God. If Zion heard the word of a man, then that minister continues unrepentantly in his own self-deceit.

But what if that minister preached the truth of God and shunned not to declare unto Zion all the counsel of God? Then what?

Then God spoke by means of that preaching. Then that preaching was emphatically not the word of a man. Then by means of that preaching, the Word himself spoke—the Word who is not an *it* but a *he*; the Word who is ever with God and who is God; the Word by whom all things were made and without whom was not anything made that was made; the Word who called light to be, and light shined out of the darkness; the Word who summoned myriads of creatures to inhabit the heavens and the dry land and the seas, and it was so; the Word who became flesh, suffered the penalty of death for the guilt of his own, arose, and became a living Lord; the Word who comes presently to raise the dead, to summon all moral creatures before his tribunal, and to express God's judgment over all; the Word who sometimes comes in a form that breaks the cedars of Lebanon, who makes the mountains to skip like rams, who shakes the deserts of Kadesh, who causes the hinds to calve, who melts the earth; the Word who at other times comes in the form of a still, small voice and speaks by means of an earthen vessel—weak and beggarly and subject to like passions as you.

Being the personal Son of God, that Word does not speak as a mere man. He called Lazarus to come forth. And that Word to Lazarus did not wait upon Lazarus' judgment. Lazarus did not deliberate within himself whether he would assent to the Word, stand up, and come forth. That Word irresistibly and efficaciously drew Lazarus out of the tomb. And that same incarnate Word ascended to the right hand of majesty. He will soon return on the clouds of glory. He will give his command, and all the dead shall come forth. By the voice of the Word, the sea shall give up those whose ashes were scattered upon her waters, and every grave shall relinquish the body held in its grasp. By that powerful Word every earthly body

shall be changed into the body that is fit for its everlasting state, and none shall resist him. He simply calls into existence what he wills to be done. He raises the dead.

The Word of God never returns to God void. The Word of God is a lively, energetic, powerful, and irresistible voice. The Word of God does not attempt to arouse men's interests by external pokes and prods, but the Word of God is a sword that divides men to their very cores. The Word does not wait for men's judgments. Rather, the Word judges men.

And as a living Lord, he ever lives to speak comfort to his people. Jesus Christ is God's anointed to preach the gospel to the poor. With all power and authority, Jesus Christ heals the brokenhearted, delivers the captives, gives sight to the blind, and sets at liberty those who are bruised. And when Jesus Christ announced these things in Nazareth's synagogue on the Sabbath, declaring, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:21), he did not bear witness of himself, but the Father bore witness of him in heaven.

Therefore, if what was preached at Zion was the Word of God and not the word of man, then the Word from heaven came with comfort for his people. But Mr. Meelker has contradicted him and said, "No comfort."

As the Christ, he always heals and delivers and liberates and fills his people by means of the preaching. But Mr. Meelker has contradicted him and said, "No Christ."

As the resurrected Lord, Jesus forever abides in that most holy sanctuary of heaven to bestow comfort upon his people. But Mr. Meelker has contradicted him and said, "No living Lord." Mr. Meelker has put the Lord back in the grave and has become a resurrection-denier if what was preached was the Word of God and not the word of man.

If the Lord spoke, then Mr. Meelker refused him who speaks. And the epistolist to the Hebrews answers Mr. Meelker and says, "If they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven" (Heb. 12:25).

Let all who left Zion stand before the face of God—stand before the Lord Jesus Christ when he appears corporally and visibly and personally in the glory of God with ten thousands of his holy ones to execute judgment upon all and to convince all who are ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him—and tell Christ, "You did not speak to Zion."

### *A Hard Saying*

"No comfort. Your word gives no comfort to our weary souls." This charge is not the first time the Word of God has been slandered so on earth. This is the same charge that

the multitude of John 6 made against the Lord when they said, “This is an hard saying; who can hear it?” (v. 60).

He who now speaks from heaven had spoken on earth the day before and proclaimed to the multitude, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (v. 51).

The proclamation of comfort!

For those who eat Christ possess the greatest good amid the greatest evil. The greatest evil is sin. And the greatest comfort is Christ, in whom is the forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and immortal life. And he comes from heaven! Just as manna was received not by toil—not by tilling the fields, nor by sowing the ground, nor by picking out the weeds, nor by harvesting the crops, nor by sifting the grains, nor by mashing the grains into meal, nor by forming the bread—but was rained down from the heavens upon Israel, so too the greatest good falls from the sky upon the elect in abundance and is received by faith, by resting in Christ’s satisfaction. Comfort!

But the multitude of John 6 received not that Word of comfort. At the conclusion of the Lord’s sermon, they threw up their hands and declared, “This is a hard saying! You speak to us too bitterly and too harshly. Your words are too rough and too stern. Your doctrine is offensive and intolerable. Who can hear it?” In other words: “No comfort. Your word gives no comfort to our weary souls.”

The day before, this same multitude had been willing to storm the gates of Jerusalem and to seat the Lord upon a throne and to make him their king. The day before, this multitude had said, “This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world” (v. 14).

Unbelief can find the Lord Jesus Christ attractive for a time. Unbelief can behold his mighty works and stand in awe. Unbelief can hear the fame of his name, assemble before him in droves, and mouth his praises. Note that scripture calls this multitude of John 6 “disciples,” disciples who were willing to dissociate from the religion of the scribes and Pharisees for a time. For a time those disciples did not mind the shame of being associated with the Lord.

But because the motive of all their actions proceeded from unbelief and sin, Jesus only seemed good to them so long as he would fulfill their carnal appetites.

The next morning when they found the Lord on the other side of the sea and asked him, “Rabbi, when camest thou hither?” (v. 25), the Word of God spoke, and the Word of God responded by cutting right to the spiritual essence of their question. The Word of God penetrated past the façade of their external discipleship. The Word of God searched out what secret inclinations of their hearts had motivated such a question. The Word of God came to their innermost beings with inscrutable precision and

divine power. And discovering their hearts, the Word of God exposed their carnal desires to their consciences. The Word said, “Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed” (v. 27). In other words: “You only seek me because you want bread. That is not what matters. All that stuff perishes. What you need is everlasting life!”

In an instant that Word of God arrested their consciences and convicted them of sin. Guilt jolted down their spines. Guilt stiffened the hairs on the back of their necks.

And I know what you are thinking: “How silly that those disciples preferred perishing bread over bread that endures unto everlasting life!” But that multitude of John 6 justified themselves over against their own carnality. As poor, they only wanted what sustains an earthly existence. But you have bread coming out of your ears. Today Jesus is good for you so long as he gives you leisure and ease, a fat pocketbook, the wine, and the oil. Today Jesus is good for you so long as he gives you a comfortable family gathering where those who believe the lie can happily sup together with those who believe the truth. At least those disciples only sought a basic earthly need...

But the Word always brings your carnality to light. Like Rachel with Laban, you can sit in your tent and conceal your idols from the eyes of men. But the Word always penetrates past the external veneer of skin and tissue, smiles and tears. The Word always comes to the spiritual heart of the matter. And when you pass under the Word of God, you cannot be left untouched.

If you are a child of God, that Word will humble you. If you are a child of God, that Word will work in you an acknowledgment and confession of your guilt. If you are a child of God, that Word will bring forth in you a cry for forgiveness.

But will unbelief be humbled? Will unbelief acknowledge the testimony of the Word, shut its mouth, and sorrow after a godly sort?

No. Once exposed in its carnality, what does unbelief first do? Unbelief tries to put on a religious front. It was no different for the multitude of John 6. After Jesus had rebuked the people’s carnality, they responded, “What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?” (v. 28). When confronted, unbelief becomes exasperated and vigorously tries to cloak itself in pious speech. And that response of the multitude did not come from fleshy and contrite hearts. That response came from cold and refractory hearts that had just been hardened in their sins. Already they had rejected the Word of God that they heard, and they more emphatically asserted themselves over against the Word that they heard.

Jesus responded to the multitude with irony: “This is

the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent” (v. 29). Marvelous! In kind with their question, Jesus said, “You want works? You want to know what you must do? Here is what work you must do: do *nothing!* Believe on him whom God has sent!”

But the multitude became more flustered in their shame. Not only their carnality but also their false conception of religion had become exposed. And being increasingly hardened against the Word, they dared to demand of the Lord a sign: “What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee?” (v. 30). That question was not asked in simple innocence. The multitude dared ask the Lord to prove himself and to prove the authority of his doctrine. They challenged the Word of God, though a day earlier they had exclaimed, “This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world!” (v. 14).

Furthermore, while ever attempting to cloak their unbelief, they only continued to expose their wretched carnality. The multitude added, “Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat” (v. 31). Do you see what they just did? They actually tried to justify their carnality with scripture. They attempted to rebut the incarnate Word with scripture, saying, “You say that we do not need earthly bread. But do you not know what God did for our fathers? *He* gave our fathers manna from heaven. *He* made sure their bellies were full.” When they read scripture, they found all sorts of justification for their own carnality—for the lusts of their eyes and the lusts of their flesh and the pride of life. The multitude of John 6 had their favorite texts. And the people insinuated that Jesus was not the Christ because he was not giving them what they thought God wanted them to have.

It is no different today. Unbelief always twists scripture to justify its own carnal desires.

But the Lord was not done speaking to the multitude. The Lord responded that the true bread from heaven was not manna but himself. The Lord testified that all who eat and drink him are those whom *God* causes to eat and drink him. “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (v. 37). “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (v. 44). The Word of God to the multitude was that God absolutely and sovereignly determines who is nourished by the Word and who is not.

And what incensed the multitude against the Word of God was this: “I say unto you, That ye also have seen me, and believe not” (v. 36). The Word of God to them was that they were unbelievers.

The Word of God always divides men into two categories: believer and unbeliever, spiritual and carnal, those who have a godly sorrow and those whose sorrow works

death, elect and reprobate. The Word always discerns whether in a man’s heart is faith toward God or deceit. The Word of God always expresses God’s righteous judgment over men and manifests that judgment to their own consciences.

That Word of God always justifies faith, because faith itself is worked by the Word. “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). That is why every believer loves the preaching. When the child of God comes to church with his burden of guilt and the stench of the world, when he comes to church with all his ingratitude and God-forgetfulness, the voice from heaven by means of the preaching speaks this to him: “Forgiven!” The Word of God judges the child of God righteous in Christ and draws that child into his kingdom.

That same Word also always condemns unbelief.

Now, it is true that all unbelief is wicked rejection of the Word of God. It is true that all unbelief is fierce rebellion against the Word of God. Yet nowhere does unbelief so visibly manifest itself than in the house of the Son of God, where his voice is heard, clearly and constantly. A hypocrite can last a long time in a church where there is no true preaching of the Word of God, for there is no power to tear off that man’s cloak and expose his nakedness. But as soon as the true preaching comes, the Word of God infallibly manifests the hypocrite’s unbelief with divine precision.

That is why unbelief always chafes under the Word of God. Unbelief will say about that preaching, “It is too judgmental. It never has anything good to say to me. It always makes me feel bad. It never edifies me.” That is what the unbeliever says. Why? Because unbelief is being condemned by the Word and shut out of the kingdom.

And you must never forget that sobering conclusion of Lord’s Day 31 in answer to the question, “How is the kingdom of heaven opened and shut by the preaching of the holy gospel?” The Catechism teaches thus:

When according to the command of Christ, it is declared and publicly testified to all and every believer, that, whenever they receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith, all their sins are really forgiven them of God, for the sake of Christ’s merits; and on the contrary, when it is declared and testified to all unbelievers, and such as do not sincerely repent, that they stand exposed to the wrath of God and eternal condemnation, so long as they are unconverted: *according to which testimony of the gospel, God will judge them, both in this, and in the life to come.* (A 84, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 118, emphasis added)

“According to which testimony of the gospel, God will judge them, both in this, and in the life to come.”

When the Word of God comes, that Word gives a testimony that accords with God's righteous judgment. When a minister preaches to you the truth, he can say at the end of his sermon, "And according to this testimony, God judges you." Why? Because it was not the word of man but the Word of God.

Let Mr. Meelker consider that. Let all who left Zion consider that.

And now, what does unbelief do when unbelief is cornered with nowhere left to go? Unbelief first attacks the messenger. Unbelief attempts to discredit the one who speaks the Word of God and has given the unbelievers nowhere to hide. That is what the multitude of John 6 did. The people asked, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? how is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven?" (v. 42). Oh, they knew full well the marvelous events that had surrounded Christ's birth, which testified of his heavenly origin. But they spoke of his family in order to excuse their unbelief. Unbelief always kills the messenger. Which of the prophets has unbelief not murdered?

Then unbelief throws up its arms and shouts as loud as it can, "This is an hard saying; who can hear it?" (v. 60).

No comfort!

And finally, unbelief will do everything in its power to escape that Word of judgment and find some other way into heaven, a back door. Unbelief will return to the ways of the scribes and Pharisees and stand in the back of their synagogues and say, "How good it is to be back!"

### *Take Heed*

"From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him" (John 6:66). After hearing the Word of God, many of the Lord's disciples departed from him. Just a day earlier they had declared that the Lord was "that prophet." But then the Word spoke to them. The Word manifested them as miserable recreants. The Word judged them. And because they could not stand that judgment, they walked no more with Jesus.

Now, chapter and verse designate these former disciples with the number 6-6-6.

Oh, I understand well that the division of this text into chapter and verse was not inspired. The modern arrangement of holy scripture into the verse units that we find in our English Bible has its own peculiar history. Yet there is no more fitting number to encapsulate the words of this text. Six is the number of man and represents the idea of earthly toil without rest. Six thrice-repeated represents the culmination of man's efforts to establish rest in his own earthly kingdom. But no matter how vigorously man strives to attain rest, he never attains to seven. He never attains the rest *of God*, the rest of God's everlasting

covenant in the kingdom of heaven. In other words, man never has true comfort. True comfort is the rest that one possesses by faith in Jesus Christ.

And here in John 6:66 is the record of those who, having heard the very voice of God and the Word of the gospel preached unto them, departed from the living God in evil hearts of unbelief. And here in John 6:66 is the manifestation of those concerning whom God had no pleasure but swore in his wrath, "They shall not enter into my rest!"

Take heed, brethren.

Today, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts as in the provocation. If you enter the house of the living God, you will hear a voice. That voice is the very Word of God and emphatically not the word of man. When you hear, do not provoke him who speaks. Remember the generation that came up out of Egypt. They tempted God. They proved God. They saw God's works for forty years. And God swore in his wrath that they should not enter his rest.

If they escaped not who refused him who spoke on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him who speaks from heaven!

On the porch of Solomon, Peter warned, "Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people" (Acts 3:22-23).

In the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas warned, "Beware therefore, lest that come upon you, which is spoken of in the prophets; behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish: for I work a work in your days, a work which ye shall in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you" (Acts 13:40-41).

Take heed!

"See that ye refuse not him that speaketh" (Heb. 12:25).

That exhortation—"See that ye refuse not him that speaketh"—is curious. It is curious because to refuse or not to refuse does not rest in the power of those who hear the Word of God. Whether or not one refuses him who speaks—this comes from God and not from man.

"See that ye refuse not him that speaketh."

If you refuse him not, then you are judged already. You are judged in Christ as righteous and worthy of eternal life. But if you refuse him, then you are likewise judged already. You are judged outside of Christ, and you will not enter his rest.

It is according to this testimony of the gospel that God judges, both now and in the day of the Lord.

—LB

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

## WHAT HAPPENED IN THE PHILIPPINE CHURCHES? (2): IN A TRICE

### *Introduction*

With this article I begin an introduction of the history of First Protestant Reformed Church in Bulacan, which eventually seceded from the Protestant Reformed Churches in the Philippines (PRCP) on May 16, 2021. I am aware that the reader might think that this article, which recounts our history, is a bit sloppy. I understand that. Our secession and reformation were an atypical process. They involved taking tortuous courses and unsystematic planning. And they also involved actions that were impetuous in nature.

But in the wisdom of God, all things were organically one as he directed all things unto his desired end. And God's will is absolutely good. Despite the impulsiveness of his people during the course of history, he is always mindful of his will to save them and to reform them according to his word.

It is my hope that you come along with me as I recount the history just before Bulacan's secession in 2021. It would not be wise to tire you, so I intricately weaved the history so that you might also be acquainted with our origin. And I want to begin with the publication of *Sword and Shield*, which undoubtedly became a vehicle of truth for those of us who were sitting in the dark and quiet place. *Sword and Shield's* witness, in distinction from the official proclamation of the word of God in the church, is faithful and edifies the believers here and beyond.

### *The Magazine*

We heard in 2020 that a new publication had come off the press in June. One could already sense the excitement and thrill among the church members on this side of the world. Young men were thrilled with how things were progressing in the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRC). However, the senior members held differing perspectives. Nonetheless, those who were opposed to the magazine could be heard instantly, although they did not provide any justification for their opposition other than that the magazine was unnecessary and schismatic and

hence should be avoided. Some people were indifferent, while others were resolved to remain silent.

Being new, *Sword and Shield* could be used to widen the rifts within the PRC. The magazine was deemed schismatic in a trice.

The reactions were understandable, since many were aware of the ongoing doctrinal controversy in the PRC, and seeing such an exotic, strange magazine for the first time drew negative impressions. All believed that the *Standard Bearer* was enough. Though many read it sparingly, they were religious zealots who believed that their publication remained worthy of trust. There was absolutely no reason for another publication. It was extremely difficult for many people to decide whether to support the endeavor of the new magazine, its editors, and the group of believers who consciously published it out of their freedom in Christ. Many regarded the magazine, its editors, and Reformed Believers Publishing as an unruly mob committed to schism, while the Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA) was regarded as holy and righteous in its publication of the *Standard Bearer*, which they believed was committed to the truth and was a faithful presentation of the Protestant Reformed distinctives.

But these negative reactions were legitimately wrong and unreformed. Those who opposed *Sword and Shield* easily forgot how some members of Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church had organized the RFPA, which eventually published the *Standard Bearer*. Prior to being part of the organization of the RFPA, Rev. Herman Hoeksema and Rev. Henry Danhof were on the staff of the *Witness*, where they could freely write and critique and oppose Dr. Janssen's heretical teachings. However, due to the common grace controversy, the staff of the *Witness* was divided internally. Hence Reverend Hoeksema and Reverend Danhof severed from the publication so that they could defend the truth freely in a new magazine. Article 3 of the minutes of the original meeting of a new organization of believers says,

Fifteen brethren were present, who unanimously decided to organize as a Publication Committee and to discuss that same evening matters pertaining to the support of the brethren ministers Rev. H. Danhof, of Kalamazoo, and Rev. H. Hoeksema, of Grand Rapids, in the publishing and sending out, as well as also the bearing of expenses in connection with the publishing of brochures, and, if possible, of a paper.

The reasons for this weighty step were the refusal and return by *De Wachter* of a series of articles written by the aforementioned ministers for our Reformed people. In order to be able to answer all the various writings coming from one side—and sometimes besmudged with personal hatred—this was the only way to offer the aforementioned ministers the opportunity to defend themselves against their attackers in the eyes of the Reformed reading public.<sup>1</sup>

It is needful to remind the reader that this organization, which would later become the RFPA and which, after about five months, would publish the *Standard Bearer*, was formed while the *Banner*, the official publication of the Christian Reformed Church, was still being published. Also, the *Standard Bearer* was originally free from ecclesiastical control. The magazine was *free*, just as *Sword and Shield* is now.

I could not find any fault in publishing a new magazine amidst the doctrinal controversy in the PRC. *Sword and Shield* was necessary. It was totally Reformed to write in defense of the truth. It was practically timely. The bloody discussions about faith, good works, and the covenant impacted every home. Individuals were having theological conversations over the legitimacy of the controversy, while others said the controversy was simply a matter of terminology, not of doctrine. But the issue was, is, and will always be between the truth and the lie. Rev. A. Lanning asserted the same in setting forth the intention of *Sword and Shield* to engage in various battles of the Christian:

The war is between the truth and the lie. In this war that spans all earthly history, there are many battles. There are doctrinal battles. There are ethical and moral battles. There are battles in the heart of the individual child of God. There are battles in the church. By its name, *Sword and Shield* announces its intention, under the blessing of God, to engage in all of these battles for the cause of God's truth and the comfort of God's people.<sup>2</sup>

Defending the truth is even more necessary during doctrinal unrest in the churches. Pulpits and pens should be used to uphold the truth and mend the almost palpable chaos among the members. Silencing the truth cannot mend chaos in the churches. Rather, silencing the truth only further inflicts grievous bodily harm to the church of Jesus Christ.

Amidst many voices, most of which are known and trusted for what they say, the truth must be upheld at all costs. Only cowards remain silent when the truth needs to be upheld and promoted through all necessary means. Believers are never relieved of their calling always to confess and to defend the truth publicly. "For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth" (2 Cor. 13:8). Almost spontaneously, believers tell and confess the truth whenever necessary. Whenever the truth is upheld and promoted, believers support the holy endeavor wherever that truth is placed antithetically against the lie. The following statement of Reverend Lanning is relevant:

Members who perhaps have been under the mistaken impression that silence is the holiest approach to the controversy will be liberated to read, hear, learn, understand, and confess the truth as it is being sharpened through the controversy.<sup>3</sup>

This new publication in 2020 was instrumental in awakening a handful of believers in this part of the world. I have been one of its silent readers since its publication.

## Hush

I consequently equipped myself by following the controversy through *Sword and Shield* and Dewey Engelsma's audacious blog, which started in 2021. I admit that it was difficult to follow the controversy. For almost six years, we in the Philippines were totally blind regarding the doctrinal controversy. There were no lectures, refutations, or discussions during that time. We were oblivious to what was happening to our sister. The foreign missionaries remained silent and refused to divulge any details.

I spoke with one of the missionaries for a brief time, but he deemed the controversy to be mere semantics. Such an approach is never helpful during controversy. His approach was only a watering down of the very core of the matter. There is nothing semantic between an unconditional and a conditional covenant, between a grace principle and a work principle, between justification by faith alone and justification through repentance, and between sovereign grace and the determinative activity of man. To put it this way: there is nothing semantic between faith

1 Quoted in Herman Hanko, "The *Standard Bearer* in Retrospect," *Standard Bearer* 50, no. 2 (October 15, 1973): 33.

2 Andy Lanning, "Sword and Shield," *Sword and Shield* 1, no. 1 (June 1, 2020): 7.

3 Andy Lanning, "Our Present Controversy (5)," *Sword and Shield* 1, no. 8 (December 1, 2020): 8.



and unbelief. The controversy was not vague. It was clear and hung on this question: Is the covenant unconditional even when it comes to experiencing it? The controversy was a legitimate controversy, and it needed careful study of God's word.

I remember trying to start a conversation by asking one of the missionaries about his knowledge of the new publication. I failed. I was not heard. There was not even a slight reaction. My words vanished into thin air in a trice. That was the time that I felt hopeless.

My church, the then First Protestant Reformed Church in Bulacan, was also silent. The pulpit was silent because Rev. John Flores was ignorant of the controversy. Since 2015 he had been unaware of the PRC's state of theology. His sermons would have made it clear if he had been aware. He was silent just like the others, but his silence was owing to his ignorance.

My church had exerted her strength on the wrong path. The year was 2017 when there was a controversy regarding the shape of the earth. Some of us in Bulacan were very concerned because Reverend Flores persuaded us to pursue the subject. If Sherlock Holmes was completely indifferent as to whether the sun moved around the earth or the earth around the sun, our outstanding pastor was not only concerned with the geocentric model but also with the shape of the earth. He exerted every effort to develop his theories; and because of his eloquence, he had dupes under his care.

And shameful it is; count me among the dupes. I was one of them. And I should confess this: "If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch" (Matt. 15:14). That is exactly what happened.

We began laboring toward the development of the notion that the earth was flat, and the matter even touched not only anthropology but also eschatology. That is, the flat-earth theory supports the idea that the coming of Jesus Christ will be seen by all inhabitants of the earth, and that could only be possible if the earth were flat. Some of our comrades even pushed and pressed the fight using the Reformed creeds, thus making the matter confessional. We were also aware that Herman Hoeksema was against the flat-earth theory as expressed in his *Reformed Dogmatics*,<sup>4</sup> and we did not care. Our supposed biblical presuppositions, not the Reformed fathers, were the *tour de force*. We did not need Hoeksema at that time, and we gladly critiqued him. If Professor Engelsma humbly critiqued Herman Hoeksema's eschatological lapse regarding his view of two separate resurrections for the elect and reprobate,<sup>5</sup> we, on the other hand, had the

audacity to critique Hoeksema's view that the earth was not flat. Shamefully absurd.

The controversy occasioned a controlled discussion with all the Protestant Reformed missionaries. Because of the commotion in the PRCP, the missionaries agreed to meet with us on February 16, 2018. The discussion was a disaster. We manifested ourselves exactly as we were—dupes. Reverend Flores was silent during the discussion because he could not sustain his theories with the missionaries from the PRC. He was simply there, condoning our tyrannical treatment of cherry-picked biblical passages in defense of our theory. But we were so deceived that we thought we were doing a holy service. That insanity persisted until 2021 when First Protestant Reformed Church in Bulacan reorganized as a Reformed Protestant congregation. Reverend Flores was so thrilled to tell us that Reverend Lanning was a flat-earthier. Aha! A comrade! It was always the trivial, absurd things that gave Reverend Flores joy, never the truth found in the Reformed Protestant Churches. Never. It all was about the earth's shape! Of all the important doctrines, we were so fond of the shape of the earth. Shameful! I assure you that my cheeks flush at the very thought of what we did during the doctrinal controversy in the PRC. We wasted every opportunity of laboring upon the things that were truly Reformed.

Every minister in the PRCP and the Protestant Reformed missionaries were occupied with something other than the PRC's theological dispute on good works and the covenant. We were very distracted back then. However, not one of the Protestant Reformed missionaries took the initiative to teach the PRCP members. It seemed that our sister wanted seclusion in order to avoid being disturbed by her Filipino counterpart. This was against the constitution of the PRC's contact committee, which says that a sister-church relationship implies

taking heed to one another's life as churches; constantly acquainting one another with decisions of their broadest assemblies; mutual decisions as to revisions of and additions to the creeds, the Church Order, and liturgical forms.<sup>6</sup>

I cannot imagine a sister-church relationship characterized by individualism and hierarchy. If the truth determines the ties between the churches, then the burden of upholding and defending the truth must also be shared and not parsimoniously communicated. Moreover, sisters must never connive to silence the truth and hinder its development, especially during doctrinal controversies. The PRCP had the duty to check on her sister for the maintenance of

4 Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), 1:264.

5 David J. Engelsma, *The Church's Hope: The Reformed Doctrine of the End* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2021), 1:137.

6 *Constitution of the Committee for Contact with Other Churches*, 5.2.4, <https://www.prca.org/resources/committee-constitutions/contact-with-other-churches>.

the truth. If the PRC was not disciplining those who proliferated false doctrine and, on the contrary, was hunting those who were preaching and writing for the truth's sake, then the PRCP was equally responsible to God by sharing in her sister's sin. The PRCP should have called out her sister for the sake of the truth. That never happened and will never happen as long as the PRCP regards her sister as a century-old idol on whom all things turn and depend.

The PRCP's sister placed a finger before pursed lips to hush the PRCP while her members were in the dark of doctrinal despair, knowing nothing and playing around like children tossed to and fro.

### *Despairing Yet Hopeful*

To privately react to what was happening in the churches, I initiated an email correspondence with Reverend Lanning as early as September 2020. He was very accommodating. He corresponded with me in light of the present controversy. The correspondence was purely doctrinal. The reverend was still a pastor of Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church. The man was able to present the gospel fluently, and I should say that my understanding of the gospel was sharpened by his labor alongside the labors of Rev. Nathan Langerak and Rev. Martin VanderWal. They were beneficial for the handful of believers in the Philippines.

The correspondence continued until Reverend Lanning suggested that someone must at least break the silence and write a letter to the PRCP. He wrote,

If the consistories of the PRCP and the missionaries of the PRCA are remaining silent on the controversy, then it would be good for someone to write a letter to them asking where the consistory stands. If there is a consistory that is concerned with the direction of the PRCA, then that consistory should write a letter to the PRCA Foreign Mission Committee asking where they stand. Once you know where the consistory stands, or where the FMC stands, then you can make your own decisions about church membership.

I wrote a letter of concern to the council of the then First Protestant Reformed Church in Bulacan on March 16, 2021. In that letter I challenged the council to test and examine the sermons of David Overway and to ask many questions that could eventually give light to the present state of the churches. I quote here in part:

Prof. Dykstra wrote in the *Standard Bearer* describing how the delegates took the issue at the

Synod 2018. He writes, "Not everyone agreed that this or that statement was in error."<sup>7</sup> This is confusing. A Reformed man can immediately detect what is wrong in the sermon. Mr. Overway was preaching conditional fellowship with God. But the delegates could not unanimously reject the error. Yes, the synod rejects conditional fellowship with God, but Prof. Dykstra further informs us, "However, synod did not declare this error to be heresy. Synod did not state that this teaching denies the unconditional covenant or justification by faith alone. The minister will be examined, but he is not suspended."<sup>8</sup> One may ask, "How can we distinguish error from heresy?" May I ask the consistory if what Mr. Overway stated in the sermon falls under the category of an error? Do you agree that alongside Christ there is our obedience playing a vital role in order for us to go to the Father? Whether we speak the objective aspect or the subjective aspect of the covenant, it is emphatically negating the work principle. Our works, even the works which have been wrought in and through us by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, are utterly excluded in the matter of establishing and maintaining our fellowship with God. Christ is the only Mediator of the covenant. Only by His blood we can have access to the Father. Our good works are immediate fruit of that fellowship not the basis or a way unto the Father.

But what happened to the office bearers who disagreed that there is error? And what about those who sympathize with Mr. Overway? Does the PRCP receive any report of disciplinary actions imposed to those who sympathize with Mr. Overway and his sermon? The PRCP must require of the PRCA a sufficient explanation why Mr. Overway was permitted to resign from the office despite the evident departure of his sermon from orthodoxy. The sermon was preached in 2015, but the gentleman who preached stayed in the ministry of the Word up until 2019 (as far as I know). Granted that the synod examined him again, but let us not forget that according to Prof. Dykstra, he was not suspended. Why? The PRCP should ask why.

I ended my letter with a plea that the council correspond with the PRC concerning the controversy, so that the PRCP might have a good grip on what her sister

7 Russell J. Dykstra, "Synod 2018: Obedience and Covenant Fellowship," *Standard Bearer* 94, no. 18 (July 2018): 414.

8 Dykstra, "Synod 2018: Obedience and Covenant Fellowship," 415.

really believed, and I insinuated that the PRC was not a worthy sister in the Lord, especially when ministers of the conditional covenant were being exonerated.

Moreover, I was aghast to know that there is still a minister who preaches a conditional covenant but is not suspended, and some ministers who sympathize with Mr. Overway's error.

I ask the consistory to consider this not as a protest but a plea to contact the PRCA concerning the matter. This is vital to our sister-church relationship. The only thing that ties us with the PRCA is the truth of Jesus Christ. If that truth is being neglected and adulterated, a church or a denomination must purge the church from all impurities of errors and heresies. I am not into the notion that this is just the problem and burden of the PRCA, and the PRCP should not be involved in the process. This notion is against the teaching of Paul in Galatians 6:1–2. If the consistory believes that there is a problem with how the PRCA handles the controversy, you must stand and advise the PRCA through their Contact Committee. We are her equal and not her little sister observing how she behaves herself without receiving any words from us. If the PRCA sins and justifies her sin, let us radically sever our ties with her. We cannot share with her sin. God forbid that we share with her error. I pray that that is not the case. PRCA is susceptible to sin, but by God's grace let it not be done deliberately.

Also, I ask the consistory to please enlighten the members of PRCB [Protestant Reformed Church of Bulacan] of what is happening in our own camp. We must know our position regarding the matter and how we should be handling this kind of controversy in a way that is worthy of God and His glory. Again, what is your take concerning Mr. Overway's sermon? Your answer can inevitably determine your future action as faithful watchmen on the walls of Zion, the church.

At the time of my writing, the council was aware of the present controversy (I did not know the level of their knowledge, but I should say that the men were still ignorant of what really was in dispute), but our church was still undisturbed. There were no surging crowds clamoring for spiritual attention, no elders on the wall watching, no prophet warding off false doctrine, and no council evoking the PRCP's duty to take heed of her sister.

My letter fell on deaf ears. The council did not respond to me. Rev. John Flores commented that my letter was

purposely sent to show off my ability as a seminary student. It was said to my face, and again I realized that the situation was hopeless.

I waited more than a month for a response, but nothing happened. Reverend Flores' tyrannical behavior explains why the council did not respond to my letter with urgency. Apparently, my letter was nothing more than a show-off, nothing urgent. The church could live with the PRC and her developing heresy.

I emailed Reverend Lanning about the council's disregard of my letter. Convinced of the truth and convinced that we were one in the faith, he and Dewey Engelsma invited me to have a video call with my friends Ben Catalan and Matt Raguirag. The meeting went well. We became more convinced of the truth and of the hopelessness of remaining with the PRCP. More than ever, we were resolved to withdraw our membership from our respective churches to establish the church anew.

But we needed a pastor. Ignorant of the fact that we could withdraw even without a pastor and eventually establish a fellowship with the help of the brethren in America, we decided to talk to Reverend Flores again. We were very hesitant. We know the man. We had always noticed that there was something singular and questionable in the man's character; but for the sake of the church, we wanted him to come with us—a blunder for which we would surely suffer in the future.

We talked to Reverend Flores on April 25, 2021. He was sitting deeply absorbed in the conversation. I was already feeling that the idea was wrong. I was not discerning any love for the truth. Rather, he agreed in a trice when he was unofficially assured of financial support by some from First Reformed Protestant Church. That day was also the continuation of the classis meeting of the PRCP. From start to finish, the meeting was a strange and an atypical session, chaotic and full of clamoring. At that meeting Reverend Flores thanked the classis for a decade-long relationship, insinuating that he would break with the denomination together with the Bulacan church and the mission work in Leyte.

We were emotional to hear such an insinuation. We never imagined ourselves breaking with the Protestant Reformed Churches in the Philippines. But little did we know that more spiritual pain awaited us ahead.

But we were hopeful, though still lying under despair. Our hope was that the Word, Jesus Christ, would never leave us in the course toward our desired reformation. He was our hope. "Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me" (Job 19:27).

—JP

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

## THE HOLY SPIRIT NOT WITHDRAWN

The title of this article is language borrowed from the Canons of Dordt in head 5, article 6. The pertinent quotation is as follows: “God, who is rich in mercy, according to His unchangeable purpose of election, does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from His own people, even in their melancholy falls” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 174). And contained in the remainder of the article are several other acts of God’s mercy in the preservation of his people. However, the focus of the article is this truth: God does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from his own people. In a word, this is their preservation. If you want to know what God’s preservation of his church is, then you need only say this: the Holy Spirit remains in God’s people, or, negatively, as the Canons states, God does not wholly withdraw his Holy Spirit from his own people.

In order to understand what this means, we must understand the setting of article 6 in the fifth head of the Canons. The fifth head pertains to the truth of the preservation of the saints. The Synod of Dordt maintained the truth of preservation over against the Arminian error regarding this truth. To the Arminian, preservation is a matter of man and his own will to persevere. The Arminian, to put it briefly, preserves himself. The believer, an Arminian would say, can fall away from faith, from justification, and from salvation in its entirety. The believer can fall away. Against this error, Dordt taught that God preserves his people so that it is impossible that one who is regenerated, has faith, is justified, and so on, can fall away from salvation. Preservation, or perseverance, is a matter of election. The source of preservation is the eternal decree of election. That was the position of Dordt. That is our position.

The Canons is experiential in its treatment of preservation. This is immediately evident in the beginning articles of the fifth head. God’s people are sinners. They are the ungodly. By nature they are God-haters, covenant-breakers, devoid of all true knowledge, haters of the neighbor, lovers of self, lovers of iniquity, murderers, thieves, covetous, and adulterers. They are the ungodly. This is who God saves. This is who God calls “my people.” This is who Christ was sent to save. He was sent to die for the enemies of God. This is who we are by nature.

God’s people are sinners not only in name but also in deeds. This is abundantly clear not only from the Canons

but also from the believer’s own experience. Daily the believer sins against God. Daily he breaks God’s covenant. Daily he transgresses God’s law. God’s people are sinners. Article 5 speaks of the consequences of their sins and especially of their grievous sins. By their grievous sins, God’s people “very highly offend God, incur a deadly guilt, grieve the Holy Spirit, interrupt the exercise of faith, very grievously wound their consciences, and sometimes lose the sense of God’s favor for a time.” To this is added, “until, on their returning into the right way of serious repentance, the light of God’s fatherly countenance again shines upon them” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 174).

How then are we to understand all these things? There is the child of God, the sinner, who has sinned against God. The child of God has lost the sense of God’s favor. He has grieved the Holy Spirit, and the sinner has grievously wounded his own conscience. The matter at hand is subjective. Losing the sense of God’s favor is a subjective matter; it deals with one’s experience of the favor of God. Note, the believer does not and cannot lose the favor of God. God’s favor is an eternal favor. It is God’s eternal love and choosing of individuals in Jesus Christ. The elect person can never lose God’s favor. God does not flip-flop between favor and disfavor, between love and hatred. God is one. That, first of all.

But the believer can lose the *sense of God’s favor*. And the question is, how does the believer again experience that favor? Does the believer get that back by his repentance? Is repentance necessary for that sense to come back? Or to put it in other words, is there that which man must do to reacquire this experience of God’s favor? Is preservation a matter of man’s will?

The answer is an emphatic no! What? Does not article 5 of the Canons say that we must repent in order for the light of God’s countenance to again shine on us? The believer must repent from his sin. Of this there is no doubt. Turn ye, turn ye! This is the duty of man in the covenant. He is to love the Lord his God, serve his God, and obey his God. Oh, yes, but that is not the gospel. Or in other words, that is not *how* he gets the blessing of God. The gospel is that Jehovah saves, objectively and subjectively. Salvation is of the Lord, absolutely.

The main point here is not what man must do but what God does, specifically what the Holy Spirit does.

And if we are so bold, we say what the Holy Spirit *must* do. The truth is that the Holy Spirit does not wholly withdraw himself from the child of God, although that child grieves the Holy Spirit by his sin. The reason for this is found in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, which becomes ours. “The Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Rom. 8:10). The one who is righteous is indwelt by the Spirit forever. It was the Holy Spirit’s work to regenerate that man, to unite that man to Christ by the bond of faith, and to apply the righteousness of Christ to that man. And the Spirit never departs from that man, not ever; it is impossible. God does not abandon the works of his hands, but he maintains them and brings them to their end.

Now, on account of sin, the Holy Spirit withdraws to a degree. Never does he withdraw wholly; the Spirit does not abandon the child of God but merely withdraws. This is why that loss of the sense of God’s favor occurs. The Spirit withdraws. He recedes in the believer. The believer’s exercise of faith is interrupted, and deadly guilt sets in. And the question is, why? Is it because the believer maintains the experience of his salvation in himself? Does the Spirit deal with the believer according to the believer’s own righteousness? No, the Spirit is life because of righteousness, true righteousness, the righteousness of Christ.

Why, then, does the Spirit withdraw from the elect believer? For the believer’s chastisement and instruction. The elect believer in this life is never free from sin. He is yet totally depraved. He yet complies with the lusts of his flesh. He yet departs from the Lord, his God. He yet offends God by his sin. And this is no surprise to God. God is not shocked when the believer sins. God does not hang his head in disappointment or hide his face in shame. But God knows the weaknesses and frailties of the believer. God remembers when he formed man out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. God remembers when Adam sinned and the whole world sinned with him. God knows his own operation in the believer, and he knows the believer’s depravity. God could make his people perfect in this life, no doubt. But he does not.

And God does not simply overlook sin. Sin highly offends God. Sin grieves the Holy Spirit. Thus God chastises his people. God turns his face for a little while. His countenance grows dim. God does so not without good purpose. His purpose in this is for our instruction. Sin is no light thing. God does not dwell with sinners. God does not bless the unrighteous, but he blesses the righteous. To sin is not the place of man in God’s covenant, but man is to love God with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength. So by God’s chastisement we are instructed by God regarding our duty and obligation to obedience in God’s covenant.

However, this must not be conceived of as cruelty on God’s part but as an act of love. God chastens whom he loves.

6. For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.
7. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? (Heb. 12:6–7)

And certainly, this belongs to the testimony of the Spirit that remains in the children of God despite their sins. Though the chastisement seems not to be joyous but grievous, yet you are God’s sons. The Holy Spirit is not withdrawn. And the Holy Spirit is not without a word of comfort: “Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees” (v. 12). And this on account of that which is yielded, even “the peaceable fruit of righteousness” (v. 11).

And in such chastisements and falls into sin, the children of God are preserved by God. God again “by His Word and Spirit” not only “effectually renews them to repentance” but also works in them that they “may again experience the favor of a reconciled God” (Canons of Dordt 5.7, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 174). And here we must say that the forgiveness of sins and the experience of God’s favor, or, if you will, the experience of our salvation, is not *in the way of* our good works or specifically here by our repentance. Nor does God work in us that which is good by “his Word and Spirit” in order that he may bless us with the sense of his favor.

First, such teachings are absurd. We are reconciled to God, and we have the remission of sins in our mediator, Jesus Christ. Then for repentance to be necessary, so that God may do something only after man does something first, is absurd and does away with the cross. For God deals with us not according to our works (which are all sinful) but as we are righteous in Christ. There is nothing more to be done. Besides, it is the will of God to bless the elect, and man’s will and activity cannot stand in the way, nor does God need man’s repentance to work in man. God is God.

Second, our repentance is at best half-hearted and polluted with sin. God does not bless that which is not perfect according to the standard of his own righteous and holy being. And to say that God accepts by grace our imperfect works is to make God half-rate.

Rather, God again causes his people to experience his favor by his Word and Spirit. And this experience of God’s favor is full and free. It is the Word as applied by the Spirit to the believer that causes him to again experience God’s favor. And this is unimpeded by all activities of man. God’s Word to his people is that they are reconciled to God, atonement has been made for their sins, they are loved by God from eternity to eternity, and salvation is of the Lord and does not depend on them. That is God’s Word, and the Spirit applies that Word to the believer so that he believes that Word and is assured by that Word. Or we could simply say that the Word is

Jesus Christ, and the Spirit applies Christ to us. That is our comfort.

And the Spirit also renews us to repentance and causes a sincere and godly sorrow for our sins. I have already stated that God does not need our repentance. Why then must we repent? The answer is to be found in who the Spirit is. Is he not the *Holy Spirit*? The Spirit of God is holy and righteous. The Holy Spirit is God. Holy and righteous are his works and that which the Spirit works in man. To state it briefly, what this means is that repentance is inevitable. It is as inevitable as the believer's experiencing the favor of God again by the Word and Spirit.

Holiness is consecration to God. The one who is holy loves God perfectly with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength at all times. God is holy in himself. The Father loves and is consecrated to the Son. The Son loves and is consecrated to the Father. And that love and consecration is the Holy Spirit. He is the Breath from the Father to the Son who makes known the love of the Father to the

Son and who consecrates the Son to the Father. The Son breathes back the Spirit in love for the Father and consecrates the Father to the Son.

And now the Comforter is given to God's people. The Comforter is sent with this missive, to make known God's love for his people and to consecrate them to God. That is the work of the Spirit in the children of God. He is the Spirit of adoption, and the Spirit is life in the child of God, so that he minds the things of the Spirit and walks in the ways of God.

This is why man's experience and man's obedience are always close together and why man's experience of the forgiveness of sins and his repentance are always close together. These are worked by the same person in God, the Holy Spirit, who works in man both the experience of man's salvation and man's obedience. Not because the blessing needs the works but because the Holy Spirit, the worker, works both the blessing and the fruit.

—Earl David Kamps

## CONTRIBUTION

# THE BEATITUDES (7): THE PEACEMAKERS

*Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called  
the children of God. — Matthew 5:9*

## Introduction

**T**he Lord Jesus in his famous sermon on the mount came preaching the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven, as that is God's gracious rule of his elect people in Jesus Christ, is an eternal reality. From eternity God appointed Christ to be the head and mediator of his covenant, and God also appointed to Christ a kingdom from eternity. Christ is our eternal king; without subjects he cannot be. God made Christ to be king in eternity when God appointed to Christ a chosen people, elect and precious, in order that he might deliver them from all their sins and miseries and rule graciously in their hearts by his Word and Spirit. The kingdom of heaven was at hand when God came in human flesh in the man Jesus Christ. That is the great mystery of the kingdom, that God was manifest in the flesh. The basis or ground

of this kingdom is the perfect satisfaction of Jesus Christ, whereby Christ purchased his people with his own blood and redeemed them from sin and death.

The kingdom of heaven is an entirely other-worldly kingdom. It is spiritual in character. Christ said, "My kingdom is not of this world." That kingdom does not arise from this world. It is not a dominion of might, force, or compulsion. Rather, the kingdom of heaven is a dominion of love. The kingdom of heaven, which shall endure forever, reaches down into the world and embraces the entire elect church.

Throughout the first part of the sermon on the mount, in what is commonly referred to as the beatitudes, the Lord Jesus declares the blessedness of the citizens of the kingdom. Last time we considered the blessedness of the pure in heart. The pure in heart are those in whom

God has worked regeneration and faith, giving them new hearts, making them new creatures in Jesus Christ, and causing them to rightly love God alone and to desire to keep his commandments. We saw that the heart of man is who man is as to his innermost essence. While man judges the outward appearance, God judges the heart. It does not matter how a man presents himself before the peering eyes of other men. It does not matter that all men speak well of a man. It does not matter even if a man does many seemingly good things. If his heart is bad, then that man is wicked. God judges the heart.

When an elect sinner who by nature hates God and the neighbor loves God, when an elect sinner loves the truth of God and seeks the glory and honor of the name of God, it can only be because God has regenerated that sinner. That in itself is a great wonder of grace. And in grace God crowns his own gifts, promising to the pure in heart that they shall see God. They shall see God in all his glory, in all his fullness, and in all his beauty in the face of Jesus Christ. When Christ appears, they shall not be consumed, but they shall be transformed and made like unto him, for then they shall see him as he is. And now in Matthew 5:9 we read, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.”

### *The God of Peace*

When in Matthew 5:9 Jesus declares the blessedness of the peacemakers, then the text is dealing with peace. What is peace? Certainly, the peace of the text is not the peace of the world. The peace of the text is the peace of the kingdom of heaven. And although, on the face of it, the text seems to be interested mainly in the peace of the peacemakers, there can be no true consideration of peace apart from first considering the author of peace, namely, God himself.

Peace is first a perfection of God. When we speak of God's perfections, it is important for us always to understand them in the light of God's simplicity. God's simplicity, or oneness, does not only refer to the reality that there is only one divine essence or being whom we call God. But God's simplicity also refers to the reality that God is all his perfections, and all his perfections are one in him. This is distinctively Reformed. Not only may we say that God is the God of peace, but God himself *is* peace. God does not need to be at peace with any creature to be the God of peace.

Peace is God himself as he beholds himself in the instant and constant fullness of his divine being and as he loves himself. God loves God in God. And in that love God is at peace in himself, so that there is full agreement and perfect harmony within his own being. That God is the God of peace, therefore, can only be understood in a trinitarian fashion. God the Father loves God the Son in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit himself is the love of

God. And it is within the threeness of God that there is complete union and fellowship in mind and will. Peace, therefore, is essentially covenant fellowship.

Within the covenant life of God triune, there is perfect agreement. There can be no true peace apart from agreement. That is the sense of the scripture when it teaches that two cannot even walk together unless they be agreed (Amos 3:3). Is that not true in the human body? We would say that there is no peace but unrest in a body where the members of that body war against each other. And yet that is the peace of the world. The peace of the world is an imitation peace that supposes that two can indeed walk together and enjoy sweet communion with one another without first being agreed.

We live in a war-torn world, and yet the world in its haste to fill its measure of the cup of iniquity makes its boast in peace. That false peace was characteristic of the reign of Jehoshaphat in the Old Testament, who made peace with apostate Israel and wicked King Ahab and brought the church of that day within a hair's breadth of being utterly consumed by her enemies. The false peace of the world will reach its culmination in the kingdom of antichrist, who will inspire a false sense of unity between the nations as well as the false and apostate church. And yet the peace of the beatitude—and you may add all the other blessings of the beatitudes—is utterly antithetical to the world.

The peace of the text is the fruit of righteousness, so that where there is no righteousness, there can be no peace. There is no righteousness in the world. There is only righteousness in the church. And yet there is no righteousness in an institution that merely calls itself church. To put that very concretely, if there is no gospel of justification, no good news of the salvation that is in Jesus Christ, and if that gospel is not embraced by faith, then there is no righteousness. Christ cannot be present and operating within that church by his Word and Spirit. In that church there can be no peace.

Christ is our peace. Christ is our peace, who has accomplished reconciliation through the blood of his cross, by which he merited all righteousness for us. Christ obtained peace for us, who were at enmity against God, by reconciling us to God. God never needed to be reconciled to us but we to God. This is the first blessing of the text, that, in a world where all men by nature stand at enmity against God, there are those who have been given real peace with God. They have peace with God according as God loved them from eternity and appointed them to that peace. Peace for the peacemakers means that God is their covenant friend and sovereign, and they have and enjoy sweet fellowship together with him. By the powerful operation of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the elect sinner, God justifies the elect sinner through faith, working peace in that sinner's heart through the word of

reconciliation. Therefore, being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

### *The Peacemakers Themselves*

Most astoundingly, even amid a war-torn world, which lies underneath the curse of God, there are those who make peace. This is profound. When we consider this, we must confess that the very existence of such peacemakers is itself a wonder of grace. The peacemaker is the one in whose heart God has worked by the wonder of regeneration, removing his stony heart and giving to him a heart of flesh, within which heart God has worked faith by the Spirit through the hearing of the gospel. The peacemaker is the child of God as that child of God has been born of God, who knows God, and within whose heart the love of God has been spread abroad. The regenerated child of God enjoys peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ. In his heart the child of God loves peace.

Matthew 5:9 combines two root words that are translated in the King James Version as “peacemakers.” The peacemaker does peace; he makes peace; he works peace. Peacemaking is the chief work of the citizen of the kingdom of heaven. That the peacemaker makes peace does not mean that he is the author of peace. I have explained how this is not the case and how all true peace has its source in God. Rather, the peacemaker makes peace by taking the gospel of peace and then out of faith applying that gospel to every situation and every circumstance in his life. The peacemaker in his own life makes peace when he lives out of the gospel and seeks to bring the gospel to bear upon every area of his life. He understands the reality that apart from the gospel there can be no peace. Nothing in his life escapes the purview of the gospel, but the gospel lives in his heart and bears fruit in the rest of his life, so that he daily turns from his sins and by faith seeks the remission of his sins in Jesus Christ alone.

For a man or a woman to be a peacemaker means that that man or woman possesses the mind of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve and who willingly humbled himself and gave his own life in love for his friends. The mind of Christ is the mind that seeks not every man his own things but every man the things of others. Peacemakers love peace. They seek peace and pursue it. They strive as much as lies within them to be at peace with all men.

Within the church the peacemakers endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, which unity is in the truth. Peacemakers are not those who entertain an unholy toleration of sin and false doctrine in themselves or in the church in the name of peace, for there can be no peace in the church where sin and false doctrine are not dealt with.

What do peacemakers look like? Peacemakers take several forms. Peacemakers are church members who rebuke the erring brother, calling him to repent. Peacemakers are

ruling elders who faithfully oversee the doctrine and conversation of the minister and faithfully exercise Christian discipline in the removal of the impenitent sinner and the readmittance of the repentant brother. Peacemakers have no interest in ecumenical church unions such as the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council, Evangelicals and Catholics Together, or any of the other accursed denominational federations that compromise the truth, expressing their mutual offense of the reproach of the gospel of Christ. And the peacemakers stand antithetically opposed to the same false ecumenicity within their own personal lives, having no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness or with the workers of iniquity themselves, even if they are close relatives or former acquaintances in false and apostate churches.

The peacemaker is one who loves the truth of the gospel, who cleaves to that truth, and who confesses it, even over against the hatred and opposition of the world. For all the peacemakers’ confessions of the truth, the world slanders them as being the very enemies of peace and accuses them of standing in the way of peace and making reconciliation impossible. Peacemakers are criticized for being harsh, unloving, and intolerant of other people’s opinions and worldviews. And yet the peacemakers have been made to understand that the devil stands behind those words. They understand that the world, which stakes its claim on peace and which maintains itself over against the church, stands in absolute and utter opposition to peace. Certainly, the children of the world too will have their peace, a peace that is not of the kingdom of heaven but is of this world, where none are agreed, where the truth is non-existent because they will have it so in order to fulfill their own sinful lusts and carnal desires. But they will perish with that same peace. That is because they have not peace with God, but they are themselves the very enemies of God. Them will God destroy.

### *The Blessedness of the Peacemakers*

The word “for” in the text denotes the reason that the peacemakers are blessed. “For they shall be called the children of God.” This calling of the text is not a matter of personal confession. It is not as if God creates his children and does not also cause them to know their sonship for themselves. That cannot be because only those who have been regenerated are peacemakers, and those who are regenerated have been given the Spirit of adoption, who testifies with their spirits that they are, indeed, the children of God. Rather, I believe the text is referring to the peacemakers as children of God in relationship to their position in this world. It is similar to what the apostle Paul mentions in Romans, that the earnest expectation of the creature—that is, the brute creation—waits for the manifestation of the sons of God (8:19).



In a moment that which was formerly veiled shall be brought to light in judgment. Now the glory, riches, treasures, and honor that are ours are from the world. Now it is hidden from the world who we are as to our innermost essence—that is, the children of God. Now the glory that we have been given is veiled behind a cloak of human flesh, so that we appear to be the same as other men before the sight of all. Do you understand that? Due to the weakness of our faith and our own sins and sinfulness, we sometimes doubt for ourselves the very peace that belongs to us in the gospel. Our sinful flesh is the first to rise in judgment against the children of God and to condemn them as the children of the devil. The flesh has its own word about the peacemakers.

Meanwhile, the world also judges the peacemakers as schismatics, radicals, cultists, and antinomians. The church is declared to be many things by the world, but *peacemakers* is not one of those things. Do we not know this to be true in our own history as a denomination of churches? How often have we not heard such things from the world, even from our own flesh and blood? Perhaps in the beginning, as a cloak for their unbelief, there were those who expressed a faint interest in the reformation. What do they say now? They say that we are troublers. We are schismatics. And we are unloving people. We certainly are not peacemakers. Has the judgment of the world been any different throughout the church's history? That word has never changed. We may never expect that word to change, for the Lord promised us that there would be those who persecute us and say all manner of evil against us falsely for his sake.

That this is the world's judgment over against the church should be unsurprising because it is the very same judgment that the world declared concerning the church's head, Jesus Christ. The whole world was represented in the trial and crucifixion of Christ. Historically, the death

of the cross was a form of Roman execution that declared Christ to be an enemy of the state. Christ was judged before the world in Pilate's court as a common criminal or murderer would have been judged. The church of Jesus' day criticized him for being a friend to publicans and sinners. The Pharisees demanded of Christ a sign, claiming that he had a devil. Caiaphas, the high priest, condemned Christ as a blasphemer when Christ plainly taught that he was the Son of God. In Psalm 120:6–7 we read Christ's prayer: "My soul hath long dwelt with him that hateth peace. I am for peace: but when I speak, they are for war." The world and the false church railed on Christ because they hated his words. And so it is for the peacemakers, who are slandered and who are spitefully used and persecuted for Christ's sake.

I say that the world has a word to say about the church. But when God comes in Jesus Christ for judgment, then shall the peacemakers be called the children of God. God's word is the only word that matters. Now it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears, we shall be made like unto him, for we shall see him as he is. God's word of judgment on the world is the same word by which the preaching of the gospel is heard and embraced by the children of God in this world. It is the same word that shall be declared at the end our lives upon earth when we shall appear before God in judgment. And it is the final word that God shall declare when he comes in Jesus Christ at the very end, when he shall raise us up in glory and shall judge both the quick and the dead at his appearing.

Be comforted, ye peacemakers, for soon shall your full deliverance be perfected, and you shall receive the fruits of the labor and trouble that you have borne. Lift your heads, for your redemption draws nigh.

—Garrett Varner

## CONTRIBUTION

# BUT WHAT DOES GOD REQUIRE?

[Scene one: circa 1844]

**Reformed:** To be Reformed is to insist that the church of Jesus Christ must not worship God in any other way than he has commanded in his word.

**Seventh-day Adventist:** I agree with you. But you do not actually give heed to this requirement because your church gathers for corporate worship on Sunday.

**Reformed:** What do you mean?

**Adventist:** God makes very clear in scripture that the *seventh* day is the Sabbath. First, scripture specifically identifies the Sabbath as the seventh day. "Six days ye shall gather it [manna]; but on the seventh day, which is the sabbath, in it there shall be none" (Ex. 16:26). And again: "But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God" (Deut. 5:14).

Nowhere in scripture does it *explicitly* state that the sabbath day was changed from Saturday to Sunday. Furthermore, when Jesus Christ lived on the earth, he kept the seventh day as the Sabbath, and he also preached in the synagogues on the Sabbath. Paul entered the synagogues on the seventh day to preach to the Jews. What does God require? There is nothing dark or hidden or mysterious about it! It could not be any clearer! The seventh day is the Sabbath!

**Reformed:** But you are ignoring all the scripture passages in the New Testament that speak of the first day of the week as the Lord's day. It was on the first day of the week that the disciples in Troas came together to break bread, and Paul conversed with them. It was on the first day of the week that the Corinthian church was charged by Paul to gather alms. It was on the Lord's day that John was in the Spirit and received a vision from the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is very clear that the apostolic church recognized Sunday as the Lord's day.

**Adventist:** I agree with you that Sunday was called the Lord's day. But the most that you can deduce from those passages of scripture is that the early church honored Sunday in remembrance of Christ's resurrection. Those passages do not literally teach that God changed the sabbath day from Saturday to Sunday. Neither do those passages establish irrefutable evidence that the requirements of the fourth commandment were observed on the first day of the week. For example, those passages give no explicit demand to abstain from earthly labor. Therefore, you have not proven to me that God commanded a change for the day of rest. Your reference to those passages only begs the question.

**Reformed:** I disagree. The New Testament teaches very clearly that the church assembled for worship on the Lord's day. However, there is more to be said about this matter. God prescribed two Old Testament Sabbath feasts that the Jews observed on the first day of the week because in his eternal counsel God intended, upon the dawn of the new dispensation, to change the day of rest from Saturday to Sunday. The first feast was the feast of firstfruits, which was fulfilled when the Lord Jesus Christ on the first day of the week arose from the grave and entered into his everlasting Sabbath. The second feast was Pentecost, which was fulfilled when the Spirit of the risen Lord Jesus Christ swooped down upon the church on the first day of the week to bring to the church the blessings of the everlasting Sabbath. Therefore, it is undeniable that God always intended for the Lord's day to be the new day of rest when his Son, the Lord of the Sabbath, fulfilled God's promise of the everlasting rest.

**Adventist:** No. You still have not proven to me that God *explicitly* commanded the church to observe Sunday instead of Saturday as the new day of rest. If God wanted the church of the new dispensation to assemble for worship on Sunday, he would have specifically commanded it in his word.

Instead, according to her own self-will and contrary to God's will, the church chose to change the day. The question is, what does God require? *What does God explicitly require in his word?* Since we must worship God in no other way than he has commanded in his word, we must worship God on the seventh day.

**Reformed:** But surely you must recognize that God did not need to give a specific command in the New Testament. If you take the teaching of scripture as a whole, then it is unmistakably clear that God requires that on Sunday we diligently frequent his house to hear his word! According to your blind fixation on God's command for the Old Testament church to observe the seventh day as the Sabbath, you willfully miss the whole of scripture's teaching. Therefore, all your Saturday worship is profane and loathsome to God.

**Adventist:** Your words are cruel and oppressive. By your lies you cast out our names as an evil thing. The question is, what does God require? What does God *explicitly* require? God never gave a literal command that Sunday is the new day of rest. I will remain unconvinced of your position unless you can give to me a specific text where God commanded that Sunday be the new day of rest. Until then, I charge your worship on Sunday to be self-willed and idolatrous.

### *[Scene two: circa 2024]*

**Reformed:** To be Reformed is to insist that the church of Jesus Christ must not worship God in any other way than he has commanded in his word.

**Exclusive Psalmist:** I agree with you. But you do not actually give heed to this requirement because your church sings something other than the 150 psalms in corporate worship.

**Reformed:** What do you mean?

**EP:** God makes very clear in scripture that the church sang psalms for corporate worship. Would you like to hear it explicitly commanded? Here: "Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him, talk ye of all his wondrous works" (1 Chron. 16:9). And here: "Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms" (Ps. 95:2). And here: "Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him: talk ye of all his wondrous works" (105:2). Nowhere in scripture does it explicitly state that the church sang anything other than psalms in corporate worship. Furthermore, when Jesus Christ lived on the earth, he sang psalms. He sang the great *Hallel* hymn before he left the upper room for the Mount of Olives. Paul told the churches of Colossae and Ephesus to teach and admonish one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, which refer to the various headings above the 150 psalms. James wrote to the churches, "Is any merry? let him sing psalms" (James 5:13). What does God require? There is nothing dark or hidden or mysterious about it! It could not be any clearer! The church must only sing psalms in corporate worship!

**Reformed:** But you are ignoring all the other scripture passages that speak of the church singing together in corporate worship with songs other than the literal 150 psalms. Moses and the children of Israel sang a song unto the Lord after God's gracious wonder of parting the Red Sea and his mighty deliverance of Israel from Egypt. All Israel sang the song of the well in thanks to God, who gave them water in the wilderness. And what of the song in Deuteronomy 32 that God specifically required Moses and Joshua to write down and to teach the children of Israel? Did not David as God's Christ bid the children of Judah to learn the song of the bow when Saul and Jonathon died in battle?

**EP:** I agree with you that those are songs of worship to God. But the most that you can deduce from those passages of scripture is that Israel sang songs together. Those passages do not teach that God commanded songs other than the 150 psalms to be sung in corporate worship on the Sabbath. You have not proven to me that in corporate worship God requires anything other than the literal 150 psalms. Your reference to those passages only begs the question. Furthermore, you must see that Jesus is the sweet psalmist of Israel, who in the midst of the church sings praise unto God. The psalms are Jesus' songs, and he is the one singing them. Therefore, in corporate worship the church must sing psalms to sing with Jesus.

**Reformed:** I disagree, for there are terrible inconsistencies in your doctrine. Let us assume, for the moment, that the church must sing psalms in her corporate worship to sing with Jesus. Now, is it not true that the Lord Jesus Christ has entered his everlasting Sabbath? Is it not true that there are no more "days" for the Lord, but only the everlasting day of rest? If the church must sing psalms in corporate worship to sing with Jesus, then that must certainly imply that the everlasting Sabbath of the Lord consists in exclusive psalm singing. But if that is the case, then those glorified souls in their heavenly corporate worship, who rejoice before God's throne in marvelous doxologies and who sing the ode of Moses and of the Lamb, are guilty of will worship. Someone must tell them quickly that their worship is intolerable and that they must sing only the literal 150 psalms in order to sing with Jesus. Or maybe they have already figured it out for themselves, when they began to sing those lovely songs of praise but Jesus sang something else.

**EP:** But what does God re—

**Reformed:** I am not done. Jesus is in his everlasting Sabbath when the church sings on Sunday. Jesus is in his everlasting Sabbath when the church sings on Monday. Jesus is in his everlasting Sabbath when the church sings on Friday. Now, if it is true that the church must sing the literal 150 psalms in corporate worship to sing with Jesus—who has entered his everlasting Sabbath—then it stands to reason that the church must sing the 150 psalms to sing with Jesus every

other day of the week. And although you have not made this your official doctrine, I suspect that in the near future you will likewise find it intolerable for members of your church to sing anything other than the literal 150 psalms at home and at school. You will find it intolerable if on Monday someone puts Solomon's song of songs or Jeremiah's laments to tune. You will find it intolerable to make melody with the ten commandments on Friday. You will find it intolerable if at school any of your children sing Martin Luther's "Ein feste Burg." You *must* find it intolerable, for Jesus Christ in his eternal Sabbath only sings with the church when she sings the literal 150 psalms!

**EP:** *But what does God require?* You still have not proven to me that God *explicitly* commanded something other than psalms to be sung in corporate worship. If God wanted the church to sing something other than psalms, then he would have specifically commanded it in his word. It was the early church who, contrary to God's will, decided to compose songs and sing doxologies other than the 150 psalms. Thus, if we must worship God in no other way than he has commanded in his word, we must sing only the literal 150 psalms.

**Reformed:** But surely you must recognize that God did not need to give a specific command for the church to praise him with songs other than the literal 150 psalms. God was pleased by his Spirit of inspiration to author other songs of praise unto himself in scripture besides the 150 psalms. God has given the whole of his word as the revelation of himself in the face of Jesus Christ so that his elect church might know him and respond in praise unto him. If you take the teaching of scripture as a whole, then it is unmistakably clear that God requires that we sing the truth of his word! According to your blind fixation on the word *psalms* in scripture—while conveniently ignoring that the simplest translation of *zamir* is "song," that *tehillah* means "song of praise," and that *mizmor* means "a melody"—you willfully miss the simple fact that God has given the whole of his word to his people so that they might know him and praise him. You have introduced into your church worship an age-old tradition of men and have fallen from the liberty wherewith Christ has made you free. Therefore, all your Sunday worship is profane and loathsome to God.

**EP:** Your words are cruel and oppressive. By your lies you cast out our names as an evil thing. The question is, what does God require? *What does God explicitly require?* God never gave a literal command that the church must sing something other than psalms. I will remain unconvinced of your position unless you can give to me a specific text where God commanded the church to sing something other than the literal 150 psalms in corporate worship. Until then, I charge your worship as self-willed and idolatrous.

—LB



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325 84th St SW, Suite 102  
Byron Center, MI 49315

## FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL

*Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. — Romans 16:3–4*

A pair of lovely souls were the married couple Priscilla and Aquila. They were Jewish converts to the gospel who lived in Rome. Aquila was born in Pontus, a province on the north coast of Asia Minor. There were Jews from Pontus in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Perhaps Aquila had heard Peter preach and was one of the thousands converted that day.

The apostle Paul met Aquila and Priscilla when he first came to the Greek city of Corinth on his second missionary journey. Paul stayed with Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth because they were makers of tents like he was. They were refugees in Corinth from Rome because Emperor Claudius had expelled all the Jews from Rome, and Aquila and Priscilla were forced to flee. The Jews had been disturbing the peace on account of the preaching of Christ in Rome. That was not the only time persecution had come to the church and people of God on account of the false church. Persecution of the church also happened during the Reformation on account of the radical and rebellious Anabaptists, and that persecution of the church would not be the last.

When Paul's stay in Corinth was finished, he took the couple with him to Ephesus and left them there while he went up to Jerusalem. In Ephesus they heard Apollos the Alexandrian preaching the things of the Lord fervently, diligently, and boldly in the synagogue of the Jews. Having heard him, Aquila and Priscilla instructed Apollos more fully in the truth of Christ, and Apollos mightily convinced the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. Apollos would later be called as the minister of the new congregation at Corinth. Staying in Ephesus, the husband and wife would play host to the church in their house.

When Paul returned to Corinth on his third missionary journey, Aquila and Priscilla were back in Rome, and Paul mentions them specifically as his helpers in Christ. They were, in fact, fellow workers with Paul who shared the burden and trouble of the gospel ministry. This was not a matter of a mere shared Jewish heritage or of shared secular occupations or even of being kindred spirits. Aquila and Priscilla were in Christ. They were saved by Christ. They loved Christ, and they thus loved the gospel and the gospel ministry. It was everything to them, and they supported the gospel ministry with all their might. That is what the power of the gospel does to those on whom God lays hold. He transforms them and causes them to be instruments in his hands. It was not them, but the grace of God in them.

Among the things for which Paul publicly thanks them before all the churches was that they laid down their necks for his life. Paul's life was frequently in danger on account of his preaching. He was hated of all the Jews, and they hounded and harried him throughout the Roman Empire during all his labors. The Jews beat him five times and stoned him once. And if there were not the perils of his own countrymen, then there were the hazards of travel throughout the ancient world and the troubles that belong to the ministry of the gospel in a wicked and perverse world. As Paul says, "In perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren." Aquila and Priscilla saved his life. They laid down their own necks for his sake and imperiled their own lives to save him. Such was the love that they had for the gospel. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. The Lord laid down his life for his people; in the Lord they lay down their lives for the gospel. Such is the power of his Spirit. Such is the beauty that God's grace creates.

—NJL