

The background features a stylized illustration in shades of orange and white. It depicts a hand holding a sword, with a shield positioned in front of it. The shield is decorated with several circular patterns. The overall style is clean and modern, with a focus on geometric shapes and a limited color palette.

SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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

Deuteronomy 33:29

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CONTENTS

- 3** **MEDITATION**
DRY BONES LIVE
Rev. Nathan J. Langerak
- 8** **FROM THE EDITOR**
Rev. Nathan J. Langerak
- 8** **EDITORIAL**
UNION WITH CHRIST (3):
REGENERATION INTRODUCED
Rev. Nathan J. Langerak
- 14** **DRY MORSEL**
WHAT HAPPENED TO THE
PHILIPPINE CHURCHES? (4):
THE BAPTISM CONTROVERSY
Rev. Jeremiah Pascual
- 20** **RUNNING FOOTMEN**
LOST AND FOUND: THE ANTITHESIS
Michael J. Vermeer

- 24** **INSIGHTS**
A VISIT WITH FATHER PATRICK
Andy Birkett
- 26** **CONTRIBUTION**
THE WELL-MEANT OFFER
AND GOD'S DECREE (1)
Earl David Kamps
- 32** **CONTRIBUTION**
THE MINOR CONFESSIONS (1):
AN INTRODUCTION
Garrett Varner
- 36** **FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL**
Rev. Nathan J. Langerak



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DRY BONES LIVE

1. The hand of the LORD was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones,
2. And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry.
3. And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest.
4. Again he said unto me, Prophecy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.
5. Thus saith the Lord GOD unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live:
6. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the LORD.
7. So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone.
8. And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them.
9. Then said he unto me, Prophecy unto the wind, prophecy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.
10. So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army.
11. Then he said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts.
12. Therefore prophecy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel.

13. And ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves,
14. And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the LORD have spoken it, and performed it, saith the LORD.
—Ezekiel 37:1–14

Terrible scene! A valley full of dead, dry bones! This is the whole house of Israel! A sad and hopeless state is the state of the sinner under the wrath of God. The sinner is guilty before the Lord his God. So then the sinner's condition is also a condition of death from which he cannot lift himself.

Wonderful and marvelous work of grace! A powerful Word and Wind from Jehovah! God gives life to those dead bones! A mighty army—the church of God—is formed from the heaps of those dead bones!

What the prophet writes he saw in a vision that is similar to the visions of the book of Revelation that were seen by the apostle John. Those visions show in a figure many profound, spiritual realities about the coming of the kingdom of God. So in Ezekiel 37 we have a deep, mysterious, and ineffable wonder of grace shown to us in a figure of a valley full of dead, dry bones that God causes to live.

In his vision the prophet is lifted up by the Spirit of God. Carried on the Breath of God, the prophet takes a flight across a great valley. God calls the scene below in the valley “your graves.” “I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves...And ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves... and brought you up out of your graves” (vv. 12–13).

The valley is an enormous, mass grave of those who have been slain. The graves are open, so that the prophet can look into death's insatiable maw and see its grotesque content. The valley is full of bones, great piles of human bones. Oh, and the bones are very dry!

Can these bones live?

Important question!

A question of salvation!

Can the bones live? Is living in their power?

Impossible!

The bones are the remains of dead men, and the bones are very dry. There is no life, no willing, no desiring,

no choosing, and no working in those dead, dry bones. There is no willing and no power in those dry bones to raise themselves from their grave. The bones are in the grip of the fearsome power of death—death that is the word of Jehovah too. It was death as a word of the Lord that stripped the men of their lives, that brought them into their graves, and that gnawed at their skin, flesh, and sinews until there was nothing left but a heap of bones.

Total depravity! The words do not convey completely the awfulness of the condition that they describe. Death! Rottenness! Decay! And but a picture—and an entrance—of the most terrible grave of all: hell, where the worm does not die, where the fire is not quenched, where there is darkness far darker than the darkness of the coldest grave, and where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth in the eternal wasting of the place of God's wrath.

The words are so easy to say: *total depravity*. But what do these words mean?

These words mean that we with all men are incapable of doing any good by nature. The words mean that the wickedness of man is not only a corruption of his deeds but also a corruption of his whole nature. From that nature as a wicked root come all man's evil deeds as weeds spring from their evil roots. Man's depravity consists not only in the fact that he does not do any good deeds or perform any virtuous actions, but he is also incapable of such. In the garden of Eden, Adam was a whole man, capable in all things to will agreeably to the will of God. After the fall Adam lost all the powers of his nature with which God had adorned man in his creation, and Adam became nothing but a dry and dead skeleton with the loathsome smell of death lingering in the air around his grave.

Man's total depravity means that man does not bear the image of God. Oh, yes, once it could be seen on man's face and in all his actions that he was a son of God. But now that beautiful image is gone, and man is but an ugly pile of bones that you cannot recognize, and he bears the image of death and of extreme wickedness.

His depraved nature means also that man does not have a free will to choose God and the good. Man's will is his faculty to choose and desire. Adam in Eden had a free will. His free will was not the highest freedom, for the highest freedom is the inability to sin. That freedom belongs to the new man and to the perfection of heaven. The new man is perfect: he loves God, loves God's law, and cannot sin. Now we have that new man in an old vessel. Adam was free to serve God, and Adam was capable of turning away from God. Adam could by an act of his will depart from God, disobey God, and ally himself with

Satan. Adam was not absolutely free. Man is never absolutely free. He is free within the counsel of God. In the providence of God, Adam abused the freedom of his will and turned from God, who was his life, to the devil, who was the death of Adam. Now man's will is bound. It is still a will and is still active. The will chooses this or that. But that will is under the power of sin and death. Man as a pile of dead bones always chooses sin; and whatever he chooses, he chooses sinfully and over against God. Man is bound under the power of death, and there is no willing and desiring in death. Yes, with death all the desires of man perish, and so the dead man has no spiritual power to choose the good.

Man's depravity consists in and is inclined to all wickedness. Man is an active and willing sinner who sins with a will and with all his being. It is not that he merely tends to wickedness that he can from time to time overcome; but because he is corrupt in nature and wills the evil, he is also bent toward that evil with his whole being, and all his deeds are wicked. He not only does not will or do the good, but also he is opposed to the good.

And man is such a loathsome creature from his conception and birth.

He does not become evil throughout the course of his life or because of bad influences in his environment.

He is born evil.

"Yes," the believer says, "I am evil, born in sin!"

The prophet sees this in the picture of a valley full of human remains that are very dry! Historically, the prophet sees the ruin of the human race in Adam and the ruin of the nation of Israel under the law.

The humans had been "slain" (v. 9)!

The law massacred these people. The law is the ministry of death. Through the coming of the law to the nation of Israel, it became perfectly obvious that man cannot live by the law. The whole house of Israel is in the valley. God instructs the prophet: "These bones are the whole house of Israel" (v. 11). In the death of the sinner, we are not dealing with a random consequence for sin or a karmic relationship between sin and death. But in death we have to do with the holy and righteous God, who said, "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them" (Gal. 3:10). The issue in man's total depravity is not only that he cannot return to God, that he will not return to God, or that he cannot will to return to God; but the death of the sinner is also God's judgment and work according to his strictest justice to reward sin with death. The greatest issue in considering the death of man is God—what God did to man and that before this God, man only daily increases his debt.

That we have to do with God's justice in the text is

clear in that the prophet on his flight over the valley sees graves. Dead people do not bury themselves. Dead people are buried, and the undertaker is God himself. The valley is a great grave of many graves! They are the graves of those who had been slain under the sentence of the law. God put all the bones there. God in his judgment upon the human race in Eden killed man, put him under the curse, and cast him into a spiritual grave. The issue in man's total depravity and salvation is not only man's great wickedness and spiritual inability but also God's will, justice, and power. God judged all men guilty in Adam; God consigned all men to death, and he cast all men from his presence and fellowship into spiritual graves. Until God releases a man from his guilt, opens that man's grave, and brings him out of that grave, that man stays there, wrapped in the corruption of death.

This is the believer's confession about himself by nature. This was Israel's confession: "They say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts" (v. 11). This is a reference to the historical circumstances of Israel's captivity—a kind of death of the nation—and thus to the historical background to the vision. Israel speaks in captivity from their graves in Babylon of their dry bones. The word *bone* means strength. When Israel says that their bones are dried, they say that in themselves there is no strength, no power, and no ability to realize their salvation and the covenant promises of God or to free themselves from their graves in Babylon. Their hope was gone as far as man is concerned, as gone as the hope of life is gone from a man in the grave. That confession refers also to the church as she is by nature fallen in sin and lying under the curse.

Can these bones live?
Impossible with man!
Wonderwork of God!

God opened the graves, caused the people to come out of their graves, and formed them into a mighty army to be brought again to the land of Israel.

Note well! When God says "Therefore prophesy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD: Behold, O my people, I will open your graves" (v. 12), then God does not command the prophet to prophesy in response to the people's confession. Rather, God says, as it were, "The circumstances being such, prophesy to them and proclaim the name of Jehovah as the one who opens their graves." Their confession of their condition was exactly right. That condition was the occasion for the revelation of Jehovah's marvelous work of grace. Jehovah regenerates totally depraved sinners. He does not regenerate good people, willing people, working people, or desiring people. He regenerates those whose bones are very dry and whose hope is cut off.

Our hope cut off is Adam. That hope on a far more glorious and eternal scale is announced in Jesus Christ. He is the first begotten from the dead! He is the first-fruits, and we are the increase. Oh, yes, to open his people's graves and to bring them alive from the grave, God must first enter the grave. For it is only God who can pay the debt to God for man's sins. Only God can accomplish a righteousness that is worthy of life from the dead. Because of God's righteousness in Christ, in which he fulfilled the law, he ended that ministry of death. Because of Christ's righteousness, we must also be made alive—regenerated.

In the valley of dry bones, we have a picture of regeneration. The whole salvation of the elect sinner can be summed up in one word: *regeneration*. There is essentially nothing more that must be done to the elect sinner or that he must do. Regeneration will be perfected; that is true. Regeneration will come to its highest expression in the new heaven and the new earth, but being regenerated the elect sinner is saved.

This regeneration—so highly celebrated—of the elect but in himself dead sinner God reveals to Ezekiel in the vision. Scripture uses the term *regeneration*, which means *to be born again*. In Ezekiel's vision that wonderwork is described as life from the dead. Regeneration is to make the dead sinner alive, to make a heap of bones a person, and out of living people to form a church.

Thus regeneration is God's work of resurrection. This is why God says that he opens graves and brings living people out of their graves. God says that he not only opens their graves but that he also takes the people out. Doctrine that teaches that the salvation of the sinner consists in the sinner's accepting God's offer of grace or availing himself of God's work of grace is similar to saying that God opens the grave but man has to climb out. God says that he opens the graves, and he takes the people out, and by his work they stand up. He does everything.

This work of making alive is a new creation, making the elect sinner a new man by a wonder no less great and glorious—indeed more glorious—than Adam's formation out of the dust of the ground. God says that he will give the bones sinews, bring flesh on them, spread skin over the sinews, give the people a Spirit, and they shall live. The old man died in Adam; but as God brought Adam out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, so God forms a new man and breathes into him a new Spirit. Regeneration makes a new creature. Regeneration takes man as he is spiritually dead, wholly incapable of any good, and inclined to all wickedness, and makes him a new man. He is a man as Adam was—in the image of God—who loves God and is righteous and holy.

And God forms his church in the world! God creates an army! Up out of the ground, bone touches bone and sinews join them together, flesh forms on them, skin covers them, and men form into a great army. As when the nation of Israel came out of Egypt and was a great army, so regeneration forms a new Israel, the church, into a great army. What the prophet sees in the vision under the type of the regeneration of captive Israel is not merely the regeneration of any person or of any one time in history but of the entirety of God's elect church in all of history, which in the end forms the great and innumerable throng that overcomes sin, Satan, and the world and has the victory forever in heaven.

God spoke this wonder!

He does all things by his Word. God created by his Word. God recreates by his Word. Not now by the preaching but by the voice of God, that Word who lives and abides forever. Oh, yes, in the closest connection with the preaching. For the prophet was commanded, "Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the LORD" (v. 4). But listen to verse 7: "So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise." It is not an inarticulate noise, but a voice comes as Ezekiel is prophesying. That voice is the living, creative, omnipotent, and irresistible voice of God. That same voice had told the prophet before what would happen when he prophesied:

5. Thus saith the Lord GOD unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live:
6. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the LORD. (vv. 5–6)

The power of the regeneration of man and of his spiritual recreation is the Word of God. The very same power that made all things in the beginning operates in the vision to recreate man from dry bones. As Jehovah had promised, so it was: "Behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone. And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above" (vv. 7–8).

But there was no spirit in the body. A body without a spirit is an inanimate shell. There is no life in the body until a spirit is breathed into the body. Just as God made Adam in the beginning out of the dust of the ground and breathed into him the spirit of life, so this recreated man must have a spirit.

And what a spirit comes there!

The spirit that animates this new man is the Spirit of the living God!

8. But there was no breath in them.
9. Then said he unto me, Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.
10. So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army. (vv. 8–10)

The Spirit is a wind. He is the divine wind. He was present in the creation of the world, brooding upon the face of the deep as a hen broods her eggs. The Spirit makes life to abound! And he is the Spirit in the vision who animates the recreated men. So God says, "Ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, and shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live" (vv. 13–14).

God is teaching the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and that regeneration consists in receiving the Spirit of grace. With the Spirit the men stand, and by the Spirit they live and walk. They walk after a new law, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ, being freed from the law of sin and death. No longer do they mind the things of the flesh, but they mind the things of the Spirit.

The Spirit is the Spirit of the Word, so that the action of the Word is made effectual by the Spirit, and the men live. God says to the prophet, "Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live" (v. 9). "So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army" (v. 10).

That wind is the Spirit of God, and he is God. Yet he obeys the voice of a man! Then the man was Ezekiel—but only in type. Now the man is Christ. The Spirit of regeneration is the Spirit of Christ, who obeys Christ and does what Christ wills as he speaks in the name of God and performs all God's will and good pleasure. By Spirit and Word God recreates for himself and calls to himself and into his fellowship a living people.

Wonderwork of grace!

The very deadness and dryness of those who are raised and recreated testify to this fact. It is one thing—and a work of God's great power—to cause a man to stand up out of the dust of the ground. God calls the things that are not as though they were. But in the vision God raises the dead who are dead because they transgressed God's law. To raise them God must be satisfied. To make satisfaction God must provide for their righteousness. The

power of God's work to save them is grace. Grace is the power of God to take the whole of creation, fallen in sin and lying under the curse, and to raise that creation to the height of heavenly glory in Christ Jesus. Regeneration is that aspect of the wonder of grace whereby the life of the new heaven and the new earth breaks in upon a man, lays hold upon him, and makes a dead sinner live with the life of the new heaven and the new earth. Grace not only restores what Adam lost, but grace also brings to a higher state of development and perfection in Christ. Grace does that sovereignly, irresistibly, and efficaciously. Grace does not offer a proposition. Grace does not ask the sinner to come in. Grace does not invite the sinner to come to God. Grace is no weak and impotent thing. But grace is the glorious and eternal favor of the living God, whose purpose is the eternal blessedness of his creatures with him in his covenant. Grace brings that work to pass without the will or the works of the sinner. Grace opens the grave, brings the sinner out of the grave, makes the sinner alive, causes the sinner to know Jehovah, and brings the sinner ultimately into the land of Canaan on the other side of Jordan in the new heaven and the new earth. Grace leaves nothing to man, for man has nothing but his guilt and depravity and is nothing but a dead, damnable, and wretched creature.

Flowing from election! Jehovah speaks and expresses his purpose. He has no other purpose than what he has purposed in himself from all eternity.

5. Thus saith the Lord GOD unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live:
6. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the LORD. (vv. 5–6)

Intimately and inseparably connected to the confession that it is the totally depraved sinner who is regenerated is the confession that it is the *elect*, totally depraved sinner who is regenerated. The question regarding fallen man is the same as Jehovah's question to Ezekiel in verse 3: "Can these bones live?"

Live they must!
To live is their salvation!
Can they live?

And the answer is the same as Ezekiel's: "O Lord GOD, thou knowest" (v. 3). Jehovah is the one who speaks. He is the absolute Lord over all. He possesses all sovereignty

and power. He is the sovereign potter who has power over the clay to make of one lump one vessel to honor and another to dishonor. It is impossible that those bones live on their own. To live is wholly impossible for them. They cannot, they will not, and they cannot will to live. There is in them no power! Jehovah knows! He knew from eternity the dry bones that he would recreate in his own image. He knew them in love. He alone is both able and willing to make those bones live.

Because of God's covenant purpose!

Oh, Jehovah calls them his people! This is his term of endearment and love toward his Israel whom he had chosen to bring near to him. They are the house of Israel. They are not all Israel that are of Israel. The house of Israel are those who are Israel by election. This election of Israel stands in distinction from Esau, who was also of Isaac and Rebekah, who was born into the sphere of the covenant, but who was rejected by God and hated of him. And God promises to bring Israel into the land of Canaan where he will place them in their own land. The land of promise. The land of God's covenant fellowship—the new heaven and the new earth—where every one has his own inheritance appointed by the Lord and where Israel will dwell with God forever.

That life Jehovah God explains as "ye shall know that I am the LORD" (vv. 6, 13). Regeneration makes a dead sinner—whose death consisted in his being far from God—alive, which life is to know Jehovah his God. That regeneration brings a man back into fellowship with God is also the point of God's promising to bring Israel back into the land of Canaan. That was the land of God's fellowship and friendship with his people as the type of the new heaven and the new earth where there is the perfection of God's covenant. Covenant fellowship is what Adam's life in the garden was. That was the purpose of his creation: to know the living God. To be made alive is to be alive to God. Life is to know him as Jehovah, to know him as the God of one's salvation, to know him in his saving fellowship and friendship, and to know his gracious word and will.

The confession of the living church! Yes, now we know it! Listen to true faith speak! There is no credit to us. Jehovah our God has opened our graves! Jehovah our God has spoken it, for there is no power in the word of man to perform it! Jehovah our God has performed it! We know this now. The salvation of the church is wholly the work of Jehovah by his Word and Spirit.

—NJL

The issue that you hold in your hands reflects the truth that *Sword and Shield* is a believer's paper. We have had many submissions sent into the magazine either from some of our regular contributors or from others. *Sword and Shield* started in part to give a voice to the believer as he occupies that most fundamental office of all believer because he shares in Christ's anointing and is a prophet, priest, and king. Refreshing and encouraging it is to have an issue from time to time that highlights the fact that *Sword and Shield* is a believer's magazine.

The editor continues his series on union with Christ by taking up the subject of regeneration. Along with that he includes a meditation on the fascinating passage in Ezekiel 37 on the same divine wonder of regeneration.

From the Philippines Reverend Pascual gives another informative article on what happened in the Bulacan Reformed Protestant Church in the Philippines. Mr. Andy Birkett sent in an enlightening story of his visit with a Roman Catholic priest. The pope's man sounds very familiar and cannot figure out what is wrong with Protestant Reformed theology! Mr. Michael Vermeer contributed an article on the important—crucial—doctrine of the antithesis. With the recovery of the doctrine of

the unconditional covenant in the Reformed Protestant Churches, there also has been a renewed interest in and growth in understanding about the antithesis. These two doctrines stand and fall together because one cannot love God and God's enemies. Mr. Garrett Varner starts a series on the minor confessions in this issue. These confessions are called minor not because they are of lesser importance than the three forms of unity but because they are of limited scope in comparison to the three forms of unity.

Mr. Earl Kamps, the only Reformed Protestant seminarian, contributes the first installment of a dogmatics paper on the well-meant gospel offer and the decree of God. Mr. Kamps has begun his internship this fall at Second Reformed Protestant Church. During his internship he will continue to submit regular contributions to the magazine. It is part of the ministerial office to write theology, stating both the positive truth and refuting the lie. And it is part of the ministerial training in the Reformed Protestant Churches that the seminarians learn to write well.

May the Lord edify your hearts, refresh your souls, and inform your minds with the content of these pages.

—NJL

UNION WITH CHRIST (3): REGENERATION INTRODUCED

Application and Order

In this series of articles on salvation, begun in the June 2024 issue of *Sword and Shield*, we are interested in the application of salvation to the elect child of God. I noted that we do not have to speak of the application of salvation. In Reformed theology it is common to distinguish between the appointment to salvation in the eternal decree of God, the accomplishment of salvation at the cross of Jesus Christ, and the application of salvation to the elect child of God. Yet it may never be forgotten that while we may speak of the application of salvation to the

elect child of God, that application of salvation *is* the salvation of the elect child of God. The fact is that some aspects of salvation take place at the subconscious level, and other aspects of salvation arise to the conscious level. According to the baptism form, the elect, infant children of believers are partakers of the grace in Christ without the infants' understanding or knowledge:

Although our young children do not understand these things, we may not therefore exclude them from baptism, for as they are without their knowledge partakers of the condemnation in

Adam, so are they again received unto grace in Christ. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 259)

The people of God are joined with Christ and regenerated in the narrow sense below the level of their consciousness, so that it is the regular reality in the covenant of grace that the people of God say that there was never a time in their years of discretion when they did not know Christ because they have been members of Christ from the womb and without their knowing it. Other aspects of salvation take place before the consciousness of the people of God, so that in their minds they are translated by the voice of God from darkness into his marvelous light and from the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God's dear Son, and being called they come. God turns them from sin to the Lord, so that they turn to him in their hearts. Hearing the preaching of the word that God justifies the ungodly, they believe that word and are justified in their consciences by faith. The Holy Spirit sanctifies them and makes them saints, and as consequences they hate the evil, love the good, and walk in all the works that God ordained for them from before the foundation of the world. The Lord works in his people both to will and to do of his good pleasure, so that they are rightly said to repent and to believe.

That salvation is of the Lord. That salvation is strictly and exclusively the work of the Lord. The eternal root and cause of salvation is the election of God, and the election of God bears its fruit and has its effect in the application of salvation. The one who is saved has as little to do with the application of salvation as he does with his election and the work of Christ at the cross. Never in the application of salvation do we come to the point where God does his part and man must do his part in order to receive the next installment of salvation. Never do we arrive at the juncture in which man is first in order that God be able to give his promised grace and blessing to man. For instance, never do we come to the point at which there is a prerequisite repentance on the part of man in order that God be able to forgive man his sins. Such a viewpoint is a total corruption of the truth of salvation. Salvation is of the Lord. Salvation is a golden and unbroken chain consisting of the works of God, which extend from the eternal decree to the everlasting glorification of the elect people of God. All their deeds and activities are always the consequences and fruits of the bestowal of salvation upon the people of God according to God's decree.

Further, in this series of articles we are interested in what is commonly called the order of salvation. But the name is misleading if the point of the name is to teach that the main issue is the *order* in which God applies salvation. The order is not temporal. The order certainly does not consist in what God works in man, so that

man by his activity triggers the next benefit of salvation. Thus it is a corruption of the order of salvation and the Reformed view of salvation to teach that God works in man to repent, so that man upon repenting can be forgiven by God. This teaching makes man first and God dependent on man and fundamentally brings conditions and prerequisites into salvation. Some try to evade the charge of conditionality by saying that such a conception is *not* conditional because God works the repenting or that this is simply the order in which God works. However, such an evasion is not a cover or a justification of their corruption. The issue is that their presentation ties the hands of God until man does his part, and whether man does his part by grace or not is entirely immaterial. The only difference between this position and the position of those who use the word *condition* and say that the condition is fulfilled by grace is that the one who refuses to use the word *condition* exposes himself to the additional charge of using a cunning deception to prey on the simple.

Salvation is of the Lord.

Focusing on the temporal order or making the main point of the application of salvation to consist in a supposedly God-ordained order leaves two things out of view.

The first is election. There is no election in that temporal order. When election is brought to bear on the order of salvation, then it is impossible that God must wait upon man. God in eternity ordained the complete salvation of each elect sinner, and that election must have its fruit and cause its effect, which consists in the actual and inevitable gift of complete salvation. As election is unconditional, so the application of salvation is likewise unconditional. As man does not precede God in election, so man's activity never can be what God requires before he will do his part.

Second, such a presentation of a temporal order leaves out of view Jesus Christ and that all of salvation is stored up in him. The temporal order becomes a transaction between God and the elect sinner. But the elect sinner is joined to Christ by the Holy Spirit as God's very first saving act in the heart of that elect sinner. In union with Christ the whole Christ becomes the possession of the elect sinner, so that he is made a partaker of Christ and all his riches and gifts. There is no room in this reality of union with Christ for a salvation by installments. An elect sinner can experience richly the various aspects of his complete salvation in Christ. In his conscience the elect sinner can hear the voice of the Lord address him in the depth of his being; he can be brought to a deep sorrow for sin or a profound love of God; over against the accusation of his conscience that he breaks all God's commandments

and keeps none of them and is inclined to all evil, the elect sinner can be justified and brought to have a sincere and zealous desire to serve the Lord and to reject all that is repugnant to his word. Yet never is it the case that the reception of one benefit of salvation is dependent upon the activity of the sinner who has received a prior grace and performs his part. It is certainly not true that the activity of man as the consequence of having received one benefit—for instance that one is sanctified and consequently he walks in good works—is the trigger for some other blessing or the next installment of salvation.

Rather, it is as the apostle says in 1 Corinthians 1:30: “Of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.” This word comes in the context of God’s election of his church: “God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty” (v. 27). Out of that election as the root and cause, we are united with Christ by God. By that union Christ Jesus is made unto us the whole of our salvation. For these reasons it is better to speak not simply of the order of salvation but of the riches of Christ. All the riches of salvation that we receive are what Christ is made unto us of God. Always in the consideration of the application of salvation to the child of God, we must keep front and center Jesus Christ as the divine treasure-house of salvation. It is as the apostle says, “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8).

Regeneration Necessary

Among the principal benefits of salvation is regeneration.

Understand that when we speak of regeneration as one of the principal benefits of salvation, we are not denying or leaving out of view that justification is the principal benefit of salvation. Justification is rightly said to be the principal benefit of salvation. Justification is that on which all the other benefits depend. When we consider justification as an eternal decree of God forgiving the sins of his people, then the application of salvation to the elect child of God is the consequence of his eternal justification. The same may be said of our justification at the cross of Christ. Romans 4:25 says concerning Christ that he was delivered because of our offenses and raised because of our justification. The translation of the King James Version obscures this point when it says “delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.” The translation “for” makes it seem as though Christ was raised in order to justify us, but the teaching of the text is that the resurrection of Christ was the divine

seal upon the justification that Christ had accomplished for his elect church at the cross. Because we have been justified at the cross, it is just and necessary that we be made partakers of the salvation that Christ accomplished for us and that we be made alive. God loves and blesses the righteous. God always loves and blesses the righteous. God only loves and blesses the righteous. Because we are righteous in eternity and we are righteous at the cross, it is only just and right that as righteous, we be saved and that in our own consciences and experiences. We must be made alive, called out of darkness into God’s marvelous light, justified in our consciences, sanctified, and glorified. Righteousness in eternity and righteousness at the cross stand as the foundation of our salvation.

Rather, when we call regeneration one of the principal benefits of salvation, we are holding to the subjective viewpoint. In the order of salvation, we are interested in the application of salvation to the elect child of God and thus also consciously in his experience of that salvation. Basic to this is that the child of God, who by nature was conceived and born dead in trespasses and sins and ignorant of all spiritual things, must be made alive in order to see the kingdom of God. It is necessary even to see the kingdom of God that a man be born again.

The necessity of regeneration in Christ is that by nature the child of God is dead in Adam. Man is conceived and born dead in trespasses and sins; he walks according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience; and he fulfills the lusts of the flesh and of the mind (Eph. 2:1–3). The imaginations of man’s heart are only evil continually (Gen. 6:5). David confessed about himself that he was shaped in iniquity and in sin his mother conceived him (Ps. 51:5). The natural man is from below, and he is born of the flesh and the will of the flesh, so he minds only the things of the flesh and cannot have any conception of the kingdom of God, which is heavenly and spiritual; and he has no power to become a son of God (John 1:12–13; 3:3–6). Man, being carnal, cannot know the Spirit and cannot receive the Spirit or the things of the Spirit, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot know the Spirit’s things because they are spiritually discerned (14:17; 1 Cor. 2:14). Thus it follows:

9. We have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin;
10. As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:
11. There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.
12. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

13. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips:
 14. Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness:
 15. Their feet are swift to shed blood:
 16. Destruction and misery are in their ways:
 17. And the way of peace have they not known:
 18. There is no fear of God before their eyes.
- (Rom. 3:9–18)

All of this is true of the children of God in their first father, Adam. By virtue of Adam's headship, all the children of Adam are guilty for Adam's sin in the garden; therefore, they come into this world dead in sin. Being guilty of Adam's sin, they are worthy of Adam's punishment, which was death.

From this it follows that with their new head, Jesus Christ, must also come the life of Christ that flows from the head to the members of his body. As in Adam all whom he represented died because of his unrighteous deed, so also all who are in Christ must and shall be made alive because of his righteous deed. It is as the apostle says in Romans 5:17–18:

17. For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.
18. Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.

The phrases "justification of life" and "righteousness shall reign in life" speak of the same reality. The opposite of this reality are the phrases "by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation" and "by one man's offence death reigned by one." In Adam all men entered death. We did not enter death because of our own individual sins, but the whole human race entered the house of death because of the sin of Adam and the condemnation of that sin passed on all Adam's children. The opposite is also true: the justification of the elect church at the cross and the righteousness of the cross of Christ mean that the whole elect church enters life for that reason. The justification of life is the justification that brings life. Being justified we are also delivered from the sentence of death and the house of death and are worthy of eternal life. Righteousness, the righteousness of Christ, thus reigns in life.

The life of regeneration is Christ in the sinner by Christ's Spirit. The life of regeneration is not like a packet of life that is implanted in the sinner without any connection to Christ. Never can regeneration be conceived

of outside the sinner's connection to Christ. But the life implanted into the sinner is implanted into him because of his union with Christ and is Christ in him by Christ's Spirit through faith as a bond with Christ. So the apostle says in Galatians 2:20: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." The word "nevertheless" does not belong. The apostle speaks of the connection of the elect children with Christ from eternity and by divine election. They are one with Christ, and so they were crucified with him. Because they were crucified with him, they also live with him. When the apostle says "faith of the Son of God," he does not mean Jesus' believing. Rather, the apostle defines the connection of the elect with Christ as faith and says that by this faith Christ lives in the elect. There is no life outside Jesus Christ; and the only life that the elect have is life in Christ, and that life is Christ in them.

It must be clear that we are speaking of regeneration in the narrow sense. Frequently Reformed theology speaks of regeneration as it includes conversion and sanctification. The Reformed simply use the term *regeneration* to include the whole work of God to change the sinner in his heart and in all his life. This we call regeneration in the broad sense. But in this article regarding regeneration, we strictly refer to the first work of God to make the dead sinner alive. This we call regeneration in the narrow sense.

This regeneration, as with all the works of salvation, is a divine work. So says Canons of Dort 3–4.12:

And this is the regeneration so highly celebrated in Scripture and denominated a new creation: a resurrection from the dead, a making alive, which God works in us without our aid. But this is in no wise effected merely by the external preaching of the gospel, by moral suasion, or such a mode of operation that after God has performed His part it still remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not, to be converted or to continue unconverted; but it is evidently a supernatural work, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable; not inferior in efficacy to creation or the resurrection from the dead, as the Scripture inspired by the Author of this work declares; so that all in whose heart God works in this marvelous manner are certainly, infallibly, and effectually regenerated and do actually believe. Whereupon the will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence becomes itself active. Wherefore also, man is himself rightly said to believe and repent

by virtue of that grace received. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 168–69)

The truth of man's total depravity means that regeneration cannot be established by the work or will of man—either through man's cooperation with God, man's not resisting the work of the Spirit, or man's accepting an offer of salvation. The elect sinner must be born from above of water and blood and of the Spirit by the will of God and not the will of the flesh or the will of man (John 1:13; 3:3, 5; 1 John 5:8).

This fact is implied in the very terms for this divine transformation of the sinner. It is a new creation, according to Ephesians 2:10: "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." Light played no part in its creation, and neither does man in his recreation. The elect sinner is begotten again from heaven. It is a regeneration or rebirth. The baby plays no part in his conception and birth but is conceived and is born. So the sinner plays no part in his spiritual rebirth. It is called a resurrection. As the dead body cannot revive itself or have any desire for new life, so the sinner does not play any part in his spiritual resurrection from the dead.

Words and Concepts

The Bible uses many terms and concepts to describe what theologically we call regeneration in the narrow sense.

The terms translated as "regeneration" in the following passages mean to be born again. In Matthew 19:28 the Lord applied the term to a renewal of the entire creation: "Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." In Titus 3:5 the term is applied to the elect church: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost." The point of the word "regeneration" is renewal by birth. However, the word denotes *the restoration of a thing to its pristine state, its renovation*, as the renewal or restoration of life after death. In the passages above the term is applied to the renewal of all things and to the renewal of the in-himself dead sinner.

When talking to Nicodemus about the necessity of regeneration, the Lord used a word that means *born* and refers to the generating power of the Father plus a word that means *something from above*, so that the origin of this first work of the Spirit is the regenerating from above. This is what the King James Version translates as "born again." "Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot

see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). The word "born" is properly used of a man's begetting a child, thus the generative power of the father. Rarely the word is used of the mother's act of bearing a child, for instance in John 16:21: "A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world." The word translated as "again" in John 3:3 is properly used to signify *something from above or from a higher place* and rarely is used to mean *again*. In John 3:3 the word "again" should be understood as *begotten from above*. The Lord was teaching Nicodemus that what is necessary is a begetting from above, of which no man is capable, but it is the wonder of God alone.

There is another word that means *born again*. So we read in 1 Peter 1:3: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." The word is used again in verse 23: "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever." This contrasts our first birth into sin and death with our second birth into life everlasting.

In James 1:15–18 there is another word with the same basic reference to being born and that is translated as "bringeth forth" and later as "begat":

15. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.
16. Do not err, my beloved brethren.
17. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.
18. Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

In verse 15 the word is used in connection with sin. When sin is finished, it brings forth death. Sin begets death. In contrast to that, God of his own will begat us with the word of truth. God brings forth life and a new creation. The idea of the word is that one is pregnant and then brings forth from the womb. In all these above words, the idea is of begetting or birthing. This is the physical picture or analogy of the spiritual reality of regeneration.

Scripture also uses various concepts to represent regeneration. Putting all these words and concepts together, we get a full picture of the wonderful, mysterious, and inef-fable work of regeneration.

In Ezekiel 36:26 the prophet represents regeneration as a radical heart surgery: “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.” God takes out one’s stony heart and gives to him a heart of flesh. The old heart is dead to God and to spiritual things, and the new heart is alive to God and to his word.

In Ezekiel 37:1–10 the prophet sees the work of regeneration as the work of the Spirit—or breath of God—that makes a heap of dead and dry bones to become men who live.

Regeneration is called the circumcising of the heart in connection with the Old Testament rite of circumcision. Colossians 2:11 says, “In whom [Christ] also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.” The same thought is found in Romans 2:29: “He is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.” The circumcising of the heart is the removal of the callousness of unregeneracy, unbelief, and impenitence, so that a new and living heart reigns.

Scripture also calls regeneration a new creation. The fallen and dilapidated creature that is man is restored and renewed. Ephesians 2:10 says that “we are his [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” And 2 Corinthians 5:17 says that “if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

Particularly does this designation of regeneration have to do with the restoration of the image of God in man. Man was created in the image of God; and in the fall in Adam, man lost the entire image of God and was turned into the image of his new spiritual father, the devil. So Christ says in John 8:44: “Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.”

This statement of the Lord does not refer only to the Pharisees as the inveterate enemies of Christ, but it is also a revelation of what man became in the fall. Man did not merely lose the image of God, so that he came from a high spiritual state into a neutral one in which he stood in the middle between God and Satan, but man took the side of the devil, and he bears now the devil’s image. This total corruption of the image of God in the fall is what is meant by Canons of Dordt 3–4.1:

Man was originally formed after the image of God. His understanding was adorned with a true

and saving knowledge of his Creator and of spiritual things; his heart and will were upright; all his affections pure; and the whole man was holy. But, revolting from God by the instigation of the devil and abusing the freedom of his own will, he forfeited these excellent gifts, and on the contrary entailed on himself blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgment, became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 166)

The image of God in man was not merely lost but was destroyed; and man took on the image of Satan, which consists in the blindness of man, horrible darkness, vanity, perverseness of judgment, obduracy of heart and will, and the impurity of all his affections.

Thus in regeneration, as regeneration is a recreation of the elect sinner, especially the image of God is on the foreground. We are made sons of God again and now not merely after the image of the earthly but after the pattern of the heavenly. We bore the image of God in Adam; now we bear the image of God in Christ, so that there is not a return to the primitive state in Adam, but there is a going up and above the possibility that the image can ever be lost again.

The other truth that the designation of regeneration as a new creation teaches is a comparison of the manner of regeneration with the manner of God’s creation of the world. God created by his Word and Spirit; so the new, elect man is the work of God’s Word and Spirit. God created by his own power, without the cooperation of any creature; so the new, elect man is a work of God alone, which God works in the elect man without man’s will, aid, or cooperation.

In connection with regeneration as a new creation, scripture also makes the closest connection between regeneration and calling, so much so that regeneration is described as a creative calling in the same way that God called the physical universe into existence by speaking his almighty Word. The Word calls the elect sinner into existence in a sense as a new creature. Romans 4:17 says, “(As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were.” Alluding to the creative work of God in Genesis 1 of calling the universe into being, the apostle says of regeneration that God calls things that are not as though they were. Second Corinthians 4:6 says, “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Here regeneration and calling are so closely connected as to

be inseparable. While we distinguish regeneration in the narrow sense as a calling, and in this the sinner is not necessarily conscious of that calling, we recognize that there is a conscious calling of the sinner to knowledge that must inevitably follow.

Regeneration is also described as a resurrection: “As the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will” (John 5:21). Paul writes of the same thing: “Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:5–6). The elect sinner is dead by nature, and his regeneration consists in God’s resurrection of him from sin and death, so that he lives and can never die.

Regeneration is salvation, not merely one installment of salvation. Regeneration is the very first act of God in the elect sinner who is united to Christ, and in regeneration the whole of salvation is basically included.

Implied is the righteousness of the regenerated. The elect sinner who is regenerated has no right to life by nature but to death only. Seeing that he is made alive, the only ground for that is the righteousness of Christ that has been imputed unto him. Regeneration can be thought of as the calling of the elect sinner, if we understand this not as the preaching but as the living and abiding Word of God, who is Jesus Christ. God always calls the things that are not as though they were. Regeneration includes in principle man’s conversion, sanctification, and glorification, so that the whole of his salvation can be summarized thus: he is born again, begotten from above to the new heavenly life of the resurrection of Christ Jesus, the Lord. Regeneration in the broad sense means that the child of God is turned from sin to God, made a saint, and in principle he sits already in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

Next time we will consider other aspects of the truth of regeneration.

—NJL

DRY MORSEL

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

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE PHILIPPINE CHURCHES? (4): THE BAPTISM CONTROVERSY

Introduction

Shortly after the May 16, 2021, secession from the Protestant Reformed Churches in the Philippines (PRCP), my church, the then First Reformed Protestant Church in Bulacan, was tried by another doctrinal controversy. I insist, reader, that it was a *doctrinal* controversy, no matter how much the Bulacan church insists that it was *merely* procedural and had nothing to do with her confession. That is a direct denial of the importance of the sacraments and their relationship to church membership. Later I intend to argue further against Bulacan’s denial.

As a church, the members were so complacent back

then that we never imagined another split would happen just a year after our secession. We were thrilled that we finally had come out of the PRCP and were finally free to have fellowship with the Reformed Protestant Churches in America (RPC). We changed our name; adjusted our yearly budget; scheduled subsequent meetings with the RPC; established our own seminary; installed our very first missionary, Reverend Flores; gave the two seminary students a license to speak a word of edification and then examined them to be eligible for calls; called and ordained our new pastor, Reverend Jasojaso; accepted an emeritus minister from the PRCP, Rev. Leovy Trinidad; worked in several outreaches (in Laguna and Manila); and many

other things that made us think that we were better than the entire PRCP. We were busy.

Being distracted by various engagements, the truth of the gospel of the covenant was left out. Busyness rapidly depleted all our energies, leaving us with little room for incoming distress among ourselves.

Baptism First?

We were not concerned at all with the development of doctrine. We devoted our energies to other things. So when a couple from the PRCP requested their daughter's baptism, it was granted with sleight of hand, and the congregation was unconcerned. Were the man and wife confessing members of Bulacan church? Had they publicly confessed their faith? Did the council announce that the parents had requested to join our church and were accepted? Never mind. Who cares about the sacrament? Who cares about church membership?

The parents, the council, and the whole church did not care. *Let it pass.*

But God says, "I will not hold him guiltless that taketh my name in vain. This will not pass."

The father wrote the following letter to the council on February 16, 2022:

I am writing this letter to you to request your Consistory that my daughter (born on October 16, 2022) be allowed to be baptized in the First Reformed Protestant Church in Bulacan. As you know, we have been a confessing member in the Berean PRC since 2016 and was even given by our Lord the privilege to serve Him as one [of] its deacons. However, the controversy between the PRCA and the Reformed Protestant Churches in Northern America prompted us to reflect upon and reconsider the serious issues surrounding the pure teachings of the gospel.

We realize the importance of the sacrament of baptism and we, as covenant parents, desire that she be baptized in a church that faithfully maintains the truths of the gospel. We are still in the process of preparing and deciding to eventually consider attending the First RPC in Bulacan, Lord willing in the near future.

We are thankful to God for the blessing of another covenant child, and we desire to rear her in the fear and admonition of the Lord.

We thank you in advance for considering this request.¹

The father was proper to ask permission to have his child baptized so that the elders could have jurisdiction over the partakers of the sacraments. Just as the preaching must be done under the oversight of the elders, the same holds true with the sacraments. No sacraments shall be administered without the preaching and, moreover, without the consistorial jurisdiction of the elders.

The request was treated in a council meeting chaired by Reverend Flores. I was there when the letter was received, since candidates to the ministry had the privilege to observe council meetings. The grandfather of the infant was also there because he was a council member. While the grandfather was explaining the urgency of the request, he also apprised his colleagues that the child's aunt wanted to attend her niece's baptism prior to her return to her international job. As I perceived it, the urgency was due to the request of the aunt. The council was wise not to grant the request of baptism unless the parents joined the church. The information that the parents had been members of Berean Protestant Reformed Church since 2016 was irrelevant because the parents had withdrawn their membership from Berean church and were waiting for their transfer to be accepted by Provident Protestant Reformed Church. At the time the letter was written, the parents had no membership at all. This information was not written, but we knew about their withdrawal from Berean church, as the grandfather had mentioned it prior to the request for baptism.

The second time that the request was treated was April 15, 2022, days after Rev. Emmanuel Jasojaso was ordained as the new pastor of First Reformed Protestant Church of Bulacan. Suddenly the request was granted.

I am aware that at the RPC family conference in August 2022, Reverend Flores was given an opportunity to explain our controversy.² In part of his explanation, he said that the parents expressed their desire to become members of the church. *That was a lie.* The reverend blushed not to babble his lie at the conference; and not only that, but he dared to defend with pertinacity what the father did not express in his letter, namely, becoming members of the church. The reader may judge the letter. The parents' request was only for baptism, and they stated that they might *consider* membership later. Evidently membership was only a possibility, but they wanted baptism to be considered before that.

The baptism was not announced publicly during a worship service prior to the administration. Rather, only the online church bulletin included the announcement one week before the baptism. Not all members had the

1 I intentionally omitted the names of the father and his daughter to avoid exposing the persons.

2 Reverend Flores' opening devotions and presentation can be found at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZbJP6E7HXE>.

means to check the bulletin online. For instance, I personally missed the announcement because I was in Leyte the week before; and on the day of the administration of baptism, I was in Valenzuela with my family, where I preached in Reverend Trinidad's church. I learned about the baptism when my wife saw pictures of the baptism online. But prior to the baptism, the congregation was not well informed.

On April 24, 2022, the child was baptized. The parents answered the questions of the baptism form rashly. They took the name of God in vain by vowing something they could not fulfill, for in principle they were not members of the church of Jesus Christ.

The first question of the baptism form refers to the child as a member of the body of Jesus Christ but only in presupposition that the parents are resolute to say with the church, "Our children are members of Christ's church and ought to be baptized." The presupposition is that the parents are communicant members of the church. Otherwise, the parents who take the vow call on the name of God rashly and with deceit by pretending to answer faithfully before God and his church.

The second question of the baptism form is simply a reiteration of the first question for public confession of faith. It is absurd then for one to answer the second question without appearing first to the church to express one's agreement with all the articles of the faith that are "taught here in this Christian church" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 260, 266). This question reaps beautiful fruits of confession out of the hearts of believing parents. *Believing* is not a term used loosely. It is a definite term that one is indeed a member of Christ's body. It is not used individualistically but corporately as the believer stands under the headship of Jesus Christ—that is, he is united to Christ through faith so that he might believe and become a member of Christ's body in which all the elect are mystically knit together as one organism. The children, in the outward administration of the covenant, are also members of the body but only if they are presented for baptism by their believing parents. The children will remain in the world and outside the kingdom if their parents are not members of the church where the children ought to be baptized.

The third question is a matter of principle. It is a two-fold principle, the second of which flows from the first—that is, the principle of life in the believer is manifested in the sanctified life. Out of that principle of life comes a practical holiness. The first question acknowledges the principle of death upon the whole human race due to

the sin and guilt of Adam, whereby our children are conceived and born in sin. But in the third question, the parents are admonished to instruct and bring up their children "in the aforesaid doctrine...to the utmost of [their] power" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 260). The parents are exhorted to exert all their energies to walk antithetically in the newness of life together with their children. Being members of Jesus Christ, the children have passed from death into life. As members of Christ, they are also members of his church. But if the parents are not members of Christ's church, the child who is presented for baptism, in principle, has no parents to instruct and bring him up in the faith. In principle the parents are outside the church and have no salvation. In principle the parents are not sanctified by the gospel as it is preached in the church institute. In principle they do not have the power of the gospel by which they can perform their duty to rear their child. The child might receive the sacrament of baptism rashly and become a member of the church, but the parents are not members. In principle *the child is a bastard*. Therefore, I asked the council to rescind the decision to baptize the child. Not to take back the water and the administration—which is impossible—but rather to nullify her membership by baptism so that the church would remain a communion of legitimate children of God by virtue of the promise that accompanies the administration of baptism.

This is also the assertion of our spiritual father, Herman Hoeksema. He emphatically argued that when the baptism form says "this Christian church" in the second question, it literally means a particular, local congregation (in this case, Bulacan church where a child was presented for baptism in 2022). Hoeksema said, "'This Christian church'—it does not mean CRC, liberated church, Free Reformed. It means only the Protestant Reformed Church."³ Hoeksema emphasized that the church membership of the parents is *a priori* when presenting a child for baptism and taking baptismal vows.

Similarly, Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 25 rightly introduces the idea of the sacraments after it explains that we are partakers of Christ only by faith and that this faith comes from the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The Lord's Day establishes that our union with Christ is by faith alone and that the gospel effectively assures us in our hearts of the promises of Jehovah. The sacraments are added to the gospel to confirm the sure word of God. Faith works in our hearts to believe the gospel. The sacraments presuppose faith. Faith comes first. Our union with Christ comes first. Becoming members of Jesus

3 Herman Hoeksema, "Baptismal Form Vows," <https://oldpathsrecordings.com/wp-content/uploads/sermons/2020/09/Baptismal-Form-Vows.mp3?fbclid=IwAR2uukqzBOvCJPfGQqtIBFNLIuNRqPfdheAqEyB8QNIj5uOk0OG50zSM990>.

Christ comes first. By implication we must be *believers* before receiving the sacraments—that is, we first must be members of a church where the sacraments are administered. Commenting on article 56 of the Church Order, Herman Hanko wrote,

It must be remembered that the name “Christians” is used in a very limited sense in Lord’s Day 12. This article, therefore, must be interpreted in the light of our creeds and our liturgical forms. If this rule is followed and if the phrase in Article 56: “The covenant of God shall be sealed...” is followed, then it becomes evident that only children of communicant members of the church are eligible for baptism.⁴

That is the temporal order. You simply cannot put the cart before the horse. Membership comes first.

The questions asked at baptism are spiritual questions. They appeal not only to the parents but also to the congregation, to those who are always in the presence of God and who believe that in Jesus Christ all the promises of God are *amen*. God’s people do not need a special oath but are always regarded as God’s children of truth, speaking praises of Jehovah’s name as they are truly united to their Lord by faith and to his beloved body by the gospel. What can we say, reader? Are the questions a matter of mere procedure? Is church membership a matter of procedure before we receive the privilege of having our children baptized? Is the violation of the third commandment a matter of procedure? If the answer to these questions is yes, then let the baptism on April 24 pass. If the answer is yes, then let alone church membership.

But God says, “I will not hold him guiltless that taketh my name in vain. This will not pass.”

Reformed Tradition?

Rashly sprinkling water onto the head of an infant as a sign and seal of the covenant is a neglect of the Reformed faith and Reformed church polity. So I wrote a letter of concern dated April 30, 2022. In the letter I urged the council to consider the matter, as the sacraments always involve the gospel of Jesus Christ:

Esteemed brethren in the Lord, the sacraments are part of the power of the church to preach. It is an integral part of the pure preaching of the gospel. You cannot sever the sacraments from the gospel. They are joined by Christ in such a way

that preaching is supreme over the sacraments. Therefore, a true church and a false church can be known by these two ordinary means of grace. We must then be careful in administering the sacraments. If you corrupt the sacraments, the corruption of the gospel in the preaching is inevitable.⁵

I also expressed in my letter my hesitation to request the baptism of my second child unless the council admitted its error and repented of it because what I had witnessed was un-Reformed and unbiblical. I could not, in good conscience, let my children partake in the sin of my church. But the letter was received with malice. Therefore, the council canceled some of my scheduled pulpit supply. I did not understand why they did that; nevertheless, they had the right to keep me from giving a word of edification. My candidacy was under their jurisdiction. According to Reverend Flores the wisdom behind that decision was to keep me from using the pulpit for my own cause. The council suspected me of pursuing the matter publicly. My character was marked as a threat to peace and order in the church.

Consequently, the council had a meeting with me on May 29, 2022. It was about my letter of concern. I was nervous but resolute. I had my notes to help me explain all the relevant articles of the three forms of unity, the Church Order, and even other continental Reformed creeds.

I know that Reverend Flores, in order to push the drama further, went to the RPC family conference in 2022 and, thinking that his audience was fast bound by prejudice, rendered many lies, including the account that I was silent and just wrote notes during the May 29 meeting with the council. The first thing the reverend did in the meeting was to request relaxation of the parliamentary order of the meeting. Indeed, the loquacious reverend did not hear me speak during the meeting. Reverend Flores was in a constant stream of bombast, while the other members of the council were mere observers. This is notable, considering that it was Reverend Jasojaso who was the chair at that time and Reverend Flores was only an advisor, being the domestic missionary.

I was not silent. I was the only one in that meeting who stood for the defense of the Reformed creeds and tradition. Reverend Flores and Reverend Jasojaso, by no means badly matched—the former is a tyrant, and the latter is just a blind adherent—agreed in their attempts to overthrow the Reformed religion for the defense of a

4 Herman Hanko, *Notes on the Church Order and the Believer’s Manual for Church Order*, (Grandville, MI: Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches), 80.

5 Letter of Concern, April 30, 2022, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mTZCqflrZ1d3MC-oAERZS9ASLwVGx6o2/edit>, 2.

procedural error. The same day of the meeting, in a sermon on Lord's Day 21, Reverend Flores preached,

You must not forget this: When the Apostles' Creed was written, there was no Reformed yet. There was no Calvinism yet. There were no confessions of faith like the three forms of unity! Don't place forcefully something which is of this age but outside the intention of the Apostles' Creed!⁶

He further stated in the sermon, "That is the reason why we have here the confessions of faith. That is why we have the three forms of unity—for us to be assured that we have one and the same faith." This statement is superficial in nature and contradicts his former statements. After disjoining the truths of the Apostles' Creed from the Reformed creeds, he exalted the creeds for their unifying authority. It was very noble of him to do that, but there was no need. As if he could just cover up what he had said to the detriment of the creeds. He cannot escape his own folly. His sin will find him out. *Sic semper tyrannis*.

In the meeting, while arguing against my insistence on the Reformed creeds and tradition, Reverend Flores asked, "So what? Are we Catholics here, that we now regard human tradition? So what if it is the Reformed tradition? Will it affect the biblical tradition? or the apostolic tradition?" Yes, he sounds like a staunch Bibli-cist. "Moreover, Rev. Flores insisted that the imposition of the Reformed Creeds is 'cultic and Romish.' And he further described the Creeds as 'man-made tradition' as if they have no bearing in the insistence on *Public Con-fession of Faith* to guard the pure administration of the sacraments."⁷

The whole council agreed with the tyrant reverend, and one of the elders had the audacity to say, "Article 28 of the Belgic Confession of Faith will not stand the test of historic faith." Bulacan's council talked with the elder who made the statement, and this was the evaluation:

What he plainly stated was that when there are *interpretations* or *applications* of the confession that seems to be unclear with the doctrines in the Sacred Scripture, then the final arbiter of truth is the Sacred Scripture as a matter of the reformed principle of Sola Scriptura.⁸

This statement was defended by Bulacan's council in a letter to the January 19, 2023, classis meeting of the RPC. Clearly the council's defense was against the words of the Formula of Subscription, which states that the three forms of unity "do fully agree with the Word of God" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 326).

The defense of the council further disputed the integrity and credibility of First Reformed Protestant Church in Bulacan as a faithful, Reformed church. Therefore, the RPC classis of January 2023 decided to no longer pursue a sister-church relationship because the then First Reformed Protestant Church in Bulacan was judged as not being one with the doctrine of the RPC concerning church membership and undermining the authority of the Reformed creeds to settle doctrinal matters.⁹

To this day the Bulacan church continues to believe that what happened on April 24, 2022, was merely a procedural error. It was only on August 10, 2022, that the council realized that such a procedural error *might lead to doctrinal problems*.¹⁰ First Reformed Church of Bulacan (the name the church presently uses) still stands with that decision. There is no doctrine involved, just procedure. Membership is just a procedural matter. That is all.

I conclude this series with a short evaluation of Bastiaan Wielenga's comments on the Reformed baptism form. He experienced in his congregation in Amsterdam that parents were apt to disregard church membership. He wrote,

More than once I have met parents who were not members of the congregation, because they did not venture or wish to make a confession, yet who happily presented their children for baptism.¹¹

6 My translated transcript of the sermon can be found at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1baktiaPuhU8-WjBKCZEFxiVVphoL5aew/edit>.

7 Withdrawal Letter of the Pascual Family, June 11, 2022, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1xM3WyxTtdU7GUknSLG8gDHgD4Z-xhAhve/view, 2>.

8 Reformed Protestant Churches in America Agenda of the Classis Meeting to be held January 19, 2023, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Aydm4ztXubuxqI7G0mTs_Yd06fR8uFBs/view, 42.

9 Minutes of the January 19, 2023, classis meeting, Article 83. See also Supplement 7, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1n87i8ScPauWg9BorQN26WZBhEgjbKhxT/view?usp=sharing>.

10 August 21, 2022, church bulletin, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dCOQmBgBK-FKCSnexAY25DAvOnPVMed47-AhEGBv4EU/edit?usp=sharing> <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dCOQmBgBK-FKCSnexAY25DAvOnPVMed47-AhEGBv4EU/edit?usp=sharing>, 3–4.

11 Bastiaan Wielenga, *The Reformed Baptism Form: A Commentary*, ed. David J. Engelsma, trans. Annemie Godbehere (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association), 276.

Parents who are not members of the church but happily present their children for baptism possess another kind of audacity. It is like asking for the hand of Jesus Christ that blesses the children but not Jesus Christ himself. It is like buying the Holy Spirit for one's own benefit without being partakers of his religion (Acts 8:9–24).

Moreover, Wielenga emphatically reiterates,

The parents of the baptized are to be regarded as belonging to the community of the saints, as lively members of the body of the Lord.¹²

It has been the practice in Reformed churches to emphasize church membership and to insist on it as every person's duty, for no one has the right to be an unbeliever or to separate himself from the church institute. Therefore, Wielenga admonishes the ministers who administer the sacrament of holy baptism:

The minister of the word, who administers this holy ordinance, must take the position of the things that are *revealed*. He cannot judge the inner man.¹³

First Reformed Church of Bulacan wants all who hold to the three forms of unity and confess to be Christians to be admitted to holy baptism.¹⁴ It is true that one who leaves a Reformed church and requests to join our church must not be required to make a public confession of faith or a consistorial confession. Their request to join is enough and consequently will be judged by the council. But even now, First Reformed Church of Bulacan vainly imagines that the child's parents requested to become church members. They did not. They requested baptism; that was all. But the church argues that they

were believers. They might have been, but they were not church members. The church judges the things revealed. She cannot judge the inner man. The congregation could not judge whether the parents were believers unless the congregation was informed of the parents' confession.

This controversy was used providentially by God to establish the church anew. First Orthodox Reformed Protestant Church, Bulacan, a relatively new church, has never wavered that our secession from First Reformed Church of Bulacan was legitimate and a matter of the gospel and sacraments. First Reformed Church of Bulacan wanted a compromise,¹⁵ but we responded,

We are still firm that FRPCB erred grievously by her decision to set aside membership into the church before proceeding with the baptism of an infant.

In this, we warn you as our mother church that having desecrated the Holy Baptism you have brought judgment upon your church and upon your membership as that sin was against the covenant of God (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Q & A 82). It is the profanity of the covenant of God with His people and their continued generations. Repent, therefore and be reconciled to God. This is the only way forward for our churches without compromising the truth and gospel of baptism and the solemn duty of every believer to become a member of the body of Jesus Christ.

With grief,

Your daughter,

First Orthodox Reformed Protestant Church,
Bulacan¹⁶

—JP

12 Wielenga, *The Reformed Baptism Form*, 276.

13 Wielenga, *The Reformed Baptism Form*, 277.

14 June 5, 2022, announcement concerning the baptism, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1k2pfATTKNPtLe2CNS1bwbmUM_6VfHKw-/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=109519212411865868860&rtfpof=true&sd=true. The translation is mine.

15 Letter of First Reformed Church of Bulacan to First Orthodox Reformed Protestant Church of Bulacan, dated July 3, 2022, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/18kxsego2p6lZ5sqUxgLDydJwc05QDj0K/view?usp=sharing>.

16 Response to the letter of First Reformed Church of Bulacan, dated August 16, 2022, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wlHtaTunZ5YkJ7k04J7TQ3VAWRYfQExG/view?usp=sharing>. We attached in the response our position paper, which we sent also to the January 2023 meeting of the RPC classis. The link to the position paper is https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jrQjvTVMT9g_QUE1bxJvCR3cVKZXIGla/view?usp=sharing.

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

LOST AND FOUND: THE ANTITHESIS

The antithesis is a doctrine that had pride of place in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). When the Christian Reformed Church taught the false doctrine of common grace as an explanation of the world around them, the answer of our fathers in the Protestant Reformed Churches was that the doctrine of common grace “obliterates the antithesis.”¹ According to our fathers, the doctrine of common grace had to be rejected, and the doctrine of the antithesis had to stand.

The PRC has been falling all over herself of late to cast off the oppressive cloak of this historical confession and to become something approved of in the world. It came as a surprise, then, that in multiple protests printed in the agenda to the 2024 Protestant Reformed Synod, the doctrine of the antithesis was given such an honorable place. Does this signal a renewal of the doctrine of the antithesis in the PRC?

Not by a long stretch. The antithesis was merely a convenient tool, dug up out of the PRC’s archives before burying it again, to get rid of Guidepost Solutions and the threats represented by its involvement to conduct a third-party investigation of sexual abuse in the PRC. And, perhaps, something more sinister is in the works.

The Antithesis Defined

To give a definition of the doctrine of the antithesis as was once taught in the PRC, I can do no better than to provide a quote by Rev. M. Schipper in response to a Christian Reformed minister who was attempting to reconcile the doctrine of the antithesis to his theory of common grace:

God not only “produced” the antithesis, but he willed it. For a correct conception of [the] antithesis, we shall therefore have to begin and end with God.

It should be clearly understood that in God himself there is no antithesis. Though the

antithesis is of Him, it is not in Him. God is pure thesis. The word “antithesis,” as any good dictionary will tell you, is composed of two words: *anti* and *thesis*. *Anti* means, against. *Thesis* comes from a Greek word meaning: to place or set. Thesis, therefore, is that which is put, or set; while antithesis is that which opposes that which is set. Now, God is, as we said, the thesis. He is light, and there is no darkness in him. He is the truth, and there is no lie in him. He is righteousness, and there is no unrighteousness in him. God never, from this point of view, suffers opposition, experiences contrary winds, has any antithesis in himself. If there is any antithesis, and there is, he creates it. Of this he speaks in Isaiah 45:7: “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil; I the Lord do all these things.” See also Amos 3:6. God willed and created the darkness that he might forever hate it; and on the other hand, he willed to reveal all the glory of his thetical being on the dark background of sin and evil and so creates the darkness to be a servant.

And the truth is that God also put the thesis in his people by his grace. And so he commands them to live thetically in every department of life as lights in the world of darkness. Just because the thesis is put in his people they shine as lights in the world, are a savory salt that is pleasing to him. And just because they are of God, the antithesis, the devil, the world, and their own sinful flesh, always opposes them. O, it is true that, as Rev. Kuiper writes, “if God had not caused his grace to enter the hearts of some, all of man’s thoughts and actions would be antagonistic to God.” The reason is that God’s people by nature, like the wicked world out of which they are born, stand in open rebellion against God and all that is holy.²

¹ Herman Hoeksema, “On the Theory of Common Grace,” in Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema, *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn: God, Grace, and Covenant*, ed. David J. Engelsma (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2015), 83.

² Marinus Schipper, “The Antithesis,” *Standard Bearer* 36, no. 21 (September 15, 1960): 499.

God created the antithesis when he placed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden of Eden. God reiterated this antithesis in the mother promise of Genesis 3:15, that he will put enmity between the elect and the reprobate. The root of this enmity is Christ, the seed spoken of in Genesis 3:15. That is what was brought to the dead Adam, cowering in the garden: God had ordained Christ, the seed, in eternity, to deliver Adam from all his sins and all the power of the devil. This is the heart of the doctrine of the antithesis. When we confess the antithesis, we confess Christ, who is opposed to all that is of this world. When Christ, who is light, comes into the world, especially in the confession of the church, the response is hatred. The reason for this hatred is that men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil (John 3:19).

Lost

The doctrine of the antithesis has been a total loss in the PRC. The members of the PRC educate their children together with the children of the world, welcome the world into their schools, and participate together with the world in sports. Protestant Reformed wedding celebrations have devolved into the drinking and dancing parties that would have made the Christian Reformed men of the 1920s blush. Protestant Reformed members will not separate from friends and family who have shown themselves to be of the world, often even after those friends and family have been excommunicated from the church. Protestant Reformed churches even join with the world's soup kitchens. The denomination's deacons bring worldly financial philosophy to the poor instead of the mercies of Christ. The denomination's ministers join with worldly institutions to host seminars on counseling. Protestant Reformed theologians burnish their credentials by visiting and speaking at the seminaries of the world and not warning the students of the devastating theology and false teachers in those seminaries. Aside from the old, dried shell of empty words, there is no antithesis remaining in the PRC.

This same denomination is in the middle of multiple controversies. God has not given rest, nor will he give rest, regarding the controversy that the denomination created by the false doctrine of giving good works a place in the assurance of salvation. Added to this controversy is a plague of abuse perpetrated by ministers, officebearers, teachers, and others within the PRC. Given the PRC's bearing of looking toward the world, it would seem only natural that the denomination would consult the

world regarding the problem of abuse in the church. The soft wind blowing away the antithesis from the PRC is strengthening.

And the denomination did decide to join with the world to solve her problems. The 2023 Protestant Reformed Synod was going to solve the problem of abuse once and for all. Among the other items on the synod's agenda, there was an overture to open the denomination to investigation into sexual abuse by a third party. The synod, in response to the overture and aligned with loud campaigning from both within and outside the membership of the PRC, approved the recommendation with the following decision and excerpts: "That synod approve the substance of the overture from Providence PRC to hire a third-party organization to investigate sexual abuse in the PRCA in the manner explained below." This decision specifically included that the PRC "contract with Guidepost Solutions to do the work of investigation with the scope, implementation, and reporting described above."³

This decision made logical sense. Christ could not have helped the PRC with this and other problems as he is no longer present in the PRC but stands outside the door and calls his people to come out. Christ was kicked out of the denomination when the PRC judged in favor of false doctrine and against the ministers and elders who dared to militate against the teachers of that false doctrine. Where else could the PRC have gone, then, to solve her problems but to the wisdom of this world? And who better to bring the wisdom of this world but secular, so-called experts? The decision of Synod 2023 made sense based on the spiritual condition of the PRC.

Found?

Given the strengthening winds blowing the PRC into union with the world, it appeared the height of irony to see Protestant Reformed ministers referencing the doctrine of the antithesis to ground their protests of the 2023 synodical decision to hire Guidepost. These men's calling attention to the antithesis reads as does the story of Rip Van Winkle, who woke up after twenty years, wandered into a political rally in town, and declared himself to be a loyal subject to King George. I wonder that the response to the ministers' protests was not "A Tory! A Tory! A spy! A refugee! Hustle him! Away with him!"⁴

Nevertheless, those protesting the decision to work with Guidepost did reference the antithesis. One of the protestants, Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma, wrote,

I believe that this [decision] violates the principle of the antithesis. God has put enmity (hated)

³ *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America 2023*, 82.

⁴ Washington Irving, "Rip Van Winkle," in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Other Stories* (New York, Penguin Classics, 2014), 43.

[sic] between the wicked of this world and the church (Genesis 3:15). Though it may seem as if the world is friendly and objective in its dealings with the church, Jesus explains in John 15:19, “If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.” This principle of hatred for the church of Jesus Christ works itself out through the institutions and organizations of this world. These organizations are incapable of being spiritually objective. “The carnal mind is enmity against God” (Romans 8:7).⁵

Similarly, Rev. Garry Eriks protested the decision of Synod 2023:

I present for synod’s consideration one ground for objecting to Synod 2023’s decision to hire Guidepost Solutions to investigate sexual abuse in the PRCA in the manner found in the decision: *this decision violates the Biblical truth that the church must not join with the world of sin and unbelief for help in the battle against her spiritual enemies.*⁶

Whether or not the protestants stated the word *antithesis* explicitly, as Reverend Bruinsma did, both Reverend Eriks and other protestants referred to the doctrine of the antithesis. Let us be open-minded and objective about what this means. What if these ministers found the doctrine of the antithesis, as Hezekiah had found the book of the law, and intended to follow this doctrine to its logical conclusion? What would that look like?

When Hezekiah found the book of the law, he turned his whole heart to seek the Lord. It was a turning point for him and his entire kingdom, and Israel then kept the passover as it had not been kept before in Israel’s history. Hezekiah and the nation of Judah were brought back to Christ as the only way of salvation as represented by the lamb at the center of the passover.

Just so, if the doctrine of the antithesis had found a renewal in the PRC, the denomination too would be brought back to Christ as the only way of salvation. The denomination would be brought to Christ as the central *thesis* against all the darkness of false doctrine. It would be impossible to stand in unity with Professor Cammenga, who dared to preach, “It is not enough for salvation that God has sent his Son, Jesus Christ into the world,”⁷ which statement the PRC has not rejected. Since that

statement in any context is a denial of Christ, if the doctrine of the antithesis had found a renewal in the PRC, the members of the PRC would be antithetically opposed to that statement and for the sake of Christ would militate against the man who taught it. If the doctrine of the antithesis had found a renewal in the PRC, it also would be impossible for the Protestant Reformed ministers to continue to rub collegial shoulders with the theologians of false churches who cannot even reject the three points of common grace, the well-meant offer, and other denials of Christ. The doctrine of the antithesis works to turn the whole heart, and the whole church, to Christ.

If the antithesis were found in the PRC, the antithesis would not merely appear at the surface as a reason to make a clean decision on working with Guidepost, only to bury the antithesis again amongst the archives. There would be clear evidence elsewhere.

What do we find when we look deeper? Certainly not a following in the footsteps of Hezekiah but a twisting and redefinition of the doctrine.

A Redefinition

In an amazing turn of events, Reverend Eriks even had the gall to use the doctrine of the antithesis as a thinly veiled promotion of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC), which the powers within the PRC have been angling to join. He wrote,

I believe there is another way to seek help against the overwhelming plague of sexual abuse in our churches; a way that is in line with the truth of Scripture.

1. Seek out other conservative reformed/presbyterian denominations for help with investigation and how to proceed.
 - a. In many ways the PRCA has isolated itself from the reformed church world so that we do not go to others for counsel and help.
 - b. Instead of going to those who confess the Reformed faith and have a faithful view of the authority of Scripture, we are willing to go to a secular organization.
 - c. We can learn from these other denominations how they have addressed sexual abuse in their denominations and from the mistakes they have made.⁸

5 “Protest—Rev. W. Bruinsma,” in *PRCA Synod 2024 Agenda*, 488.

6 “Protest—Rev. G. Eriks,” in *PRCA Synod 2024 Agenda*, 497.

7 Ronald Cammenga, “Jesus’ Call to the Weary (1),” sermon preached October 12, 2003, Agenda of Classis East, September 8, 2004, 9.

8 “Protest—Rev. G. Eriks,” 500.

There is a sinister redefinition of the antithesis in this paragraph by Reverend Eriks. This paragraph must be taken together with the thrust of his protest, where he asserted that the reason that the PRC must not work with Guidepost is “*the Biblical truth that the church must not join with the world of sin and unbelief.*” For Reverend Eriks, while Guidepost represents the world of sin and unbelief, conservative Reformed and Presbyterian denominations do not.

By giving his ground in these terms, Eriks safely stayed away from the heart of the doctrine of the antithesis, which doctrine points directly to Christ, the seed of the woman who saves the church. This is important, because the implications could get messy if the antithesis were defined in terms of Christ and separation from false doctrines of Christ, especially when the expressed goal was to “seek out other conservative reformed/presbyterian denominations for help.”

Reverend Eriks did not mention NAPARC, the United Reformed Churches, or other denominations by name, but it does not take much digging to learn with whom he has been cozy, for example in the area of counseling. Can he state that the doctrine of the United Reformed Churches is not the world of unbelief when that denomination cannot even reject wholesale the false theology of common grace? What about the theology of the covenant of works enshrined in the Westminster Confession?⁹ Does Christ have fellowship with that theology?

And this is “a way that is in line with the truth of Scripture”? Could it be stated any more clearly that at least one leader in active ministry (and more importantly, with a good reputation) in the Protestant Reformed Churches is ready to lay aside divisions with the nominal (anti)Christian church world?

If Christ has fellowship with these philosophies, then Eriks would be correct in his implied assertion that those who teach them are not the world of sin and unbelief. Indeed, if that is the case, then any divisions between these denominations are superficial and, I must also add, wrong. If Christ has fellowship with these philosophies, then the very divisions between these denominations are wicked because they create division in the church on earth where Christ does not. If these denominations are not the world of sin and unbelief, then the PRC ought to join with them and quickly—not only in the peripheral areas of biblical counseling and the PRC’s problems with abuse but especially at the very heart of her confession.

The Protestant Reformed members are already there unofficially. By redefining the antithesis, Reverend Eriks just provided the theological basis to make union official.

NAPARC, make your move. The Protestant Reformed Churches are open for business.

Found!

To our dear loved ones and the Van Winkles who remain in the PRC, along with those who are scattering to “other conservative reformed/presbyterian denominations,” please take note. A soft but steady wind has blown away the antithesis from the PRC, *never* to return. This wind has strengthened into a gale that is blowing the PRC into assimilation with the rest of the false church world. There is no antithesis in the PRC any longer.

Now you ignore all this and come to us, begging, “Let us have none of this doctrinal disputing. Cannot we have a carnal, earthly relationship and ignore our differences?”

Yes, only if one condition is met: if Christ means nothing to us.

Just like how the PRC can ignore or subvert the doctrines of Christ that were the denomination’s very foundation, and she can now cozy up with “other conservative reformed/presbyterian denominations” with whom the denomination had deep and principled theological disagreements in the past.

If Christ and his antithesis mean nothing to us, then it would be possible for us to have a carnal relationship with you and ignore your denial of him. If we could deny the Spirit of Christ in our hearts, then we could meet with you at the lake, have a nice time, sit by the pool, go boating, and come home to bury the empty feelings in our guts that we have denied Christ. If we can live unto ourselves and not unto Christ, then we can continue living in a carnal relationship with you. With that we could also have our earthly lives and all that they entail. But if Christ means nothing to us, then woe unto us!

A hateful gospel, you say? a cult? schismatic? unloving? a different Jesus? “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34).

We are the ones who have changed? I accede the point; allow me to explain the change. We were living carnally in earthly relationships with you, and Christ came by his gospel. Christ shook us, so that we could see nothing but the denial of him in the PRC. Especially Reverend

9 Westminster Confession of Faith 7.2 in Philip Schaff, ed. *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vol. (New York: Harper and Row, 193; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 616–17. “The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.”

Koole's false theology as printed in the *Standard Bearer* shook me,¹⁰ but there were other false teachers and other false doctrines. Through this all you hated to speak of it and made clear you wanted nothing more than for us to shut up.

Having shaken us out of the PRC, Christ reestablished his church and gave us the gift of the pure preaching of the gospel. This gospel, the power of God unto salvation, has shown us that Israel—God's church—dwells alone in safety. When God brought us out, he not only called us to live separately from the false church, but in many

instances he actually picked us up and threw us out. God *will* have the members of his church dwell alone in safety, even when their natural desires kick against him.

And so, the antithesis has been recovered in the Reformed Protestant Churches—not in the counterfeit antithesis of the PRC that rejects the world of Guidepost Solutions while embracing the world of NAPARC but in lives that exalt Christ and his truth above all and that will not live in fellowship with those who worship a different Christ.

—Michael J. Vermeer

INSIGHTS

A VISIT WITH FATHER PATRICK

A conversation I recently had with a Roman Catholic priest recalled the old saying, “All roads lead to Rome.” While this quote originally referred to the network of roadways built by the Roman Empire, the same could be applied theologically to spiritual departures from the truth of salvation.

Normally I do not stop and talk with Roman Catholic priests, but after finishing some errands, I drove past Holy Name Catholic Church. I noticed that the nice-looking church building appeared to have about eight to ten good-sized classrooms and a gym. The church is centrally located in the area near the residences of some members of Second Reformed Protestant Church and where other members tend to be moving. I could tell from the signs that the church is no longer using the building as a school and that a private daycare is currently occupying the space. And I surmised from the small number of cars in the parking lot that the building appeared to be underutilized.

So I stopped in at the rectory, and the administrative assistant led me into a conference room to meet with

Father Patrick. After the usual pleasantries I inquired concerning the possibility of renting the school building for our church and school.

When Father Patrick asked for some background information about our group, I explained to him that I am a member of a church that formed about three years ago and that when God formed us as a church, he also formed a school for our children.

Father Patrick seemed somewhat taken aback by my explanation and inquired as to the reason God had formed us as a church.

I explained that the church of which we were former members had adopted the false doctrine of salvation that said that we experience fellowship with God through faith, on the basis of what Christ has done, and in the way of our obedience.

Father Patrick immediately embraced the doctrine as his own and responded, “Well, there's nothing wrong with that!”

And I said, “Exactly! But I'm *not Roman Catholic!*”

Father Patrick immediately smiled understandingly

10 Kenneth Koole, “Herman Witsius: Still Relevant,” *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 4 (November 15, 2020): 81–83. The series continued for four more issues and ended in *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 8 (January 1, 2021): 173–75. See also Mike Vermeer, “Letters: Witsius on Sanctification,” *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 12 (March 15, 2021): 272 and *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 13 (April 1, 2021): 295–96; Kenneth Koole, “Response,” *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 12 (March 15, 2021): 272–75 and *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 13 (April 1, 2021): 296–99.

and said, “Well, I think it would be better if all of us who trust in Jesus would just set aside our hobbyhorses and get along.”

That was a very familiar sentiment, and one that I still hear repeatedly from members of the denomination that drove us out. And I found it fascinating that Father Patrick understood immediately what I meant when I responded that I am not Roman Catholic.

Father Patrick’s statement made me think, “What is the essence of the hobbyhorse to which he referred? the hobbyhorse for which so many have either gained or lost their earthly lives?”

The essence of the doctrine that is being downplayed as a hobbyhorse is the doctrine of salvation, specifically concerning how sinful man is reconciled to a holy God.

God manifests his eternal power and Godhead to *all* men, so that they are without excuse.

19. That which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them.
20. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse. (Rom. 1:19–20)

Throughout history men have known that they need to be reconciled to God. Father Patrick was correct when he asserted that members of both the Roman Catholic Church and Reformed churches claim to “trust in Jesus.” But do they really trust in Jesus? The division between the true and false church always comes down to this: who Christ is and what he has accomplished.

The Roman Catholic viewpoint concerning sinful man and the work of Christ is the following:

Man is a sinner and in need of special grace from God. Jesus Christ, by his sacrifice, has secured the reconciliation of man and God. All who receive the benefits of Christ’s work are justified, but the key, as in traditional Catholic teaching, lies in the way the benefits of Christ’s work are applied. Christ won grace; the church imparts it. Aquinas

taught that Christians need the constant infusion of “cooperating grace,” whereby the Christian virtues—above all, love—are stimulated in the soul. Assisted by this cooperating grace, a Christian can do works that please God and gain special merit in God’s sight.¹

The Roman Catholic Church confesses, “Christ won grace; the church imparts it,” and, “Christians need the constant infusion of ‘cooperating grace,’ whereby the Christian virtues—above all, love—are stimulated in the soul.”

The Protestant Reformed Churches confess, “We experience fellowship [salvation] with God through faith (instrument), on the basis of what Christ has done (ground), and in the way of our obedience (way of conduct or manner of living).”²

Antithetically, the Reformed Protestant Churches confess, “Salvation is of the Lord.”

Over against the cacophony of new doctrines that withhold different benefits of salvation (which flow to the elect by grace through faith) from the believer unless and until he first performs good works is the testimony of scripture in Romans 11:6: “If by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then it is no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.”

The first benefit of salvation that the Protestant Reformed Churches withhold unless and until good works are performed is fellowship with God (which *is* salvation). To that withholding is added the benefit of assurance (which *is* the elect sinner’s by faith) and the forgiveness of sins, and recently added is the confirmation of the assurance of justification.

Over against the Roman Catholic and Protestant Reformed lie that salvation can only be experienced by the elect through the lethal mixture of grace-enabled works is the testimony of scripture in Ephesians 2:8–9:

8. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:
9. Not of works, lest any man should boast.

—Andy Birkett

1 Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 4th ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 258–59.

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

THE WELL-MEANT OFFER AND GOD'S DECREE (1)

Who is God? This is the question of all Reformed dogmatics. This question is investigated in the locus theology and is revealed in all the other loci in Reformed dogmatics. In the locus theology God's knowability, essence, names, the holy Trinity, and the works of God in eternity are examined. In all these matters the dogmatician studies the truth of who God is. But the question of who God is does not end with the locus theology; for in all the other loci, one is confronted with who God is. What does God reveal unto men in the creation and regarding who man is? What does God reveal of himself in Christ, salvation, the church, and the end of all things? One must find in all these topics of dogmatics the eternal and sovereign God, who does all things according to his decree, who infallibly brings to pass all his good pleasure, and who is never thwarted. This never may be forgotten in all of one's study of dogmatics.

And this question is at the forefront of this article: Who is God? Is God a god who is favorably inclined to all men, desiring to save all who hear the gospel and showing grace to all who hear the gospel? In a word, is God the god of the well-meant offer of the gospel? Or is God the God of the decree, of a particular promise to a particular people? This is the matter at hand.

This matter of who God is was apparent to those who were involved in the common grace controversy in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in 1924. Rev. Henry Danhof recalled the president of the 1924 Christian Reformed Synod, Rev. I. Van Dellen, saying,

I cannot refute all heretics, even my own brother who is a Baptist. But my Reformed antennae tell me that Danhof and Hoeksema proceed from a wrong idea of God, and that therefore their doctrine is dangerous for our churches to consider.¹

Who is God? Is God well-meaning to everyone in the preaching? Or is his promise in the preaching particular, only for the elect?

The Christian Reformed Church's first point of common grace contains the teaching of the well-meant offer. I quote here the first point in full:

Concerning the first point, with regard to the favorable disposition of God toward mankind in general, and not only to the elect, Synod declares that according to the Scripture and the confessions it is determined that besides the saving grace of God, shown only to the elect unto eternal life, there is a certain kind of favor, or grace of God which He shows to His creatures in general. This is evidenced by the quoted Scripture passages and from the Canons of Dort II, 5 and III and IV, 8 and 9, which deals with the general offer of the Gospel; whereas the quoted declarations of Reformed writers from the golden age (hey-day) of Reformed theology, also give evidence that our Reformed fathers from of old have advocated these opinions (sentiments).²

It is necessary when considering the first point of common grace and the well-meant offer contained therein to identify the heart of the issue. First, as is clear from the quotation above, the first point teaches that besides the sovereign grace of God, which grace is unto salvation, there is a general favor or grace of God shown to all creatures in general. The first point teaches that God shows favor to both the elect and the reprobate. To the elect is directed God's saving grace, which is to say, grace unto eternal life. This grace is irresistible, efficacious, and for the elect only. But both the elect and the reprobate are also objects of the favor of God, that is, of common grace. No Reformed person would deny that saving grace

1 For the English translation, see Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 68. Hanko quotes Danhof from his article "God is God," in *Standard Bearer* 1, no. 1 (October 1, 1924).

2 *Acts of Synod 1924 of the Christian Reformed Church Held from 18 June to 8 July 1924 in Kalamazoo, MI USA*, trans. Henry J. De Mots, ed. John Knight (Grand Rapids, MI: Archives of the Christian Reformed Church, 2000), https://www.calvin.edu/library/database/crcnasynod/1924acts_et.pdf.

is shown only to God's elect. The elect alone are saved and none besides them. No one denies that God's saving grace is particular. The question then is whether God also shows a certain general favor to both the elect and the reprobate.

Further, that there may be no ambiguity regarding the objects of this general grace, I note that the first point deals with all men. It teaches that this certain favor of God is shown generally to all mankind—that is, “toward mankind in general” and “to His creatures in general.” Both statements refer to all mankind and not to living things in general, which would include both rational, moral creatures and beasts.

Rev. Herman Hoeksema affirmed this when he wrote,

“His creatures in general” means all men, since the first point deals with a favorable attitude of God toward mankind in general, not only toward the elect. Berkhof and Kuiper also admit this. There is then a certain grace of God shown to elect and reprobate indiscriminately.³

Moreover, this is evident from the first point, which mentions “the general offer of the Gospel” as an instance or proof of this certain favor, and the preaching of the gospel in no wise is to all creatures on earth but to men.

Finally, by way of introduction to the treatment of the well-meant offer as taught in the first point of common grace, I note that the word *offer* itself is not the issue, nor is the word *offer* as such heretical. If the first point uses “offer” in the same way that the Canons does, then the word as such is not to be condemned. This is because the word *offer* comes from the Latin *offerre*, which means *to set forth or present*. When Canons of Dordt 3–4.9 states that “it is not the fault of the gospel, nor of Christ offered therein” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 168), the idea is not that Christ and salvation in Christ are offered to all men indiscriminately, so that if men would only accept the call of the gospel, or a man would let Christ into his heart, then they would be saved. This is not at all the meaning of the Canons, which rejects such teachings as Pelagianism in 3–4.10 and error and rejection 3–4.9. Rather, what is expressed by “offered” in the Canons and by others such as Calvin is that in the preaching of the gospel, Christ is set forth as the only way of salvation and that apart from him there is no salvation. That the word *offer* itself is not the issue by no means clears the first point and the well-meant offer of the gospel from the charge of Arminianism, that the well-meant offer teaches that man's will is decisive in salvation. This matter I will treat later.

What is this grace that God supposedly shows to the elect and the reprobate? This is a necessary question to ask, for the first point claims that besides saving, irresistible grace, there is another grace that God shows to both the elect and the reprobate. What does this grace look like? What does this grace do?

One would think that the answers to these questions would be readily and easily found and explained, considering that the three points teach this common grace. However, the reality is that the opposite is true. I will demonstrate this with a series of quotations of Herman Hoeksema concerning the writings of Prof. Louis Berkhof:

In order to be entirely fair, it is proper and expedient first to consider, what does the Christian Reformed Church accept as the meaning of the first appendage [that God in the preaching of the gospel is gracious to all who hear]? I must warn the reader that he will be greatly disappointed if he expects a concise and definite answer to this question from the leaders of the Christian Reformed Church. Their answers are ambiguous and evasive.⁴

Hoeksema later characterized the first point and Berkhof as Janus:

The first point reminds one of the two-faced head of Janus, a Roman idol distinguished by the remarkable feature of having two faces and looking in two opposite directions. There is a marked similarity between Janus and the first point. The latter is also two-faced and casts wistful looks in opposite directions. The same may be asserted of the attempts to explain the first point by the leaders of the Christian Reformed Church.

The difference is that while the two faces of heathen Janus bore a perfect resemblance to each other, the Janus of 1924 shows two totally different faces. One of his faces reminds you of Augustine, Calvin, and Gomarus, but the other shows the unmistakable features of Pelagius, Arminius, and Episcopius. Your troubles begin when you inquire of this two-faced oracle what may be the exact meaning of the first point. Then this modern Janus begins to revolve, alternately showing you one face and then the other, until you hardly know whether you are dealing with Calvin or Arminius.⁵

3 Herman Hoeksema, “Calvin, Berkhof, and H. J. Kuiper: A Comparison,” in Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema, *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn: God, Grace, and Covenant*, ed. David J. Engelsma (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2015), 311.

4 Herman Hoeksema, “A Triple Breach in the Foundation of the Reformed Truth,” in *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn*, 376.

5 Hoeksema, “A Triple Breach,” in *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn*, 377.

This characterization is because on the one hand Berkhof denied that the Christian Reformed Church introduced Arminianism in the first point and affirmed that the CRC taught the truth of limited atonement, that Christ died only for the elect, and the infinite value of the blood of Christ.⁶ On the other hand, Berkhof taught that there is a certain grace of God toward all sinners, both elect and reprobate.

Though the proponents of the well-meant offer in 1924 were as all false teachers, “who *privily* shall bring in damnable heresies” (2 Pet. 2:1, emphasis added), we can, nevertheless, come to the bottom of what they taught in the first point and see it for what it truly is, namely, Arminianism. Let us consider Berkhof on the matter:

The following link in the argument of synod is this: the general and well-meant offer of salvation is a sign of God’s favor toward sinners, is for them a blessing from the Lord. This must emphatically be pointed out, because those who cannot agree with the declaration of synod maintain that the preaching of the word is merely intended as a curse for the reprobate who dwell under such preaching. God does not bless them by this but curses them through it. Insofar as the preaching concerns them, God merely uses it as a means to plunge them more deeply into destruction. Hence preaching is an instrument of his hatred. This is a positively unscriptural thought. The scripture teaches most certainly that we must consider the offer of salvation a temporal blessing also for those who do not heed the invitation.⁷

Berkhof defended this position by appealing to Ezekiel 18:23, 32; Ezekiel 33:11; and Matthew 23:37. Consider his exegesis of these passages:

That God calls the ungodly to conversion is presented in scripture as a proof that he desires their salvation. [The reprobate are meant here.] In the prophecy of Ezekiel we listen to the voice of the Lord in words that speak of tender mercy: “Have I any pleasure at all [even in any measure] that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD; and not that he should return from his ways and live”

[18:23]? “For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth [he who dies in his sins] saith the Lord GOD: wherefore, turn...and live ye” [v. 32]. These passages teach as clearly as words can that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked (notice that he does not say “the elect wicked” but “the wicked” entirely in general); and the tender calling to them witnesses of his great love for sinners and of his desire to save the ungodly.⁸

There is still another passage in Ezekiel in which the Lord expresses the same thought in still stronger language, in which he even confirms it with an oath, namely, Ezekiel 33:11: “As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?” Are these not the words of tender loving-kindness, in which a father implores his backsliding children [the reprobate] to return to the house and to the heart of the father? Do you listen here, even in the least degree, to the voice of hatred?⁹

Now let us consider the question that I posed earlier: What is this grace that God shows to both the elect and the reprobate? It is not saving grace, as I pointed out earlier. Very simply, this means that whatever this grace accomplishes, it does not infallibly lead to the salvation of the object of this grace. The first point teaches another grace than saving grace. A question immediately arises: Is there more than one grace of God? It is certainly true that the word *grace* can be used in many different ways. For example, when we read in Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God,” then it is immediately apparent that the word “grace” refers to the power of God as he alone saves the sinner, delivers him from sin, renews him, and sanctifies him. Grace can also refer to God’s attitude toward one, which is an attitude of favor, tenderness, and love. For example, we read in Genesis 6:8: “Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.” And there are more uses of the word “grace” in scripture.¹⁰

But whenever we speak of God’s grace, we must always deal with God’s favor and loving-kindness for the object

6 Hoeksema, “A Triple Breach,” in *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn*, 376–77. The truths mentioned here may seem out of place when we are considering common grace. However, if one teaches that God is gracious to all men, then it necessarily follows that Christ died for all men.

7 Louis Berkhof, as quoted in Hoeksema, “Calvin, Berkhof, and H. J. Kuiper,” in *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn*, 313.

8 Berkhof, as quoted in Hoeksema, “Calvin, Berkhof, and H. J. Kuiper,” in Danhof and Hoeksema, *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn*, 313–14. The insertions in brackets are the editor’s.

9 Berkhof, as quoted in Hoeksema, “Calvin, Berkhof, and H. J. Kuiper,” in Danhof and Hoeksema, *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn*, 314–15. The insertion in brackets is the editor’s.

10 If the reader wishes to read more on this, see Herman Hoeksema, “The Meaning of Grace,” in *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2005), 2:280–81.

of that grace. This is the teaching of Hoeksema concerning the idea of grace:

Underneath all the uses of the word *grace* lies the always present and fundamental meaning of favor and loving-kindness. This fundamental thought must always constitute the chief element in the definition of *grace*. The objects, the manifestations, and the operations of this favor may vary, but grace is always favor of God.¹¹

We must remember this when dealing with the well-meant offer. This exposes the nonsense of the first point, which claims “that besides the saving grace of God... there is a certain kind of favor, or grace of God which He shows to His creatures in general.” If we operate from the above assertion, that always underneath the idea of grace we are dealing with the favor of God, then we see immediately that two different graces of God or two favors of God cannot possibly coexist in God and that a contradiction arises. The well-meant offer destroys the doctrine of double predestination. Let one think logically on the matter. The first point asserts, on the one hand, that there is a saving grace of God that he shows to the elect alone and that he saves them only, seeks their salvation, and works by the power of his grace to save them alone, and that God simultaneously passes by all others who are not his elect and beloved, chosen people in Christ, seeks their destruction, leaves them in their darkness, and does not operate in them with the power of his saving grace. On the other hand, the first point asserts that there is another grace of God according to which he has a favorable disposition to all men in general, as is evidenced by the well-meant offer that is proclaimed indiscriminately to all men, whereby God seriously desires to save all those who hear. Put succinctly, God shows grace to the elect and not to the reprobate, and God also shows grace to the elect and to the reprobate. This is nonsense, plain and simple. This would put a contradiction in God of hating and loving the same person. Is not God one? Can there be any contradiction in God?

But this is the God who is taught by those who believe in the well-meant offer. Is this not clear from Berkhof? Berkhof taught that the well-meant offer shows that God has favor toward all sinners. All sinners, entirely general. Berkhof did not mean elect sinners but *all* sinners, elect and reprobate—“we must consider the offer of salvation a temporal blessing also for those who do not heed the invitation,” as he put it. This too must be remembered when dealing with Berkhof’s exegesis of the passages in

Ezekiel. Berkhof taught a God who swears by himself that he has no pleasure in the death of wicked sinners, entirely general, and desires the salvation of all who hear the gospel. God by a holy oath, said Berkhof, tenderly calls to all and assures all who hear that he desires their salvation and loves them.

Berkhof’s entire presentation of the matter is thoroughly un-Reformed. Berkhof entirely omitted election and reprobation from his exegesis. But predestination is fundamental to understanding the texts in Ezekiel. Remember, Ezekiel was a prophet to Judah in captivity, and the word of God through Ezekiel to Judah was this:

21. But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die.
22. All his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be mentioned unto him: in his righteousness that he hath done he shall live.
23. Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD: and not that he should return from his ways, and live? (Ezek. 18:21–23)

This was God’s word to his rebellious people in captivity who had departed from the Lord and turned to idol gods; God’s word to them was to repent and to live, for he had no pleasure in the death of the wicked. And this word went out to the entire nation; both the elect and the reprobate heard it. This word was addressed to Judah as she was one organic whole, as one wheat field that had both wheat and tares. This word was *to* all but not *for* all. Always God’s promise in the gospel is salvation for Israel but not all of Israel.

In close connection to Ezekiel 18:21–23 are the words of Ezekiel 33:11: “Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?” Here especially, if one claims that God desires the salvation of all who hear the preaching, then he is exceedingly audacious. Men ought to be still when the living God speaks and swears by his own being to the truth of his words. Surely, as God speaks, God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked but in their life. But this is true only of the elect wicked whom God has purposed to save from eternity. This necessarily must be the case because God swears by his own name. Therefore, if God swears by his own name that he has no pleasure in the death of all who hear the gospel, then surely all who hear the gospel

¹¹ Herman Hoeksema, “On the Theory of Common Grace,” in Danhof and Hoeksema, *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn*, 71–72.

are saved. God swears by his own name! Is not God the justifier of the ungodly (Rom. 4:5)? Is God not the one who justifies (8:33)? Is not salvation of God who shows mercy and not of him who wills nor of him who runs (9:16)? Is not salvation of the Lord (Jonah 2:9)? If it is God who saves, and if he desires to save all who hear, then surely, all who hear are saved.

In connection with these texts, I quote John Calvin, as he responded to Pighius' Pelagian interpretation of these texts:

God requires of us this conversion, or turning away from our iniquity [Ezek. 18:23, 30; Ezek. 33:11], and in whomever he finds it, he does not disappoint such a one of the promised reward of eternal life. Therefore, God is as much said to have pleasure in and to will this eternal life as to have pleasure in repentance; he has pleasure in repentance because he invites all men to it by his word. All this is in perfect harmony with his secret and eternal counsel by which he decreed to convert none except his own elect. None but God's elect, therefore, ever do turn from their wickedness. Yet on these accounts the adorable God is not to be considered variable or capable of change, because as a lawgiver he enlightens all men with the external doctrine of conditional life. In this primary manner he calls or invites all men unto eternal life. But he brings unto eternal life his own children, only those whom he willed according to his eternal purpose and regenerated by his Spirit as an eternal Father.

It is quite certain that men do not "turn from their evil ways" to the Lord of their own accord or by any instinct of nature. Equally certain is it that the gift of conversion is not common to all men, because this is one of the two covenants that God promises he will not make with any but his own children and his own elect people, concerning whom he has recorded his promise, "I will write my law in their hearts" [Jer. 31:33]. A man must be utterly beside himself to assert that this promise is made to all men generally and indiscriminately.¹²

And Hoeksema, who referred to Calvin in opposition to Berkhof on this matter, wrote:

Calvin affirms what I have often and always taught and written: that insofar as the message is general and comes to all, it is *conditional*. The offer is eternal life. The condition limiting this offer is turn from your wicked ways.

This condition makes the content of the general message particular. As I have emphasized in the past, a contention my opponents have tried to laugh to scorn, there is a general proclamation of a conditional and particular gospel. He promises *to all who believe* peace and eternal life.¹³

I do not doubt that one's Reformed antenna quivers when he reads that the gospel is "conditional and particular" and of "conditional life." But we must note how Hoeksema and Calvin used the word *condition*. They did not use *condition* in the sense that it is that which man must do before God acts. They did not mean to say that salvation is a matter of the will of the sinner who hears the gospel. This is how we understand conditional theology today. Man does something first, and then God gives him salvation. That kind of theology is always characterized by being general. Christ died for the sins of mankind, and if you accept Christ or believe in him, then you will be saved. This was not the point that Calvin and Hoeksema were making.

Rather, Hoeksema and Calvin used the word *condition* to limit salvation in the preaching of the gospel to the elect. The preaching of the gospel is always the general proclamation of a particular promise. First, the preaching is a general proclamation. This means that when a minister preaches, he preaches the gospel to both the elect and reprobate. The gospel is sounded in the ears of the elect and reprobate, so that both hear the good news of the salvation accomplished by Jehovah-salvation. All who come under the preaching, whether elect or reprobate, hear the words, "Christ died for you and paid for your sins." The preaching of the gospel is a general proclamation.

But just because the gospel is preached promiscuously and without distinction does not mean that the gospel is general—that is, that the promise of the gospel is for everyone. The preaching of the gospel is not the general proclamation of a general promise. This would be conditional theology as we have it today—that is, the preacher proclaims that Christ died for everyone, and now it is time for the people to get busy and believe in Christ, and

12 John Calvin, "God's Eternal Predestination and Secret Providence," in *Calvin's Calvinism*, ed. Russell J. Dykstra, trans. Henry Cole, 2nd ed. (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2009), 88–89.

13 Hoeksema, "Calvin, Berkhof, and H. J. Kuiper," in Danhof and Hoeksema, *The Rock Whence We Are Hewn*, 323.

then they will be saved. That is proclaiming a salvation that waits and depends on the will of man.

Rather, the preaching of the gospel is the general proclamation of a *particular* promise. The point of Calvin and Hoeksema was that although the promise is proclaimed generally to all, it is not for all. Salvation is not for all who hear on the condition that they turn and believe, for that is salvation governed by man's will and not by predestination. But salvation is for the elect, who are the ones who turn and believe. And you must insist on this word order: salvation is for the elect, who are those who turn and believe. That is what Calvin wrote regarding the promise of Jeremiah 31:33: "I will write my law in their hearts."

[God] brings unto eternal life his own children, only those whom he willed according to his eternal purpose and regenerated by his Spirit as an eternal Father...

The gift of conversion is not common to all men, because this is one of the two covenants that God promises he will not make with any but his own children and his own elect people.

Now, if we define the elect as those who turn and believe, then Calvin and Hoeksema's point is made clearer. They did not use the term *condition* to explain what someone needs to do to be saved, but they used the term to describe those who are saved, those to whom the promise of the gospel belongs. Calvin and Hoeksema described them by means of what they do by the work of the Holy Spirit—that is, they turn and believe.

This is in harmony with Canons of Dordt 2.5: "Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life"; and Canons of Dordt 1.9 states, "Men are chosen to faith and to the obedience of faith, holiness, etc. Therefore election is the fountain of every saving good, from which proceed faith, holiness, and the other gifts of salvation" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 163, 157). You could simply insert the words "the elect" or "the children of God" in these statements of the Canons. The elect are described in the Canons as those who believe in Christ crucified, which faith proceeds from election, the fountain of every saving good. The promise of the gospel is that the elect shall not perish but have everlasting life. And according to the Form for the Administration of Baptism, it is the elect who are "buried with [Christ] into His death" and "raised with Him in newness of life" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 259).

Election and the particular promise also explain passages in scripture such as Matthew 11:28: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give

you rest." Here again is the same general proclamation, yet rest is given only to the laboring and heavy-laden ones who come to Christ. By identifying those who come as laboring and heavy-laden, it is clear that the promise in the text is particular. Not all men labor and are heavy laden. Not all men come to Christ. The text is governed by election and reprobation. It is the elect sinner who is regenerated, so that he labors and is heavy laden. By virtue of his new heart and the knowledge of his sin, the elect sinner labors under the weight of guilt and sorrow for sin, which is as a heavy burden on him. Christ says, "Come unto me, and I will give you rest." And Christ also says, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44). It is from the fountain of every saving good that the elect are regenerated; and then being called by God and drawn to Jesus Christ, they come to him and are given rest. This is not what man must do to be saved and have rest but what the man does who is saved, being elect in Christ.

Over time the term *condition* has been totally corrupted to the point where it cannot be used in an orthodox way. *Condition* has come to mean what man must do to be saved. But it is clear that neither Calvin nor Hoeksema meant it this way. Furthermore, they were not discussing what someone must do to be saved, but they were discussing who is saved. It is clear from both men's writings that they were teaching that salvation is for the elect, and for them only, because it is the elect, and them only, who by God are made to believe and turn from their wicked ways.

Is this to be ascribed to the exercise of man's free will?
No.

But it must be wholly ascribed to God, who as He has chosen His own from eternity in Christ, so He confers upon them faith and repentance, rescues them from the power of darkness, and translates them into the kingdom of His own Son [and all this for God's glory and not their own], that they might show forth the praises of Him who called them out of darkness into His marvelous light. (Canons of Dordt 3–4.10, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 168)

That there would be no doubt, Calvin wrote,

But, I ask you, what kind of a division, and how iniquitous a division of all praise and glory, would it be to make God the creator of us mortal men, and yet to make each one of us his own creator unto righteousness and eternal life? In this way God would only have for himself the praise of ineffectual and failing grace. The portion of the glory that is far more excellent would fall to

our lot. But Scripture positively affirms that to circumcise the hearts of men is the work of God alone, and regeneration is not ascribed to any other than God himself.¹⁴

This article is the first half of a dogmatics paper that was written on the well-meant offer of the gospel. So far I have examined what is meant in the first point of common grace when it speaks of a general favor of God toward all mankind and that this is grounded in the supposed general offer of the gospel. Next time, I will explain the well-meant offer of the gospel for what it truly is, namely, Arminianism. The first point makes the gospel dependent on the will of the

sinner and robs God of his sovereignty. And I will establish the positive truth of God's sovereignty in the preaching of the gospel. The truth of the matter is that God's will, not man's will, is the issue in the preaching of the gospel. God works out his own will according to his decree of election and reprobation. God loves some who hear the preaching and hates others who hear the preaching. These are not confused, as the well-meant offer would have it. Whom God hates, he destroys through the preaching of the gospel; but the elect whom he loves, he saves through that preaching. This truth I will consider next time.

—Earl David Kamps

CONTRIBUTION

THE MINOR CONFESSIONS (1): AN INTRODUCTION

This series is intended to touch briefly on the key teachings of and the history surrounding the Reformed minor confessions. These confessions include the ancient church creeds, the liturgical forms, and to a lesser extent the Church Order of Dordrecht. The major confessions are the three forms of unity: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordrecht.

The minor confessions are otherwise referred to as the lesser confessions, not because they are any less significant or any less important in comparison to the major confessions. Neither is the name meant to compare the smaller length of the minor confessions with the larger length of the major confessions. Rather, the name refers to their limited scope: each minor confession focuses on a single point of doctrine, whereas the major confessions cover the whole of Christian doctrine.

While this is a useful classification, it is by no means perfect. The Belgic Confession most closely follows this classification, covering the whole system of doctrine in correspondence with the six loci, or topics, of Reformed dogmatics. It could be argued that the Canons of Dordt has a somewhat limited scope, focusing mainly on setting

forth the truth of the Reformed faith over against the errors of the Remonstrants. Similarly, while divided into three separate sections, in its whole system of doctrine, the Heidelberg Catechism maintains the very specific theme of comfort. However, the classification is useful for the intention of distinguishing the minor confessions from the three forms of unity. For the duration of this series, I will be referring to them simply as the minor confessions.

While there is much material that I hope to touch on throughout this series, it is beneficial to be reminded concerning what the confessions are and their necessity in the true church of Jesus Christ. This is important for us to insist on in a day and an age when men hate ecclesiastical authority and despise church government as that government of the church is exercised according to the word of God and by means of the confessions.

The Idea of the Confessions

The idea of the confessions can be understood by their main labels: creeds, symbols, and confessions. The word *creed* is an English derivative of the Latin verb *credo*, which being translated means *I believe*. This phrase appears as a constant

¹⁴ Calvin, "God's Eternal Predestination and Secret Providence," in *Calvin's Calvinism*, 89.

refrain in the Apostles' Creed, the content of which the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 7 defines as those things that are necessary for a Christian to believe. In a very concrete way, a creed is meant to form the essential doctrinal content of faith, what scripture often refers to as "the faith." A creed answers the question, what does true faith believe?

Therefore, first, a creed is a statement of faith, the articles of which set forth the truths that the framers of each creed believed to be necessary unto salvation and essential to the well-being of the church. The antithetical character of a creed comes out in the name *creed*. A creed is not merely an organization of pious-sounding thoughts or religious speech with which a church or an individual may agree or disagree with no serious consequences. A creed is unlike any other statement of principles from an earthly club or association. Instead, a creed is the fruit of Christ's promise to send forth his Spirit to guide his people into all the truth (John 16:13). For an individual and a church to reject a creed, therefore, is for them to reveal themselves as faithless and unbelieving.

Second, creeds are symbols. That they are symbols refers to the fact that the true church does not subscribe to her creeds begrudgingly nor out of custom or superstition. Rather, the church wears her creeds like badges of honor and spreads those creeds over her walls as great banners. This is what we mean when we say that we are the Reformed Protestant Churches. We often tend to think that we are Reformed because we believe that our doctrine is the heritage of the Protestant Reformation. This is true. However, this does not answer the question, how did the Reformed Protestant Churches come into the possession of that doctrine? These churches are *Reformed* for no other reason than that they have adopted the Reformed creeds. The Reformed creeds inform the key doctrinal positions of the Reformed Protestant Churches as witnesses over against those who also call themselves Reformed but are not Reformed, and the Reformed creeds are tests that must be used to examine every doctrine and every teacher.

Third, the creeds are confessions. The word *confession* comes from the Latin verb that means *to say together with*. In the Reformed confessions the church speaks together with God. In the church's confessions she agrees with the word of God, which is God's own exegesis of himself. By those Reformed confessions the church speaks together with the church of all ages concerning what she believes to be the doctrine of the word of God. This is crucial. We are Reformed for no other reason than that we have adopted the Reformed confessions. And we confess that we are Reformed *according to the word of God*.

Here I answer the objection of those who stand opposed to creeds and confessions, presuming that the

church that holds to creeds must necessarily ascribe to them equal authority with the sacred scriptures. This is a fictitious charge that easily can be dismissed. For the truly Reformed, confessional church, the word of God is the sole rule of doctrine and practice (*sola scriptura*). And yet the Reformed church also confesses that her creeds "do fully agree with the Word of God" and contain "the true and complete doctrine of salvation," as is evident from the Formula of Subscription and the questions posed to every confessing member of the Reformed church in his or her public confession of faith (*Confessions and Church Order*, 326, 266). The Reformed church admits that the authority of the Reformed confessions is *derived* from the word of God. The confessions are not infallible rules in themselves, containing original authority like the inspired scriptures. However, the truths that are taught in the Reformed confessions are binding insofar as they do fully agree with the scriptures, and in that understanding the confessions are indeed regulative for doctrine and practice.

The Necessity of Confessions

The value or usefulness of creeds is not the main consideration when answering why the church has creeds. Of course, the Reformed church admits that the creeds are very useful in many ways. The creeds settle doctrinal controversy in the church. The creeds form clear and concise statements of faith that guard membership in the church from those who do not believe the truth of the word of God and those who would bring in damnable heresies, thus disrupting the unity of the church in the truth. The creeds are often quite useful in teaching the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith, laying out the main teachings of the Bible from the clearest and plainest passages. However, while the Reformed creeds are very useful, the Reformed church believes that the creeds are *necessary*.

The Reformed church does not merely confess that she *may* adopt creeds, but she confesses that she *must* have creeds. There is a credal imperative. By this credal imperative we always must insist on the creeds and must condemn all those who wish to slight those creeds either publicly or privately, in preaching or in writing.

The church must have creeds because it is the chief calling of the true church of Jesus Christ publicly to testify as one united body concerning the truth. This is the teaching of 1 Timothy 3:15: "If I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."

Paul gave Timothy specific instructions on how Timothy ought to conduct himself as a young minister in the true church of Jesus Christ. The church in the text is a reference to the instituted church, the local manifestation in the world of the universal body of Jesus Christ. And

the instituted church is called “the church of the living God.” The church is the church of the living God. This is what must be confessed about every true church of Jesus Christ. God is God from everlasting to everlasting. God is the same in the instant and constant fullness of his divine being as the only good God, the implication of all perfection—the God who is his perfections and is eternally the same in all his perfections. God is the living God because God is the triune God. In God, life is fellowship: God the Father fellowshiping with God the Son in God the Holy Spirit. The life of God is the life of breathing and being breathed. In that life of God, God never changes. That God is the living God means that God cannot change. God cannot change with respect to his being nor any of his perfections. And God cannot change with respect to his eternal counsel.

First Timothy 3:15 certainly has in view God’s eternal counsel. That the church is the church of the living God means that the church is the product of the eternal counsel and will of God. The church of the living God is not merely the church as the universal body of Jesus Christ but also the church as instituted. It is God’s house wherein he is pleased to dwell and wherein he rules graciously by his Word and Spirit. It is God’s house wherein he makes known the wonder of grace in Jesus Christ and unfolds his sovereign will and good pleasure, wherein God communicates himself to his people.

This explains the innermost essence of the instituted church. The church as she is manifested in the world is the result of the decreeing God. God is a living God, possessing a living will, according to which God performs all things in time and history. God decreed the church and every member of it. And according to that sovereign will, God calls his people out of the world and gathers his elect from the four corners of the earth into the church institute. And God also decreed what the church’s chief task is in the world: to be the pillar and ground of the truth.

The church of the living God that God elects, that God calls and gathers into one body in Jesus Christ, and that God manifests in the world in the institute is the pillar and ground of the truth. This is God’s purpose for his church in the world. This is her sole office or task in the world. The church’s task is not a bunch of other things. The church’s task is not to be a place where everyone feels loved and accepted for who they are, where no judgments are cast. The church is not called to aid and assist movements for reform in society. Rather, the church is called to be the pillar and ground of the truth. The church’s task is to uphold and to establish the truth.

Being so founded upon the truth of God, the church is tasked with supporting that truth in such a way that

everything in the church flows from that truth. The church has the right, authority, and calling to confess what the truth is according to the word of God. Likewise, the church has the right, authority, and calling to threaten with eternal damnation all those who depart from her confession of the truth.

If it is true that the church is called to be the pillar and ground of the truth, then how does the church carry out this task?

The Reformed church answers, “By the confessions!”

That this is the case is demonstrated by the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 3:16: “Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.” The words “without controversy” in the King James Version can also be translated as *confessedly*. By this the high calling of the church to be the pillar and ground of the truth is given a concrete expression, which is that she makes a confession of that truth. The calling of the church is not merely that she makes a confession. There is an antithetical character to the church’s confession. In 2 Timothy 1:13 Paul exhorted Timothy to “hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.”

Indicative in this exhortation is the reality that not every confession confesses the truth. This is evident from the context in which Paul further exhorted Timothy to “shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness” (2 Tim. 2:16). And Paul warned of those who had departed from the truth, “who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some” (v. 18).

This is further demonstrated in Galatians 1:8–9 by the apostle Paul’s very serious warning to the churches of Galatia, which seemed to have departed from the gospel that Paul had preached to them:

8. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.
9. As we said before, so say I now again, if any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.

Another gospel is not another, but it is a perversion of the gospel of Christ. “There be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:7). Another gospel is any lie of man that overturns or corrupts the truth of the gospel of Christ. Certainly, there can be no greater condemnation of the lie than to declare it to be no gospel at all and a perversion of the gospel of Christ.

Notice how the inspired apostle not only condemned the lie but also issued a word of condemnation to the man who brings such perversions of the gospel into the church: “Let him be accursed.” The calling of the church, therefore, in her confession of the truth is not to settle for a merely outward profession. Neither is the calling of the church to be accepting, allowing several different sounds within her walls in the name of Christian charity and toleration. Rather, the church’s chief task and calling according to the word of God is to hold forth the form of sound words that are contained therein by confessing the truth and condemning every lie that perverts that truth and those who teach and promote it.

Additionally, the church needs confessions because confessions are the weapons of her spiritual warfare. By the church’s confessions, she guards herself against terrible heresies promulgated by wicked men who seek to make shipwreck of the faith and make merchandise of the church. The effect that false doctrine always has in the church is that it disrupts the unity of the church, which unity is in the truth. The members of the church are not like the staves of a barrel that are bound together by an iron ring. Rather, the members of the church are as several members of a body, each operating in harmony with each other as living members of one single organism, growing up into Christ as their head.

The church is admonished to be of one mind. None can walk together except they be agreed (Amos 3:3), and that is no less true for the members of the church who are united together in true faith and in brotherly love. Agreement in the truth is not only necessary, but it is also the sure fruit of the Spirit’s operation in the church. The calling of the church is to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). To this end it is utterly inconceivable that the church should not have any test of orthodoxy, officially agreed on and ecclesiastically adopted for the promotion and the maintenance of that unity. Presbyterian minister Samuel Miller, in his book on the doctrine and utility of the creeds, makes a point that those who would acknowledge that the church has the responsibility to maintain peace and unity and to be a witness to the truth in the world and yet rob the church of the creeds as a means to that end are like the cruel Egyptian taskmasters who demanded that the Israelites make bricks without providing them the straw and materials with which to accomplish that task.¹

The Value of Confessions

The usefulness and value of the Reformed confessions can be understood properly in connection with their necessity. The creeds are greatly useful in the true church of Jesus Christ. The church has many callings, including the calling to teach the following generation the truth.² The usefulness of the Reformed creeds cannot be slighted in the education of our covenant youth. It is utterly absurd to disregard the creeds in the instruction of our children. The children must learn from church history about the development of the Reformed faith as that Reformed faith has been delivered to them via the Reformed confessions. The children must also learn about themselves in relationship to the church of the past, as the heritage of the church has been tested and proved through the fires of intense doctrinal controversy. The children must learn how the Lord preserved his church through controversy. The children must be taught that the creeds are God’s gifts to his church, which present the truth of their salvation in simple terms from scripture’s plainest passages. This informs our Reformed insistence on catechetical instruction.

Teachers in our good Christian schools must be encouraged to use the creeds in their curriculum, to keep themselves and the children in constant remembrance of them. The teacher is greatly mistaken who naïvely supposes that the creeds do not have much to offer in the way of lesson planning. The creeds touch on many of the subjects taught in the curriculum and often can serve as helps in directing the attention of the lesson away from the carnal and mundane and toward the spiritual significance of any subject. Parents must teach their children from the Bible, but parents may not neglect to teach their children the creeds. This is part of the parents’ vows that they made at the baptisms of their children, to see that the children are instructed and brought up in the articles of the Christian faith as those articles are taught in every true church of Jesus Christ.

While there is more that can be said about the value of the confessions in the Christian church, my allotted space is filled. The value of the confessions will be highlighted as I navigate through the minor confessions, beginning first with the Apostle’s Creed, the earliest of the ecumenical creeds. Until next time.

—Garrett Varner

1 Samuel Miller, *Doctrinal Integrity: On the Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions and Adherence to Our Doctrinal Standards* (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1989), 12.

2 “We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done. For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children: That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children” (Ps. 78:4–6).



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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL

For I have not sent them [the prophets], saith the LORD, yet they prophesy a lie in my name; that I might drive you out, and that ye might perish, ye, and the prophets that prophesy unto you. —Jeremiah 27:15

The prophets of Judah prophesied a beautiful message: “Ye shall not serve the king of Babylon! Behold, the vessels of the LORD’s house shall now shortly be brought again from Babylon!” Their message was full of salvation, hope, and joy. Everyone in captivity would return. The vessels of God would be brought back to the temple. The time of God’s wrath was past, for surely the Lord had chastised his people. A new day dawned. The church had a bright future looking forward, and God was with his people for good. There had been some problems in the past. Many bad things had been uncovered, but the people were cleaning up those things, and God was going to turn the captivity of his people and restore his house, which had been stripped of its treasures, and the temple would be a glorious house again. Jehovah had spoken to Judah!

It was a message that the people want to hear. You can see them streaming out of church smiling to one another. They are talking together about what a positive and uplifting message the minister brought that morning. They praise the minister for being so pastoral and for having such a concern for the comfort of the sheep. He does not always preach about sin. They comment about how their souls simply thrill to hear him speak each Sunday. He always seems to know just the right tone to strike, his words are all carefully chosen, and the message is beautifully crafted. They have a very warm feeling inside today. What a gracious God they have!

There were many prophets who preached this beautiful message. And the priests and elders were in favor of that kind of preaching too.

But it was a lie.

Curious thing! How could the people know who was telling the truth? Those prophets or Jeremiah? Would Jerusalem be sacked or restored? If the prophets’ words came to pass, they were true prophets. That always has been the sign of a true prophet.

Strange sign! Would it not be too late, then? Yes. For the true Word of God carries with it the power of its reception. The true Word of God works faith and has no need of man. The Word comes, and God’s people receive it infallibly and are saved. They bring their necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and they submit to the judgment of God that Jerusalem would go into captivity for seventy years. They are not captivated by the siren songs of the false prophets.

For that word too—the word of the lie—God sent. Oh, he did not send the prophets! They speak in his name, but they are sons of hell and children of the lie with their messages of false grace, hope, and joy. Yet, God did send them in his sovereignty. He sent those prophets with their lying words and their cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive. God said that they prophesy a lie in my name in order that Jehovah drive you out and that ye might perish, ye and the prophets that prophesy unto you. Yes, there was a sovereign and divine purpose in those lying prophets for the people with whom God was not well-pleased and for the false prophets themselves: “Because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thess. 2:10–12).

—NJL