

The background features a large, stylized orange illustration. On the left, a sword is shown diagonally, pointing towards the top right. On the right, a shield is depicted, partially overlapping the sword. The shield has a circular design with several smaller circles inside. The entire illustration is rendered in a solid orange color against a white background.

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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ASHEN APHORISMS AND CLAY BULWARKS

Your remembrances are like unto ashes, your bodies to bodies of clay. — Job 13:12

The above verse was the response of Job to his three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. By the time Job spoke these words, each friend had spoken. We remember that, at the very least, their purpose in coming to Job was to grieve with him and to comfort him. They each had come with an explanation of the miserable circumstances in Job's life, and they each offered a solution for Job's misery. They had come with their answers.

Why had Job lost all his oxen and asses to the Sabeans, his sheep to fire from heaven, his camels to the Chaldeans, and all these cattle together with his servants? Why had all his children gone to eat at their eldest brother's house the same day that a great wind struck the four corners of his house, killing them all? Why, moreover, had Job been stricken with boils from the soles of his feet to the top of his head?

And lest we forget, Job was not ignorant of the fact that God had done those things. Sabeans may have stolen Job's oxen and donkeys and slain his servants; Chaldeans, his camels; and the wind may have struck the four corners of the house of Job's eldest son, and the crumbling house crushed Job's children, but the hand of God was sovereign over it all. That was Job's confession: "The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away" (Job 1:21). Moreover, that was Job's answer to the folly that came from the mouth of his wife, when she told him to curse God and die: "What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (2:10).

Job knew that God had done these things to him. And Job did not even have the full picture as we do. The devil had moved all these things against Job. Nevertheless, God did them. God took away all Job's cattle and servants. God put to death all Job's children. God covered Job with boils. There is no power but God's power. All that happened took place under the providential hand of God. Job was well aware. Why had *God* done all these things?

Job was not troubled by the philosophy of fortune or chance. After his response to his wife, scripture even says, "In all this did not Job sin with his lips" (Job 2:10). Job's

confession was correct. But those words are troubling. With his lips Job did not sin. That is scripture's notice of what was going on in Job's heart. Job's lips confessed the goodness of God, but in his heart Job doubted it. He needed comfort. He needed the answer that would deliver him from all his sins. Job needed the answer that explained that all evil is subservient to his eternal good. Such is comfort. Comfort is that greatest good that does not merely alleviate the evil but is the perfect answer to all evil.

To comfort Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar had come. But Job likened their remembrances to ashes and their bodies to clay. What does that mean? We could slightly improve the translation as such: Your memorable sayings are aphorisms (or proverbs) of ash. Each friend had come with an aphorism of his own wisdom, saying, "Remember, Job." They all brought wise sayings, sayings that Job was supposed to keep in mind, sayings bearing wisdom to be applied to Job's life and circumstances.

Well, that is what the friends thought about their aphorisms.

But Job likened his friends' aphorisms to ashes—things that were as vain and light as ash. The proverbs were fit to be forgotten, for they provided no wisdom at all. They gave no understanding that could stand before the blast of death. Like ashes in the wind, so were all the remembrances of Job's friends. Folly.

And Job likened his friends' bodies to those of clay. The word "bodies" does not refer to their human bodies. The Hebrew word refers to a convex surface that here is to be understood as a bulwark, something in which one can hide and find refuge. It is a place of defense. And here Job refers to their bulwarks figuratively and means their argumentation. Really, the ideas of aphorism and bulwark should be taken together. The friends' wise words were meant to be sources of comfort for Job. Their words were meant to convey the wisdom that is the refuge of the soul.

A good example of a bulwark is what Jesus said: "They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners

to repentance” (Mark 2:17). That is a truly wise saying to the people of God as they know themselves to be ungodly sinners who have no righteousness of their own. Lest they begin to doubt the mercy of God on account of their sins, they must remember that just as the sick, not the whole, need a physician, so also Jesus came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. That is wisdom that is a bulwark against evil, a refuge in the valley of the shadow of death, and comfort in the midst of this valley of tears.

But Job likened the bulwarks of his friends to the bulwarks of clay. That picture is easily grasped. Imagine the day of battle. The enemy besieges the city. He employs his engines against the city and rains his arrows over the garrison. To the bulwarks the besieged fly for refuge. But lo, the bulwarks are clay. In the day of evil they cannot stand. They cannot provide the least defense from the onslaughts of the foe. They cannot give a moment of safety. But in an instant they are made a heap of rubble, crushing the sorry soul who flees to them for refuge.

What had the three men said to Job to warrant such a response? Let us hear from them.

Of the three, Eliphaz spoke first.

7. Remember, I pray thee, who ever perished, being innocent? or where were the righteous cut off?
8. Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same.
9. By the blast of God they perish, and by the breath of his nostrils are they consumed. (Job 4:7–9)

The wisdom of Eliphaz, the culmination of his years having beheld the children of men! What was he saying? He was arguing from the effect to the cause. The reaping of evil is because of the plowing of iniquity and the sowing of wickedness, just like the harvest of wheat is from the sowing of wheat. You reap what you sow. The miserable circumstances of Job’s life—the evil—were the fruits of what Job had plowed and sowed. They were the blast of God’s nostrils that consume the sinner. Remember, Job, who ever perished being innocent? Do you not know that you reap what you sow? Where were the righteous ever cut off?

Bildad spoke next.

3. Doth God pervert judgment? or doth the Almighty pervert justice?
4. If thy children have sinned against him, and he have cast them away for their transgression;
5. If thou wouldest seek unto God betimes, and make thy supplication to the Almighty;
6. If thou wert pure and upright; surely now he would awake for thee, and make the habitation of thy righteousness prosperous. (Job 8:3–6)

And later Bildad said, “Behold, God will not cast away a perfect man, neither will he help the evil doers” (Job 8:20).

Bildad’s answer was much the same as Eliphaz’s. Does God pervert judgment, and the Almighty, justice? Of course not! God is the God of strictest justice. Do you not see, Job, that God cast away your children for their transgressions, because they sinned against him? Do you not know, Job, that God neither casts away the perfect nor helps evildoers? If you would seek God and make supplication to him, God would awake to your help. If you are pure and upright, God will prosper the habitation of your righteousness. Bildad’s explanation? God was punishing Job for some sin in his life, and that is why God also killed Job’s children. Bildad’s solution? Fix your walk, walk in the way of obedience, cleanse your life from sin, and then you will be prospered.

What of Zophar, who finished the first round of wisdom?

2. Should not the multitude of words be answered? and should a man full of talk be justified?
3. Should thy lies make men hold their peace? and when thou mockest, shall no man make thee ashamed?
4. For thou hast said, My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in thine eyes.
5. But oh that God would speak, and open his lips against thee;
6. And that he would shew thee the secrets of wisdom, that they are double to that which is! Know therefore that God exacteth of thee less than thine iniquity deserveth. (Job 11:2–6)

Zophar spoke plainly. Job, God is exacting from you the wages of sin, albeit less than your iniquity deserves. And Zophar reminded Job who God is, “He knoweth vain men: he seeth wickedness also; will he not then consider it?” (Job 11:11). Remember, Job, God tries the hearts and the reins. He knows all the imaginations of the heart. He knows the vanity of men and sees man’s hidden wickedness. Zophar was calling Job a hypocrite because he had said that his doctrine was pure and that he was clean in the eyes of his friends. Job, you can hide your wickedness from us, but you cannot hide from God.

And because Zophar’s view was the same as the others, namely, that God was punishing Job for his sins, then Zophar’s solution was the same:

13. If thou prepare thine heart, and stretch out thine hands toward him:
14. If iniquity be in thine hand, put it far away, and let not wickedness dwell in thy tabernacles.

15. For then shalt thou lift up thy face without spot; yea, thou shalt be steadfast, and shalt not fear. (Job 11:13–15)

Do you want to be steadfast, Job? Do you want assurance and not fear? Do you know what will cause you to lift up your head? Cleanse your heart, put all iniquity far away, and rid your life of all wickedness. To be brief, that was Zophar's word. It was the same as the others.

It was repentance before forgiveness and blessing in the way of obedience.

Lo, the ashen aphorisms and clay bulwarks of the Protestant Reformed Churches!

All the friends' proverbs were vain, and their bulwarks were corrupt. No wonder Job called his three friends "forgers of lies" and "physicians of no value" (Job 13:4). Moreover, they were speaking for God but wickedly and deceitfully (v. 7). They were contending for God, that is, they were acting like God's prosecuting attorneys, but they were partial toward God (v. 8). They were acting like the Pharisees toward the woman caught in the act of adultery. They emphasized the law and the justice of God, but they left out God's own word to his people. That is the idea of their partiality. They omitted God's own defense of his people.

Job likened his friends' aphorisms to ashes—things that were as vain and light as ash...The proverbs were fit to be forgotten, for they provided no wisdom at all. They gave no understanding that could stand before the blast of death. Like ashes in the wind, so were all the remembrances of Job's friends.

That word of God, the sure defense of God's people, is Jesus Christ. That was the omission of Job's three friends. The omission of Christ, the wisdom of God, makes every saying vain and every bulwark worthless. All Christian comfort is contained in the simple truth that the children of God are not their own, but they belong to Jesus Christ. That is God's own word to them. That is the Rock that God gave to his people in which to hide. That is their only comfort.

But Job's friends forged lies. They omitted Christ from the equation. They were physicians of no value. Who, belonging only to himself, can stand before their sayings? Who can find any refuge apart from Jesus Christ? Is not wickedness in all that man sows? Are not all man's ways defiled with sin? Does not man daily transgress against the living God? Is there not in the flesh of man the very motions of sin? How shall he be covered in the sight of the Most High? Who shall stand when the Lord enters into judgment? Who, then, can prepare his own heart and cleanse himself of evil?

To be left alone, that is, apart from Jesus Christ under those sayings, you must necessarily wither. There is no hope. If the blessings of God wait for your repentance and obedience, then salvation will never come. If the good things of God indicate God's attitude toward the Christian, then God must despise him, for God sends not only the good but also the evil. Then the Christian would be in constant despair and doubt concerning his justification, for every evil would be a witness of his condemnation.

But in Christ is the comfort, the answer over against all the evil. Who perished, being innocent? Christ did. Where was the righteous one cut off? At the cross. There the just suffered for the unjust as the sacrifice for sin. There Christ was cut off out of the land of the living and stricken for the transgressions of his people. And that was the justification of his people once and for all, so that God's judgment of his elect in Christ is that they are perfectly righteous. That is the judgment that God will not reverse and the justice that the Almighty will not pervert. And that is why it is impossible that God ever will exact from his people what their iniquity deserves, nor even less than it deserves. To exact punishment twice is the grossest perversion of justice. The Almighty will not pervert justice!

Jesus Christ. The wisdom of God! The sure refuge!

Oh, it is true, we cannot explain why it was the good pleasure of God to take all from Job, just as we cannot know why it is the good pleasure of God to send to us good and evil, health and sickness, riches and poverty, fruitful and barren years, rain and drought, even life and death. It is not our place to ask or know God's reasons. God is sovereign. But we do know that belonging to Jesus Christ, all things are made subservient to our salvation! Never does God punish his people. Never does God do anything to them that harms their salvation. Never does God send to them more than they are able to bear. Yea, rather, "our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor. 4:17).

"Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding" (Prov. 3:13).

—EDK

Jachin and Boaz—those two massive, brazen pillars standing on either side of the priest as he entered Solomon’s temple were two monumental witnesses that testified to the truth of God’s covenant. According to the name of the former, the revelation regarding God was that *he establishes*, and the revelation according to the latter was that *in him is strength*. God’s word in Jachin was, “I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure...I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it” (Isa. 46:9–11). God’s word in Boaz was, “Hearken unto me, ye stouthearted, that are far from righteousness: I bring near my righteousness; it shall not be far off, and my salvation shall not tarry: and I will place salvation in Zion for Israel my glory” (vv. 12–13). Thus Israel was surrounded on the left hand and on the right with the testimony of the living God—the God who establishes his covenant by his decree and the God who redeems his covenant from destruction by his everlasting power of grace.

Jachin and Boaz—those two massive, brazen pillars towering over the congregation that assembled for worship were God’s antithetical word over against man’s vain imaginations about himself and his abilities. Throughout this issue of *Sword and Shield* is the sharp expounding of that same antithetical word. In the *Meditation* Reverend Kamps teaches Jachin and Boaz over against the ashen aphorisms and clay bulwarks of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. In the rubric *Understanding the Times*, Reverend Ophoff continues exploring a recent, concrete case wherein hearts of enmity against Jachin and Boaz have become manifested. Reverend Pascual capably unfolds the antithesis of Jachin and Boaz in his sermon on Ecclesiastes 3:15. And in the *Running Footmen* rubric, Mr. Caleb Ophoff defends the Jachin and Boaz of the Christian’s assurance over against Ish-jachin and Be-adam-oz, the two pillars standing at the entrance of the Protestant Reformed Churches’ counterfeit temple, teaching that *man establishes* and *in man is strength*.

In the editorial the undersigned begins a brief series on the assurance of faith taught in Lord’s Day 32: “Also, that every one may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 120). This study is not occasioned by any lack of writing on the topic in *Sword and Shield*. Indeed, several articles already have taught the Jachin and Boaz of this Reformed

confession.¹ Rather this study was occasioned by a personal phone conversation that the undersigned had earlier this year with kinsmen according to the flesh who lust after the Protestant Reformed perversion of this Lord’s Day. More specifically, this study has in view what was sent via text to my wife the following day:

In light of [...]’s conversation last night, my devotions this morning included reading and dwelling on these words. Can’t help but share them with you. Thinking and praying for you today.

“These words” and “them” refer to what accompanied the text—that is, a highlighted photo of question and answer 65 of A Compendium of the Christian Religion:

Q. 65. What *purpose* then do your good works answer?

A. That I may thereby testify my thankfulness to God for all His benefits, and that He may be glorified by me: and *that also I may be assured of the sincerity of my faith by good works as the fruits thereof*; and that my neighbors may be edified thereby and gained to Christ. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 151, emphasis added)

To the one who sent this text to my wife: You must understand that such good words and fair speeches only make my wife and I want to vomit. What is so repulsive is not how easily you make an open show of your piety before men (you can keep your prayers that you speak to your deaf and mute idol—we do not want them) or how you so easily imitate the pattern of the serpent by conversing with my wife (who was not even present for most of the conversation) while intentionally excluding me. But what is so repulsive is your proud, ruthless, and coercive doctrine about the function of good works in Lord’s Day 32. We loathe it from the very depths of our beings. Thus I have summoned your doctrine to stand trial, and the purpose of the editorial is to scrutinize it. And I assure you that your doctrine will be found as nothing but ashen aphorisms and clay bulwarks.

To the reader who has received by the grace and election of God the love of the truth, may the truth written in this issue strengthen you in confessing Jachin and Boaz and stir up from your heart a boasting in the living God, the God who establishes his covenant by his decree and the God who redeems his covenant from destruction by his everlasting power of grace.

—LB

¹ See, for example, Tyler D. Ophoff, “Union with Christ: The Inevitable Fruits of Thanksgiving,” *Sword and Shield* 5, no. 5 (October 2024): 21–26; Alisa Snippe, “Backpacks Filled with Bricks,” *Sword and Shield* 4, no. 6 (November 2023): 30–39; Nathan J. Langerak, “Professor Settled and Binding (3): The Charge of Schism,” *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 10 (December 1, 2021): 15–24.

EDITOR V. PRIDE, RUTHLESSNESS, AND COERCION: ASSURED OF FAITH (1)

Opening Statement of the Case

Bailiff: All rise! The Court of Appeals for the Office of All Believers is now in session. Presiding is the Honorable Judge Freewoman's Son, with the Honorable Judges Good Conscience and Justified Sinner. All persons having business before this Court are admonished to draw near and give their attention, for the Court is now sitting.

J. Son: Please be seated.

Clerk: The Court will now hear the matter of Case number 2021–26, *Editor versus Pride, Ruthlessness, and Coercion* on appeal from the prior judgment in Court De Facto. The appellant is representing himself pro se. Appearing for the appellee, Pride, Ruthlessness, and Coercion, is counsel Kinsman according to the Flesh.

J. Son: The case before the Court is a dispute concerning a particular clause in Lord's Day 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism, namely, "Also, that every one may be assured in himself of his faith, by the fruits thereof." This clause is part of the Catechism's teaching in question and answer 86 about the necessity of good works for a Christian. For the sake of the Court, I will read that entire question and answer:

Q. 86. Since then we are delivered from our misery merely of grace, through Christ, without any merit of ours, why must we still do good works?

A. Because Christ, having redeemed and delivered us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit after His own image; that so we may testify by the whole of our conduct our gratitude to God for His blessings, and that He may be praised by us; also, that every one may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof; and that by our godly conversation others may be gained to Christ. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 120)

This case has come to the Court because Mr. Editor as the appellant objects to a prior judgment entered by Court De Facto that has construed the aforementioned clause in favor of the appellee, Pride, Ruthlessness, and Coercion. For the convenience of the Court, the appellee will be addressed hereafter as PRC.

The appellant's objection consists in three parts. First, Mr. Editor objects to PRC's doctrine about the nature of the assurance of faith in Lord's Day 32. Mr. Editor contends that PRC erroneously commingles the substance of this assurance with the substance of faith.

Mr. Editor acknowledges that PRC may distinguish between the term *assurance of faith* and the term *faith*. However, according to Mr. Editor, PRC teaches by consequence that when a Christian gains the assurance of faith in Lord's Day 32, he essentially gains what Lord's Day 7 defines as "faith," namely, "a certain knowledge...[and] an assured confidence...that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sin, everlasting righteousness, and salvation are, freely given by God" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 90–91). Expressed negatively, PRC teaches that in what measure the Christian lacks assurance of faith, in the same measure he lacks knowledge and confidence of his election, his union with Jesus Christ, and his enjoyment of salvation.

Second, Mr. Editor objects to PRC's doctrine about the nature of the relationship between the assurance of faith and good works as taught by Lord's Day 32. Mr. Editor contends that PRC erroneously makes good works the ground for the Christian's enjoyment of salvation.

Mr. Editor acknowledges that PRC literally may deny that good works are the ground or basis for the Christian's enjoyment of salvation. However, according to Mr. Editor, PRC nullifies this orthodox statement by consequence when

PRC construes the nature of the relationship between the assurance of faith and good works as a means to alleviate doubts, thus teaching this practical syllogism for the Christian: “If I struggle with doubts about my salvation, I need the assurance of faith. Lord’s Day 32 teaches me that good works are necessary to assure me of my faith. Therefore, I will examine my life for good works in order to deliver me from my doubts.”

Mr. Editor also insists that PRC literally nullifies the orthodox statement that good works are not the ground for the Christian’s enjoyment of salvation in statements such as these: “Good works have a *minor, secondary, and supportive role* in our being assured of our faith,”¹ and “We *may become confident that we are truly believers* as we see that faith has produced fruits...Why do I live godly? *Partly because* I don’t want to lose the assurance of my faith.”²

Third, Mr. Editor objects to how PRC applies the relationship between good works and the assurance of faith to the Christian’s new life of gratitude.

Mr. Editor objects to PRC’s application of Lord’s Day 32 to a Christian who is weak in faith, teaching that good works help a Christian to overcome his doubts of belonging to Jesus Christ and to become confident that he is a sincere believer. Mr. Editor objects to PRC’s application of Lord’s Day 32 to a Christian’s motivation for godly living, teaching that a Christian performs good works to avoid losing the assurance of his faith and requiring a minister to warn his congregation that the members will lose assurance of their salvation if they do not work.³ While PRC makes these erroneous applications, Mr. Editor insists that PRC also completely ignores the true and upright application to the Christian of Lord’s Day 32.

As to his doctrine Mr. Editor teaches, first, that assurance of faith in Lord’s Day 32 is of an entirely different substance from faith and stands in strict service of the theodicy, a revelation of God’s righteous judgment. By itself *assurance* consists of an approval by examination

that vindicates a judgment already passed. Thus assurance *of faith* is the approbation of an elect sinner’s faith that vindicates God’s justice in declaring the elect sinner to be righteous by faith alone. Second, Mr. Editor teaches good works as evidences that approve faith. Third, Mr. Editor teaches that assurance of faith in Lord’s Day 32 must be applied to the Christian’s life of self-examination and responsibility to conduct Christian discipline.

The question for this Court is this: Did the prior judgment by Court De Facto err when it ruled in favor of the appellee?

The Court has before it the issue just stated. Mr. Editor, you are representing yourself in this matter. You may proceed with your argument.

Overview of Appellant’s Argument

Editor: May it please the Court. This appeal concerns the correct interpretation and proper application of the clause in Lord’s Day 32 “also, that every one may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof.”

This appeal is necessary because the prior judgment favoring the appellee subverts the entire body of the Heidelberg Catechism’s instruction and militates against the Reformed faith. The appellee exploits the contested clause to foist a fictitious, man-made doctrine into Lord’s Day 32 that is completely foreign to the sense of the Catechism. Furthermore, the appellee plays fast and loose with orthodox statements to conceal heterodox doctrine, so that by good words and fair speeches the appellee deceives the hearts of the simple. Rather than instructing Christians concerning their new, thankful lives of perfect liberty in Christ, the appellee uses this Lord’s Day—a Lord’s Day that lays the groundwork for the entire third section of the Catechism—to foment a spirit of bondage that suffocates the Christian life with its unbearable yoke of fear.

My doctrine has been introduced already by the Honorable Chief Judge. By a threefold argument this appeal will prove that my doctrine is the doctrine of the Heidelberg Catechism.

1 Joshua Engelsma, “The Necessity of Good Works,” sermon preached in Crete Protestant Reformed Church on June 7, 2026, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermons/67262334522839>.

2 Barry Gritters, “Grace...And Good Works,” sermon preached in Grace Protestant Reformed Church on February 16, 2025, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermons/2162517701702>.

3 Gritters, “Grace...And Good Works,” in which sermon Gritters said, “Don’t be afraid of works. Don’t render that minister suspect who calls you to work. Don’t have suspicions about that minister that warns you that if you do not work, you’re going to lose the assurance of your salvation.”

The first aspect of my argument examines the contested clause in light of what question 86 indicates about the spiritual condition of the Christian who makes this confession. The second aspect of my argument examines the contested clause in light of its subordinate place in answer 86. The last aspect of my argument examines the contested clause in light of the purpose of Lord's Day 32 as an introduction to the third section of the Catechism.

First Aspect of Appellant's Argument

Editor: My argument begins in question 86 of Lord's Day 32, which reads as follows: "Since then we are delivered from our misery merely of grace, through Christ, without any merit of ours, why must we still do good works?"

Notice, first, that the Catechism does not ask simply, "Why must we do good works?" but the Catechism begins its question with a doctrinal statement. Notice, second, that the Catechism begins this doctrinal statement with the words "since then," thereby indicating that this statement is grounded upon the entire instruction of the first two sections in the Catechism. Notice, third, that this doctrinal statement is not impersonal but represents the living confessions of Christians in whose hearts dwells the truth of the previous thirty-one Lord's Days.

Why are these observations significant? Here the Catechism teaches as clear as the summer sky that those who confess "also, that every one may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof" have first confessed "since then we are delivered from our misery merely of grace, through Christ, without any merit of ours."

The appellee maintains that the contested clause in Lord's Day 32 is for Christians who are overcome with doubts, for Christians who want to become convicted that they are believers, and for Christians who will lose the sense of God's favor if they do not walk in a godly manner. Now, what question 86 demands from the appellee is to teach that such people also simultaneously confess "we are delivered from our misery merely of grace, through Christ, without any merit of ours."

But who are these Christians in Lord's Day 32?

Before the Christians in Lord's Day 32 utter a syllable about assurance of faith, the same already have confessed "we *are* delivered." The "are" in our received English text is significant. Its correspondent German verb *sein* forms in the original

text a stative-passive construction that emphasizes an existing state or condition resulting from a completed action. The Catechism utilizes this grammatical construction to underscore the fully accomplished, spiritual reality that dwells in the hearts of these Christians by faith.

What is this fully accomplished, spiritual reality wherein they dwell—"we are *delivered*"? The original German word for "delivered" is *erlöst*, which brings the redemptive nature of the Christian's deliverance to the foreground. The redemptive nature of the Christian's deliverance is addressed in Galatians 4:4–7:

4. When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,
5. To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.
6. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.
7. Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.

When the Christians in Lord's Day 32 confess "we *are delivered*," they mean that they are redeemed from being under the law. To be redeemed from being under the law refers, first, to a spiritual *state*. The spiritual state of these Christians, negatively, is that the law no longer has any legal authority over them. Though the law discovers them as sinners, the law cannot condemn them and the law cannot consign them to death because they have been bought with a price. The spiritual state of these Christians, positively, is that they belong with body and soul, both in life and death, unto their faithful savior Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood fully satisfied for all their sins. They are bought as those whom God foreknew and predestinated to be conformed to the image of his Son. Their unpayable sin-debt—their debts in Adam and the debts that they daily increase by their own sinful natures—is paid in full.

Who, then, are the Christians in Lord's Day 32 who confess "we *are delivered*"? To understand their confession you must observe what dwells in their hearts by faith. What dwells in their hearts is an eternally complete act manifested in the fullness of time at Calvary when

God smelled the sweet savor of his satisfied justice personally accomplished in our flesh by his only-begotten Son; when Jesus brought the law's rigorous demand of perfection to completion and swallowed the last bitter dregs of the law's infinite wrath against sin; when God and his Christ exclaimed together, "It is finished!" This fully accomplished act of almighty power and divine grace has laid hold upon the hearts of these Christians and ushered them into a new spiritual state of redemption from the law.

Second, to be redeemed from being under the law refers especially to a spiritual *condition* supplied by the aforementioned spiritual state. The spiritual condition of these Christians is perfect emancipation from being under the law. This means, first, that these Christians are not regulated by the law as though they were under an external code that dictates every last detail of their lives. Rather, these Christians do what they want from the heart, and what they want from the heart is good. Second, emancipation from being under the law means that these Christians so freely drink from God's cup of salvation and so unencumberedly walk in the light of God's countenance that they never can be told by any law, spirit, or man, "If you don't do good works, then you cannot enjoy your salvation!"

The spiritual condition of these Christians, therefore, is Christ's own spiritual condition as the only-begotten Son. Can the law have any power over God's Son, so that the law says to him, "You must walk in a way of good works in order to have fellowship with God"? Can the law have any power over the Lord Jesus Christ, so that it says to him, "If you don't do good works, then I will remove the light of God's countenance from you"? *Can* the law do that? No! The very suggestion that the law ever could do that is too gross a blasphemy, for the Lord is risen, and he never can see corruption!

Who, then, are the Christians in Lord's Day 32 who confess "*we are delivered*"? Before these Christians utter a syllable about assurance of faith, what dwells in their hearts is the glorious liberty of the sons of God. What dwells in their hearts is that eternally complete act of which Christ first spoke when he prayed, "Now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (John 17:5). What dwells in their hearts is what God manifested in the fullness of time

when he raised Jesus Christ from the dead and declared, "Thou art my Son! I will make known unto thee the ways of life. I will make thee full of joy with my countenance." This fully accomplished act of almighty power and divine grace has laid hold upon the hearts of these Christians and ushered them as adopted sons into heavenly places to sit with their redeemer and partake of his own glorious liberty, truly and presently.

The evidence of this glorious liberty is reflected in the confession "*we are delivered*." The evidence of their liberty is how these Christians walk with one another. Being delivered from all their misery as nobodies—ungodly sinners—and justified by faith alone before God's tribunal, they also live with one another as nobodies. They are delivered from the impossible burden of trying to be somebodies. Their liberty is that they do not have to try to be anything other than ungodly sinners before one another. And when one of them falls, they will come to restore the lapsed, understanding themselves to be least deserving of God's mercy.

The evidence of this glorious liberty is reflected in that threefold ascription of their entire deliverance to God and not to themselves: "merely of grace" and "through Christ" and "without any merit of ours." Such liberal praise from one's lips only arises after a heart has been freely supplied out of God's eternal election with Christ's heavenly abundance and after a mind has been released from all notions that good works increase, maintain, or come into the explanation for such blessedness.

And the evidence of this glorious liberty is especially reflected in this question: "Why must we still do good works?" That question gives the indisputable evidence of those who deeply understand their liberty as adopted sons of God.

Your children who dwell in your house are always asking the question, why? They want to know their parents' plans and purposes. The children are genuinely interested in why their parents do what they do. A hundred times a day they ask, why? So too in question 86. This is a question asked by children who are genuinely interested in their heavenly Father's purpose for good works. They ask as babes and not as the wise and prudent. They simply want to understand why. They ask as the free sons of God and not as sons of the bondwoman. They desire to be in God's house. They do not want the tents of sin. Lacking nothing, they ask, why?

One will never understand this question if his confession is that he has fellowship with God only in the way of his good works. One will never ask this question truthfully if his confession is that God forgives him in the way of his repenting first. And those who confess that they must be active in obtaining their Christian comfort because “God does not drop assurance out of the sky on us and now we have it forever and it can never be taken away from us and we have nothing to worry about as regards this matter of the assurance of our faith”⁴—these persons are of corrupt and proud minds, groping about in darkness, delighting in the bondage of death, seeking out persons upon whom they can bind grievous burdens.

Let PRC now give the meaning of this Christian confession: “We are delivered *from our misery*.” Let PRC explain how it can be that Lord’s Day 32 is for the Christian who is overcome with doubts when the same Christian confesses that his present spiritual state and condition is deliverance from all doubt. Let PRC explain how it can be that this Lord’s Day is for the Christian who wants to become convicted that he is a believer when the same Christian confesses that his present spiritual state and condition is that he is adopted for Christ’s sake? Let PRC explain how it can be that this Lord’s Day is for the Christian who can lose the light of God’s countenance if he does not do good works when the same Christian confesses that his present spiritual blessedness is entirely apart from any of his good works.

If PRC does not have answers to these questions, then neither can PRC begin to teach the answer to question 86!

J. Son: Mr. Editor, how does the clause in answer 86 “also, that every one may be assured in himself of his faith by the fruits thereof” harmonize with the doctrinal statement in question 86: “Since then we are delivered from our misery merely of grace, through Christ, without any merit of ours”? More specifically, explain how this assurance of faith does not imply want or lack in these Christians.

Editor: Certainly. The original German word that our received English translation has rendered as “assured” is the adjective *gewiss*, which Langenscheidt translates as “certain.”⁵ This particular

word simply expresses the certainty and reality of a proposition without implying any want or lack of something.

This word “assured” in Lord’s Day 32 is entirely different from another word translated as *assured* in the Catechism. The latter word is always used in connection with the Christian’s need. It is the word used in Lord’s Day 1: That “by His Holy Spirit, [Christ] also *assures* me of eternal life.” It is the word used in Lord’s Day 16: “That in my greatest temptations, I *may be assured, and wholly comfort myself* in this, that my Lord Jesus Christ, by His inexpressible anguish, pains, terrors, and hellish agonies... hath delivered me from the anguish and torments of hell.” It is the word used in Lord’s Day 27: That baptism is God’s “divine pledge and sign” whereby He *may assure* “us that we are spiritually cleansed from our sins as really as we are externally washed with water.” It is the word used in Lord’s Day 29: That by the Lord’s supper Christ *assures* “us that we are as really partakers of His true body and blood (by the operation of the Holy Ghost) as we receive by the mouths of our bodies these holy signs” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 83–84, 100, 110, 115; emphasis added).

If a Christian stands in any misery, then there is an *assurance* that he needs, but it is an assurance found in the second section of the Catechism and not in Lord’s Day 32. This Lord’s Day assumes that the Christian is delivered by faith from all misery and possesses the assurance of the Catechism’s second section. The *assurance of faith* in Lord’s Day 32 is of an entirely different essence.

I plan on explaining more fully what the Catechism means by *assurance of faith* in this Lord’s Day in the second part of my argument. May I continue to do this?

J. Son: The Court will recess at this time. The matter will continue in the next issue of *Sword and Shield*, when the Court will reconvene and the appellant may resume his argument. Counsel for the appellee will then have an opportunity to respond. The Court is adjourned.

—LB

4 Ronald Cammenga, “Saving Faith as Assurance,” sermon preached in Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church on March 14, 2021, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermons/31421175035658>.

5 *Langenscheidt’s Standard German Dictionary: English-German, German-English*, rev. ed. (Langenscheidt: Maspeth, NY, 1984), s.v. *gewiss*, <https://archive.org/details/langenscheidtsst0000unse>.

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

THE PRESENT WORKING OF THE MYSTERY OF INIQUITY (2)

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues... And the brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child: and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death. —Matthew 10:16–17, 21

Before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake. —Luke 21:12

Yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me. But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them. And these things I said not unto you at the beginning, because I was with you. —John 16:2–4

Introduction

“**F**or the mystery of iniquity doth already work” (2 Thess. 2:7). The antichristian power works in the world and is working presently. Its aim is to bring about the antichristian kingdom where man rules and shows himself to be God. It will be a kingdom with a political aspect and a religious aspect, where the man of sin will “be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God” (vv. 3–4). In this series of articles, I am recounting how in a very specific way, man tried to be God in God’s church. God’s church was not allowed to judge an action to be sin unless or until the magistrate first judged it as a crime. That position is fundamentally antichristian because it robs Christ of his power to rule in his church and puts judgment in the hands of the magistrate.

First Reformed Protestant Church came under a fierce attack. By denying membership to individuals because of impenitent sin, First church was exposed to a lawsuit for judging a spiritual matter spiritually. If the lawsuit would have been successful, it would have marked the end of Christian discipline, for what impenitent sinner who is being put out of the church believes that he is a sinner?

And any impenitent sinner, believing that he has been unjustly excommunicated, could take the church to the law for defamation. A sinner is put out of the communion of Christ and his church because he does not believe that he is a sinner. In retaliation he comes against the church with the powers of the government.

The scriptures tell us what was taking place. Men delivered us up to councils. They rose up against former friends and family. They brought us before kings and rulers for Christ’s sake. All the while they thought that they were doing God’s service. They have convinced themselves that God is pleased with them and that they were doing the Lord’s work. It is reported that they have said to each other, “We are suing by faith.” What a strong delusion the Lord has sent that they should believe the lie. They call the truth a lie and the lie the truth. They attempted to cloak their wickedness by suing individual members of the church and not the church itself. Deceitful! The original “Pre-suit Retraction Demand” from Brandon and Alana Oostra came against the church, while the lawsuit itself came against individuals. Perhaps men calculated that it was too nakedly obvious and wicked to sue the church of Jesus Christ, and so they tried to obfuscate the issue by suing men in their so-called personal capacities. The Lord knows the devices, counsels, and plans of the

wicked. He determined them as that which he hates but which are for the eternal good of his church.

The church takes comfort in the word of God and does not think it strange concerning the fiery trial that tries her, as though some strange thing happened (1 Pet. 4:12). But she is a partaker of the sufferings of Christ that he left behind for her. When the church is reproached, happy is she, for the spirit of glory and of God rests upon her.

Spiritual Versus Carnal Purposes

The issue in the case was, may the church judge actions to be sin without having a judgment of the civil government?

Mr. Ryan Schipper penned a series of articles, and he asked this rhetorical question: “Has anyone ever witnessed a more appallingly evil situation?...Church members charged with felonies?”¹ He asked this question not seeking an answer but to make a point. Ryan’s underlying assumption was that Brandon and Alana Oostra were in fact charged with criminal felonies. However, they never were charged with criminal felonies by the church nor by individuals. The church of Jesus Christ deals with spiritual matters, wielding spiritual weapons with a spiritual goal in view. The church is radically spiritual and is not carnal. Whether the magistrate is involved in a case or not, the church can judge, may judge, and must judge sin.

Later Ryan wrote,

It is well known that there is a pending defamation lawsuit pertaining to the Oostra Case. Now instead of the oath having its proper place to be the end of all strife in the church, God is seeing to it that the oath will be used in its other proper role: when the magistrate demands it of his subjects (Lord’s Day 37). Let all observe and see who will be stripped naked.²

Ryan showed himself to be a carnal man. He looked for vindication in a spiritual matter from a worldly magistrate! He supposed that if Brandon and Alana would have won their case, then the true church would have been “stripped naked.” He failed to understand that it did not matter whether the church won or lost in a court of law.

Whether the church won or lost in court would not have determined the rightness or wrongness of the events, letters, decisions, and sermons that took place at First. Because the matter had everything to do with the truth of the word of God. If you have the truth, it does not matter what anyone says or thinks. What men think, what

the world thinks, and what the nominal church world thinks do not matter. The reality of the church in the world is that she only ever loses in this life; but ultimately she never loses a thing, for she always has Christ, his spiritual salvation, and eternal glory. God always blesses the plagued righteous, and his curse is always on the prospering wicked. Nothing can separate the church from the love of God in Christ. In Christ we have peace. In the world we shall have tribulation. But we are of good cheer, for Christ has overcome the world.

The lawsuit served one purpose for the church. It was a measurement of where she stands in relationship to Christ’s return. Christ said that he comes quickly and does not delay. He comes according to God’s eternal counsel and in the perfect realization of God’s will that not one of his elect goes lost but that his entire church is gathered unto him.

The lawsuit served one purpose for the church. It was a measurement of where she stands in relationship to Christ’s return. Christ said that he comes quickly and does not delay. He comes according to God’s eternal counsel and in the perfect realization of God’s will that not one of his elect goes lost but that his entire church is gathered unto him. The lawsuit and its consequent verdict were a measurement—nothing more, nothing less. Does the church have a place in the world anymore? Has her place become so despised that at the hand of former members, she will be hauled before the judge, thrown into prison, and soon be killed? Does the church have the freedom to preach the gospel that man is nothing and God is everything? May the church judge sin without fear of a lawsuit every time she does so? Can she even administer discipline according to the law of God? Will the government peel back the separation of the church

1 Ryan Schipper, “Dear Uncle Laban (1),” *Under Grace* (blog), September 27, 2025, <https://undergrace1.wordpress.com/2025/09/27/dear-uncle-laban/>.

2 Schipper, “Dear Uncle Laban (1).”

and the state? The lawsuit served no other purpose than as a sign of the coming of Christ. A falling away must come first, and on the wings of that apostasy must the antichrist ride in order that he might be destroyed with the brightness of Christ's glory and the breath of his mouth. There must be a terrible persecution of the church that has not been since the beginning nor will be in the world.

Various Points Regarding the Case

The argument of Brandon and Alana and company hung on a strange distinction between the term *theft* and the term *stealing*. One term was for sin, and the other was reserved for criminal activity. But the eighth commandment literally reads, "Thou shalt not steal" (Ex. 20:15). And Lord's Day 42 of the Heidelberg Catechism says, "God...comprehends under the name of theft all wicked tricks and devices" (*Confessions and Church Order*, 132). The terms *stealing* and *theft* are interchangeable. They are synonyms. There is no distinction. Unrepentant sin against the eighth commandment makes one the object of discipline. If a man abuses and wastes God's gifts—something for which the government will never punish—and he will not turn after his sin is pointed out, he is the proper object of discipline. Brandon and Alana did not turn from their wickedness. They instead went on the offensive against Second Reformed Protestant Church, who, like a good parent who asks his child what he did that was wrong, told Brandon and Alana,

You seek membership into the body of Christ, the church. Your request for membership is the occasion of strife among the members of the body of Christ. Why is this? Tell us from your perspective where the sin lies. What are the sins that lie in the way of your membership which need to be resolved. With whom are there conflicts? What occasioned these conflicts? We ask that you retrace your steps and examine your actions and your motives, as these are the fruits of the heart, and see if there is any sin that needs to be addressed and resolved. And analyze also who you may have sinned against.³

What love! Entirely despised!

To use an analogy, a loving father sits down his child who sinned, often knowing full well what sin was committed, and asks, "What did you do, and who did you hurt?" And the father wants to hear that child say, "I did this, and I hurt this person." Then the father disciplines

that child in love. He tells the child that what he did was wrong and why and how he can make it right with the neighbor.

Brandon and Alana refused to acknowledge their sin. They would not turn from their sin, and they had a whole pack of individuals who strengthened "also the hands of evildoers, that none doth return from his wickedness" (Jer. 23:14). So much so that Brandon and Alana filed a lawsuit against the church. It is the absolute height of wickedness to persecute God's church. By the persecution of God's beloved church, the world fills God's cup of wrath and makes itself ripe for God's fierce judgment and avenging anger.

In the lawsuit Brandon and Alana alleged essentially two things: first, that Reverend Ophoff harmed their names and reputations by statements that charged them with secular crimes; and second, that Reverend Langerak, Mr. Altena, and Reverend Ophoff colluded together to defame Brandon and Alana. Part of what condemns this whole business as wicked are the repeated appeals throughout the documents to Brandon and Alana's reputations. It became abundantly clear that their names and reputations are very important to them. Everywhere throughout their documents can be read *names, names, names, reputations, reputations, reputations!* There was a time when I heard that sound before—in the Protestant Reformed Churches. Brandon and Alana are indignant at the alleged defamation of their names and reputations, and that is all one really needs to condemn their lawsuit.

It is the absolute height of wickedness to persecute God's church. By the persecution of God's beloved church, the world fills God's cup of wrath and makes itself ripe for God's fierce judgment and avenging anger.

Are the believer's name and reputation important to him? Does he act atrociously and rise up in holy horror when his own name is slandered, maligned, and reproached? No! It is God's name and God's glory that are important and all-consuming to the believer. In a controversy the question is, is the truth at stake? Is the

³ Letter from Second Reformed Protestant Church to Brandon and Alana Oostra, September 24, 2024.

lie ascendent? If so, let my name be nothing, for God is everything!

For months after the lawsuit was filed, there was a back-and-forth between all the parties involved through their respective attorneys. Sometimes months would go by without any correspondence, but generally things moved forward, albeit at a snail's pace. During the majority of this phase what took place was something called discovery. *Discovery* is a pretrial process where both sides in the case gather information, documents, and evidence against each other. This takes place through requesting documents, correspondence, and written answers.

Belonging to that process was Brandon and Alana's demand that any correspondence that was sent between the defendants be delivered over to them. The problem with their request? There was no such correspondence. Brandon and Alana were looking for a smoking gun of defamation-collusion that never existed. They were constantly probing for anything they could dredge up. They found nothing because there was nothing. And that is how the discovery process concluded.

Motion for Summary Disposition

In November 2025 I filed a motion to dismiss the case on the grounds of the First Amendment and the ecclesiastical abstention doctrine. The following excerpt is from the first motion that was filed for summary disposition on my behalf:

Plaintiffs Brandon and Alana Oostra allege that Reverend Tyler Ophoff defamed them in two sermons delivered at First Reformed Protestant Church ("First RPC") and in an article he authored for a denominational magazine. These claims arise from the Oostras' efforts to obtain membership at First RPC following the closure of their previous church, Sovereign Reformed Protestant Church ("Sovereign RPC"). After several church leaders raised concerns about the Oostras' religious qualifications—and as their involvement in Sovereign RPC's closure sparked division within First RPC's membership—Rev. Ophoff addressed the controversy in two sermons. In those sermons, he stated that the Oostras' conduct was sinful according to the Heidelberg Catechism and the doctrinal principles of the Reformed Protestant Church.

The article he authored contained ecclesiastical discussions among church leadership regarding the Oostras' membership and the congregational split that ensued.

None of Reverend Ophoff's statements constitute actionable defamation. Under the First Amendment's church autonomy doctrine, also known as the ecclesiastical abstention doctrine, courts are precluded from adjudicating claims that would require a fact finder to delve into matters of religious doctrine, church governance, or ecclesiastical discipline. The claims brought by the Oostras against Rev. Ophoff fall squarely within this category of protected speech. Accordingly, their claims against Rev. Ophoff must be dismissed as a matter of law.

The Oostras' Complaint asserts two claims against Reverend Ophoff, both of which also fail on the merits. Count III alleges defamation but does not identify any statement capable of bearing a defamatory meaning. Count IV alleges civil conspiracy and fails for two independent reasons. First, the allegedly defamatory statements made by the co-defendants were directed to First RPC, not Rev. Ophoff, and therefore he cannot be part of a conspiracy to produce those statements. Second, Rev. Ophoff's sermons and discussions concerning the alleged defamatory content were conducted solely in his capacity as a pastor and were not coordinated with the co-defendants. Accordingly, because there is no genuine issue of material fact supporting either claim, Rev. Ophoff is entitled to summary disposition of all claims asserted against him by the Oostras.⁴

The plaintiffs' counsel responded to the above motion for dismissal and narrowed down the plaintiffs' allegations against me to the sermon preached on November 20, 2024, titled "No Stealing." The contention of the plaintiffs' counsel was that the statements in the sermon do not belong to protected religious speech under the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. The following excerpt is the reply that was filed on my behalf in response to the plaintiffs' narrowed-down allegations. In summary the church has the right to teach the truth and apply that doctrine to the lives of the members of the congregation, and the state has no business entering into the spiritual matters of the church.

⁴ Defendant Tyler Ophoff's Motion for Summary Disposition, *Brandon Oostra and Alana Oostra vs. Dillon Altena, Nathan J. Langerak, and Tyler Ophoff*, No. 2025-008126-CZ, Ottawa County Circuit Court (November 5, 2025), 1–2.

Reply in Support of the Motion for Summary Disposition

Introduction

The plaintiffs' response has substantially narrowed the issues concerning Rev. Ophoff. First, the plaintiffs now contend that the only allegedly defamatory statements at issue are those made in his November 20, 2024 sermon: "that was theft" and "that money was taken." (Response at 14–15 & n.9). Second, the plaintiffs concede that the facts relevant to whether these statements are actionable are undisputed, which is why they seek partial summary disposition in their favor under MCR 2.116(I)(2). Rev. Ophoff agrees that no further discovery is necessary to determine whether his sermon was defamatory. It was not. A minister cannot be liable for defamation for expressing, from the pulpit, his belief that certain conduct is, or that a congregant engaged in, sin. Accordingly, Rev. Ophoff's motion should be granted.

Argument

I. None of the statements in Reverend Ophoff's sermon are actionable.

In their response, the plaintiffs attempt to conflate various allegations involving Mr. Altena and Rev. Langerak, hoping that the resulting confusion will allow them to keep Rev. Ophoff in the case as an alleged civil co-conspirator. The plaintiffs ultimately concede, however, that only two statements made by Rev. Ophoff from the pulpit are alleged to be defamatory. (Response at 14–15 & n.9). For the Court's convenience, a partial transcript of Rev. Ophoff's sermon is attached as Exhibit 1, with the two statements at issue highlighted on page 2. Both statements are purely and unequivocally religious. Rev. Ophoff's sermon explained that, under Reformed Protestant interpretation of Scripture and the Heidelberg Catechism, the prohibition against theft in the Eighth Commandment encompasses not only conduct punishable by the state but also conduct the state does not regard as criminal. (Ex. 1, at 1). Rev. Ophoff specifically articulated the following Reformed Protestant interpretation of the Eighth Commandment's prohibitions:

This is what the catechism says: "all abuse and waste of his gifts." Do you want to know how simple this whole thing is, beloved? It's this simple: believers gave gifts that God had given them to God's kingdom and to His church. And those goods were confiscated for the kingdom of man. That's how simple this whole thing is. (Ex. 1, at 2).

Rev. Ophoff then cited the situation in Iowa as an example of what the Eighth Commandment prohibits. In his view, funds given to the church in Iowa were intended solely for church purposes—not for educating children who were no longer part of the church community. Rev. Ophoff characterized this conduct not as a secular crime, but as a "spiritual" theft: taking funds dedicated to God's purposes and using them for something else:

The government's not always going to punish for that. Is the government going to come and punish you for being a faithless steward of God's gifts in the church? No, of course not. The church may judge, and the church doesn't need the government to judge a spiritual thing spiritually, to make a spiritual evaluation of something, and to say, "That was theft." (Ex. 1, at 2).

Likewise, Rev. Ophoff characterized the money involved as "taken" not because it was a criminal act under secular law but because it was "taken from the Lord" according to Reformed Protestant theology:

That's how simple it all is, and I'm going to just say it one more time: money that was given by believers to God's kingdom—money that you gave, the Spirit so moved you—that you gave to the general fund there in Iowa, and you paid and funded the teaching of the world. You funded a public school. There was no Reformed Protestant school there. You're not angry for your sake, because...if it was a dollar or if it was 10,000 or a million dollars or \$750,000, you ought to be angry—mad at that, that it was taken from the Lord. That money was taken. (Ex. 1, at 2).

Rev. Ophoff, in other words, was not asserting that the Oostas committed any crime. He was simply expressing his belief that, under his understanding of Scripture, what occurred during the wind-down of Sovereign was sinful and spiritually improper—even if secular authorities might not view it as wrongful. Such statements are squarely protected by the First Amendment. Religious sermons are "unequivocally ecclesiastical in nature." *Hullibarger v Archdiocese of Detroit*, unpublished per curiam opinion of the Court of Appeals...Ministers are entitled to state that congregants have engaged in sin and to deny the privileges of membership to them. *Maciejewski v Breitenbeck*...Any other outcome would be untenable, as it would require courts to adjudicate whether certain conduct is "sinful" and would expose pastors to civil litigation whenever they deliver unpopular religious messages to their congregants. *Kavanagh v Zwilling*...

The plaintiffs rely heavily on the unpublished decision in *Ogle v Hocker*...But in *Ogle*, a bishop stated in a sermon that another bishop had sexually propositioned him. Resolving that claim required no inquiry into religious doctrine: either the proposition occurred, or it did not. *Id.* Here, by contrast, the dispute centers on whether an individual's receipt of funds intended for church purposes constitutes a violation of the Eighth Commandment according to the Heidelberg Catechism. The only way for the Oostras to prevail is for this Court to determine that Rev. Ophoff's statements "that was theft" and "that money was taken" are false according to Reformed Protestant theology. Because that analysis would require the Court to take sides in a theological dispute, it is barred by the First Amendment.

II. All of the communications pertaining to the Oostras' membership request and the church discipline process are protected by the First Amendment or a qualified privilege.

The plaintiffs next argue that Rev. Ophoff is liable for allegedly "amplifying" Altena's and Rev. Langerak's accusations of sin against them. But even if Rev. Ophoff mentioned their statements or attached the original documents in a letter sent to the First RPC congregation, that does not make Rev. Ophoff liable for defamation. If it was, then Alana Oostra—who was the first person to tell First RPC that Altena was accusing her of "stealing"—would be liable for defaming herself. In the same way, Rev. Ophoff's transparency with his congregation about what he received from other church leaders is not defamatory "amplification." In any event, these distinctions are immaterial because it is undisputed that all of these discussions occurred within the context either of Rev. Ophoff's sermons or the church membership and discipline process. Michigan has long recognized that

statements made by church leaders and members during the church membership and discipline process are protected by a qualified privilege. See, e.g., *Van Vliet v Vander Naald*...(publishing a church tribunal's findings in the church's official newspaper); *Westerhouse v De Witt*...(meeting called to reconcile two church members); *Konkle v Haven*...(church members wrote a letter about a former pastor to members of another church); *Howard v Dickie*...(statements regarding plaintiff's fitness for election as church leader). That is consistent with the many other cases that recognize that the First Amendment's church autonomy doctrine prevents defamation claims from being asserted with respect to ecclesiastical communications in church discipline and membership processes, as well. See, e.g., *McRaney v N Am Mission Bd of the S Baptist Convention, Inc.* (collecting cases); *Kavanagh*...

The alternative is untenable: disappointed membership applicants could pursue defamation claims against churches that rejected them for theological reasons or unresolved "sin." Such a regime would force churches to pay damages simply for enforcing the doctrinal boundaries of their own faith community. That outcome is fundamentally incompatible with the First Amendment, which guarantees churches the unfettered right to define and govern the contours of their faith.

Conclusion

Rev. Ophoff is entitled to summary disposition under MCR 2.116(C)(10).⁵

Next time, the Lord willing, I will conclude this series with some final thoughts and closing remarks and give thanks to the Lord for the deliverance of his beloved church that was caught in the fowler's net.

—TDO

⁵ Reply in Support of Defendant Tyler Ophoff's Motion for Summary Disposition, *Brandon Oostra and Alana Oostra vs. Dillon Altena, Nathan J. Langerak, and Tyler Ophoff*, No. 2025-008126-CZ, Ottawa County 20th Circuit Court (December 1, 2025). Docket numbers and dates for the cases listed throughout the reply have been elided for readability.

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

SERMON: GOD REQUIRETH THAT WHICH IS PAST

*That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been;
and God requireth that which is past. — Ecclesiastes 3:15*

Introduction

Beloved, everything exists as though time is running according to our own determinations. Self-determination has been the illusion of man since the beginning. This is the root of freewillism and many other sophisticated philosophies of men today. Indeed, men have been deceived into thinking that they are holding their tomorrows. According to our natures, we are one with the world in thinking that circumstances are in our hands.

The truth is that we look for man in every circumstance. This quest is epitomized in the Protestant Reformed Churches and in the First Reformed Church of Bulacan (now the Free Presbyterian Church of the Philippines). They teach essentially what man can do as he is considered to be central in the work of salvation and fellowship in the covenant. Christ is nowhere to be found in their doctrines; thus they continue according to their own wills. They think that they can do something so that God will bless them. They think of blessing as the end unto which their obedience and activity of faith infallibly arrive. Lastly, they think that the church depends upon the will of a man who dictates the form of polity and doctrine.

If you want to profane the gospel, make man an ulterior doctrine. Hide man behind every lip service. After all, members will not notice that in each acknowledgment of God's grace in the covenant there is an undercurrent of anxiety for man. And if you can no longer contain yourself, let it out, but let the best professors and seasoned ministers speak for you. You know well that these men have an undeniable charisma and the ability to bewitch most of the members with their words. So easily they gain a following once you let them speak in Latin or Dutch.

Moreover, if you want man's will to prevail (hierarchy) and to profane the sacraments, baptize an infant whose parents are not members of the church and defend their non-membership by saying that they are elect and believers. Mumble these words in your international so-called apology: "Yes, we erred. But the error does not concern important doctrine. Our judgment is that it was only procedural."

What?

"What we mean...there was nothing wrong in the baptism. The church is okay and well. We are still Reformed."

All the fearful wondered at the men who said that. Thus the apology was accepted. Man prevailed. And when that happened, the covenant surely was profaned.

Man is so intoxicated with himself, so wrapped up in himself.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 says that "to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." And what is under heaven? Man. Indeed, in every season, as history passes like a river rushing from the fountain of God's eternal determination, you will see that he has made everything beautiful in his time (v. 11). It is as if history is impregnated with God's counsel, so that nothing happens outside his determination. But in the context you can also see man: his birth and death, labor and toil, sin and culture, strength and talents, psychological adaptation, religion and ethics, philosophy and logic, oratory and eloquence, and hatred and love. How we perceive everything as it goes down in history is so centrally humanistic. Everything is about man.

But Ecclesiastes 3:15 says that "God requireth that which is past." *To require* is to seek and to demand. God is seeking something. That is the reality in the world. He demands something from his works, and they must

answer to him in perfection. And that seeking is consequently a humiliation of man because he is in the bondage of sin; he is serving the devil and his kingdom. While everyone is busy acting and laboring for himself, God looks down and seeks something altogether different, as though he pays no attention to what men are doing. It is as though all the works that men do have no value to God. What a shame! This means that sinners have no part of God. According to their natures, they are separated, alienated, from God, so it is no mystery why God is seeking something as though he does not see the sinners. The natural man cannot have and never will have fellowship with Jehovah. God will shine his face upon the sinners only when he finds what he is seeking—when he finds what is “past.”

The Meaning

In all his works God ever before him that which he purposed to accomplish. He seeks himself in all his works. His seeking is not the search of one who has lost something, as though some object lay beyond his knowledge or control. Rather, the language of seeking speaks of his divine will and good pleasure. What he seeks is precisely what he himself has ordained and brought to pass. When he beholds the works that correspond to his eternal purpose, he is well pleased, for he sees therein the perfect execution of his own counsel. His delight is found in his works as they conform perfectly to what he has determined in himself.

Thus when the text speaks of requiring, we must understand this language in terms of God’s eternal will and purpose. He seeks that which accords with the counsel of his own mind. His purpose is not formed gradually as history unfolds, nor is he discovering what he desires as events take place. Rather, all that God wills to accomplish has been perfectly known and determined in his eternal counsel. What he requires (seeks) in his works is the realization of that which he has eternally purposed in his mind—nothing lacking, uncertain, or missed but that which he has ordained according to his perfect wisdom.

Yet who can know the mind of God? No creature can penetrate the depths of his wisdom. Only the Spirit of God knows perfectly the things of God, for “the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God” (1 Cor. 2:10). Through the Spirit the Father reveals himself to the Son, and likewise the Son hides nothing from the Father because they seek one another in the Holy Spirit.

Such is the mystery of the eternal covenant among the divine persons and the economy of knowing perfectly and completely the substance of God’s mind. The revelation is complete and perfect as a result of his love toward himself, who subsists in three divine persons. There is no

gray area in the mind, will, and revelation of God, for the purpose of every thought is to reveal himself. This mystery of divine fellowship is altogether unlike the fellowship of creatures, in which even those most intimate with one another retain thoughts and intentions unknown to each other. However, no one can fathom what is in the mind of God. No one can search out his secret counsel and not even his will, which has been creaturely revealed. Indeed, “no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end” (Eccl. 3:11).

Meanwhile, men are occupied continually with their own works. Their lives are marked by a seemingly endless succession of activities: birth, death, planting, harvesting, killing, healing, tearing down, building, weeping, laughing, mourning, dancing, loving, hating, believing, repenting, and many more. There are many things with which they occupy themselves, thinking that life consists entirely of working and striving. But Ecclesiastes 3:9 asks rhetorically, “What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?”

We are born inherently as laborers or workers. Since we fell into sin, God has cursed us to till the ground, and he cursed the ground to turn against us after we till it. Without exception all the world is at work. We are naturally inclined to work. All sinners are workers of their own righteousness—workers who strive for themselves and for their own welfares. We always want to be doing something or contributing something to God’s work. Everything is labor for man. But “what profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?” “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world?” (Eccl. 3:9; Mark 8:36). Absolutely nothing.

Moreover, with all our striving, we still cannot search out what is in God’s mind. What a shame! In all man’s striving, laboring, and toiling, no one can fully attain to the mind of God. No matter how much man strives, he cannot reach or equal the wisdom of God. No matter how much man strives, God’s wisdom is far beyond the reach of his understanding. Thus Jesus said, “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). All God’s works are impossible for us, yet many still insist that God’s works can be attained by mere possibilities. If you repent, then God will forgive you. If you do this and that, God will bless you. Surely you actually can experience the goodness of God by a mere prepositional phrase—“in the way of.” O taste and see that the Lord is good in the way of this and that.

In essence many act according to their sinful natures and strive to equal God. But beware, without God’s grace, we are no different. By nature we are coworkers in the sphere of unbelief. We strive to know the mystery of God’s mind through our works, but by doing so we create

many lies instead. Ancient lies. Ultimately, we invent much wickedness. We are, after all, workers of iniquity.

By attempting to attain to God's wisdom, we make ourselves fools. We imagine that if we persevere sufficiently in our labors, we may ascend even to heaven, much as the builders of the tower of Babel sought to establish a name for themselves. Worse yet, even our afflictions and poverty are easily interpreted according to this same man-centered wisdom. That is, when poverty exhausts us, we may suppose that our poverty itself constitutes the means by which God will make us worthy of salvation, as though divine mercy were more readily extended to those who suffer. When sickness overtakes us, we may imagine that our afflictions are what move God to compassion. When we abound in good works, we may even entertain the thought that our diligence somehow assists God in accomplishing his purposes. Thus beneath all our striving there remains the persistent desire to measure ourselves as God's coequal laborers. Man deceives himself by imagining that God is chiefly concerned with the measure of men's activities.

The only thing God requires is the "past." What does this mean?

At different places in the context of Ecclesiastes 3, the *present* is mentioned. And verse 15 says, "That which hath been is now." The second thing verse 15 mentions is the *future*: "That which is to be hath already been." Now, the "past" is unlike the *present* and the *future*, which are altogether set in history, and thus the "past" is not mentioned in the same way but is mentioned to say that it is the only thing that God requires or seeks. And God's seeking the "past" is not placed in the text alongside the *present* and *future* as though the past were missing. History is the perfect unfolding of God's counsel in time. There is nothing missing, for God determines and directs history's beginning and end. It is not as though the present and future are already here and the only thing lacking is the past and that is what God is seeking. That is not the meaning. "Past" in the text does not refer to history or to things that have passed away with the passage of time. Rather, the "past" is the goal of history. It is so evident in the text that when God requires it, he demands it. The *present* and *future* must serve the "past" that God requires. They both must answer to what God requires.

When we speak of the past, we mean that which has already been finished. These are things already inscribed in history—events whose appointed time has come and gone and that now stand as accomplished realities under the direction of God's will and purpose. Yet the expression "which is past" means more than merely those things that have ended or passed away. "Past" refers rather to those things that have already been established—things

that have been firmly determined and settled according to the counsel of God. Thus the text means by "which is past" things that have been established; things that cannot be altered, revoked, or supplemented. Nothing can be added to them, and nothing can be taken away from them because they already have been established according to the immutable counsel of God. This is precisely the truth expressed in Ecclesiastes 3:14: "I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it."

Therefore, what God seeks are the decrees he established from eternity. And God's decrees are *not* like a plan that is still being formed and that God watches as it develops in history. God's decrees are not comparable to a human architect's drawing a blueprint and his subsequent observing whether the structure corresponds to his design. Rather, the building, if you will, is really finished and complete in God's mind. He does not learn what will happen by watching history unfold. Nor does history progressively inform him of what his purposes ought to be. Everything is real in eternity as it was established in the counsel of God.

What is future to us is not future to God in the sense of uncertainty or possibility. What we experience successively in time has already been comprehended and determined within his eternal counsel. This is admittedly beyond the full comprehension of the creature, especially as the text clearly says that the present has already happened, and even the future has already happened. From our perspective, we cannot fully comprehend this. Everything has already passed—even the future? Absolutely. From eternity all things were already finished in the mind of God.

The death of the Lord Jesus Christ was not an afterthought in the divine purpose. Revelation 13:8 says, "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." The cross, therefore, was not an unexpected remedy devised after the entrance of sin (so unlike the view of the Presbyterians and Baptists that the cross was a *remedy of the covenant of grace* because Adam messed up so badly in paradise). Christ and his crucifixion belong to the eternal counsel of God. Christ centrally belongs to it, so that all things must serve his death as the summary of his perfect work of salvation.

Therefore, nothing happens by mistake. Why did Adam fall into sin? Because "God requireth that which is past." He determined that Adam had to fall. Why are not all Israel that are of Israel? Because "God requireth that which is past." He determined the spiritual seed of his covenant, and they only will be incorporated into his fellowship, while the others were eternally reprobated and damned. Why were we born? Why do we study? Why do

we have businesses and jobs? Why do we have spouses? Why do we remain unmarried? Why are we few in the church? Why do we have children even though life is extremely difficult in the Philippines? Why did we leave the false Protestant Reformed Churches and her rightful daughter the First Reformed Church of Bulacan? Why do these churches turn away from the truth and the gospel of the Lord? Because “God requireth that which is past.”

This is what many have forgotten. We are prone to explain our circumstances according to human striving and human wisdom. We attribute success to diligence, hardship to misfortune, numerical weakness to insufficient evangelistic zeal, and separation from former churches to a failure of love. Again and again the explanation is sought in man.

Man, man, man!

The Implication

But man is not what God seeks. This is especially evident in the matter of salvation. Why are we saved? Is it because we are good? Because we are obedient? Because we believe? Because we accepted Christ? Because we were baptized? Because we partake of the Lord's supper? Because we repent? Because we are Reformed and faithfully attend worship? Because we are faithful adherents to the Reformed Protestant distinctives? Absolutely not. The only explanation is because “God requireth that which is past.”

That is plain and simple; that is our gospel. No *ifs* and *buts*; no *in the way of*, for there is no other way but Christ. God sovereignly determined to save his elect through the Lord Jesus Christ. In him all things meet and are ordered according to the eternal purpose of God, that his people might be brought into his everlasting covenant.

Yet to many this gospel appears old and obsolete. They say, in effect, “The past? God seeks the past? That has passed away. Times have changed. Therefore, God must change with them. If everything was once grounded in grace, perhaps God must now recognize the goodness of man. We are no longer as sinful as we once were. Such doctrines are outdated. The gospel must change. Preaching must change. Worship centered upon the preaching of the word is outdated. The times are different now.”

From the perspective of fallen man, beloved, the will of God has always appeared outdated. Indeed, this rebellion began in Eden. Man thought in his heart that God's will no longer was sufficient for him. He trusted his own judgment and exchanged the commandment of God for his own conception of what was good. He relied on himself and his own view and replaced God's will with something new. What was that *new thing*? Needless to say, everything that is contrary to God's will.

In the perfect first creation of God, something new happened—sin and death. Sin entered paradise, and all humanity plunged headlong with Adam into the pit of sin and death. Once there was truth. Then change happened: We all became slaves to falsehood and servants of Satan. Once our hearts, minds, and souls were devoted only to God, but now we offer our strength, time, and wisdom to earthly things. From the human perspective God's will has passed away. We have changed everything because we suppose that God's will is outdated and obsolete. But that is only from the human perspective. From God's perspective nothing has changed. Everything is already past. All that comes to pass does so precisely according to what he has determined. His purpose has not been frustrated. No one can change the mind of God. The world may rage against him, but he is not surprised by that rebellion. He sits in the heavens and laughs at those who imagine that they determine their own futures and possess sovereignty over their own tomorrows. Man rebels; God always prevails with much power and majesty. For instance, the fall did not frustrate his counsel.

In our fall into sin through Adam, God sought the “past” and found *him*—the seed of the woman—the same seed who was promised to Abraham two thousand years after the fall. Out of that seed the tree continues to grow, as the covenant line is developed in time and in history. Christ is the seed and the root out of which all the elect will be born and saved. He is the seed at which time and history aimed in perfect precision (as if history were pregnant), as God set Christ at the center of all creation. Christ is not in the periphery of history (both of heaven and earth) but at the very heart of it. Thus the only explanation of the fall into sin is that of divine providence, which directed it. However, God remains holy and untainted with sin and remains thrice holy in his divinity. “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!” (Rom. 11:33).

This is a comfort, for it means that our salvation is sure. It is certain as long as Jesus Christ is at the heart of every counsel and work of Jehovah. Now everything serves that purpose of God of saving us. That is declared to us in the gospel. That is implied also in our text. Everything is for our good. The *present* and *future* are already established because the “past” is what God seeks, and he finds it constantly in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The End

As members of the church of Jesus Christ, we also live in the past. We live in Jesus Christ, in the fellowship of Jehovah. By his Spirit he has given us new hearts that always seek his word. Therefore, as he dwells in us, we consider

even his perfect law. Moreover, we live in the principle of the Reformed faith.

Our doctrines come from the past, from things firmly established by the Lord and carefully handed down through every generation of believers. Every article of our faith is old. This is precisely why the world despises it. The world is continually changing and demands that the church conform her thinking to the spirit of this age. Many churches therefore live according to the present, adapting their teachings to the prevailing ideas of the culture. Their gospel no longer comes from the past but from continual modifications of doctrine. Their gospel is shaped according to the will of man and what is palatable for a natural man, yet repugnant to the word of God and to the continuous practice of the church of Jesus Christ. Thus our gospel is regarded as something that belongs to another age and world. *Risum teneatis, amici?* (Can you hold back your laughter, friends?) These Christians! Their gospel! Strange!

For instance, in our worship we seek the past. We seek God's will rather than our own preferences. The elements of our worship are regulated by the ancient principles of divine worship according to the truth as it has been recovered by our Reformed fathers. But to many such worship appears boring. In their churches preaching becomes humanistic and purely practical. It centers around man, as it begins with man and ends with man. Jesus Christ is nowhere to be found in their worship services because their pulpits are destitute of the truth. They may bear the names Reformed and Presbyterian, but the names they bear do not establish the presence of Christ's Spirit among them. Where the Spirit of Jesus Christ is absent, the mere possession of a Reformed or Presbyterian name is void and empty. Rather, the assumption of these names by false churches serves only to bring the great Reformation of the sixteenth century into ignominy, casting reproach upon the Reformed faith and giving the world occasion to despise what the Reformed fathers recovered from the darkness of the Romish church. We, beloved, are children of that great Reformation.

We are children of the past. And that claim is determined by our union with our Lord Jesus Christ. We are children according to the decree of predestination. We were elected in Christ Jesus so that we might be conformed to his image in all things. We were elected in Christ so that at the appointed time he would be born of a virgin, and at the appointed time he would suffer and die for us. We are unashamedly children of the past. We were purchased by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ more than two thousand years ago. There on the cross we were sealed by the Lord's blood and cleansed from our sins. We are

declared righteous because of the death and resurrection of Christ. From that past Jehovah looks upon us. He always looks at Christ whenever he regards his elect people. He always looks at the finished work of Jesus Christ. From eternity he looked upon us in that past, though it was not yet established in time and history.

Indeed, Jesus Christ is the one whom God seeks. Jesus Christ is the *past*, the *present*, and the *future*. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Amen. He is the eternal wisdom of God whom God seeks. Why do all things happen in heaven and on earth? Because of Christ. Because of him, God is pleased. Whether evil or good, God is pleased according to what he has determined. When heaven and earth pass away, God will still be pleased because Christ is what he seeks.

Beloved, Christ is at the center of our salvation. When "God requireth that which is past" in the church, he finds the Lord Jesus Christ hanging on the cross. And he declares, "I find no iniquity in Jacob, neither have I seen perverseness in Israel: the LORD his God is with him, and the shout of a king is among them" (Num. 23:21). We have been forgiven our sins because God found that the Lord Jesus Christ had fulfilled all righteousness on our behalf. Christ is the one established from the beginning for our righteousness. He is our election, justification, regeneration, sanctification, and glorification. For his sake God is pleased with and has fellowship with the church. Though we suffer persecution and ridicule because we belong to the past—to Jesus Christ—nevertheless, we rejoice that we have a part in the *past that God requires*. That is, beloved, we are intimately joined with Jesus Christ through the bond of faith.

Finally, the day will come when we shall receive in fullness what God has appointed for us in Christ. There will be no more persecution, no more sin, no more suffering, no more mourning, no more death, and many other things that belong only to this world. All the things that belong to this present age—destruction and building, weeping and birth, sorrow and death—surely will have passed away.

The day will come when we shall be with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus the sufferings of this present world, however grievous they may be, cannot be compared with the glory that shall be revealed when our Lord returns in a cloud with power and great glory. Then we "shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17). This will surely be, beloved, for "God requireth that which is past," and he finds it in Jesus Christ alone.

Amen.

—JP

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

MY FLESH AND MY HEART FAILETH

*My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart,
and my portion for ever. — Psalm 73:26*

Introduction

Often in this life a child of God struggles to know that salvation is truly his. A child of God can struggle with assurance. To doubt is sin, and sin is in our natures. Most of his life the child of God does not live in the full assurance of his faith. He keeps his eyes on earthly things, not on heavenly things. Very rarely does he live hating sin. There is barely the desire to go to heaven. He seems to love the things of this world. But we must not conflate our doubt or our assurance with feelings. Men's feelings change from day to day. Even small inconveniences can sour our moods. This does not mean that God's attitude toward us has changed. Assurance and doubt are strictly spiritual matters.

The believer knows the truth and understands that God is sovereign in all things; the believer knows that God alone chose those who are saved. The believer can do nothing to change God's sovereign plan. What if he were chosen for damnation? He cannot do anything to change that. Could he be the hypocrite? Will God pluck him from the fold of the church?

Where will the believer find his comfort over against these thoughts? Can he take comfort in his spouse or church family; in his love for the church or schools; or in his own good works, walk of obedience, repentance, or turning from sin? To understand the struggles of the elect child of God, we must first examine the condition of the world in which we live, a world fundamentally devoid of the true peace that only God can provide.

Man's Nature: Uncomforted

The world is uncomfortable. Day by day, sin develops and multiplies. Man knows that there is a God; creation is his proof (Rom. 1:20). Yet in man's hatred for God, man

rebels and denies God. Man has no comfort regarding his eternal destination. The sinful world relies on man's inventions and logic to give itself some semblance of comfort. Men use pills, drugs, and alcohol to cope with and disillusion themselves about their sinful flesh and hatred against their creator. They go to therapists who, using man's logic, explain away their misery and blame their deep-seated discomfort on circumstances and events in their lives. Men attempt to drown this misery in distractions and the battle for earthly possessions. As much as men try to convince themselves that God is not real, there is no comfort for them. For the reprobate world the end is eternal damnation.

The world is not the only group that lies to itself for comfort. The false church world also must justify its lack of comfort. God does not give to the false church comfort or assurance. Members of false churches also lie to themselves and fabricate for themselves peace with God. I say that they lie to themselves because the members thereof seem to be very sure of their salvation. From the Roman Catholic Church to the many offshoots of so-called Christian religion, the members believe they are saved. This assurance certainly is not one worked by God, but it is one worked by some other force. By their own pride and sin, men deceive themselves that their comfortable place in this world is right with God. The devil keeps the false church a thriving institution for his approaching antichristian kingdom.

Although she says that she preaches Christ, the false church has something necessary for man to do in salvation. This preaching will create two types of people in the pews: those who think they are able to fulfill their part and those who know they cannot. There are the Pharisees, who think, "We might not have kept the law

perfectly, but we are doing pretty good—or at least better than that person over there.” They become drowned in their pride and ignore God’s demand in the law for perfection. They are the proud workers of Matthew 7:22–23. There are also the burdened, those who are honest with themselves. They know that they did not do the law and have not kept God’s commandments, and they will wilt under the preaching. They are uncomfortable by the intermingling of law and gospel that is all too present today.

The elect, too, can struggle with assurance. In this life we do battle with our threefold enemy. The first of this threefold enemy is the devil, who uses every tool he can to turn our eyes from Christ. The devil accuses us that the promise is for others, others who are better: better Christians, better parents, better people. The promise is not for us. We are too sinful, and we cannot keep God’s law. The devil loves to use the law of God. It is one of his best tools to try to take salvation from Christ and put it in the hands of man. Anyone can think to himself that he is obeying the law. The devil uses this to give false assurance to those who are relying on their rotting works for comfort. He even helps them to convince themselves that those works are truly wonderful and acceptable, even if they are imperfect.

Regarding assurance, the greatest point of the battle of faith is the understanding that it is *you* who is saved. Our doubts, worked by our threefold enemy, often can tell us that the word we just heard does not apply to us.

The second of our threefold enemy is the world. The world, with all its distractions and sinful pleasures, chants the love of tolerance and conformity. The world, in the form of the false church, brings misery to the child of God. Family and friends whom God did not bring into the true church, whom we watch God harden with each conversation, accuse us of being hateful, intolerant,

and cultish. They live with the mask of bliss with their large church buildings, endless funds, and unity with all so-called Reformed churches. They are the “full” of Luke 6:25 and the seemingly blessed of Psalm 73.

Finally, the third enemy is our own sinful flesh. We hate God by nature. We know that we are nothing, yea, worse than nothing. We have heard God’s word and still blaspheme his name with our thoughts and actions. An honest look at ourselves and the testimony of God’s law leaves us as damned. We think, “Although I know Christ died for his people, who is to say that I am numbered with them? Why would God save me?” These doubts and discomfort are our sins. “Hath God forgotten to be gracious? hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies? Selah. And I said, This is my infirmity” (Ps. 77:9–10).

The Protestant Reformed Comfort

It is not only the secular world or the Roman Catholic Church that manufactures peace where there is none. This same error, putting focus on man instead of God, has found its way into the pulpits of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). The PRC has many uncomfortable sheep in her flock, and for good reason. The denomination has lost the gospel. The lost sheep in the PRC will go to their ministers for comfort. Surely the sheep will follow the directions given to them by the ministers and professors in the PRC. You have no comfort? Look at your works. You are a good husband or wife. You are a good member of a church. You are repentant. See that? You work; thus you are saved.

The following quotations are a few examples of the Protestant Reformed teaching that man and his activities are the way to assurance. Along with the references I also note articles from this magazine that have dealt with and refuted these teachings.

What he [the apostle] is describing is a life lived in obedience to God’s ten commandments. God uses that in order to confirm in us the assurance of our election and salvation.¹

Although God works the assurance of faith under the preaching of his word, we are active in this whole matter of the assurance of faith. God does not drop assurance out of the sky on us and now we have it forever and it can never be taken away from us and we have nothing to worry about as regards this matter of the assurance of our faith;

1 Ronald Cammenga, “Saving Faith as Assurance,” sermon preached in Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church on March 14, 2021, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermons/31421175035658>. This statement was refuted in Alisa Snippe, “Backpacks Filled with Bricks,” *Sword and Shield* 4, no. 6 (November 2023): 30–39.

but God's people are active, busy in this whole matter of the assurance of their faith.²

Only in the way of holiness do we enjoy the assurance, the assurance in ourselves that one day we will come to the perfection that is proposed to us.³

In fact, the more faithful the saints are to God's law in the grace of Jesus Christ, the more they prosper in the great blessings of the covenant. They prosper in their marriages, in their family life, and in their church life. Above all, they prosper in the enjoyment of God's covenant fellowship.⁴

But John also understood that the experience of that covenant fellowship with God and the joy of his fellowship, which is by faith, comes also only in a particular way of life.⁵

The Spirit, you see, leads him in the divinely determined right way of repentance and sorrow for sin and in true believing, whereby we receive forgiveness, pardon, justification, and peace with God.⁶

Hence, I conclude, that sanctification and its effects are by no means to be slighted, when we treat of assuring the soul as to its justification.⁷

McGeown makes the same claim:

On the other hand, walking after the Spirit is a life in harmony with and pleasing to the Holy Spirit. If we walk after the Spirit we live in the light, we love God and the neighbor, and we keep God's commandments: "with love and delight [we live] according to the will of God in all good works" (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 33, A 90). As we

live in that way, pleasing God, which is the fruit of faith, which is the fruit of being "in Christ Jesus," we are assured—we may be, and we must be, assured—that there is no condemnation, but only justification, for us. About those who walk after the Spirit, God says, "No condemnation!"

That, too, is Herman Hoeksema's explanation of the text. "The assurance of our being in Christ is in the way of sanctification. The way of our being blessed is that we walk in sanctification. And the fruit of this walk in sanctification is that we say, 'There is no condemnation for me.'"

Let us walk in the way of sanctification, to God's glory, and to our own comfort. In that way, only in that way, we enjoy the conscious assurance of our justification. God's marvelous work of sanctification will, God willing, be the topic of the next article in this series.⁸

In that way—the way of your good works—and only in that way can you enjoy the assurance that your sins are forgiven. McGeown mentions faith, but we know already that for McGeown faith is man's act of believing.⁹ By grace, of course, man does faith and obedience; that is how he is assured of his salvation.

The members of the PRC will do their works and live perfect lives in the eyes of those around them. Preach Christ, but keep a balance! Man needs to do good works and keep his faith. Preach practical applications with an emphasis on obedience to the law because "it has ever been the teaching of the Reformed that the law serves as an instrument of grace."¹⁰ Protestant Reformed ministers will preach Christ and man's works for salvation. Protestant Reformed members will find comfort and rest in those works. They will go to the judgment with

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- 2 Cammenga, "Saving Faith as Assurance." Refuted in Tyler D. Ophoff, "A Distorted Doctrine of Prayer (1)," *Sword and Shield* 4, no. 3 (August 2023): 15–21.
 - 3 Ronald Cammenga, "God's Law for His Redeemed People (19): The Marks of Christians," sermon preached in Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church on February 5, 2023, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermons/2523202049992>. Refuted in Snippe, "Backpacks Filled with Bricks."
 - 4 James Slopesma, "Treasure in the House of the Righteous," *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 2 (October 15, 2020): 28. Refuted in Tyler D. Ophoff, "God's Work of Reformation," *Sword and Shield* 6, no. 10 (March 2026): 11–19.
 - 5 Steven Key, "Radiating Divine Love," sermon preached in Loveland Protestant Reformed Church on June 5, 2022, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermons/65221658432493>. Refuted in Luke Bomers, "The Only Way to Be Happy in Jesus," *Sword and Shield* 6, no. 3 (August 2025): 10–20.
 - 6 Richard Smit, "Repentance and Remission of Sins Through Faith in Jesus Christ," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LY-5t2A2VWNI&t=1128s>. Refuted in Nathan J. Langerak, "Three Blind Mice (2): Justified Through Repentance and Faith," *Sword and Shield* 6, no. 8 (January 2026): 7–12.
 - 7 Kenneth Koole, "Herman Witsius: Still Relevant (4)," *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 7 (January 1, 2021): 151. Refuted in Nathan J. Langerak, "Christ on Trial," *Sword and Shield* 4, no. 11 (March 2024): 8–21.
 - 8 Martyn McGeown, "The *Ordo Salutis* (6a) Justification and Assurance: No Condemnation to Them Who Walk after the Spirit," *Standard Bearer* 100, no. 17 (June 2024): 423–24.
 - 9 See Lee Wiltjer Jr., "McGeown's Manufactured Faith," *Sword and Shield* 5, no. 1 (June 2024): 26–31.
 - 10 "Protest of Prof. Ronald Cammenga," in *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches 2017*, 274.

those works and say, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?”

Then Christ will reply, “I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matt 7:22–23).

For those in the PRC, Christ is no true Christ but an idol manufactured by their own minds.

Our Only Comfort in Life and in Death

If not in the way of our holy living, where do we find our comfort and assurance? Doctrinally, the source of our comfort is in God’s eternal plan. He chose his people before time (2 Tim. 1:9), and in time he draws them to himself into the church (John 6:44; Acts 2:47; Belgic Confession 27–28). God gives to his people all of salvation, assurance included, freely in Christ (Rom. 8:32), through faith, and by the means of grace (Belgic Confession 33; Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 65). Our comfort is God-worked from beginning to middle to end.

The application of this doctrine to our hearts is brought by the means of grace, primarily the preaching of the gospel and secondarily the sacraments, which flow from the preaching. God gives two testimonies in the preaching to his children: the testimony of the law and the testimony of the gospel. When the law comes to their hearts, God testifies that they are sinners who daily blaspheme Christ. They are condemned, for “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). If at any point there is an aspect of salvation that we must fulfill, we already have failed and can never accomplish it. That is what the law testifies to us. It makes us nothing.

The gospel testifies to us that Christ fulfilled every promise, lived the law to perfection, and performed every activity of repentance and faith that is necessary for salvation. He shouldered the sins of his church—past, present, and future—and paid for them in full. He took on the testimony of the law and set us free from condemnation (Rom. 8:1–2). He defeated the testimony of the devil and our flesh. Christ is the head of the covenant. He alone is the basis of, maintains, and perfects that covenant. He brings us into the covenant and makes it known to us. He is the head of the church. We who are engrafted into Christ by faith have every blessing that the Father has given to Christ for his gracious work. Every blessing of salvation, from regeneration to forgiveness to assurance to glorification, is ours presently.

And Christ pours out the Spirit in the church. The Spirit testifies to us that we are the sons and daughters of God (Rom. 8:16). The Spirit works in us to form us to be

children of God, giving life to the spiritually dead people that we were. The Spirit also assures us that Christ’s work is true. God sends his Spirit, through Christ, into the church to assure his children that they are his. Assurance is caused by election.

The great Comforter abides in the hearts of those who have been raised from spiritual death. God is with us and will never forsake us. In time we have a taste of the glorious eternity of friendship and fellowship with the living God. Christ fulfilled all our salvation. The Father gives it. The Spirit works it in us. That is what the gospel testifies to us. Our salvation is in God alone. These testimonies come with the preaching each Sunday: We are nothing, and God is everything.

Regarding assurance, the greatest point of the battle of faith is the understanding that it is *you* who is saved. Our doubts, worked by our threefold enemy, often can tell us that the word we just heard does not apply to us. At times we might feel that we are not that sinful and that we do not have a great need for Christ. At other times we might despair that we are too sinful and surely Christ did not save us. But faith rejects all that is not Christ. Faith points us to him and to what he speaks directly to us. Faith rejects the doubts. Faith tells us that we are dead to the law and alive in Christ. By faith we are assured that despite our sins, God has fulfilled all his promises.

This battle of assurance is a struggle that believers go through throughout their lives. Our hope is in the promise of God that he will take his church to heaven, where he will kill our old man of sin and glorify us, thus ending this earthly turmoil and bringing us into perfect peace.

Faith points us to him and to what he speaks directly to us. Faith rejects the doubts. Faith tells us that we are dead to the law and alive in Christ. By faith we are assured that despite our sins, God has fulfilled all his promises.

In whatever place or position they occupy in this world, God loves his people. Whether they are living out of the small beginning of new obedience or struggling

with sin, God is sovereign. He gives to each of his people the measure of comfort that he pleases. The almighty God, in his absolute sovereignty, bestows comfort upon whom he pleases. This certainty does not rest upon, nor is it obtained through, the penitence or the holy conduct of the creature. Solely by God's independent hand does he draw the sinner out of the darkness of his sinful flesh and into God's marvelous, gracious light. So when we think to ourselves, "I had better read my Bible more or have more devotions, so that I might feel closer to God!" we must reject our flesh, which looks to ourselves for our comfort, and rest in the work of Christ alone, who works all things for our good.

Good Works

What of good works then—repentance, holy living, and obedience? When the preaching comes, it points us to Christ. It also tells us that God has made us new creatures. All our works are as filthy rags (Isa. 64:6), yet we do good works; it is impossible for a child of God not to do good works. The book of James and Belgic Confession article 24 are clear. When called to examine ourselves before the Lord's supper, with our eyes still set on Christ, we see a perfect heart flowing with works. When our eyes stray back to ourselves, we see the sin that corrupts all that we do. This is the struggle of Paul in Romans 7:19. By faith we know that we do good works, even if our consciences might say otherwise.

God be glorified for the works that he ordained and performs in us (Phil. 2:13; Eph. 2:10). Yet according to God's justice, not one of those works is worthy of salvation. Do not look to yourself. Man is not assured by his works or by his activities. Man cannot say "I am nothing"

and look to that confession for assurance. Our eyes must be kept on Christ and his work.

Conclusion

The life of the believer is not always one where he lives out of the full assurance of his salvation. At times believers have to drag themselves to church on Sunday. That is because in this life everything testifies against them. But believers are drawn to hear the voice of Christ, and when the word of the gospel comes, it brings to the child of God great comfort and peace.

God promises to gather his people into the church. In the church he comforts them, tells them that they are his, works that comfort in their hearts by the Spirit, and makes them to know that his promise is yes and amen. Although our lives on this earth are difficult, with the devil, the world, and our flesh testifying against us, we have rest and know that we are pilgrims and strangers on this earth. God will not take us from his flock. He promises to preserve us to the end, no matter our sins. And when we die, we will be brought into eternal friendship and fellowship with the triune God, finally free from sin.

As we go through the tribulations of this life, our flesh often fails. But in Christ "we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us" (Rom. 5:3–5). Rest in that hope, a gift of the Spirit.

"My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever" (Ps. 73:26).

—Caleb Ophoff

ASSOCIATION MEETING OF REFORMED BELIEVERS PUBLISHING

This year the board scheduled the seventh annual association meeting to be held on **October 23 at 7:30 p.m.** in the new building of Grace Reformed Protestant School, located at 694 Jackson Street in Grandville, Michigan. Men, women, young people, and children are invited and encouraged to attend this meeting to hear the edifying and inspiring speeches and informative reports from the board and to enjoy rich

communion of the saints with like-minded believers who are committed to the glorious privilege of publishing the truth of the sovereignty of God in salvation. Rev. Earl Kamps, minister of Cornerstone Reformed Protestant Church, will give the keynote address on the topic "The Efficacious Work of the Holy Spirit." To livestream the meeting, go to reformedbelieverspub.org and click on the livestream link.



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ELECTRONIC SERVICE REQUESTED

FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL

Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.—2 Corinthians 13:11

Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived. —Numbers 21:9

Israel was the church of God according to election. Yet a bitter and rebellious people were the Israelites as they took their pilgrimage through the wilderness and into the land God had promised. The elect by nature were no different than the surrounding nations or the carnal element that always resides in the church. Again the Israelites lodged their complaints against Moses and against God. They longed for Egypt and the things of Egypt. They were filled with contempt for God's provision of the manna. They accused Moses of bringing them into the wilderness to die.

Swiftly and quickly came the Lord's reply. The Lord sent upon the nation fiery serpents. Fiery because of the venomous bite that inflamed the site of the deadly wound. Where the snake's fangs pierced the skin, the venom immediately began to work, until the body shut down and the Israelite perished.

A symbol of sin! Bitten by sin was man in the garden, and he perished under that sin according to the righteous judgment of God. And bitten by those fiery serpents, the Israelites were as good as dead. With no antivenom and no antidote, their end was to perish. And many did perish in the nation. They died under the terrible power of sin that brought them down to hell. God through this event was teaching the Israelites who they were by nature. They were sinners, guilty in Adam and sold under sin.

The Lord answered Moses' intercessory prayer through a sign. Through the sign God declared the gospel to dead sinners. He appointed the antivenom. Moses was to craft a brazen serpent and lift it up on a pole. That brazen serpent was the symbol of God's curse and his wrath against sin.

Dead sinners looked upon that glistening and glinting serpent suspended on a pole, and they lived! To the Israelites God brought healing and life. Sinners who were doomed to die now lived only by a true faith in the promise of God.

Of this event Christ spoke. As Moses lifted up that serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up. And on the accursed tree of the cross, Christ became like that serpent lifted up. God made him, who knew no sin, to be sin for us. God made him a curse for us. Imputed to Christ were all the sins of his ungodly, elect people, and he identified himself with their sins. For our sins he was lifted up and accursed of God at the place of a skull. Christ took away our guilt, the wrath of God, and the curse.

That we might be made the righteousness of God in him. Instead of guilt Christ's perfect righteousness, satisfaction, and spotless holiness are imputed to us. And instead of being cursed, the church of God is unimaginably blessed. The curse is lifted off the church because the Son of man was lifted up.

And Christ still is lifted up every Sunday in the church where Jesus Christ crucified is declared as the only way of salvation. All who believe in him shall never perish but have everlasting life.

—TDO