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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FORMALISM AND OBEDIENCE

It came to pass in the fourth year of king Darius, that the word of the LORD *came unto Zechariah in the fourth day of the ninth month, even in Chisleu; when they had sent unto the house of God Sherezer and Regem-melech, and their men, to pray before the* LORD, *and to speak unto the priests which were in the house of the* LORD *of hosts, and to the prophets, saying, Should I weep in the fifth month, separating myself, as I have done these so many years? Then came the word of the* LORD *of hosts unto me, saying, Speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying, When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to me? And when ye did eat, and when ye did drink, did not ye eat for yourselves, and drink for yourselves? Should ye not hear the words which the* LORD *hath cried by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity, and the cities thereof round about her, when men inhabited the south and the plain? And the word of the* LORD *came unto Zechariah, saying, Thus speaketh the* LORD *of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother: and oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart.* —Zechariah 7:1–10[1]

Oh, slavish fear!

Futile questions arising out of hearts bound by the chains of barren tradition.

Should I weep?

Must I separate myself and fast in the fifth month?

Must I wring tears from my eyes, even though my heart shouts for joy?

Must I sing sad songs, even though I want to make a joyful noise?

Must I deny myself food and drink, even though within me there is a jubilant shout: "Let us eat and drink and be merry!"?

Is such compulsory, external, and formal worship that is without substance, Spirit, and truth ever pleasing to the Lord?

Oh, yes, the forefathers had so spoken!

During the exile the forefathers had instituted days of fasting and weeping in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months in connection with specific events, such as the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and the assassination of Gedaliah.[2] Then the people abstained from food and drink, broke into lamentations, and sat down by the rivers of Babylon in sackcloth and ashes. Especially then in that alien land, they hung their harps on the willows and refused to sing one of Zion's songs. And that institution became an ordinance in Israel. The people gradually forgot that the ordinance was not obedience to the word of the Lord but a commandment of men. When the people returned to the land of their fathers, they remained faithful to that institution of men. They lived again in the land of their fathers, and they still always wept and fasted in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months.

"Should I weep in the fifth month, separating myself, as I have done these so many years?"

Must I?

The men of Bethel had sent a delegation to Jerusalem with this very question to seek the advice of the leaders of the people about this matter of conscience. That is how the second verse of Zechariah 7 ought to be understood. Our translation makes it seem as though the delegation was sent to the temple. However, the words "house of God" in the original is the word *Bethel*. Furthermore, "unto the house of God" should be translated as "*from* the house of God," or from Bethel. Although the temple was being built in Jerusalem, it was far from finished. Still more, the temple was commonly called the house of the Lord. Thus we should understand that the men of Bethel sent Sherezer and Regem-melech and their men to pray before the Lord and to seek an answer from the "priests which were in the house of the LORD of hosts and…the prophets" concerning this weighty question: "Should I weep in the fifth month?"

The ordinance did not appear to make sense any longer.

1 In the original meditation Hoeksema quoted only verses 3, 5, 9, and 10 of Zechariah 7. The translator includes the first ten verses for the benefit of the readers.

2 For this history of Gedaliah, see 2 Kings 25:25–26 and Jeremiah 40–41.

The men of Bethel were in earnest.

On the one side weighed tradition, the ordinance of the forefathers that seemed to be an ordinance of God. The men of Bethel did not want to do something that was displeasing to the Lord. If the ordinance really was an ordinance of the Lord—a word of God—then, very well, they would stifle the joy in their hearts on one day, and they would break into lamentations in the fifth month. The ordinance of the forefathers weighed heavily on the men. They could hardly escape from under its weight.

But on the other side, the men were alive to reality, and they believed that there had to be a ground for their weeping and wailing. After all, there had to be a reason for their fasting and weeping if it was going to be done in sincerity and from the heart. And the fasting and weeping had to be done from the heart if it was to be pleasing to the Lord!

The men of Bethel could no longer fast and weep from their hearts!

Not in the fifth month!

Nor in the fourth, seventh, and tenth months!

Circumstances had changed. It was the ninth month of the fourth year of King Darius, nearly two years after the night of visions that had taken place on the twenty-fourth day of the second year of the reign of King Darius. It was nearly two years after the construction of the temple had resumed and about two years before the completion of the house of the Lord. There was progress that had been made. People were beginning to look forward to the dedication of the temple.

Moreover, Bethel had been rebuilt quickly. The evidences of the exile—the revelations of God's wrath over his people—in large measure had diminished, and everything declared that God was looking down with favor upon his heritage.

Must we still always weep in the fifth month, separating ourselves, as we have done these so many years?

Is it not more pleasing to God to eat and to drink, to sing and to rejoice, and to praise and to give thanks?

Yet, there was the ordinance of the forefathers.

Men could not cast off that ordinance!

Must we?

Spirit of bondage!

Significant question!

Because at its core the question concerned the matter of sacrifice or obedience, form or substance, flesh or spirit, appearance or reality.

And the sinful heart is ever inclined to give a positive answer to the question and—instead of letting the offering be an act of obedience—to substitute that offering for obedience itself, to weep only with the eyes rather than with the heart, to fast in a mere outward show, and to honor the Lord with the lips while the heart is far from him!

The Pharisees—the theologians, the leaders of the people, the men of the law—living after the exile always quickly gave an affirmative answer to the question. They pursued—and they taught the people to pursue—the righteousness that was out of the law, not the law in the spiritual-ethical sense but the law of ordinances, the law as an externally imposed yoke. Indeed—so ran their answer—you must fast and you must weep precisely in the fifth month and in the fourth, seventh, and tenth months too. You must go to the temple; you must offer sacrifices; you must pay tithes; you must pray, and you must do—oh, so much more to do—just as the ancients meticulously have worked out and prescribed. And in all that lies your righteousness before God!

Yet these men overlooked that all those ordinances were meant to be expressions of penance and repentance, of love and fear of the Lord—from which the weightier and essential matters of the law ultimately spring. And so it came to pass that the people tithed mint and anise and cumin, while neglecting the weightier matters of the law—judgment, mercy, and faith—and they strained at a gnat and swallowed a camel. And under the guise of pious, lengthy prayers, they devoured widows' houses!

Must I weep?

Oh, the culmination of this question you see later in the Pharisee, who stood in the temple giving thanks that he actually was the only good man:

> 11. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.
> 12. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. (Luke 18:11–12)

Must I weep?

Momentous question!

But, therefore, the answer to the question of the men of Bethel did not come from the priests and the prophets. No, the men of the theological college were not equipped to lead in the right way, for they always stood in the service of tradition. They would certainly have answered, "The traditions of the forefathers must be maintained!"

The word of the Lord alone is a decisive answer to the question: "Ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time…but I say unto you!" Therefore, because the question was indeed fundamental and important for all, the word of the Lord came not only to the men of Bethel but also to all the people and priests by the mouth of the prophet Zechariah.

Fast and weep?

Oh, yes, go ahead and fast and weep and pour out your

hearts before the Lord! But not in the fifth month and not in the fourth, seventh, and tenth months either. Because you rightly feel in your hearts that there is much more reason to sing, rejoice, and celebrate—to eat and drink and feast—because of the blessings and faithfulness of the Lord shown to you. He remembered his covenant; he redeemed you out of a strange country; he brought you back to the land of your fathers; your cities have been rebuilt, and the house of the Lord is near completion; the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. Rejoice in praise and thanks to the Lord your God, who had mercy on his inheritance!

Must I weep?

Oh, certainly, go and weep because there is enough about which to sorrow and mourn as long as you still lie in this present death. But do not let your weeping be the upholding of an ordinance of men without your hearts being able to express themselves in that weeping. Do not suppose by weeping and by fasting as such that you are well-pleasing to me. As bare forms they have no significance for me. Your fasting and your weeping are of no significance to me. By your formal worship you are not righteous before me:

> 5. When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?
> 6. And when ye did eat, and when ye did drink, did not ye eat for yourselves, and drink for yourselves? (Zech. 7:5–6)

Weeping and fasting?

Certainly, weep and mourn in sackcloth and ashes!

And do much more than that! Maintain all the institutions of the Lord: Pay your tithes, bring your offerings, and honor your Sabbaths and feast days. Or, to speak the language of the new dispensation: Attend faithfully the Lord's services on the day of rest, bring your children for baptism, celebrate the holy supper, sing and pray, and be devoted to and administer the word of God.

But do not ask, "Must we?"

Then you are nothing but slaves, bondmen in God's house!

Then you perform only an external, formal service!

And slaves do not remain forever in the house, but only the Son remains forever. God does not want a house full of slaves who endlessly ask how much is required of them and who are glad when the work is done. But God desires a home filled with free and joyful children who understand and cherish the unspeakably great privilege of serving the God of the covenant.

Children, for whom nothing is ever too much!

Who no longer anxiously ask, "How much must we do?" but who eagerly ask, "How much may we do?" and who sing as they serve:

> What peace is theirs who love thy holy law!
> They shall not fall on paths of consecration;
> Lord, I find in thee my joy without flaw.
> With thy chosen ones, I hope for salvation.
> All thy commands I keep with loving awe;
> No burden to me in this blest relation.[3]

Must we weep and fast in the fifth month?

Serious question!

Weep?

Yes, but weep because you have understood the full demand of the eternally abiding word of the Lord: Thou shalt love!

Indeed, that is the word of your God:

> 9. Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother:
> 10. And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart. (Zech. 7:9–10)

Love!

For how will you truly administer justice unless you love truth and righteousness? And how will you show kindness and mercy to one another unless you love each other? Or how will you be able to resist the temptations to oppress the widow and the orphan—who, after all, cannot withstand you—and to trample upon the stranger and the wretched—who may well be regarded as having no rights—if you are ruled by hatred and envy and lust and greed? Or how will you prevent yourselves from plotting evil in your hearts against your neighbors, if you are filled with resentment and envy toward them?

Love!

Oh, that always has been the demand of the covenant! Thus spoke the Lord through his servant Moses. Thus spoke the prophets whom the Lord sent to his people since the days of Moses. Thus God spoke through the ministry of the former prophets: "Should ye not hear the words which the Lord hath cried by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity, and the cities thereof round about her, when men inhabited the south and the plain?" (Zech. 7:7).

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3 Hoeksema quoted from psalter number 119, stanza 83, in the Dutch psalm book. This is the versification of Psalm 119:165–68. A similar version is found in our English psalter number 428, stanza 9. The translator renders his own metrical version, with certain accommodations made for English rhyme, that more closely matches the Dutch that Hoeksema laid before his readers.

And it was because they neither understood nor desired this weightiest part of the law that God the Lord was angry with the forefathers and swept them away among the Gentiles! "I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them, that no man passed through nor returned: for they laid the pleasant land desolate" (Zech. 7:14).

Thus the Lord had spoken to Israel prior to the exile:

> 7. Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
> 8. He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? (Mic. 6:7–8)

And so the Lord spoke when he came in the flesh: "If ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matt. 12:7).

And thus the Lord spoke through the apostles: "All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Gal. 5:14). And again: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27).[4]

Love!

Love one another!

But how shall you love one another if the love of God is not in your hearts? Oh, no, do not prattle, as the moderns do, that upholding justice and judgment and practicing benevolence and mercy—which constitutes true religion—is something man can perform by nature with a loving Jesus as a teacher and an example. Such a person has not grasped the weightiest part of the law. For you do not love your neighbor if you do not love God. There is no love other than the love of God! And that love of God you do not know by nature. You are enemies of God—hateful and hating one another.

Must I weep?

Yes, you! But then weep because you have understood the weightiest part of the law. Weep because it presses on your soul as so many tons, a burden that you are unable to bear or to cast off.

Weep until—with tear-stained face and weeping heart—you have found, and time and again find, the God of your perfect salvation, the God who reveals himself in the face of Jesus Christ, the Lord!

Weep until you have found forgiveness and peace at his cross and in his resurrection!

And weep until your weeping has turned into eternal joy!

Through faith!

—Herman Hoeksema

FROM THE EDITOR

By the time you read this, the annual meeting of Reformed Believers Publishing will have taken place, the Lord willing. I have no doubt as I am writing this that the evening will be as edifying as it has been in the past. The editor reminds the readers of the ongoing need at Reformed Believers Publishing for financial support to continue publishing *Sword and Shield*. The magazine is supported entirely by the generosity of its readers moved by the Spirit of Christ. The thought of the board and of the editor is that if the readers are edified by the content of *Sword and Shield*, then they also will support the publication of *Sword and Shield*. If that is not the case, then the magazine has had its place and work.

God has given to the magazine a place in the world and will continue that for as long as he is willing. The magazine is sent free of charge every month to those on the mailing list. The purpose of the magazine is to witness to the Reformed truth in this evil age of apostasy in which many claim to teach the Reformed faith but in fact have adopted Arminianism, modernism, and cultural and political activism as their creeds. *Sword and Shield* is committed to publishing meaty and weighty doctrinal articles in an age not only of erroneous content

4 Hoeksema throughout this section briefly referenced these verses as he moved quickly to the end of the meditation. The translator quotes the verses in full.

but also of drivel and fluff, light food that cannot satisfy a hungry soul.

We have seen and are seeing the development of this apostasy in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), which denomination was at one time a stronghold of the Reformed faith, but whose theology is becoming increasingly bizarre. One would think that someone, anyone, in the PRC could pick up an issue of *The Standard Bearer*, the unofficial denominational magazine, and compare it with issues published early in the denomination's history and sound the alarm that the PRC is a long way theologically from where she started. One would think that someone, anyone, could read through the online discussions of theology by members of the PRC and point out that they sound a lot like those in the Christian Reformed Church. One would think that someone, anyone, who is witness to the increasing involvement of the PRC with parachurch ministries and organizations, as well as her cozy rapprochement with other apostate denominations and ecumenical organizations, could warn that the PRC is very far departed from the voice of her fathers. Where are those who, in the beginning of the Reformed Protestant reformation in 2021, said that when they saw the developments of apostasy in the PRC they would leave? Alas, the Lord has given to them the spirit of blindness, eyes that cannot see, and hearts that cannot understand, lest they be converted and God should heal them. With a man-first theology of repentance, there is only one direction in which the PRC can go and that is to be overrun by a man-centered, man-glorifying, God-dishonoring theology of works-righteousness. Man by his acts of repentance and faith, conversion and obedience—all by grace, of course—enters into the kingdom of God! And the PRC is following the pattern of apostasy seen in other professing Reformed and Presbyterian churches. *Sword and Shield* was born in the crucible of fighting against that man-first theology and now in its seventh issue is committed to continuing the fight against that theology and its corruption of the Reformed faith. If you are edified by the content of the magazine, consider supporting this cause.

The editor also takes the time to bring before the readership another pressing need for Reformed Believers Publishing. We are in need of copy editors to begin training. The backbone of the publication of *Sword and Shield* is our copy editors. I daresay that there is hardly a magazine published in the world today that is as thoroughly and professionally copy edited as *Sword and Shield*. To take up that work requires extensive training, so that the quality of the magazine can continue, the Lord willing, into the future. The position requires a working knowledge of English grammar and syntax and the style sheet of Reformed Believers Publishing. It is a labor of love. It requires a love for theology, a love for the cause of *Sword and Shield*, and a love for the truth for which the magazine stands. It will not hurt to have a little patience and courage too to deal with a grumpy writer who does not like having someone muck with his commas or to ask uncomfortable questions of a writer who thinks his sentence is clear, when it is in fact about as clear as mud. If there is someone who is interested, the editor encourages him or her to contact the board to inquire further.

In this issue we have another meditation by Rev. Herman Hoeksema on the book of Zechariah. These meditations were written by him in the late 1930s and early 1940s in the Dutch language and were published in *The Standard Bearer*. The editor has been translating them into English. I find them to be very timely, uplifting, edifying, and encouraging. These meditations alone ought to show the members of the PRC that they are very far indeed from the faith of their spiritual father. I intend to continue to translate and publish these meditations in *Sword and Shield*.

This month's *Running Footmen* contribution from Ally Ophoff takes up the sword against the abysmal theology of the PRC and her corruption of the Reformed creeds in particular. And Mary Lou Vermeer in an *Insights* contribution demonstrates how that abysmal theology corrupts the reading of the scriptures also. Man, man, man—all that the PRC has is man. We warned her. She did not listen, and she cast us out. Straining at a gnat, she swallows a camel with little difficulty.

Reverend Ophoff finishes his brief review of the very unchristian and, indeed, very antichristian behavior of the Oostras and their supporters. Christ said that wicked apostates would haul his people before judges, and that is exactly what happened. For carrying out the work of discipline against impenitent officebearers in the church, we were hauled before a judge. We are honored and count it all joy so to suffer for Christ's sake, for so did the wicked apostates to the prophets, the apostles, and Christ himself.

May the Lord speed the contents of this issue to the hearts of the readers!

—NJL

THE END OF ALL THINGS (8): ANTICHRIST AS THE MAN OF SIN

Cush begat Nimrod: he began to be a mighty one in the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD: wherefore it is said, Even as Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD. And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. Out of that land went forth Asshur, and builded Nineveh, and the city Rehoboth, and Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah: the same is a great city. — Genesis 10:8–12

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit. — Isaiah 14:12–15

I saw in the night visions, and behold a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; and it had great iron teeth: it devoured and brake in pieces, and stamped the residue with the feet of it: and it was diverse from all the beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns. I considered the horns, and, behold, there came up among them another little horn, before whom there were three of the first horns plucked up by the roots: and, behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of man, and a mouth speaking great things. — Daniel 7:7–8

Then I would know the truth of the fourth beast, which was diverse from all the others, exceeding dreadful, whose teeth were of iron, and his nails of brass; which devoured, brake in pieces, and stamped the residue with his feet; and of the ten horns that were in his head, and of the other which came up, and before whom three fell; even of that horn that had eyes, and a mouth that spake very great things, whose look was more stout than his fellows. I beheld, and the same horn made war with the saints, and prevailed against them; until the Ancient of days came, and judgment was given to the saints of the most High; and the time came that the saints possessed the kingdom. — Daniel 7:19–22

Out of one of them came forth a little horn, which waxed exceeding great, toward the south, and toward the east, and toward the pleasant land. And it waxed great, even to the host of heaven; and it cast down some of the host and of the stars to the ground, and stamped upon them. Yea, he magnified himself even to the prince of the host, and by him the daily sacrifice was taken away, and the place of his sanctuary was cast down. And an host was given him against the daily sacrifice by reason of transgression, and it cast down the truth to the ground; and it practised, and prospered. — Daniel 8:9–12

And in the latter time of their kingdom, when the transgressors are come to the full, a king of fierce countenance, and understanding dark sentences, shall stand up. And his power shall be mighty, but not by his own power: and he shall destroy wonderfully, and shall prosper, and practise, and shall destroy the mighty and the holy people. And through his policy also he shall cause craft to prosper in his hand; and he shall magnify himself in his heart, and by peace shall destroy many: he shall also stand up against the Prince of princes; but he shall be broken without hand. — Daniel 8:23–25

The king shall do according to his will; and he shall exalt himself, and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak marvellous things against the God of gods, and shall prosper till the indignation be accomplished: for that that is determined shall be done. Neither shall he regard the God of his fathers, nor the desire of women, nor regard any god: for he shall magnify himself above all. But in his estate shall he honour the God of forces: and a god whom his fathers knew not shall he honour with gold, and silver, and with precious stones, and pleasant things. Thus shall he do in the most strong holds with a strange god, whom he shall acknowledge and increase with glory: and he shall cause them to rule over many, and shall divide the land for gain. — Daniel 11:36–39

Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin 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. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. —2 Thessalonians 2:3–10

Introduction

I have been considering the subject of antichrist. Antichrist has been an ongoing reality in the world since the garden of Eden, where the Lord said that there would be continual warfare throughout this present age between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. God will have his man, the Son of man; and Satan will have his man, the son of perdition. Thus antichrist has appeared throughout history in various types and forms: Cain's city, Nimrod and Babel, Amalek and its kings, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Macedonia, Rome, and other nations with their kings, princes, and emperors. Antichrist will have also a final form in the worldwide kingdom of the beast, headed by the man of sin, the son of perdition, whom the Lord will destroy with the brightness of his coming to usher in the new and everlasting age of the kingdom of God's dear son.

The purpose of scripture in recounting the types and forms of antichrist is not only to show the church the things that must shortly come to pass but also to reveal the ultimate futility of all antichrist's striving against God and his anointed. Throughout history there has been an ongoing clash between these kingdoms. But this clash always has been under the sovereignty of God. Whatever temporary success antichrist has had, always he has been cut short. In the figurative language of scripture, his wings have been clipped, his horn has been broken off, or he has been destroyed without hand. The divinely determined and appointed time for antichrist to succeed in the earth is always a time, times, and half a time—that is, a time cut short with an astounding abruptness. Antichrist can succeed, but only so far and for so long as God has determined. God's kingdom advances through history, and God in his sovereignty has determined that Satan with his antichrist in his opposition to God and Christ must serve the purpose of the final coming of God's kingdom and the final destruction of Satan's kingdom.

I have noted that antichrist as an ongoing reality in the world has three closely related aspects. First, there is the political aspect of antichrist, which is the deified state that demands and receives the worship of its citizenry and out of which the church of God is cast, so that there is no room for the church in society. Second, there is antichrist as a religious movement for unity apart from the truth. This religious aspect of antichrist serves the first and primary political aspect of antichrist by causing the world to wonder after and ultimately to worship the deified state. Whenever there is talk in the church world of unity apart from the truth—a unity not only of apostate Christianity but also of apostate Christianity and the world's religions—then this aspect of antichrist is rearing its deceptive head that looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon. Third, there is the aspect of antichrist as the one man who sits at the head of the deified state. This aspect I consider in this and subsequent editorials. It may be said that when many use the term *antichrist*, then they have in view particularly this man.

Antichrist is a kingdom, but always at the head of a kingdom and synonymous with a kingdom is a king. A kingdom is in fact nothing other than the extension of its king, the sphere of his sovereignty and the expression of his will. This is why the explanation of the four beasts in the vision in Daniel 7 is that those beasts represent four kings and four kingdoms: "These great beasts, which are four, are four kings, which shall arise out of the earth. Thus he said, the fourth beast shall be the fourth kingdom upon earth, which shall be diverse from all kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, and shall tread it down, and break it in pieces" (Dan. 7:17, 23). All the great types of antichrist as a political power that have appeared in history have been headed by a leader or king whose ambition has driven the formation and advance of that kingdom. This aspect of antichrist will have its final form in the man of sin, the son of perdition, who is mentioned by the apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:3: "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition." He especially will declare himself to be God and demand and receive from the wondering world divine worship.

The man of sin, the personal antichrist, is that single, male human being whom Satan, under God's sovereign control, will cause to appear in history at his appointed time to head the antichristian world power at the end of the ages. He is Satan's dark, demonic parody of God's man,

the Lord Jesus Christ. As Christ has a divinely ordained time, coming, and revelation, so Satan's man has a divinely ordained time, coming, and revelation. As God's man has a kingdom, riches, power, and glory, so Satan's man will have a kingdom, riches, power, and glory. In virtually everything about the man of sin, he is the sinful imitation of Jesus Christ. In that imitation the ambition of the man of sin is to oppose Christ, displace him, and destroy his kingdom. The man of sin personally is the culmination of the development of sin that began in the garden of Eden with the lie of Satan that Adam would be as God, knowing good and evil—that is, determining for himself apart from God what is good and what is evil. The man of sin is as close as Satan can come to the incarnation of himself, so that the man of sin will be the visible representative of that malevolent spirit and will be animated by Satan himself. To him Satan will give his own seat, authority, power, and kingdom. The man of sin will be moved by that spirit, and thus he also will be motivated to be God by the same proud ambition as that spirit.

About this ambition Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 14:12–15:

> 12. How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!
> 13. For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north:
> 14. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.
> 15. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.

The words of this prophecy come in the context of God's condemnation of Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon and their destruction. But in the middle of that prophecy with the words of the above verses, the Lord reveals that Lucifer stood behind Nebuchadnezzar. Lucifer is the name of Satan according to God's good creation of him. But Satan was lifted up in pride and was cast out of heaven. Satan's determined work is to oppose God and his kingdom and to be God himself. For this Satan has labored in all the historical types of antichrist as the man of sin. The worship of the man of sin by the world is the worship of Satan in that man of sin.

Historical Types

Types of the final form of antichrist have appeared throughout history. These types, as is true of all types in scripture, have been divinely ordained with a view to the final reality that will come in the end. These types are in fact the shadows that are cast by that reality, so that in seeing and in examining those shadows, we can see the characteristics of the reality. So in these types we see some of the characteristics of what the man of sin will be at the end of the ages.

One of the most dangerous forms of antichrist was Nimrod and his kingdom Babel. The church at that time was small and vulnerable. All the people were united in a single language and lived in the same area of the earth. Nimrod's kingdom was evidently a coalition of the willing. The people of that day yearned for one united kingdom that would do mighty things against God and his command to disperse and settle the earth. God smote Nimrod's kingdom with the deadly wound of the confusion of tongues, by which Nimrod's kingdom was broken and men were dispersed over the earth. By that confusion of tongues, God put a massive roadblock in the way of Satan's project to unite the nations. That deadly wound of Babel will be healed at the end of the ages in the final form of antichrist and his kingdom.

Nimrod's solution to the wrecking of his coalition was to go out and establish another kingdom by conquering other peoples. And so began the wars that were to dominate the rest of history. Such martial activity to achieve a kingdom has characterized the typical forms of antichrist throughout history. In those wars the various kingdoms or nations have labored against the deadly wound of Babel. Men have come into their kingdoms and power by force of arms, always with the lust to unite those nations under one head. About this we can say that all such activity in which one nation has sought the subjugation of another nation has been demonic and antichristian, a part of the working of the mystery of iniquity, and the goal of which is the coming of the antichristian kingdom in its final form.

Nimrod's mantle passed to the empires of the Sumerians, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Medes and Persians. And from them the mantle was given to Alexander and the Macedonians and after the death of Alexander to his four generals. From them the power went to Rome and afterward to Western nations. This progression in the appearance of the typical forms of antichrist and their conflicts and wars Daniel sees in the visions of Daniel 7, 8, and 11.

Daniel's visions were for the historical purpose of teaching the church after the exile and prior to the coming of Christ that there would be an almost continual upheaval in the world through the various wars and conflicts between the world powers vying for domination. The church in that era of the old dispensation would be caught in the middle of those conflicts and so suffer in them. But at times the world powers would specifically turn their attentions to the church to persecute and to destroy her. In that revelation of antichrist, there always was also the promise that God would preserve his church and destroy the world powers. And in those visions we catch a glimpse too of the man of sin himself in his typical

form as he appeared at the head of those various nations. And from those visions the Holy Spirit reveals remarkable things about the antichrist as the man of sin.

In Daniel 7:3–7 we read that Daniel saw four kings and their kingdoms under the appearances of a winged lion; a bear who had in his mouth three ribs of its prey, which the bear had devoured; a leopard with four wings; and a fourth beast described as "dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; and it had great iron teeth." The fourth beast is also described as having "ten horns" and a "little horn, before whom there were three of the first horns plucked up by the roots" (vv. 7–8).

In the little horn we see one of the historical types of antichrist as the man of sin. It is quite obvious from the text in Daniel 7 that the four beasts in order represent the kingdoms of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greco-Macedonia, and finally Rome and its successors in the Western world. The identity of the little horn is historically the pagan Roman emperors, and the vision takes us to the very end of time and gives to us a glimpse of the man of sin himself as he will be in the last days. The antichristian world power at the end of time with the man of sin at its head will arise out of the ruins of Rome and the so-called Christian West.

About this man represented by the little horn, Daniel says, "He shall speak great words against the most High, and shall wear out the saints of the most High, and think to change times and laws: and they [the saints] shall be given into his hand until a time and times and the dividing of time" (Dan. 7:25). When this man represented by the little horn speaks great words against the Most High, then the revelation about him is that he is a great blasphemer against God. The man is moved by hatred for God, declares war on God, and carries on that war against God by a war on the saints of God. The description of the people as saints indicates their election, their consecration to God and his cause and kingdom by grace, and their union with Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. They stand visibly by their confessions and lives as being of the party of the living God in the world. The antichrist targets them in his war on God.

Antichrist's war against God is carried on also by his seeking to "change times and laws." These times and laws are all the ordinances of God in creation as well as the truth of God revealed in the creation and in scripture. All these times and laws declare plainly that God is God and that man was created to serve his God. In all this God reveals that he is sovereign and that he determines what all things—including man—shall be in relationship to himself. Seeking to be God himself, the antichrist is determined to change all that God has ordained and instituted in the creation and in the church. We see this spirit afoot in the apostasy in the church world; in the elevation of man's wisdom about the sexes above the law of God in creation; and in evolutionism's attempt to cast God out of his very creation, which attempt is driven by the lust of man to free himself from the laws of God in creation. In this man also shows that he is a fool. It becomes in society a terrible crime to shoot a pestilential dog, but a thing to be condoned and excused is a woman who murders her children. It is obvious to the simplest idiot that a man is not a woman and that a woman is not a man. Though this spirit and drive was present in Rome and her emperors, its final and terrible manifestation will be at the end of the ages when the man of sin will determine for the world what the laws will be and what the relationship of the world to him will be. One of the laws will be that the church of the saints will have no place in his kingdom.

Antiochus Epiphanes

Daniel saw another vision concerning antichrist. The vision in Daniel 8 is of "a ram which had two horns: and the two horns were high; but one was higher than the other, and the higher came up last" (v. 3). Daniel was told later that "the ram which thou sawest having two horns are the kings of Media and Persia" (v. 20). The Persian Empire had its origin in the Medes—the first of the two horns. Later the Persians came to dominate—the latter and larger of the two horns—and the Medes receded into the background.

In the same vision Daniel saw that "an he goat came from the west on the face of the ground…and the goat had a notable horn between his eyes." Daniel 8:5 says that this "rough goat is the king of Grecia: and the great horn that is between his eyes is the first king." When the "he goat came from the west," he "touched not the ground."

> 6. And he came to the ram that had two horns… and ran unto him in the fury of his power.
> 7. And I saw him come close unto the ram, and he was moved with choler against him, and smote the ram, and brake his two horns: and there was no power in the ram to stand before him, but he cast him down to the ground, and stamped upon him: and there was none that could deliver the ram out of his hand. (vv. 6–7)

The figure of the swift and strong he goat is of Alexander and the Greco-Macedonian Empire. That the he goat touched not the ground when he ran at the ram, broke his horns, and stamped on the ram refers to Alexander's precipitous destruction of the Persian power. When Alexander attacked the Persians, he succeeded in a very brief time and beyond all expectations. Alexander's army was tiny in comparison to the Persians' army, his supply lines were stretched thin, and yet battle after battle went to the Greeks.

But Alexander's reign was short-lived, and he died young. His kingdom was divided among his generals, four of whom with their families came to power. We read of this in Daniel's vision: "The he goat waxed very great: and when he was strong, the great horn was broken; and for it came up four

notable ones toward the four winds of heaven. And out of one of them came forth a little horn" (Dan. 8:8–9). About the four horns we read, "Now that being broken [the great horn], whereas four stood up for it, four kingdoms shall stand up out of the nations, but not in his power" (v. 22).

Alexander's kingdom was divided among these generals: Antipater, who took Macedon; Ptolemy, who took Egypt; Seleucus, who took Syria-Mesopotamia; and Lysimachus, who took Asia Minor. Each kingdom was powerful in its own right, but those kingdoms never achieved the kind of power and influence as Alexander's kingdom. In fact within about 150 years, those kingdoms were overshadowed by the emerging influence and might of the Roman Republic, and those kings had to pay deference to Rome. It was this interference by Rome that later would be the cause for rage on the part of another type of antichrist, Antiochus Epiphanes, who in retaliation against God's sovereignty over his conquests would attack the church of God.

The Seleucid kingdom in Syria-Mesopotamia produced Antiochus Epiphanes. He is that "little horn" that came up in Daniel's vision (Dan. 8:9). Antiochus was one of the clearest types of antichrist in scripture.

That "little horn…"

> 10. Waxed great, even to the host of heaven; and it cast down some of the host and of the stars to the ground, and stamped upon them.
> 11. Yea, he magnified himself even to the prince of the host, and by him the daily sacrifice was taken away, and the place of his sanctuary was cast down.
> 12. And an host was given him against the daily sacrifice by reason of transgression, and it cast down the truth to the ground; and it practised, and prospered. (Dan. 8:10–12)

In Daniel 8:23–25 we read again of Antiochus:

> 23. In the latter time of their kingdom, when the transgressors are come to the full, a king of fierce countenance, and understanding dark sentences, shall stand up.
> 24. And his power shall be mighty, but not by his own power: and he shall destroy wonderfully, and shall prosper, and practise, and shall destroy the mighty and the holy people.
> 25. And through his policy also he shall cause craft to prosper in his hand; and he shall magnify himself in his heart, and by peace shall destroy many: he shall also stand up against the Prince of princes; but he shall be broken without hand.

Of this same man we read again in Daniel 11:30–32:

> 30. The ships of Chittim shall come against him: therefore he shall be grieved, and return, and have indignation against the holy covenant: so shall he do; he shall even return, and have intelligence with them that forsake the holy covenant.
> 31. And arms shall stand on his part, and they shall pollute the sanctuary of strength, and shall take away the daily sacrifice, and they shall place the abomination that maketh desolate.
> 32. And such as do wickedly against the covenant shall he corrupt by flatteries: but the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits.

And yet again we read of this man in Daniel 11:36–39:

> 36. The king shall do according to his will; and he shall exalt himself, and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak marvellous things against the God of gods, and shall prosper till the indignation be accomplished: for that that is determined shall be done.
> 37. Neither shall he regard the God of his fathers, nor the desire of women, nor regard any god: for he shall magnify himself above all.
> 38. But in his estate shall he honour the God of forces: and a god whom his fathers knew not shall he honour with gold, and silver, and with precious stones, and pleasant things.
> 39. Thus shall he do in the most strong holds with a strange god, whom he shall acknowledge and increase with glory: and he shall cause them to rule over many, and shall divide the land for gain.

The visions of Daniel are in the first instance a revelation of God concerning history that would come to pass after the death of Daniel. In Daniel 8 there is the revelation of the conflict between Greco-Macedonia and the Persian Empire. In Daniel 11 there is the revelation of the almost continual conflict between the Seleucid kingdom in Syria and the king of the Ptolemies in Egypt. Within this large revelation about history is the revelation about the man Antiochus Epiphanes. What we have in these descriptions of Antiochus Epiphanes is not only a revelation of that man but also in him the revelation in a type of who antichrist will be in the last days.

The picture that we receive is of a self-willed, self-absorbed, deceitful, capricious, cunning, ambitious, blaspheming enemy of God and his covenant. After he was stymied by the "ships of Chittim" after an assault on the neighboring king of the south—Egypt and the Ptolemies—he retaliated against the covenant and people of God. By means of an alliance with a host of Jewish apostates and by a close association with and worship of Satan himself, he assaulted and made desolate the true worship of God. The cause of Antiochus' anger was God's sovereign frustration of his lust for power and territory by means of the "ships of Chittim."

In my next editorial, I will consider him and the final form of antichrist that he represented.

—NJL

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 (3)

Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken, and we are escaped.
—Psalm 124:7

Concluding Remarks

With this article I conclude my brief examination of the series of events regarding a lawsuit that took place at First Reformed Protestant Church. More could be said, and many more documents could be shared. I could demonstrate the deceit, lies, and manipulation that were on display during these events: the wickedness in meetings in attempting to muzzle the church with non-disclosure agreements; emails from Brandon and Alana Oostra's attorney casting accusations for supposedly spreading court documents on the internet; the ridiculous charge that the church was involved in an AI-generated podcast; and the courtroom shenanigans that were employed. I could write on that; however, it would not be edifying. I have said what I needed to say. The lawsuit and its surrounding events were thoroughly antichristian, and the church experienced what the apostle says, that "the mystery of iniquity doth already work" (2 Thess. 2:7). We felt that operation of the kingdom of Satan pressing against the church and the kingdom of God. We do not battle flesh and blood but principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this world, and spiritual wickedness in high places. The church can forget that and think she is battling men with faces and personalities. But behind these men is something far more sinister.

Those who went out from us were not of us. If they had been of us, they would have remained with us. Like the rebel kingdom of the ten tribes who boldly declared, "We have no part in David" and left God's kingdom, covenant, promise, and Christ, so also many have left the true church where the gospel came to them in great power and not with the enticing words of man's wisdom. Like Israel, they set up a new worship to an idol god of their imaginations in Dan and Bethel. And that worship looks so similar to the true worship of God in Jerusalem. They have an order of worship, sermons, singing, praying, and collections, but all of it is a spiritual fraud. They made a god of their own hands who is like unto them who made it. They wanted a god who tolerated them in their sin, ungodliness, and carnality, especially as it came to friendly relations with unbelieving family members. He is not a covenant god or an antithetical god. He is a god who is not absolutely righteous; neither is he a consuming fire in his holiness.

During the reign of Hezekiah, the rebellious ten tribes were taken captive by the Assyrians from the north. The world came in and swallowed up that rebel kingdom. The ten tribes never returned to Canaan but were assimilated into that ungodly kingdom. Today you will not see any Assyrians coming down from the north upon those who left. But there will be a flood of worldliness and apostasy that will take place, and it will sweep them away. They declared, "We have no part in Christ" and left the church where Christ was heard. They wanted their families and friends. They would not condemn those families and friends for their toleration of the lie. The lie of salvation by the willing and efforts of man is not offensive to them. They can get together with people from many different denominations and churches. They can send their children to nominally Christian schools. All is well for them in the earth. "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matt. 16:25).

Our Souls Escaped

The rest of this article is a brief meditation on Psalm 124:7: "Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken, and we are escaped." This

text became a kind of anthem for the Reformed Protestant Churches at the beginning of the reformation in 2021 and anytime it became so clear that God was delivering his church from men who had laid snares and traps in the churches. This psalm lives in the hearts of God's people, and again we make this our confession. God has broken the snare, and as a bird we are escaped free! The psalm, especially the last three verses, is a doxology. It is an ascription of praise to the only good God.

What occasioned this triumphant note of praise? God did not give us as prey to the teeth of men who rose up against us and whose wrath was kindled against us. If the Lord had not been on our side, then they would have swallowed us up quickly and the waters would have gone over our souls. The snare that was so carefully laid by the foe has been broken by the Lord. The trap that was placed by the enemy is loosed, and we are free.

Our souls have escaped. The word "soul" in the text means the life of the child of God. And the psalmist compares that soul of the elect child of God to a little bird or a sparrow. In other places in scripture as well, the life of the child of God is compared to a small bird. Jeremiah cries out in Lamentations 3:52, "Mine enemies chased me sore, like a bird, without cause." In Psalm 102:7 the child of God confesses, "I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top."

What is the point of comparison between the soul and the bird? The sparrow is a winged creature, and belonging to it is the gift of flight. Belonging with flight is freedom and liberty. The bird may go wherever his wings take him. He is not hindered nor stopped. He flies from one place to the next. Nothing at all can hold him back.

That was man's life in Adam before the fall. Man's life and liberty was that he was free and at liberty to serve God. Man's soul was like a little bird in the hand of his almighty creator. Man's life was that he was in a covenant relationship with God in that original state of rectitude. Man's whole life was directed toward the glory of God. Man desired and chose for God. He loved God with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength. God was his life. And man's freedom was to serve his God and as king to consecrate the entire creation to the glory of God. Freedom for man was not to live however he wanted. It was not freedom for man to serve the lusts of the flesh. It was not freedom to be friends with and to live with the world. But true freedom is to serve God as the friend of the living God.

But also note about the bird in scripture its helplessness. The bird depends upon God each and every moment of its existence. Does not Jesus speak thus in Matthew 6:25–26?

> 25. I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?
> 26. Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?

The little bird depends entirely upon God. God as a Father to his creation feeds his creatures with his own hand. The bird does not sow, reap, or gather into barns, but the bird depends every moment on the daily provision of the living God. So the idea of the bird applied to the life of man means too that he depends upon God. And man has no resistance or strength against his foes. There is the element of folly in the bird too, that "a bird hasteth to the snare, and knoweth not that it is for his life" (Prov. 7:23).

The fowler is a bird-catcher. He lays traps or snares. He is the determined predator of the bird. He calculates, devises, and plots how he might catch the bird. Having his plan, he sets the trap. He places on that trap something enticing for the bird. He puts bait in the trap to lure the bird down from its liberty and into the snare. The fowler waits until the bird gets in nice and close and then springs upon it the net! The fowler's goal is the life and destruction of the bird. He wants to chew that bird between his teeth. He wants to inflict pain upon the bird. And the engaged snare takes away the glorious liberty and freedom of the bird, so that the bird is in bondage and enslaved in the trap.

Our souls are compared to the bird. Man was created a glorious creature. He was made in God's image in a covenant relationship. But a fowler came. The fowler had seen God's creation of man on the sixth day. He had seen the glorious position that man had been given, and for envy the fowler took with him a third of the angels from heaven, and he entered into the garden in the form of a serpent. He told the woman, "You can be as God, knowing good and evil." The stratagem of the fowler was devised. The trap was set. The lure was placed to tempt man into the trap and away from God. All man had to do was eat of that forbidden tree, and he would be God. That is the lie that stands behind all false doctrine. That is the lie that stands behind the working of the mystery of iniquity in the world. Man can be God! God is not God, but man and his works, actions, will, and desire is God! So man took and ate, and his eyes were opened, and he saw that he was naked. That root sin of Adam must come to expression in all its terrible reality in the human race until finally the man of sin will appear and sit in God's temple and claim to be God. That power of the antichristian kingdom is always working, and it says, "Man is god."

Satan is the fowler who cast his net over the whole human race and drew man into the love of sin and hatred of God. Man brought upon himself death and destruction by his sin. He is trapped! He is caught! The fowler came seeking Adam's life and with wild success. Man is bound in that snare. He is in bondage and enslaved to sin because God said, "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:17). The wages of man's sin is death. And man is enslaved because he is guilty. He is not free to serve God, but man is in bondage to sin and the devil.

These snares are the stratagems and devices of ungodly men who seek the ruin and destruction of the church. The psalm speaks of "men" rising up against us. "They" had swallowed us up quick. "Their" wrath was kindled. The church was not given to "their" teeth (Ps. 124:2–3, 6). The church has ungodly men as her enemies. There are those who desire to keep us in bondage to the law. They would have us be slaves to the bondage of another gospel, which is no gospel. They would have us be prey to their teeth and would return us to the bondage of keeping the law for righteousness and for a blessing instead of the glorious liberty that we have as God's sons and daughters. Our reasonable service would not be true thankfulness and freedom but fear and terror of the living God.

Once already, God has cut a hole in the net of the snare of the Protestant Reformed theology of works-righteousness. It is a net and snare that has captured many and in which many will perish. The lie of the Protestant Reformed Churches is that man is God in salvation. For man to experience the forgiveness of sins, he must repent. For man to be saved, there is that which he must do. For a blessing man must obey the law. Such was the snare. And it came with an allurement that appealed to the flesh: Man is active in the matter of the experience of salvation, and man does have a vital role in salvation. Man can be as God, knowing good and evil! There is a place somewhere for man in salvation.

More snares have men laid. Another snare that came to trap the church was the appeal to man's desire to have a name and a place in the world. "We can be friends with the world and friends with God. We do not have to be so harsh and judgmental. We can play nice with friends and family who have departed the faith. There really is not that large a divide between us. We cannot say that they belong to a false church. All these people that you keep condemning for holding to false doctrine are good people with nice families." A snare! And the fowler would have the church caught in it to flood her with worldly relationships and carnal peace.

And this trap was laid also: The church must be quiet about sin. "Do not say to us that we are living in rebellion against God's law unless or until the magistrate rules. Do not tell us how carnal and wicked we are and of our hopeless condition. And if you do, then we will make you pay for that." John the Baptist was beheaded for telling Herod and Herodias that they were living in sin. John condemned Herod, saying that it was unlawful for him to take his living brother's wife for himself. (There in this recorded section of scripture is the clear condemnation of divorce and remarriage.) It is unlawful for a man to take another living man's wife. And John the Baptist condemned the sin. But Herodias could do nothing against John. So at a party a plot was laid by her and her daughter. Herodias' daughter danced for Herod, and it pleased him. He promised to give her anything she wanted, up to half the kingdom. And she plotted with her mother for the head of John the Baptist on a charger. For condemning the sin of adultery in that marriage, John the Baptist was killed. The plots of men against the church are no different in essence. They will take the church and bring her before the government to answer for her preaching and condemnation of sin. Brandon and Alana Oostra, Henry Kamps, Gordon Schipper, and the rest had their snares and traps. They sprung those snares on the church. They held the souls of God's people in their hands and were ready to put them as prey to their teeth.

The breaking of the snare and the escaping free at the cross of Jesus Christ is also the church's victory over all her enemies.

But wonder of wonders, behold! The snare is broken! We are escaped!

Someone broke it. The believer and the church did not do it. We did not work or effect it. As far as we were concerned, our situation was hopeless. Deliverance for us came from without ourselves. This comes out in the grammar of the text. The verb "escaped" is a passive verb that indicates that the subject, the bird, is being acted upon.

And by what? Or better, by whom? Jesus Christ is in the text in the word "broken." How was the guilt of sin as it was imputed to us in Adam taken away? How were the dominion and pollution of sin as ruling powers over us broken? Our help is in the name of Jesus Christ, the only name of salvation. The answer is that God sent Christ,

who came in our flesh and died on the tree of the cross. Jesus Christ loved his church. He loved all that the Father had given to him. Through his perfect work he accomplished all righteousness, and by the sacrifice of himself that he once offered on the cross, he took away the cause of our death, namely, our guilt. He came to a miserable people who hated and rejected him as the man of sorrows, and through his work he justified his ungodly people. Having justified them, he renews them in the same image from glory to glory. He broke the snare, so that we ungodly sinners are justified before the sight of God. And restored to our souls is the liberty and freedom to serve God in love and delight.

The breaking of the snare and the escaping free at the cross of Jesus Christ is also the church's victory over all her enemies. Now is the prince of this world cast out. All the enemies that come against the church cannot prevail against her. Their traps are never successful. They cannot have any victory but must all come to defeat. Christ has already gotten the victory, and this is the victory, even our faith, for we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

The church has the victory even when God sends evil and sin in the life of his church in his providential care, so that the church must suffer for righteousness' sake, lose her possessions, become nothing in the earth, and finally be killed by her enemies. Though the church is small, weak, and helpless, she has a living Lord who rules over her in his grace and over the wicked with a rod of iron. That rod of iron is Christ's dominion, authority, and sheer power over the creation, Satan and his hosts, wicked men, and the whole world. Christ's dominion over the world stands in service of his rule of grace over his church.

How agitated and disquieted we can become when things seem to be going all wrong for the church. We would like our circumstances to be different, but instead we are plagued by our enemies. But the whole world is in God's hand, and he upholds, directs, and governs all things. He is the one who made the heavens and the earth. He works all things in this earth for the salvation of his church. He is in the heavens, and he does whatsoever he pleases. In his omnipotent power, he carries out his eternal purpose.

The church fell into a cunning trap laid by ungodly and wicked men. She was ensnared, and it seemed that she was doomed to destruction. Her cause appeared hopeless in the world. She had no power against the seemingly inexhaustible resources and power of men. God came and simply broke their trap in one fell swoop. And he spoke, "No, I will still have my church here, and I will still have my gospel preached. I have more yet who must be gathered in." The measures concocted by wicked men were broken. Their schemes were confounded. Their devices were disappointed. The Lord laughs them to scorn and holds them in derision. The Lord is for us, and so we sing with the psalmist:

1. Now Israel may say, and that in truth,
   If that the Lord had not our right maintained,
   If that the Lord had not with us remained,
   When cruel men against us rose to strive,
   We surely had been swallowed up alive.

2. Yea, when their wrath against us fiercely rose,
   The swelling tide had o'er us spread its wave,
   The raging stream had then become our grave,
   The surging flood, in proudly swelling roll,
   Most surely then had overwhelmed our soul.

3. Blest be the Lord Who made us not their prey;
   As from the snare a bird escapeth free,
   Their net is rent and so escaped are we;
   Our only help is in Jehovah's Name,
   Who made the earth and all the heavenly
   frame.[1]

The church can do nothing but praise God for his deliverance and salvation. Notice in Psalm 124:8 that it is not just *my* help. He is my help; he is your help. But he is "our" help. The church is speaking with one voice and in one triumphant song of praise.

By "help" the Lord shows his beloved church that salvation is not of her. Her deliverance from her enemies is not in her power. And even when the world persecutes and kills the church, nothing can take her out of Christ. He powerfully will preserve his church into eternal glory. His stretched-out arm and almighty hand have gotten him the victory. The church is protected under the almighty, sovereign care of the triune God. We then fearlessly will proclaim the truth and despise all the stratagems and plots of Satan and his host. Our help is in the name of Jehovah who made the heavens and the earth.

—TDO

1 No. 353:1–3, in *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and added Chorale Section*, reprinted and revised edition of the 1912 United Presbyterian *Psalter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1927; rev. ed. 1995).

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

SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD

In 1741 Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards preached the now-famous sermon titled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."[1] Whatever scholars have to say about the rest of Edwards' theology, the sermon is dreadful. Meant to awaken the unregenerate and unconverted sinners in his audience to be born again and to obtain salvation, Edwards evoked ghastly images of sinners who were exposed to God's wrath. He used phrases such as "God holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire" and "You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it."

The problem is not the descriptions of God's wrath and hell as such. Hell is a real place to where the reprobate will go when they die, and the scriptures describe it as everlasting punishment, the lake of fire, the place of torment, and where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched. And the reprobate live their entire lives on this earth under the crushing weight of the wrath and curse of God. In the preaching, reprobation should serve election, as the preaching is God's word of comfort to his elect church.

Edwards' emphasis throughout the sermon was that it is the sovereignty of God that holds a sinner in such a place and that the sinner can do nothing to induce God to spare him. Yet somehow the sinner in the audience "had an opportunity to obtain salvation," for "God stands ready to pity" him, and "Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open." For Edwards the way for a sinner to be saved from the wrath of God was to believe. Edwards said, "Till he [man] believes in Christ, God is under no manner of obligation to keep him a moment from eternal destruction" and "Let every one that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come." Man's act of faith was made to be the hinge upon which the favor of God turned.

The text for Edwards' sermon was Deuteronomy 32:35, along with multiple other scripture passages that he used to support his points. But had Edwards been a Reformed minister in a Reformed church in this day and age, he would have belonged to the pack of wolves who twist Lord's Day 31 to serve their purposes. Lord's Day 31 question and answer 84 reads as follows:

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

Reading question and answer 84 and comparing it to Edwards' sermon, it is not hard to see how a minister could corrupt this Lord's Day to attempt to coerce by fear men and women to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is exactly what a Reformed minister in a Reformed church did.

In 2023 Protestant Reformed minister Rev. Clayton Spronk preached a sermon to his congregation in Faith Protestant Reformed Church. The sermon was titled "Preaching, One Key of the Kingdom," and it was

1 Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/edwards_jonathan/Sermons/Sinners.cfm. Quotations from Edwards in the article are from this sermon.

based on Lord's Day 31 question and answer 84.[2] I do not remember how or why I first listened to this sermon over three years ago, but I know this: I did not forget it. The sermon is representative of the false doctrine that has arisen and taken hold in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

What do Jonathan Edwards' fire-and-brimstone tirade and Reverend Spronk's homily have in common? It is essentially this: There is that which man must do to be saved, and—contrary to prevailing Protestant Reformed theology—man is compelled to do it not by grace but out of fear of damnation. Both sermons teach a wrong view of how the sovereignty of God is exercised in the church and in the salvation of sinners.

I note at the outset that something is severely lacking in Spronk's sermon, and that is God. The sermon is not theocentric. Oh, Spronk mentioned the word *God* a handful of times throughout the sermon, but God is never the subject of any actions. God is only mentioned in phrases such as "we thank God" and "God forbid" and "Son of God." While Spronk spoke of Jesus Christ throughout the sermon—as the one who holds the keys of the kingdom and who is prophet, priest, and king in the church—he needed to ascend higher. The preacher must be a theologian because all doctrine falls under the one heading of *theology*. All things are of God, through God, and to God (Rom. 11:36). It is true that Christ is the chief officebearer in his church and that he holds the keys of the kingdom. Christ is the mediator of the covenant. He is the elect one. But that can be true only if there is first *God*. Without God in a sermon, there cannot be the decree; and without the decree there cannot be Christ; and without Christ there cannot be free and gracious salvation for ungodly sinners. In his decree God elected Christ, and in Christ God chose a body for Christ. In God's one decree of predestination, there are election and reprobation; there are those who are members of his kingdom and those who are not. His decree he unfolds in time, and according to that decree, he manifests the citizens of his kingdom. The lack of God in Spronk's sermon explains everything that is wrong about his sermon. And where there is a lack of God, something undoubtedly will fill that void, and that is man.

I note too that there are many true statements of fact throughout Spronk's sermon. There are even true statements regarding the gospel. No one ever accused a Protestant Reformed minister of not saying some true things. Sermons by Protestant Reformed ministers often are dogmatically correct. But the problem comes in when Protestant Reformed ministers cloak their false gospel in those true statements in order to deceive the hearts of the simple. They deceitfully use those true statements in the service of the lie to bring their hearers into the bondage of salvation by the willing and working of man.

Spronk formatted his sermon in the classic Reformed style of an art homily, making it easy to determine what the main point of his sermon was and what point he wanted to drive home. After Spronk gave his sermon divisions, anyone with a pair of Reformed antennae should have sensed the direction that the sermon was going. The three points of the sermon were "Christ and the Key," "The Preacher and the Key," and "The Hearer and the Key." And along with the third point, Spronk very carefully emphasized, "Take heed how you hear." By the end of the sermon, it became very clear that his message culminated in how *man* hears the preaching of the gospel. Everything in the sermon revolved around and served that point.

Throughout the sermon Spronk set forth a pressing question to his congregation:

> You need to think about this personally…What is Christ doing with his key to me this morning? Is he opening, and no man can shut? Or is he shutting, and no man can open?
>
> When Jesus, through the preaching, says it [the kingdom] is open or it is closed, beloved, you understand it's not just words. It's happening. He does what he says. Jesus Christ has real power, and you and I face the ultimate question of our lives under the preaching of the word. Right now, I have to have an answer to this question: Where am I in relation to the kingdom of heaven? Am I in, or am I out? Do you understand, beloved, the reality of this as the fundamental question that you must answer this morning?
>
> The question for you this morning is, how do I stand in relation to King Jesus? And am I with him in his kingdom? Or am I apart from him and shut out of his kingdom?

Spronk never said this explicitly in his sermon, but to be in the kingdom is a matter of justification. The Catechism points this out when it connects the opening and shutting of the kingdom of heaven with the forgiveness of sins. The question Spronk set before his congregation is really this: Are my sins forgiven? Am I justified? It is a fair question. The believer struggles the whole week long against his threefold enemy—the devil, the world, and

2 Clayton Spronk, "Preaching, One Key of the Kingdom," sermon preached in Faith Protestant Reformed Church on October 15, 2023, https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermons/1015231319124333. Quotations from Spronk in the article are from this sermon.

his own sinful flesh—and his sins rise up against him, and his conscience accuses him, "You have no part in the kingdom of God. You are too big of a sinner. You did not do enough good works. You were not sorry enough for your sins."

And the child of God comes to church on Sunday to hear the answer to that question, to be assured of his salvation and his justification, to hear Christ say to him, "Fear not. I have redeemed you, and I call you by your name. There is nothing left for you to do, for I have accomplished all your salvation and have forgiven all your sins. Rest in my finished and completed work."

The reason God's people believe in Jesus Christ and enter into the kingdom is not because Christ is so powerful and they are scared of what he will do to them if they do not believe and so they believe.

So the question is fair. I do need an answer to that ultimate and fundamental question! But I do not go to church to hear that question asked of me, over and over again. I am not the one who provides the answer to the question. Christ does. Christ is the one who, through the preaching of the gospel, answers that question. He comes in the power of the Spirit and declares to his people that all their sins are really forgiven them of God for the sake of Christ's merits, and his people receive that promise by a true faith. That is what I love about Reformed Protestant preaching. Reformed Protestant preaching is actually the most practical preaching in the entire world. And "practical" does not mean that the preaching tells God's people all the things that they need to do or how they need to order their lives, but the preaching gives them the comfort and assurance that they need to live out of day to day. True gospel preaching tells God's people that they are ungodly sinners and assures them that they have been redeemed by the blood of Christ and that they belong to him in both body and soul, both in life and in death. There is nothing more practical and personal than that.

But Spronk never answered the question for his congregation or told the members whether they were in the kingdom or not. Instead, he told them how to find the answer. And because the sermon was God-less, decree-less, and election-less, only one way remained: by man's activity. Sure, there was a lot of "Jesus this" and "Jesus that," but man's act of believing and man's hearing were made to be the hinges on which the door to the kingdom of heaven swings.

In the sermon there was no mention of faith as it is union with Jesus Christ. In the sermon faith was man's act of believing and man's act of hearing. This became apparent when Spronk explained the different soils in the parable of the sower. About the soils Spronk said, with emphasis:

> There are three different kinds of bad soils, three different kinds of people *who don't listen*. They don't listen…The good soil, the people who hear, they are those who believe.
>
> You and I must be careful how we hear the preaching of the gospel.

The four different soils, or hearers, in the parable really represent only two different soils: good soil and bad soil, which is split into three different sub-types. Our Reformed church fathers explained the differences between the good soil and the bad soil in the following way:

> Christ…notes…a…difference between those who believe only for a time and true believers, when He declares…that the former are without root, but that the latter have a firm root. (Canons of Dordt 5 rejection 7, *Confessions and Church Order*, 178)

> The fathers call attention to a…distinction between those represented by these two kinds of soil…There is a difference of root: temporary faith is without root, and true faith is characterized by a firm root.
>
> The seed of the Word is sown and sprouts and takes root, firm root, in the heart, from which are the issues of life. And that heart is a heart which is already in abiding connection with Christ and His life. Thus the true believer is firmly rooted in Christ.[3]

The difference is a root. The root is faith as it is union with Christ. The child of God who hears and receives the preaching of the gospel by faith and thus enters into the kingdom of heaven does so because he is united to Jesus Christ, not because he listened and carefully heard the preaching.

3 Homer C. Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers: An Exposition of the Canons of Dordrecht* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1980), 819, 822.

Later in the sermon, Spronk continued to accentuate the importance of man's hearing:

> The admonition to take heed how you hear is very important.
>
> Do you see how serious this is? Christ, the sovereign Lord, not only says this, but he's doing it. He's saying, "You who don't take heed how you hear, you won't hear. I'm shutting the gate and I'm turning the key and I'm locking you out." Take heed how you hear.

Normally when Protestant Reformed ministers preach about salvation and about how man obtains and experiences that salvation, they insist that by grace man performs all the activities that are required. God is sovereign, but man still has responsibility. God is sovereign, but man is not a stock and a block. God is sovereign, but man must still believe or repent or obey. And man's believing or repenting or obeying is done by grace. This grace is the Holy Spirit's empowering and enabling man to do these things, but man must do them. Spronk gave a nod to God's sovereign rule of grace in the hearts of his people by saying,

> Christ is sovereign in saving sinners and in damning the impenitent wicked. The key belongs to him. He opens and shuts, so we must not ever make this mistake: That woman believes; therefore she opened the kingdom…No. The whole point of this is to confess and find comfort in the sovereignty of Christ as king. And it comes down to this then, that when a man or a woman or a child believes, that person not only heard the testimony of the preaching "Believe in Jesus Christ, and you will be forgiven," but that person has also received the Holy Spirit of Christ.

But God's sovereign rule of grace by his Spirit in the hearts of his elect was not enough for Spronk. Does he not trust that God by his Spirit will accomplish through the preaching exactly what he has determined? Is Spronk afraid of the promise of the gospel that whosoever believes in the Lord Jesus Christ shall be saved? Does he not believe Lord's Day 21, that by his Spirit and word, Jesus Christ gathers, defends, and preserves to himself a church chosen to everlasting life? Spronk is in fact afraid of the gospel, and so he beat the old antinomian drum in order to strike fear into the hearts of his listeners too. He became very strident:

> You and I must be careful how we hear the preaching of the gospel. If anyone here this morning is saying, "Wait a minute. Christ holds the key. He's sovereign. He opens the kingdom, and he sovereignly brings people into the kingdom. He shuts the kingdom, and he sovereignly keeps people out of the kingdom. That means this has nothing to do with me, and this has nothing to do with how I hear. He's sovereign." Beloved, that's exactly backwards. It is so deadly serious how we hear exactly because he is the powerful, sovereign king.

To illustrate his point Spronk made an analogy comparing an earthly king to Jesus Christ:

> Can you imagine anyone saying, "There's a great, sovereign king; he is mighty in power; he is full of riches and wisdom and honor; and he has soldiers who can carry out his threats. Well, because that king is so sovereign and powerful, I'm not going to listen to him. It doesn't really matter if I listen to him." No one would ever say that, would they? They would say that it's exactly because of his sovereignty, his power, that I better be careful to heed this king. Because when he says "I can do good to you and bless you," he can do it, and he will. And when he says "I can also curse you and I can chop off your head," he can do it.
>
> Jesus is the sovereign, powerful king who means what he says. "You don't believe in me? You better take this seriously. I will shut you out of my Father's house, and I will send you to the place of outer darkness where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth forever. But believe in me, and I will open my Father's house to you and give you eternal life."

What Spronk said begs the question regarding to whom he is preaching. Like Jonathan Edwards, is Spronk preaching to a pack of unregenerates over whom the Lord Jesus Christ rules with a rod of iron and by his sheer power? Or is Spronk preaching to the blood-bought church of Christ? God is never angry with and never does he threaten his people like Spronk and Edwards did.[4]

4 Regarding the "threatenings" of Canons of Dordt 5.14, Homer Hoeksema wrote, "In a sense it may be said that God threatens His people. But this must be understood pedagogically. Paradoxically speaking, God threatens them in His grace, to warn them of the dire consequences of the way of sin and iniquity, to call them away from the darkness. In the sense that He is of bad intentions toward His people, or even means to frighten them into heaven by poising the whiplash of hell-fire over them, the Lord does not threaten His saints, however. Always His Word is a Word of grace to His own, and always He is graciously inclined toward His people, even in the so-called threatenings of the gospel. Attached to the exhortations and threatenings of the gospel, therefore, are also the abundant and precious promises of salvation for our encouragement and comfort" (Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers*, 763).

Oh, there is a serious command to all men to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And there is a word to the hypocrites in the church: Those who do not believe will perish in everlasting damnation. But to his people God promises! And in that promise he actually accomplishes all that he has promised. All those who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life.

The reason God's people believe in Jesus Christ and enter into the kingdom is not because Christ is so powerful and they are scared of what he will do to them if they do not believe and so they believe. The reason God's people believe is because in eternity God elected them and joined them by faith to Jesus Christ, the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world, and in time God brings them to the consciousness of that faith by the preaching of the gospel, so that they actually do believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and experience by faith the salvation that is theirs eternally. The elect are appointed to the belief of the truth (2 Thess. 2:13). As many as God ordained to eternal life believe, and as many as God did not ordain to eternal life believe not (Acts 13:48).

But Spronk tried to frighten the members of his congregation into believing. Believe in Jesus Christ, or else! You had better believe in Christ for fear of damnation. You do not want to go to hell, so you had better listen to Christ. It is not unlike Jonathan Edwards' tirade that God is dangling men like spiders over the pit of hell and is ready to burn them everlastingly lest they believe. In both sermons God's sovereignty was only a cudgel to intimidate men to believe.

What about the phrase in the Catechism "they stand exposed to the wrath of God and eternal condemnation, so long as they are unconverted"? That phrase forms what Spronk thinks is the basis for his threatenings, and Edwards too, had he been a Reformed minister preaching from the Catechism. It is not that a person sitting in the pew is not sure whether he is in the kingdom or out of the kingdom, and then the minister says, "If you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved. But if you do not believe, I will shut you out of my kingdom." Rather, that phrase is part of the twofold, antithetical testimony of the gospel. When the gospel comes to an elect child of God, he hears the good news of salvation that his sins are forgiven and that he has been brought into the kingdom of heaven. And when the gospel comes to the unconverted and unbelieving man, he hears the testimony that God is judging him, that his sins are bound to him, and that he is now perishing under the wrath of God. It is not that if a man is unbelieving, he had better take the preaching seriously, for Christ will throw him into hell if he does not believe; but it is a real testimony to the unbeliever that he is now being judged outside of Christ and is outside the kingdom of heaven.

This shows how salvation is completely out of the hands of man and how it rests solely in the sovereignty of God in his decree of election and reprobation. Question and answer 84 have to do with the call of the gospel. The question asks how the kingdom of heaven is opened and shut by the preaching of the gospel, and the answer describes the call of the gospel: Receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith, and your sins are really forgiven for the sake of Christ's merits. That makes salvation by man impossible because faith is not something that is in man's power.

> Salvation, therefore, in Jesus Christ is dependent on God. The heart of the gospel is election. When God says, "All who believe and repent in Jesus Christ shall be saved," he has just said, "I will save who I will save. I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy. And whom I will, I harden. And according to that testimony of the gospel, God judges.[5]

And so when Spronk concluded his sermon with the way for his congregation to determine the answer to that ultimate and fundamental question, all that can come from his call is damnation. There is no power to save in his call because there is no Christ. There is no power in his call because throughout the sermon the call to believe became what man had to do.

> If you are a sinner that can say this morning, "But I believe in Christ and I hear Christ," then this is the comfort for you this morning—and I'm not saying it, but Christ commands me to say it on his behalf—"You believe? My kingdom is open to you."

Over against this kind of dreadful preaching is the decretal gospel-preaching of the Reformed Protestant Churches, where every Sunday Christ comes to throw open wide the doors of the kingdom of heaven and to bring his people into that kingdom by faith, so that they consciously experience the blessedness of the forgiveness of their sins and know that everlasting righteousness and eternal life are theirs. In that preaching man is nothing and God's sovereignty is everything in the salvation of sinners. By means of this preaching, God's people know that they are ungodly sinners, and they are comforted by

5 Nathan J. Langerak, "The Keys of the Kingdom," sermon preached in Second Reformed Protestant Church on February 13, 2022, https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermons/21322167111892.

the truth that they and their salvation are in the hands of a sovereign and gracious God.

3. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ:
4. According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:
5. Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will,
6. To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.
7. In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace;
8. Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence;
9. Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself:
10. That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, even in him:
11. In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:
12. That we should be to the praise of his glory. (Eph. 1:3–12)

—Ally Ophoff

INSIGHTS

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

READING SCRIPTURE BY FAITH

Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin. —Romans 14:22–23

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. —Galatians 2:16

By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. —Ephesians 2:8

So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. —Romans 10:17

God's word to his church in the Bible was inspired and written by the Holy Spirit through men of faith. The words of scripture were Spirit-driven then and still are today. The Spirit is *the* powerful, unchanging, and eternal God, whose word has the unchanging and powerful effect that he eternally intended it to have. Because of this, scripture never can be read without a divine effect on its readers. Whether scripture is read by men whom God created to be eternally righteous in Christ or by men whom God created to be eternally wicked outside of Christ, scripture always will do what God has ordained it to do. Wicked, apostate men who hate God's sovereignty over them reject the true God of scripture and form to themselves (using God's own word!) a god of their own imaginations. In pride they reject God, twist his inspired word, and with it form

a god that pleases their flesh. Like the heathen, who know from the creation that there is a God, these wicked and apostate men make and then worship a god they want to serve instead of worshiping the only true God who reveals himself in scripture. In doing this men become gods to themselves, but the God of scripture will condemn them. These are men who follow the one who lied to Eve, saying, "Ye shall not surely die" if she ate of the tree. They do this by teaching men that the regenerated man is no longer totally depraved. But Adam and Eve *did* die, as God had said. They immediately died spiritually, so that their natures became totally depraved. Eventually they died physically too. All men died spiritually in their father Adam and inherited from him a totally depraved nature. All men will remain spiritually dead unless God gives to them Christ's own resurrection life by putting Christ's Spirit in their hearts, renewing them by regeneration. But this new spiritual life does not change the totally depraved nature that they have received from their father Adam.

Only those to whom God gives spiritual life have in themselves the light of the knowledge of God unto salvation. Only in this light can they understand spiritual things spiritually, so that they know the true God as their creator *and* as their savior. This life-gift may never be taken for granted by God's people. Only with the *mind of Christ* (faith's mind) dwelling in them can they read scripture and know God as their sovereign friend and heavenly Father. Christ's Spirit dwelling in them is what causes God's elect people to read and understand his word in the light and life of the knowledge of God, so that they are able to know who God is, who they are, and receive the comfort of salvation found in scripture. Without Christ they are spiritually dead. Spiritually dead people cannot know God savingly.

"The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14).

It is true that sometimes God sees fit to blind his elect people for a time, so that they live in sin and fall into spiritual slumber. He does this when he sends them strong delusions and causes them to be deceived by false teachers or to fall deeply into personal sins. Then sin so intoxicates them that they stagger through life for a while; they even may be convinced by their own lies that what they are doing is right and good. Sin is horrifying to see in fellow saints and in oneself when God suddenly exposes it. It is comforting to know that God always rescues his elect children! You can read about this in the fifth head of the Canons of Dordt.

This happened to members of the Reformed Protestant Churches during the years before the reformation of 2021. Protestant Reformed preachers began to teach that salvation is in the way of man's obedience. A foundation for this lie had been laid by many years of so-called practical preaching and teaching that focused on man's responsibility instead of on God's sovereignty in salvation. With this foundation laid it was easy for the devil to get men to teach and to believe that grace merely enables man to walk in the way of obedience, so that he can have the assurance of salvation. Little by little, God's people were brought to the point where they no longer could understand God's word correctly. They became distressed and could not find comfort in the preaching, but they did not understand why. Little by little, and without even realizing it was happening, their faith was being weakened by a poison from Satan himself. They became spiritually drunk, and they staggered in unbelief. In their carnality they could no longer understand spiritual things spiritually when they read God's word.

Then the Lord roared in the hearts of his people through the reformation of 2021: "I am a sovereign God!" This roar awakened them to all the lies they had been sitting under for so long. They studied, read writings of their forefathers, and listened to sermons. Christ's Spirit in their hearts confirmed that what their spiritual fathers had taught them in the past is certainly true. Christ's Spirit is a sovereign, powerful, irresistible, and efficacious force in his elect people! Grace is not something that men, by nature in Adam, have the ability to take hold of in order to *help* them to repent and obey! Man does not reach up to God. Oh, no! God comes down in his mercy and love to rescue his elect. Grace is God's irresistible power given to them by the gift of faith (Christ's indwelling Spirit). God's grace is not a mere enabling power. God will not share any of his glory. Any man who teaches or believes that Christ's Spirit is a mere enabling power shows that either God has caused him to fall into a damning doctrinal error for a time or that Christ's Spirit is not in him. Like full-blown Arminianism, this error subtly roots out Christ from salvation and puts man in control of it. The Spirit will not remain in a church that teaches this. When the Spirit of truth leaves a church, she becomes a false church.

God heard our sighing. He mercifully opened our eyes and turned us from the wicked doctrine that made us think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. The deceivers in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) are like the deceivers of Isaiah's day, about whom God spoke in Isaiah 28. God's people who were led astray by evil men in the years before the reformation of 2021 were like the deceived remnant in Isaiah's day referred to in Isaiah 29:1–3. For the sake of Christ and in love and

mercy, God saw the distress and heard the sighing of his people then and of us when we were still in the PRC. He heard them and he heard us as his "Ariel" (his Lion of the tribe of Judah). He heard them as his "Ariel" for the sake of his promise because Christ was in their loins. He hears us today as his "Ariel" because Christ's Spirit dwells in our hearts, and he will keep his people in his truth. Is it not amazing that the eternal God of heaven and earth hears our sinful sighing as the sighs of his beloved Son and his Spirit in us and through us? This is of God's mercy! It makes the hearts of his people spontaneously swell in thankfulness, for they know they are not worthy!

For Christ's sake, God sends judgments on both the deceived and the deceivers. But his judgments are always loving chastisement toward his "Jacob," so that in love for his people he turns them, opens their eyes and ears to the truth, and causes them to fear him from the heart. The fifth head of the Canons of Dordt teaches that God will always deliver his people from the dominion and slavery of sin, so long as they continue on this earth. This is because the Spirit of Christ in them is stronger than their sinful flesh. Sometimes by the righteous permission of God, saints fall into sin, for example the lamentable falls of David, Peter, and other saints in scripture (article 4).

> By such enormous sins…they very highly offend God, incur a deadly guilt, grieve the Holy Spirit, interrupt the exercise of faith, very grievously wound their consciences, and sometimes lose the sense of God's favor for a time, until, on their returning into the right way of serious repentance, the light of God's fatherly countenance again shines upon them. (article 5)

> But God, who is rich in mercy…does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from His own people, even in their melancholy falls; nor suffers them to proceed so far as to lose the grace of adoption and forfeit the state of justification, or to commit the sin unto death; nor does He permit them to be totally deserted, and to plunge themselves into everlasting destruction. (article 6)

Article 7 tells us this is because God

> preserves in them the incorruptible seed of regeneration from perishing…and…by His Word and Spirit certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator, may again experience the favor of a reconciled God, through faith adore his mercies, and henceforward more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 174)

About his "Jacob" God says,

> 22. Jacob shall not now be ashamed, neither shall his face now wax pale.
> 23. But when he seeth his children, the work of mine hands, in the midst of him, they shall sanctify my name, and sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and shall fear the God of Israel.
> 24. They also that erred in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine. (Isa. 29:22–24)

These beautiful, comforting words of mercy and grace were not God's words only to the deceivers of Isaiah's day; nor are they his words only to the deceivers in the PRC today. God's judgment of wrath fell on both of them. Israel was taken captive by Assyria, and God's righteous judgment is now falling on the PRC. Gradually, the PRC tried to destroy God's beloved with lies. Now God is using her own deceptions to unite her with the kingdom of antichrist, who will sit in the temple of God and claim to be God. God's judgments are always fitting and just—and sometimes ironic.

These two different outcomes between the wheat and the chaff are not without cause. They are the result of God's sovereignty over man's eternal destiny. He gives his Spirit (grace) to his elect people in order to draw them into his covenantal life. He does not give his Spirit (grace) to the reprobate so that their own lies bring them to eternal destruction with Satan in hell.

Faith is God's gift of the Spirit of Christ who dwells in the hearts of his people. Romans 14:23 says, "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." Without Christ's indwelling Spirit, no man has faith. Even the activity of reading the scriptures is sin and works condemnation in faithless people. They cannot discern God's truths in a way that causes them to fall down before him in humble adoration. God is a Spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in (Christ's) Spirit and in (Christ's) truth. No matter how much biblical knowledge men acquire, God's salvation cannot be experienced without Christ's life in them. They cannot know him in love, and they cannot worship a God whom they do not know. They can see him in creation and know that he exists, but unless God joins them to Christ and savingly reveals himself to them by his Spirit and Word, they cannot worship him. They are not only outside God's covenant by God's eternal decree, but by this same decree they are also used by God and then destroyed as chaff after serving his purposes.

"What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction?" (Rom. 9:22).

There are only two kinds of men who have ever lived in this world: those who are united to Christ by faith

and are righteous in God's eyes, and those who are not united to Christ by faith and are unrighteous in God's eyes. Because there are only two kinds of men on earth, there are only two ways in which men can read God's word. The righteous read scripture with the mind of Christ dwelling in them. With Christ's mind they see Christ's work of salvation for them in every passage they read. The unrighteous read scripture with their own carnal understanding, and then they claim their own activities of repenting and believing as coverings for their sins. In their carnality they read a passage of scripture and see only what they must do for salvation. About these men God says, "Woe to the rebellious children, saith the LORD, that take counsel, but not of me; and that cover with a covering, but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin" (Isa. 30:1).

God's word has its intended effect on these two kinds of readers. Christ draws the one into blessed spiritual fellowship with himself, lifting their souls into heavenly places. The other is left on earth in himself and outside of Christ.

Reading scripture with the understanding that Christ's indwelling Spirit gives feeds a soul with the spiritual, life-giving body and blood of Christ and unites a man more and more to his Lord. Reading with man's own understanding feeds a soul with poison and brings him deeper into the bondage of sin, farther and farther away from his maker.

Let us examine Psalm 1 with these two kinds of readers in mind.

1. Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.
2. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.
3. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.
4. The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.
5. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.
6. For the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish.

The psalmist states facts about a righteous man and an ungodly (unrighteous) man. Because of God's eternal decree of election and reprobation, it is true that God will always bless the righteous and will always curse the ungodly. The righteous man in this text is Christ and all who have been united eternally to him by the gift of true faith. The ungodly are those whom God eternally ordained to be outside of Christ.

How can God say that his elect people are righteous? God is the Holy One who hates sin. Even the righteous on earth are terrible sinners, ungodly in their human natures. Is it really true that these righteous men never walk in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of the scornful? Do they always delight in the law of the Lord and meditate day and night on that law? These people are still totally depraved in their fleshly bodies; therefore sin still clings to everything they do. By nature they certainly do walk in the counsel of the ungodly, stand in the way of sinners, and sit in the seat of the scornful. And they do not meditate day and night on God's law.

How can the God of truth say these lovely things about the righteous in this psalm? The elect child of God answers these questions in the joy and confidence of faith. He reads these verses and understands that he is a member of Christ's body and says to himself, "The righteous in this psalm is first and foremost Christ and then me, only because I am united to Christ. I belong to him. I am a part of him. Because he is the righteous man of the psalm, I am also righteous. Because I have been given a new spiritual life in Christ, my true identity is in him, not in the sinful human nature I inherited from my father Adam. Only as I am found by God in Christ am I righteous and blessed."

God's people remember their doctrine when they read a psalm like this. They know that God sees his chosen, elect people as righteous because he imputed Christ's own righteousness to them. He calls them righteous because they are *in* Christ. They know that God only sees Christ when he looks at them, and he never looks at them apart from Christ. Because of this, God will always and only bless them. Their sins and sinful natures cannot change God's thoughts toward them. They were so perfectly united to their savior, even before they were born, that already at his cross the debt for all their sins was paid and his righteousness became theirs. They are so thoroughly united to their savior that God sees them as bone of Christ's bone and flesh of Christ's flesh. He is their head, and they are members of his blessed body.

Besides this, Christ's Spirit powerfully makes their carnal and stubborn wills subject to his good and perfect will. God does this by putting Christ's Spirit in their hearts, thereby writing his law in their inmost beings. He causes them to hate their own fleshly desires and to conform to

his perfect will. Even though they sin in everything they do, God sees his own work in and through them and blesses them for the sake of his own work.

The truth of total depravity causes God's people humbly to admit that by nature they cannot and do not keep God's law as the Lord demands. They trust that God will chastise them when necessary and that their sins cannot hinder God's love for them. They know that because of the gift of faith, Christ's perfect righteousness belongs to them. This is the only reason they prosper. This is why they are like trees planted by the riverside. Christ's Spirit in them is like a well of living water giving heavenly life and eternal prosperity, so that out of their bellies flow rivers of living water (John 7:38–39). This is the only kind of prosperity that matters to them. Knowing that their lives are hidden in Christ, they give all praise and honor to God for the good works God gave them to do in this life, taking nothing for themselves. What peace they have while living as pilgrims and strangers on life's journey!

The doctrine of election teaches God's people that apart from Christ they would be the chaff that the wind blows away. The wind here is the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit uses and tolerates chaff in his church for a time. He tolerates the chaff for the sake of his elect kernel and the advancement of his truth. When his purpose with these men is fulfilled, he blows them out of the church so that his church can go forward in truth, unburdened by their hypocritical presence. The righteous rest comfortably in faith's knowledge that they are not chaff because they are united to the elect kernel, Jesus Christ. Even though they know that they sin in everything they do, they know God has already mercifully punished Christ for their sins and imputed Christ's perfect righteousness to them. Jesus perfectly kept the law for them, so that they are free from the bondage of keeping the law in order to have God's approval. God's law is the delight of their hearts; in thankfulness the desire of their hearts is to serve and praise the God of their salvation.

Believers rest in God's sovereignty as the potter over the clay. They do not question God's justice in this. They shut their mouths before him, honoring the potter. Neither do they judge the eternal destinies of other men when they see them walking in unbelief, for that is not their business; it is God's. Rather, believers fall down in humble adoration and worship, adoring the Lord's abundant mercy toward them, giving all honor and glory to Christ in whom they dwell. God is now not only their maker but also their Father for Christ's sake. Because of this union, God knows them and their way in Christ as the way ordained from eternity. What comfort is theirs!

Now let us consider how a man with a false faith necessarily will read scripture—that is, with his own understanding instead of with the mind of Christ dwelling in him. This is of the Lord, who purposely did not give to that man the Spirit of illumination, so that when he reads the Bible, he is driven even deeper into the sin of his doctrinal error. When this man reads Psalm 1, he also remembers the doctrine that came off his pulpit; thus he reads it with himself in view. He thinks of his own activities of believing and repenting and the good things he has done for his church, his god, and for other men. And he says to himself, "That is me. I am the righteous person of whom God speaks. I am righteous because by grace I try to do what God's word says so that God will bless me. I try not to walk in the counsel of the ungodly. I try not to stand in the way of sinners nor to sit in the seat of the scornful. I try to delight in the law of the Lord. I meditate on his law every morning and evening, sometimes even more often so that I am able to serve God better. I try to do all these things by the grace that enables me. Because of this, I am like a tree planted by the rivers of water. I prosper because I take hold of grace, and by that grace I am strong to do what is necessary to get the blessing of the assurance of salvation from God. By that grace I am a member in good standing in my church, and I am determined to work diligently in God's kingdom the best way that I can. I am not someone who causes others to sin. I do not cause trouble or burden anyone in church by sinning against them. I go to church every Sunday, support my family, and try to do what is good and right every day. By grace I want to be like a fruitful tree in God's kingdom. I am not now and do not ever want to be like the chaff that God does not need. Yes, with God's helping grace, I am able to do good. And when I do sin, I repent and try to do better. Because I do these things by grace, God shows that he loves me by blessing me with the assurance of salvation."

This is how some read scripture because it is how the preaching they receive teaches them to think. Some believers still may be subconsciously reading scripture this way and do not see the horror of it. Some may completely deny that they do this. My prayer is that this article will make them think about the effect of man-centered preaching on their hearts and on the hearts of their children who sit with them in the pews. But even if they say that they do not read scripture this way, by their church membership they are responsible for what comes off their pulpits and for what their ministers are teaching to their children and grandchildren. People who read scripture this way do not know who they are by nature. They do not think about faith as union with Christ and Christ's righteousness

imputed to them as their own righteousness because those truths are not impressed upon their hearts by the preaching they receive. Instead, they are taught about the necessity of their own obedience for righteousness. They are taught to believe that they are righteous because Jesus paid for all their sins; but only in the way of their repentance, believing, and walking in the way of obedience (by grace, of course) will they receive the assurance of salvation. They are not taught about their assurance coming by the power of gospel preaching and Christ's indwelling Spirit! They know that they sin, but God forgives the sins of those who repent and believe in Jesus, and they did that, so all is well with their souls. Subconsciously they might worry about repenting enough, but the thought is easily brushed aside if what they hear on Sunday rarely focuses on God's holiness and hatred of sin and dwells on what man is able to do by grace. It seems that they have a god who is like a good man who will pay them for the good that they do.

Do these people really think that they perfectly have kept God's law? What if their activities of repenting and believing are not good enough? Do they really believe that union with Christ is through their activities? If it is through their activities, how do they receive the new spiritual life necessary to even know about God's grace, so that they are able to believe? God's grace is a spiritual thing; it takes the spiritual life of Christ even to know about grace and to see it. What makes them think that grace is something men are able to reach up and grab, instead of a power that is sovereignly and irresistibly conferred on those of God's choosing? A grace that is available and that enables men to believe, so that they can experience salvation, sounds eerily similar to the grace that was taught before the reformations of 1924 and 1953. What righteousness will these men cling to when they stand before God in judgment? Will they have the audacity to claim their own activities of believing before the thrice-holy God who made them? Unless these men are brought to repentance, they live in a terrible delusion. They will be horrified in the day of Christ's return.

Why do people read the Bible? What is their goal in doing this? What draws them?

Reading scripture in order to learn the way of obedience in order to experience salvation is to read scripture with your own understanding instead of the mind of Christ. Reading scripture this way causes men to commit spiritual adultery. This is why the PRC's teachings that faith is both union to Christ *and* man's activity (not God's) and that assurance of salvation is in the way of obedience are teachings that make her the whore of Babylon. These teachings take men out of the spiritual marriage bed with Christ and put them into a bed with a god of man's imagination, *instead of* the God of scripture. These Protestant Reformed doctrines cause Protestant Reformed members to read scripture in a way that makes them look to themselves for righteousness *unto* salvation instead of to Christ's perfect righteousness imputed to them by faith's union.

God's people read scripture because Christ's Spirit in them draws them. He makes them yearn for fellowship with their Lord and savior. Absorbed in the word they find a quietness that cannot be found on earth. They are brought into sweet communion with their savior, Jesus Christ, where they find rest for their weary souls; comfort in the sorrows of life; strength to fight against their sin, Satan, and the wicked world around them; and to experience the joy and hope of their salvation. They read scripture to hear Christ's word to them and to experience fellowship with Jesus Christ, the one who is wisdom, beauty, and mercy and the one who saved them by grace alone.

Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly. Vindicate thyself and thy people against all the ungodliness of men.

1. In sweet communion, Lord, with Thee
   I constantly abide;
   My hand Thou holdest in Thy own
   To keep me near Thy side.

2. Thy counsel through my earthly way
   Shall guide me and control,
   And then to glory afterward
   Thou wilt receive my soul.

3. Whom have I, Lord, in heaven but Thee,
   To Whom my thoughts aspire?
   And, having Thee, on earth is nought
   That I can yet desire.

4. Though flesh and heart should faint and fail,
   The Lord will ever be
   The strength and portion of my heart,
   My God eternally.

5. To live apart from God is death,
   'Tis good His face to seek;
   My refuge is the living God,
   His praise I long to speak.[1]

—Mary Lou Vermeer

1 No. 203:1–5, in *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and added Chorale Section*, reprinted and revised edition of the 1912 United Presbyterian *Psalter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1927; rev. ed. 1995).

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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL

As Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith. But they shall proceed no further: for their folly shall be manifest unto all men, as theirs also was. —2 Timothy 3:8–9

Jannes and Jambres!

From what source Paul learned the names of these men, we do not know. The tradition of the Jewish church maintains that they were sons of Balaam and that like him they were destroyed for their opposition to Moses and his messenger Aaron. The Holy Spirit, the author of scripture, wanted the names Jannes and Jambres recorded as an example for the church.

Their names mean *he who opposes* and *he who causes rebellion*!

Ministers of Satan they were. Satan is the original rebel and opposer of Christ and his church. Throughout the old and new dispensations, Satan continuously has raised up his ministers to oppose and to cause rebellion against the gospel of Christ. These two men stand as the representatives and spiritual fathers of all those throughout the history of the new dispensation who will arise to withstand the gospel of Christ.

These evil men and seducers were the leaders of Pharaoh's magicians who withstood Moses. Moses' message was that Israel was God's Son and that Pharaoh must let him go. It was a message of grace and salvation and of the sovereignty of God. Over against that message Pharaoh demanded that Moses and Aaron show a sign for themselves; so Aaron cast his rod to the ground, and it became a serpent. Pharaoh called for Jannes and Jambres and their cohort of magicians and sorcerers, and they cast their rods on the ground, and the rods became serpents too. But Aaron's serpent swallowed up all their serpents. And God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Likewise, when Moses turned the river of Egypt to blood, Pharaoh's magicians turned water to blood. And when Moses brought up frogs upon the land, Jannes and Jambres also brought up frogs on the land.

Folly! With all their sorcery and magic, they only could increase the misery of Egypt, adding blood to blood and frogs to frogs! In the sovereignty of God, they were instruments of Satan so that God would harden Pharaoh's heart in order that God might show his power in Pharaoh. Soon the impotence of these magicians became clear when they tried to mimic Moses' work to cover the land of Egypt with lice. Then they had to admit that the lice were the finger of God.

Just as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do those false teachers who arise in the new dispensation resist the truth. They are men of corrupt minds and reprobate concerning the faith, evil men and seducers who wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.

But they will proceed no further! They will have their work for a time. Many will fall prey to their deceptions and seductions according to the sovereign purpose of God. But evil men cannot hinder the victorious progress of the gospel of Christ. Their insane and foolish opposition to God and to his Christ will be made manifest to all—even to their followers—even as the folly of Jannes and Jambres was made evident in Egypt when all they could do was add to the misery of Egypt, and finally they were forced to admit that God was against them.

Then the minister of the gospel and the true church of Christ never must be surprised when they are opposed by such men. And they must know that those men in all their ineffectual opposition will never hinder the truth, but they must serve the truth.

—NJL