

Editor's Notes

The Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary is pleased to issue our November 2021 *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*. In this issue, our readers will find three articles that are devoted to the subject of sanctification. The articles by Revs. Steven Key, Matthew Kortus, and Joshua Engelsma were originally speeches presented at an officebearers' conference of Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches in September of this year. The students and faculty of the seminary were privileged to attend the conference. It was our judgment that the speeches deserved a wider audience than the attendees of the conference. We were glad that the speakers were willing to comply with our request that they submit their speeches in manuscript form for publication in the *PRTJ*.

The speeches address a recent controversy in the PRCA and set forth the biblical, confessionally Reformed doctrine of sanctification. Although not every aspect of the doctrine could be addressed, the three speeches summarize and defend three very important aspects of the doctrine. We trust our readers will profit from the speeches now published in written form.

Prof. Douglas Kuiper begins a series of articles tracing the history of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary. This series coincides with the upcoming celebration of the centennial of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (1925-2025). The title of the series is, “‘Committing the Truth to Faithful Men’: A Centennial History of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary.”

This first article traces the humble beginnings of the PRTS, especially under the leadership of Herman Hoeksema and George M. Ophoff. Prof. Kuiper demonstrates that from the beginning of their existence the PRCA was committed to a trained clergy and the training of PRCA ministers by those who were already PRCA ministers—experienced ministers training future ministers. As the article demonstrates, the history of PRTS was from the beginning fraught with difficulty and even controversy. But through it all, God blessed the humble beginnings of the seminary.

It is hoped that this series of articles inspires the members of the PRCA and our friends and supporters with a renewed appreciation for what the Lord has given us in our precious seminary. The series also demonstrates that the seminary stands today exactly where it has always stood. And it is our resolve in the years to come, by the grace of God, to continue to stand where we have always stood. This is a period of transition in the seminary. A new generation of professors is taking the place of a generation that is in the process of retiring. May God keep the new faculty faithful to the heritage that has been handed down by those who have gone before.

Our newest faculty member, Prof. Cory Griess, shares with our readers the only letter that John Calvin wrote to his senior Reformer, Martin Luther. As a matter of fact, the letter was never delivered to Luther by his junior co-worker, Philip Melanchthon, to whom Calvin sent the letter. What Melanchthon did with the letter is not known, except that he never shared it with Luther. Prof. Griess draws from the letter important insights into the attitude and character of John Calvin.

Although our book review section is somewhat slender in this issue, we trust that our readers will profit from the reviews that are included.

These are the last “Editor’s Notes” that I will be writing. After nearly fifteen years as the editor of *PRTJ*, I am stepping down. The faculty has appointed Prof. Kuiper to succeed me. I am sure that he will continue the good tradition of doctrinally sound and scholarly articles that our readers have come to expect.

Soli Deo Gloria!
Ronald L. Cammenga

The Spirit of Freedom¹

Steven Key

The doctrine of sanctification is a very important subject, especially given the recent history of the Protestant Reformed Churches and the ongoing effects of the schism that has taken place and continues to affect our churches. The doctrine is worth healthy discussion. In seminary, Professor Herman Hanko told us it was his conviction that soteriology is the most difficult locus of Reformed Dogmatics. It certainly was the locus that stimulated the most discussion and questions, not only in dogmatics class with Professor Homer Hoeksema, but in exegesis and other classes as well with Professor Hanko.

Given some of the confusion in the churches over various aspects of soteriology, we do well to spend time studying the doctrine and discussing it. I hope that healthy *discussion* is not lost to us. I have concern that with the controversy we have faced the past few years, we have learned too quickly to dig in our heels, to refuse to listen, and to become overly defensive. That hinders careful discussion. We face personal attacks today. We are called heretics, vipers, whores, and who knows what else. Our natural reaction in the face of such attacks is to flinch and to attempt to protect ourselves, or to respond in ways that are inappropriate. We still have our own sinful natures to fight. But we need to search God's Word and respond appropriately when faced with error in the doctrines of the Word of God.

I have often referred to the Reformed faith, and more particularly the Reformed faith as set forth historically in our own churches, as the most balanced biblical perspective. But if we view the pathway of truth as walking a balance beam, then Satan, the great deceiver, is always seeking to knock us off the balance beam. We face those threats always. We face them in our own churches, as Professor Barrett Gritters has recently demonstrated in the *Standard Bearer*.² Our

1 This article is the written version of a speech that Rev. Key gave at the Classis West Officebearers' Conference of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America on September 28, 2021, in Crete PRC (IL).

2 See the series of editorials that Prof. Barrett Gritters wrote in the November 2021

goal must be to maintain the beautiful balance of biblical Christianity, including the doctrine of sanctification.

The work of sanctification in the hearts of God's people is the blessed work of Christ's Spirit. In this article we note, particularly from Romans 8:2 but also from other verses in Romans 8, that Christ's Spirit is the Spirit of freedom.

In Romans 8 the inspired apostle sets forth the beautiful truth of the assurance of salvation as it runs from our justification through our glorification, as seen in Romans 8:29-39. The fundamental and comforting proposition of the Christian life is set forth in the very first verse: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." Even though our consciences accuse us and clamor for our condemnation, the sovereign Judge, the perfectly holy and righteous God, proclaims over us, "No condemnation!" The only basis for that declaration is that we are *in Christ Jesus*, "Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God" (Rom. 3:25). Not only has Christ's perfect righteousness been imputed to us, but by His Spirit He has taken us into His own life, evidenced in the fact that we walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

The apostle continues his development of that theme in the verses that follow. That is indicated by the connecting word "for" at the beginning of verse 2. We who expound the Scriptures understand the importance of those little words called *conjunctions*. The word "for" indicates that what follows is a reason, an explanation, for what has just been expressed. So we have to consider carefully what is the connection between verse 2 and what the apostle has set forth in verse 1. To fail to explain this in its proper context has led to serious errors.

I will not take the time to consider all the various erroneous interpretations that have been given this passage. Many of them are variations of this error: we are no longer under condemnation because the Holy Spirit has delivered us from that law of sin and death. He has given us the ability to walk in faithful obedience to God, and on

Standard Bearer from March 1, 2021 to September 1, 2021. In particular, note the editorial entitled "Schism: Doctrinal Issues," *Standard Bearer* (April 1, 2021), 293.

that basis we are no longer condemned. In other words, deliverance from our condemnation is the result of our being sanctified.

We may have nothing to do with this error in thinking. Nowhere in the Bible is the opposite of condemnation said to be sanctification. The opposite of condemnation is justification. And the basis for justification the apostle has repeatedly and clearly set forth as Christ alone and His perfect atonement. His righteousness is ours by faith alone. Sanctification is the fruit of justification, a necessary fruit, but a fruit that proceeds necessarily from our justification, our being in Christ Jesus. That is true because, as is evident in the last part of Romans 8:1, “no condemnation” not only means freedom from guilt and its consequences, but freedom also from the enslaving power of sin. The result of the Spirit of life in us is that we live in the consciousness of our justification, hearing the Word of God to us in Christ Jesus, “No condemnation.” By that Spirit we walk. We walk, not after the flesh, but after the Spirit!

So by this little conjunction “for,” the apostle is continuing the thought expressed in the last part of verse 1, which demonstrates the fruit of the blessed freedom that is ours in Christ Jesus, the fruit that flows from the knowledge of faith that seizes God’s Word as our own: “No condemnation!” Our justification is evident! That living faith that is mine comes to expression! I am living proof of God’s magnificent work, “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.”

With this we are ready to see that Christ’s Spirit is the Spirit of freedom. First, we will note the nature of that freedom; secondly, the accomplishment of that freedom; and finally, the purpose of that freedom.

The Nature of Our Spiritual Freedom

The freedom of which this text speaks is not the legal freedom that has already been proclaimed by the words “no condemnation,” and that marks our legal state, but the spiritual freedom that marks our lives.

We now live as those who are free. That does not imply that we are sinless. It does not contradict what the apostle confessed in Romans 7. Although being in Christ means that we are perfect in principle, that we have His holiness, we still live in this sinful flesh. Our old nature does not change, does not get better. We need God's forgiving grace every day. We need to hear in the preaching of the gospel that our sins are forgiven and that there is therefore now no condemnation for us who are in Christ Jesus. But we now have life that is in Christ Jesus, a life in which we are no longer in the bondage of sin and death. The freedom revealed in verse 2 is found in the life that is now ours. It is the freedom in which we delight in the law of God after the inward man, as Paul confessed in Romans 7:22, and in which we constantly strive to live to God's glory, no longer being a willing slave to sin.

In verse 2, that freedom is set forth by way of a stark contrast. The contrast is that of the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus over against the law of sin and death. Law stands in opposition to law. By the one we are freed from the other.

What are these two laws? Some say that the law of sin and death refers to the moral law of God. After all, the apostle had shown that the law always condemns us. The law exposes to us the misery of our sin and death. But this interpretation has a significant problem. In the first place, while it is true that *by* the law comes the knowledge of our sin (Rom. 3:20), the law of God is never referred to as "the law of sin and death." God's law is a law of righteousness. It teaches us the way that we should go. Secondly, verse 2 tells us that we have been *freed* from the law of sin and death. But while Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13), we are not freed from the moral law. That law continues to be binding upon us as the rule for our life of gratitude to the God of our salvation. So, as those redeemed by Christ, we *love* that law. We cannot, then, define this law of sin and death as God's moral law.

The apostle uses the term "law" here in the same sense that he used it in Romans 7:21-23, "I find then a law (notice, *a* law) that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in *the* law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to

the law of sin which is in my members.” When Paul speaks of *a* law, he is not speaking of a legal code of binding precepts, but is referring to a moral principle that directs us from within. In Romans 6:12, the apostle had written, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof.” That law of sin and death is that which controls the natural man. It is a law in the sense that we speak of the law of gravity: the law of gravity is not a moral code of precepts, but a power established by God that directs the falling tree to the ground.

Ever since the fall and the bondage of death came upon the human race, the person outside of Christ is directed in all his activities away from God and contrary to His revealed will. The sinner is so under the power of sin, that the law of sin moves him in the direction of everlasting death. The power of death so holds him (again, not death in terms of inactivity, but in terms of that developing and rotting decay) that his desires and thoughts, his actions and speech, are directed by that power that holds him in bondage. To make clear, because man’s created nature did not change in the fall, and he remains a willing, thinking, moral-rational creature, this law of which the apostle speaks does not force him against his will. It is not like the law of gravity that pulls me to the ground apart from my willing or desiring it if the ladder falls out from under me. The sinner is *willingly bound* to the law of sin and death. But from that law of sin and death I have been freed, says the apostle.

Another law has *usurped* that law of sin and death, namely, “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.” We have been radically changed from that time in which we were held in bondage. Paul puts it this way in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” We have been freed from the law of sin and death, liberated by the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. That life has to be understood as the opposite of death, indeed the victory over death. Because this law also speaks of that inward spiritual principle that directs our hearts, our minds, our wills, the direction of our life is now toward the living God. Christ is life. In Him we live. In Christ, that is, by faith in Him, we live our lives, loving Him, longing to do His will, seeking Him, serving Him in the very activity of our lives.

Yes, that love for Him, that serving Him, must still come to expression through our sinful human nature, the *flesh*, the old man. But that old man does not define us any more. Life in Christ is what defines us, what directs us.

The author of this life is the Spirit. That life is *in Christ Jesus*. Spiritual life, everlasting life, is only in Christ. That is why we must maintain a Christ-centered focus in our preaching, even when it comes to preaching the law and all the exhortations of the Word of God. A proper view of living the Christian life cannot be separated from Christ. But the emphasis in Romans 8 is on the Holy Spirit as the one who alone unites us to Christ. The Holy Spirit is sent by God into our hearts (Gal. 4:6), and unites us to Christ our Head in regeneration, establishes the bond of faith that is the gift of God. The Spirit of Christ works in us the knowledge of faith by which we know that we are in Christ Jesus. The Spirit applies to us all the benefits of the life that is in Christ Jesus, and so works in us both to will and to do God's good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13). By the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus we live! The Spirit, therefore, is the one who liberates us from sin and death, changing the direction of our thoughts, our desires, our hopes, and our outward deeds.

Remember that to be in bondage to the law of sin and death is to be dead in trespasses and sins. A man in bondage might be committed to reforming himself for his own sake. For example, a man in the bondage of prison serving time for a series of criminal acts might come to the realization that his life is being wasted behind the walls of prison. He might be committed to changing his behavior when he gets out. But he is still in prison. And when a man is a slave to sin and death, he cannot free himself. Such slavery, after all, is not merely physical slavery. It is spiritual bondage! Only the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus can give such freedom. Such is the wonder enabling us to confess, "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death."

That truth is especially drawn out by the inspired apostle in Romans 8:9-11, where he impresses on us the intimacy of the Spirit who dwells with the Father and the Son now dwelling in us. The Spirit's presence and power is manifest *in us*. The Spirit of Christ dwells in us unchangeably. He has taken up His residence in us in such a way

that we are identified by His dwelling in us, and no longer by the depravity of our sinful natures: “So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. . . . But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you” (vv. 8-9). His identity establishes the sovereignty of His work in us. He is not dependent upon us. He is not an intruder in the house, who forces His will and way upon us. He owns us! He sovereignly works in us both to will and to do. That is what it means to be in Christ Jesus and to be partaker of His life by the Spirit. That is our freedom too. Our freedom is to live as those who are in Christ Jesus, and therefore as those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. We can now say with Galatians 2:20, “I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” There is nothing like the freedom of having life in Christ Jesus!

Let us not forget, when it comes to the freedom that is ours who are united with Christ, that our life of freedom in Christ comes to expression in activity. Life always comes to expression in activity, in activity of the mind, first of all. We now mind the things of the Spirit (v. 5). In the words of Romans 12:2, we are now able to “prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” The Spirit also works in us in such a way that we now have an inner desire to walk in God’s precepts. We delight in them. We will the will of God. That is the Spirit’s work in us who are alive in Christ and, therefore, who are truly free. Not only do we desire to walk according to the will of God, but we actually walk in God’s ways. We walk after the Spirit, the apostle has said in verse 1 and again in verse 4. That is activity. That speaks to how we live in our homes, how we treat each other. It speaks to how we live in the workplace, as the Spirit gives us the understanding of the calling and privilege of the freedom Christ has given us to serve Him. The Spirit works in us both to will and to do God’s of good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).

The Canons of Dort, in the Heads Three and Four of Doctrine, Article 11, speaks of our spiritual freedom in terms of the Spirit pervading the inmost recesses of His elect in working true conversion. In doing so He “infuses new qualities into the will, which, though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree it may bring forth the fruits of good actions.”

The Accomplishment of That Freedom

Returning now to Romans 8, the accomplishment of that freedom is established in verse 3: “For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh.” Once again with the word “for,” the apostle is giving us the explanation of what he had just stated in verse 2. In doing so he is not setting forth anything new. The apostle is reaffirming what he had previously written in Romans 5:10, “For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.”

But the way in which he sets forth the truth here is very interesting. In the first place, he speaks of “the law.” The reference now is to the moral law of God. Think not merely of the Ten Commandments, but the whole demand of those Ten Commandments as set forth in the summary given us by Christ, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matt. 22:37).

Secondly, the apostle speaks of what that law could not do. The law could not do what Christ alone could do, namely, condemn sin in the flesh. To understand that, we have to realize that the apostle here, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, personifies sin and presents it as a tyrannical master. He does not refer to sin, therefore, as man’s activity; but he speaks of it as a spiritual, ethical power that rules over man.

If you were to take that last reference to sin in verse 3 as a reference to our sinful actions, then certainly the law condemns sin, because our sinful actions are the violation of the law and therefore stand condemned by the law. So again, in this last clause of verse 3 that speaks of God condemning sin and doing what the law could not do, sin is personified as a tyrant that held us in bondage. It ruled over us. And because of the fall it had the right to rule over us, and that by the sentence of God Himself. The wages of sin is death. The law could not free us. The law could not condemn that tyrant and break its rule over us. And why could not the law do that? Because the law can only demand. The law demands obedience, perfect obedience. The law demands that we love the Lord our God perfectly. That law also threatens with death all disobedience: “Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them” (Gal. 3:10). That is the law.

When the text says, moreover, that the law was “weak through the flesh,” it is acknowledging that our sinfulness rendered the law powerless to free us from the bondage of sin and the curse. That tyrant, sin, cannot be condemned by the law. The law cannot say to sin, “You have no right to rule over him, or over her.” The law can only say, “Sin, you have the right to rule over him, or over her. In the sinner’s relationship to me, he has demonstrated time and again that he has disobeyed God and offended Him beyond measure. Sin, you are right; whoever sins is a slave to you.” The law *could not* condemn sin in the flesh. So the law could only hold us in bondage. That is the devastating reality of our relationship to the law—until the Spirit freed us.

What the law could not do, *God* did. *God* condemned sin in the flesh. He did so by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin. Think of how amazing this is! What the law could not do, *God* did. What we could not possibly accomplish, salvation by the works of the law, *God* accomplished. *He* condemned sin. *He* rebuked her and deprived her of the right and power to rule.

Get the picture before your mind. Sin, as a person, stands before God the righteous Judge. It argues its case. It claims the right to its dominion over the human nature. It insists that humans, that you and I, are in its power, that we are its slaves and it is our master by right. And it carries the legal support it needs into that courtroom. It has in its hand God’s law. It appeals to that law. It appeals to the specific code that condemns to death, to spiritual bondage, the soul that sins. So it insists that God’s own law consigns the sinner to its dominion. Again, the law cannot deny that claim! The law, in fact, supports its claim. It exposes the sinfulness of the flesh. As the defendants in that courtroom, that is the devastating position in which we find ourselves, except for this: “There is therefore now no condemnation.”

But how? God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh! God issued the verdict that sin had no right to rule. He stripped her of her claim to dominion, and condemned her. The possibility of our sanctification was established in our justification. The possibility of our being made free was accomplished by Christ purchasing our freedom. He alone did what we could never do. The sinless, spotless Lamb of God, our

Lord Jesus Christ, took upon Himself our human nature, a human nature subject to all the effects of the fall and of sin. While remaining perfectly sinless and holy, He subjected Himself to the sorrow and grief, to the pain and suffering of our fallen human nature. He gave Himself to death. He did so *for sin*, not His own, but for your sin and mine. He satisfied the justice of God, living in perfect obedience even to the death of the cross. That is what it took for the power of sin to be broken, for the curse of the law to be abolished, for the dominion of sin to be destroyed. He took all the guilt of those given Him by the Father before the foundation of the world and blotted it out. That is the wonder of the atonement, of Christ's perfect satisfaction. And because our guilt has been removed, the power of sin has no right to rule over us any longer.

That spiritual freedom in Christ Jesus is ours by faith alone. That spiritual freedom is not ours by faith and works, but by faith alone. As the apostle has emphasized previously, our works contribute nothing to our spiritual freedom. Through faith alone we receive Christ and all His benefits. And that faith is not of ourselves. It is the gift of God, freely given by the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. But the text does not end here.

The Purpose of That Spiritual Freedom

Verse 4 calls our attention to the purpose of that spiritual freedom that Christ has given by His Spirit. God will see that spiritual freedom come to expression to the glory of His grace: "God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh." And now notice: "That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." The spiritual freedom God has given us in Christ Jesus and by the Holy Spirit is a freedom from the power of sin *that God might be glorified*.

We must maintain that God-centered focus in our perspective of the Christian life. The Christian life is a life of activity. Sanctification speaks of holy activity. The text speaks of walking. It uses that term to express all the activity of our lives. We walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. But, remember, the Spirit testifies of Christ. Jesus said in John 16:14, "He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you." To walk after the Spirit, therefore, is to

walk with a single eye upon the glory of our Redeemer and, therefore, the glory of God Himself and in thankfulness to Him.

How shall we glorify the God of our salvation? Only by living in harmony with and obeying His will. That is why the apostle uses the language that he does in verse 4. The purpose of His work of saving us and of freeing us from the law of sin and death, is “[t]hat the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.” This is a tremendously important concept for us to understand and embrace by faith.

Romans 8:4 is not speaking of our justification. The apostle has made a transition from setting forth the wonder of our justification in verse 1 to the blessed effects of our justification by the work of the Holy Spirit. The apostle is now speaking of the wonder of our sanctification. Justification was the great theme in the preceding chapters as brought to a conclusion in Romans 8:1. Now the truth of our sanctification will be developed, concluding in our glorification. Now the apostle speaks of the Christian life. When the apostle, therefore, says, “That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us,” we must not make the mistake of understanding the apostle to be saying, “That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled *for* us,” as if he is referring to the righteousness of the law fulfilled by our Lord Jesus when He died on the cross. We realize, as the apostle clearly set forth previously, that Christ in His work of reconciliation paid our debt and so fulfilled the law of God. It is that truth upon which is established the verdict “no condemnation” for us who are in Christ Jesus.

But the point here is that our Savior has not only established the righteousness of the law *for* us and in our place, but that He also fulfills the righteousness of the law *in* us. The Holy Spirit did not inspire Paul to write in verse 4, “That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled *for* us.” The Holy Spirit did not inspire Paul to write, “That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled *concerning* us or *with respect to* us.” There is another Greek term that could have been used to express that idea. But the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus gives us spiritual freedom “that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled *in* us.” This emphasizes that the wonder of salvation is not only that God changes our legal status by declaring us not guilty on the basis of the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ. But

He also changes us spiritually by giving us the life of Christ, a life by which we are made new creatures, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit.

Being one with Christ by the living bond of faith, all our life flows from Him, to the praise of the glory of God's grace. We now draw our life out of Him. As the Spirit works in us, we are enabled to fulfill the righteous demands of the law. We love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind. We desire to express our gratitude to Him, to glorify Him in all our activity: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death!"

Notice how carefully this truth is set forth in verse 4. The text does not say, "That we might fulfill the righteousness of the law." It says, "That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled *in us*." And when you ask the question, as you must, "*By whom* is the righteousness of the law fulfilled *in us*?" the answer is, "By God through the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus." God is the Author of our salvation from beginning to end. That is our assurance, too. The apostle will develop that thought later in the chapter, verses 29-31: "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. What shall we say then to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?" Again, God's purpose in our salvation is that we be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. God never abandons that work in us whom He has united to His dear Son by the living bond of faith. We draw our life out of Him. We bear the fruit of faith, walking not after the flesh but after the Spirit. Indeed, we bear that fruit consciously and willingly. That belongs to the activity of faith. But that we bear that fruit and receive the blessedness thereof is by the work of the Holy Spirit in us on the basis of Christ's righteousness.

Thus, in our whole life the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us, to the glory of God's grace. To be sure, we have only a small beginning of this new obedience. That is our confession because we know only too well that the sin that still dwells in our members, the

sinfulness of our natures, pollutes all our actions. The works of the law could never save us. But our spiritual freedom, and the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus who dwells in us, brings us to daily repentance, moves us to confess our sins before God, to fight against the sinfulness of our natures, and to live to God's glory. Salvation from beginning to end is in and through the Lord of glory, God's exalted Son, and ministered to us by His Holy Spirit. To God be all glory now and forever. ●

Be Ye Holy: The Doctrine of Sanctification from Leviticus¹

Matthew Kortus

The title of this journal article might strike the reader as rather odd. “The doctrine of sanctification from Leviticus? Why turn to Leviticus for instruction on sanctification? Why not turn to the book of Romans or some other book of the Bible?”

In response to such questions, I freely acknowledge that the book of Romans, especially chapters 6-8, have much to say regarding sanctification. However, I believe a strong case can be made that the book of Leviticus has as much to teach us about the doctrine of sanctification as any other book of the Bible.

For example, the word “holy” occurs more times in the Leviticus (94) than in any other book of the Bible (Isaiah is second with 56). In addition, the phrase, “Be ye holy, for I am holy,” is not original to the apostle Peter (1 Pet. 1:16), but comes from the book of Leviticus, where it occurs again and again (11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7, 26). Also, the so-called “Holiness Code”—that long list of ceremonial laws that governed the worship and life of the Old Testament Israelites—is found in the book of Leviticus. Finally, and most importantly, the book of Leviticus sets forth many fundamental aspects of the doctrine of sanctification, as this article intends to demonstrate. If someone wants to learn what the Bible teaches about sanctification, he can find all of the basics already in the third book of the Bible.

The goal and purpose of this article is to draw out eight points of instruction regarding sanctification from this important book. And now the reader understands the title: “Be Ye Holy: the Doctrine of Sanctification from the Book of Leviticus.”

Before getting into the specifics, it is worthwhile to remind ourselves of the place of this book in the Old Testament. The book of

1 This article is the written version of a speech that Rev. Kortus gave at the Classis West Officebearers’ Conference of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America on September 28, 2021, in Crete PRC (IL).

Exodus ends with the assembling of the tabernacle in the wilderness and the cloud of God's glory filling that tabernacle (Ex. 40:34). The book of Leviticus begins with God speaking from the tabernacle. Leviticus 1:1 reads: "And the LORD called unto Moses, and spake unto him out of the tabernacle of the congregation, saying..." This book, therefore, contains God's instruction for His covenant people among whom He would now dwell. More specifically, this book teaches us the possibility for an unholy people to live and fellowship with a holy God, and the manner of life in which they would enjoy that covenantal fellowship.

It is within that context that we find the repeated calling: "Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2). Importantly, the book of Leviticus does more than merely state this calling; it unfolds this calling, explaining what this looks like for God's people. Thus the book of Leviticus gives rich instruction regarding the doctrine of sanctification. Specifically, I call your attention to eight truths regarding the doctrine of sanctification contained in Leviticus.

1. The Reason and Necessity for Sanctification: God Is Holy

In Leviticus 11:44 we read, "For I am the LORD your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy." The word "for" in this verse indicates the reason for the calling to a life of holiness; namely, that Jehovah God is holy. This establishes the necessity of sanctification: God's own holiness.

So what does it mean that God is holy? The basic idea of being holy and of holiness is that of separation. To be holy is to be set apart in some way. This is the most basic meaning of both the Hebrew and Greek words translated as holy or holiness. Both קָדוֹשׁ and ἅγιος mean literally "separated" or "set apart." And Scripture everywhere emphasizes that God Himself is holy—set apart. This is true in at least two primary ways.

On the one hand, God's holiness is His transcendence above all else. God is holy in that there is none to whom we can liken Him; God has no equal (Isa. 40:25). God is in a class by Himself. In other words, He is set apart in the sense of being exalted above all as the God of heaven and earth.

On the other hand, God's holiness refers to His moral purity—the fact that is He separated from all sin and perfectly consecrated to Himself. Negatively, there is no sin or impurity in God. In fact, His eyes are too pure to behold evil or to look upon iniquity (Hab. 1:13). Positively, God is consecrated, devoted unto Himself. This is true not in some narcissistic manner but, as the Triune God, each of the three persons is devoted unto the others in a bond of love and peace. Our God is holy!

God's holiness is the starting point for the doctrine of sanctification; it explains the *necessity* of sanctification.

This is true in light of the fact that this holy God has established His covenant with us. In that connection, He now dwells in our midst and brings us into fellowship with Himself. For this very reason, we now have the calling to be holy, even as our God is holy. We are to be like Him: separated from all sin and devoted unto our God.

That God's holiness is the starting point for the doctrine of sanctification is true also because our sanctification is ultimately a matter of being restored more and more to the image of God. At regeneration, God recreates us in His image, which image includes not only knowledge and righteousness, but also, *holiness* (Eph. 4:24). In sanctification the Spirit of Christ is at work to conform us more and more to that image, so that we grow in holiness. From a spiritual point of view, we are made to look more and more like our God. Thus, to put it in the simplest terms, sanctification is God's work to make us holy, even as He Himself is holy.

2. The Place of Sanctification in Salvation

From a negative point of view, the book of Leviticus teaches us that a holy life is not what makes us right or acceptable to our God. In other words, a holy life is not the reason that we can enter into God's holy presence; it is not a condition for fellowship with God.

This is evident from the structure and layout of the book of Leviticus. Though this book emphasizes the calling to be holy, the book does not start there. Instead Leviticus begins with the offerings and sacrifices. The first seven chapters are devoted to the various offerings that the Israelites were to bring to the tabernacle. In starting here, the book teaches God's people that the only possibility for the holy God

of heaven to dwell in the midst of an unholy people is on the basis of the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. For the sacrifices point us to the atoning death of our Savior. His saving work is the basis on which God establishes His covenant with us. Only as those who have His redeeming blood sprinkled upon us may we enter into God's presence and enjoy covenantal fellowship with our God.

This was also the significance of the location of the altar of burnt offering at the tabernacle. The only way for a sinner to come into God's presence is in and through Jesus Christ, who was sacrificed on the altar of the cross for our sins.

All of this indicates that a life of holiness is not what makes us right or acceptable to God. We are made right with God in justification, on the basis of Christ's saving work. Subsequently, one of the great benefits of our justification is that we now have peace with God, and thus enjoy fellowship with Him.

Although a sanctified life is not what makes us right with our God, nevertheless, now from a positive point of view, sanctification is still an important part of our salvation. The book of Leviticus makes this clear in that it does not end with the sacrifices. The book teaches us more than the possibility of enjoying covenant life with God; it also teaches us the manner in which we are to live. For the book goes on to admonish us regarding our obligation as God's covenant people: namely, to live a life of holiness.

In harmony with this understanding of the importance of sanctification, John Calvin often spoke of the double benefit of grace, referring to salvation as including both justification and sanctification.² More specifically, Calvin, and the Reformed tradition with him, emphasized that these two benefits are distinct yet inseparable. They are distinct in the sense that we must not mix them together or confuse them in

2 In his *Institutes* 3:11.1, Calvin wrote: "Christ given to us by the kindness of God is apprehended and possessed by faith, by means of which we obtain in particular a twofold benefit." See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, transl. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983 reprint), 2:37. What Beveridge translates as "twofold benefit," Ford Lewis Battles translates as "double grace" (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:725. By this "double grace" Calvin refers to both justification and sanctification.

any way. Yet, they are inseparable in that we must never suppose we can have one without the other.

To help explain how justification and sanctification are distinct, yet inseparable, Calvin employed the illustration of the light and heat of the sun. He wrote, “But if the brightness of the sun cannot be separated from its heat, are we therefore to say, that the earth is warmed by light and illumined by heat? The sun by its heat quickens and fertilizes the earth; by its rays enlightens and illumines it. Here is a mutual and undivided connection, and yet reason itself prohibits us from transferring the peculiar properties of the one to the other.”³ Calvin’s point here is that the light and heat of the sun are distinct: the light of the sun illuminates the earth whereas the heat of the sun warms the earth. These two properties cannot be interchanged. Yet the light and the heat of the sun are inseparable; it is impossible to have the one without the other.

So too, justification and sanctification are distinct from each other. Justification concerns our legal status before God and addresses the guilt of sin, whereas sanctification concerns our spiritual-moral condition and addresses the pollution and power of sin. Justification is a complete and perfect act, so that there are no degrees of justification. In contrast, sanctification, at least in a certain sense, is an ongoing process. Justification is a matter of imputation: Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us by faith. Sanctification is a matter of infusion: the life of Christ is infused into our heart and we live out of that. These are a few ways in which justification and sanctification are distinct.

At the same time, justification and sanctification are inseparable. You can never have the one without the other. All those whom God justifies, He also sanctifies. This is true, on the one hand, because both of these benefits flow from our union with Jesus Christ and we receive both of them by faith. This is the instruction of 1 Corinthians 1:30, which teaches us that Christ is made unto us: wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption. As those united to Christ by the work of the Spirit, we receive both: righteousness and sanctification from Christ—never one without other.

On the other hand, these two blessings always go together because as those who are justified, we have every reason to live a life of sanc-

3 Calvin, *Institutes* (3.11.6), Beveridge, 2:42.

tification, namely, gratitude. For by means of the law, we recognize that we are a sinful and, therefore, unholy people. We deserve to be banished from God's presence—put outside the camp, to use a figure from Leviticus. What a wonder, therefore, that we have the blood of Jesus Christ sprinkled upon us and can now live in God's presence and enjoy fellowship with Him. Out of thankfulness for all this, we now want to serve our God. In other words, the Holy Spirit uses this knowledge to kindle in our hearts a desire to be holy even as the LORD our God is holy. For this reason, justification and sanctification are inseparable.

3. Sanctification Is God's Work, in Which We Are Made Active

In Leviticus 20:7-8 we read: "Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be ye holy: for I am the LORD your God. And ye shall keep my statutes, and do them: I am the LORD which sanctify you." Notice that in the span of two verses we read both, "sanctify yourselves," and, "I am the LORD which sanctify you." This striking juxtaposition raises the question: whose work is sanctification? The answer is that sanctification is God's work in which man is made active.

On the one hand, sanctification is God's work, as is evident from the phrase, "I am the LORD which sanctify you." God is the subject of sanctification. We are the objects of sanctification. God sanctifies. We are sanctified. This is His work. And that has to be the case because we are talking about an aspect of our salvation, all of which is of the LORD (Jonah 2:9).

On the other hand, in sanctification God makes us active, as is evident from the beginning of Lev. 20:7, which states, "sanctify yourselves." This is a striking calling, so much so that it almost sounds heretical to us. But yet this is God's Word to us. And the proper way to understand and explain this language is that in sanctification God makes us active.

But this raises the question: how does God's work of sanctification relate to our activity in sanctification? To answer that question, admittedly, we need the clarity of the New Testament, specifically, Philippians 2:12-13. There we read: "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.”

In harmony with Leviticus 20:8, this passage speaks of God works in us. This is a reference to the work of the Spirit of Christ that He performs within us. Specifically, the Spirit of Christ energizes us spiritually. In other words, the Spirit not only regenerates us, giving us new life, but also works in us, empowering us to will and to do that which is pleasing to God. Notably, this work of the Spirit within us is an ongoing work (present tense verb). It is not as though the Spirit gets us started and then withdraws. Rather, the Spirit works in us continually.⁴

At the same time, Philippians 2:12 also speaks of working out our own salvation, in harmony with Leviticus 20:7. Certainly this reference to working out our own salvation cannot mean that we work *for* our salvation. Nor is this passage teaching any sort of synergism: God does His part; we do our part. But the point is that God makes us active in a life of obedience.⁵

Having established that God works in us and that at the same time we work out our own salvation, the key question becomes: how is God’s work related to our activity? The answer of Scripture is that we work out of God’s work in us. In Philippians 2, we read, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. *For* it is God which worketh in you” (emphasis added). We could rightly translate these verses to read: work out your own salvation *because* it is God who is working in you. The idea is that we work out of the power of the work of God in us. He works in us the spiritual energy to work out our salvation.

On the one hand this means that all of our working depends on the Spirit’s work in us. Our work is the fruit of His work in us. We can do nothing apart from God’s grace and Spirit. His work is first. We work because God has worked in us.

4 For a fuller explanation of the work of the Spirit within us, confer the Canons of Dordt, 3-4.11. More specifically, compare what Articles 1 and 11 say about the mind, heart, and will of humans before the fall, after the fall, and after the Spirit’s work within us.

5 Confer Canons of Dordt, 3-4.12-13.

On the other hand, we still actively work. Notice that the text does not say that God works *for* us. There is a crucial difference between God working *in* us and God working *for* or *instead of* us. The latter is unbiblical. But rather, as the fruit of God's work in us, we become active. As rational-moral creatures we consciously and willingly live a life of obedience.

This is how we are to understand the juxtaposition of the phrases, "sanctify yourselves," and, "I am the LORD which sanctify you" in Leviticus 20:7-8. Sanctification is entirely God's work. In sanctifying us, God is at work in our hearts through His Spirit. Yet we sanctify ourselves—we work out our own salvation in the sense that we live a life of sanctification. This brings us to the fourth aspect of the doctrine of sanctification taught in the book of Leviticus.

4. Sanctification Is a Calling

All throughout the book of Leviticus, Jehovah God tells His people: "Be ye holy." This is an imperative, clearly indicating that sanctification is a calling.

To be clear, sanctification is first and foremost a work of God—an aspect of our salvation. In that connection, we recognize that in a certain sense sanctification is a principle. It is already true of us. This comes out in Leviticus 20:26, where we read, "And ye shall be holy unto me: for I the LORD am holy, and have severed [separated] you from other people, that ye should be mine." God had sanctified the nation of Israel in that they were set apart from every other nation. They were already holy. The same applies to us; we are sanctified in principle. For we have been given the new life of Jesus Christ. On account of our union with Him, we are dead to sin. There is a definitive sanctification that has already taken place so that we are holy.

At the same time, there is a sense in which sanctification is an ongoing work. This is an important part of the distinction between justification and sanctification. This also comes out in the exegesis of Philippians 2:13, specifically, that God's work in us through the Spirit of Christ is an ongoing work. God is ever at work to mold and to shape us, conforming us to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.

All of this is a reminder that sanctification is ultimately God's saving work. But if we stop there, we have not done justice to the

whole of God's revelation concerning sanctification. For sanctification is also a calling. God's Word, especially in the book of Leviticus, commands us: "Be ye holy!" But God does not stop with this general, overarching command. Instead, God gives to His people many specific commandments. This was especially true for the OT Israelites; much of Leviticus is comprised of the various laws by which God prescribed how His people were to live and to worship. This underscores the point that sanctification is a calling.

In emphasizing this calling, we certainly must avoid the danger of moralism, that is, of making the Christian religion entirely about being a better person. In other words, in emphasizing the calling of sanctification, we must never become guilty of stripping Christianity of the gospel and focusing solely on how we are supposed to live. In addition, we must avoid the danger of perfectionism, that is, of supposing that in this life we can reach the point that we live without sin. In other words, we must not imagine or leave the impression that on this side of heaven we could ever keep God's law perfectly.

Though we must bear these dangers in mind, nevertheless, Scripture clearly sets before us the calling to live a life of holiness. Therefore, this must be part of our theology and our preaching. As those who have been redeemed—delivered from both the guilt and power of sin—the law of God now serves as a map and guide. The law teaches us what a thankful life of obedience and service looks like. And now in the next few points of this article, we will consider this thankful life of sanctification more specifically.

5. The Positive Aspect of Sanctification: Consecration unto the LORD

The positive aspect of a holy life comes out especially from the whole burnt offering prescribed in Leviticus 1. Each of the various offerings set forth in the opening chapters of this book has its own unique emphasis and symbolism. The unique characteristic of the whole burnt offering was that the entire animal was placed upon the altar and burned. "And the priests, Aaron's sons, shall lay the parts, the head, and the fat, in order upon the wood that is on the fire which is upon the altar: But his inwards and his legs shall he wash in water: and the priest shall burn *all* on the altar, to be a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, of a sweet savor unto the LORD" (Leviticus 1:8-9,

emphasis added). When these verses make a distinction between the head and fat on the one hand and the inwards and legs on the other, the point is not that only that the head and fat were laid on the altar, but that the inwards and legs were not. Rather, the inwards and legs were washed first, before they too were placed on the altar. This makes the whole burnt offering distinct from the other offerings in which a portion was reserved for the priest, or even for the one bringing the offering. Placing the entirety of the animal on the altar served as a vivid picture of complete consecration to God. The animal was devoted entirely to the LORD.

Ultimately the whole burnt offering points us to Jesus Christ. He alone was fully and completely devoted to Jehovah God. His entire life was set apart unto the Father. Even in His suffering and death He was consecrated to God.

But the whole burnt offering also has application for the believer; namely, it sets before us the positive aspect of a life of sanctification. As God's covenant people, we are to present ourselves as such sacrifices to our God. This is the teaching of Romans 12:1: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." As those who are justified by faith, we are to present ourselves as sacrifices—we are to be devoted and consecrated to our God. This is the positive aspect of a life of sanctification.

The question becomes: is this true of us? Are we devoted to our covenant God? To such a question, our inner lawyer is quick to respond: "Of course, I am devoted to the Lord!" But before we quickly dismiss the question, we need to consider the significance of the whole burnt offering for our own lives. Are we giving the whole of our lives in devotion to our God? Or do we keep certain parts of our lives for ourselves? Sometimes we are guilty of holding back certain aspects of our lives. In our hearts, we think: "Okay, God, you can have all those other parts of my life, but do not touch this one part. I will devote all of the others to you, but let me hold on to this one thing." Such thinking is a temptation for us. But the positive calling of the book of Leviticus is that we present the whole of our lives as sacrifices to our God.

6. The Negative Aspect of Sanctification: Separation from Sin

From a negative point of view, the book of Leviticus teaches us that a life of sanctification is a life of separation from sin. The evidence for this comes especially from the long lists of laws regarding ceremonial cleanliness. Specifically, chapters 11-15 contain a number of laws establishing that which was clean and that which was unclean. For example, chapter 11 prescribed for the Israelites what animals they could and could not eat because God had determined certain ones to be clean and the others to be unclean. When we read these lists, we might wonder: what is the point of all this? Why would God be so restrictive? The answer is that in these ceremonial laws God was giving important instruction both about sin and holiness.

These laws concerning ceremonial cleanliness teach us, first of all, about sin. Specifically, they remind us of the defiling character of sin. The unclean things picture sin as spiritual and moral uncleanness. In other words, sin makes us spiritually dirty. Sin is disgusting and loathsome to God and, therefore, ought to be for us as well.

In addition, these ceremonial laws also point to the fact that sin so readily spreads. For example, chapter 15 addresses the uncleanness associated with bodily discharges. Again and again throughout the chapter, God's Word is that anything and everything that such discharges touch is to be considered unclean. The message is that sin contaminates.

In teaching us about sin, these laws regarding ceremonial cleanliness in turn teach us about sanctification; namely, that it includes separation from sin. As God's covenant people, we are to keep ourselves from all that is unclean. For us this does not mean that certain foods are inherently sinful or that we may not touch certain objects. As those living in the New Testament era, nothing is literally unclean for us. Nevertheless, the substance of these laws still applies because they point to the need to be set apart from that which is spiritually unclean and defiling.

Again, this raises the question: is this true of us? Do we avoid anything and everything that would make us unclean? The Israelites were told that they could not eat certain animals. What are we consuming? What are we taking in? I am not asking so much about what we take in through our mouths, although I suppose there is application in that

respect to drugs or alcohol. But what are we taking in through our eyes? What are we setting in front of them and consuming mentally? What are we watching? What about our ears? What are we taking in through them? To what are we listening? These are important questions in light of the instruction found in the book of Leviticus. We must recognize that certain things will make us spiritually dirty.

What then is our calling regarding sin? To draw from the book of Leviticus, the calling is this: Do not even touch it. That is the language of Leviticus 11:24, which says concerning unclean animals: “Whosoever toucheth the carcass of them shall be unclean until the even.” Notice that the instruction is not: Limit your exposure. Nor is the instruction: If you were in contact for more than thirty minutes, then you become unclean. But, rather, the implied calling is this: Do not even touch the carcass of an unclean animal. This is instructive regarding our calling with respect to sin. Stay away from it! No fooling around with it! No flirting with it! We must not give even an inch, for if we do, the devil will take a mile. Instead, we are to guard against the smallest beginnings of sin in our lives. For a life of sanctification is a life of separation from sin.

7. Sanctification Includes Spiritual Separation from the Wicked World

From a general point of view, a life of sanctification includes separation from sin. One specific application of this is the calling to be distinct from the wicked world around us. This comes out throughout the book of Leviticus. For example, in Leviticus 18:3 God commands His people to be different from the wicked world. “After the doings of the land of Egypt, wherein ye dwelt, shall ye not do: and after the doings of the land of Canaan, whither I bring you, shall ye not do: neither shall ye walk in their ordinances.” In effect, this passage is saying: do not be conformed to the world around you. In other words we are to live antithetically, to be spiritually separated from the wicked world unto our covenant God.

This spiritual separation from the wicked world is the reason God gave certain laws to Israel that may strike us as odd at first glance. For example, we read in Leviticus 19:27-28: “Ye shall not round the corners of your heads, neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard. Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any

marks upon you: I am the LORD.” When reading such commands, we might wonder: why would God forbid such practices? What is wrong with shaving around the side of our heads? Why were no tattoos permitted? The answer to these questions lies in the fact that these were some of the practices of the heathen nations around the Israelites. Thus, these passages teach us that, as God’s covenant people, we are not to participate in customs whereby we would identify ourselves with the world around us.

Other aspects of the levitical law pointed symbolically to this spiritual separation from the wicked world. For example, in Leviticus 19:19 God commanded: “Ye shall keep my statutes. Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind: thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed: neither shall a garment mingled of linen and woollen come upon thee.” Again, these seem like strange laws to us. From our perspective, it might seem that God is being overly restrictive. But importantly, these laws pointed symbolically to the need for spiritual separation, for being distinct from the world around us.

So are we distinct from the wicked? Or have we conformed to world around us? Is it apparent that we are God’s covenant people by the way we live? By the way that we speak? By the way that we think? We must not allow the thinking and practices of the world into our lives or into our churches. We must do everything we can to keep the spirit of the world from being found in the church itself.

Regarding this calling to be spiritually distinct from the world, the book of Leviticus highlights one area of application in particular; namely, the calling to be set apart from the world regarding sexual sins. This is a point of emphasis in the book. Previously, we quoted Leviticus 18:3: “After the doings of the land of Egypt, wherein ye dwell, shall ye not do: and after the doings of the land of Canaan, whither I bring you, shall ye not do: neither shall ye walk in their ordinances.” Significantly, the very first applications made in the subsequent verses concern sexual sins. Furthermore, the book of Leviticus comes back to this application in chapter 20, where it prescribes the corresponding punishments for violations against the seventh commandment. All of this is part of being spiritually different from the world around us.

The calling to live antithetically regarding sexual sins certainly has application today. Like the Egyptians and the Canaanites during the

time of the exodus and conquest, our society is saturated with sexual sins. Our culture, especially the entertainment industry, celebrates and glorifies sexual pleasure. Will our lives be set apart from the world in this respect? Will we be spiritually different? Will we, as single members, remain chaste and pure in our singleness? Will we, as husbands and wives, remain faithful to our spouses? All of this is part of being holy even as God is holy.

8. We Enjoy Covenant Fellowship in the Way of a Holy Life

Finally, when studying the book of Leviticus, one finds important instruction regarding how our walk of life relates to the enjoyment of covenant fellowship with Jehovah our God.

On the one hand, from a negative point view, the book of Leviticus makes clear that we will not enjoy God's blessing when we walk in the paths of sin. This comes out most forcefully in the prescribed punishments for sin and uncleanness. Leviticus 20 prescribes the death penalty for a number of sins: offering children to Molech (v. 2), cursing one's father or mother (v. 9), and committing adultery (v. 10). In chapter 24, we find a concrete case of the death penalty being administered to a young man who blasphemed the name of Jehovah. This penalty makes clear that one does not enjoy God's blessing in the way of sin.

This truth applies to believers who walk in the paths of sin for a time; they do not enjoy covenantal fellowship with God on the path of sin. This comes out in Leviticus 13:46, which calls for those who were found unclean to be placed outside the camp: "All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be." Being placed outside the camp for a time symbolized, and no doubt drove home to such individuals, that they could not enjoy the nearness of and fellowship with God while they were defiled in some way. In other words, sin interrupts our communion with God. We see this same thing in the second half of Leviticus 26, which reveals the curses that would come upon God's people for impenitent sin. These verses clearly teach that if you walk in sin, it will not go well for you.

These passages highlight the negative impact that sin has on the enjoyment of our relationship with God. We must not believe the lie

of the devil who tempts us to believe that the way of sin is the way of pleasure and happiness. Instead, we are to believe the truth of God's Word, which teaches that the way of sin is the way of misery—it brings one outside of the camp, apart from the blessedness of fellowship with our God.

On the other hand, from a positive point view, we enjoy covenantal communion in the way of a holy life of obedience. This is evident from the first half of Leviticus 26, which clearly connects God's blessing to a life of obedience. Verses 3-7 are representative: "If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them; then I will give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield her increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. And your threshing shall reach unto the vintage, and the vintage shall reach unto the sowing time: and ye shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely. And I will give peace in the land, and ye shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid: and I will rid evil beasts out of the land, neither shall the sword go through your land. And ye shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword."

To be clear, in interpreting such passages of Scripture the point is not that walking in God's statutes or keeping His commandments is the reason or basis for God's blessing. Neither is our obedience a condition we must fulfill in order to receive blessings from God. Nor do our good works serve as the instrument whereby we receive blessings from God.

Nevertheless, Scripture itself establishes a positive connection between a holy life of obedience and the blessings that God has in store for His people. Scripture links the two together. In light of this connection, we confess that we enjoy the blessings of salvation, such as fellowship with God, in the way of (on the path of) a life of sanctification. This serves as further encouragement for us to heed the central calling of the book of Leviticus: "Be ye holy, for the LORD your God is holy!" May our God work this holiness in us by His Spirit. ●

In the Way of Obedience¹

Joshua Engelsma

The subject of my article is *practical*. It addresses the matter of the believer's experience in this life. Is there anything more practical than that?

The subject of my article is *pastoral*. That is, it gives instruction to my colleagues in the ministry and to me with respect to how we are to preach certain aspects of the Word of God.

The subject of my article is *controversial*. It is not controversial because I intend to say anything controversial, but because it addresses a subject that is related to the controversy that has taken place recently within the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA).

What has taken place in the PRCA grieves me to my core. Yet, at the same time, I am thankful for the good that God is working through it all. For example, I am thankful to see an increased interest in doctrinal issues, a sharpening of our understanding of important truths, and evidence of the strengthening of our churches in our commitment to our precious heritage.

For that reason, I am grateful for the opportunity to address the subject. I hope to be able to contribute in a small way to sharpen our understanding of the issue and in that way to lead the churches forward.²

1 This is the transcription, edited for publication, of a speech given at an Officebearers' Conference of Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America on September 28, 2021, in Crete Protestant Reformed Church, Crete, IL.

2 I acknowledge my debt to two of my colleagues for speeches they gave upon which I depended heavily in writing this speech. The first was a speech by Prof. B. Huizinga on October 30, 2020 entitled "Of God, Through God, To God" (<https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=1030202348512769>), and the second a speech by Rev. M. Kortus on February 5, 2021 entitled "The Place of Good Works in Our Fellowship with God" (<https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=21021192811681>).

I was asked to address the phrase “in the way of our obedience,” specifically, that we experience covenant fellowship with God “in the way of our obedience.”³

This is a uniquely Protestant Reformed topic. I am not aware of any other denominations or authors who make “in the way of” an issue. This arises out of the fact that as Protestant Reformed believers we love the unconditional covenant of grace. We are careful to defend the unconditional covenant of grace, both from the heresy of conditions and works-righteousness on the one side, and the heresy of antinomianism on the other.

Fellowship by Faith

What do we mean when we say that we experience covenant fellowship with God in the way of our obedience?

Let us begin, briefly, with the idea of the experience of covenant fellowship.

The covenant is the bond or relationship established by God between Himself and His elect people in Christ. This is a relationship of the most intimate friendship and love. The earthly relationships between husband and wife and between parents and children illustrate this reality, but they cannot compare to it.

Within this relationship of friendship, we consciously experience and enjoy fellowship and communion with our heavenly Father and covenant Friend. We know His love and favor, we know His nearness, we bask in the light of His fatherly countenance shining upon us.

Is it any wonder that as churches we love the doctrine of the covenant? How rich and beautiful is this truth!

How do we get into that fellowship? What is the *ground* or *basis* for it?

The way unto and into God’s covenant fellowship is Jesus Christ. Jesus says of Himself in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” God is the holy and righteous God. He cannot have fellowship with that which is unholy, with us unholy sinners. The only basis or ground for our fellowship with God is the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. Apart from

3 This phrase is lifted from the *Acts of Synod of the PRCA 2018*, on p. 74.

Christ, we cannot have fellowship with God. We have this fellowship only because of Christ's perfect work.

Thus, the believer says with the apostle Paul in Galatians 6:14: "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Thus, every faithful minister echoes the words of the apostle in 1 Corinthians 2:2: "For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

Faith is the sole *means* or *instrument* whereby we enjoy this fellowship.

Ephesians 2:8 teaches that faith is the alone instrument of salvation: "For by grace are ye saved *through faith*..." In the passage quoted above from John 14, Jesus says, "no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." That coming is the activity of faith. That is evident from John 6:35 where Jesus says, "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst." Notice that in this passage "cometh" is parallel to "believeth." Therefore, coming and believing are equivalent.

We come to the Father and enjoy His fellowship by believing in Jesus. Faith trusts in, rests on, and looks to Jesus Christ and His righteousness alone. By faith alone, in Christ alone, we enjoy fellowship with our covenant God.

We ought to have clear in our minds the nature of faith's activity. Specifically, we ought to be clear that the activity of faith and the activity of doing good works are two totally distinct, different activities. In the activity of believing, the child of God looks away from himself to Christ and is always trusting in Christ, resting in what He has done, and always receiving. Faith's activity is not working. But in the activity of doing good works of obedience, the child of God is always giving, giving obedience with heart, mind, soul, and strength, giving his life as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Romans 4:4-5 make this distinction: "Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." This passage distinguishes believing from working and defines believing as not working. This means that faith is not simply another good work that we perform in order to experience

fellowship with God. Faith is not working but reliance upon the God who works and upon the finished work of Christ.

Though in harmony with Scripture and the Reformed confessions we rightly speak of the activity of faith and the child of God believing, we must not suppose that faith is something inherent to us or something for which we can take credit. Our coming and believing is the effect of the Father's drawing. John 6:44 says, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him..." God sovereignly draws us to Himself and into His fellowship. He does so through the saving call of the gospel in which He commands, "Come! Believe!" He does this by making the call of the gospel efficacious through the work of the Holy Spirit, who powerfully (irresistibly) draws us to Himself. He does so in such a way that He works faith in our hearts causing us to believe in Jesus who is the way to the Father. Thus we enjoy the conscious experience of fellowship with God by faith in Jesus Christ.

What about Works?

How are we to speak, in this connection, about our obedience as regenerated believers?

Some might ask, "Why even bring up good works at all? Is it not enough to speak of enjoying fellowship with God by faith in Christ?"

The reason for raising the subject of obedience in relationship to fellowship with God is that the Scriptures make a certain connection between obedience and experience. Our theology must not be imposed upon Scripture or established apart from Scripture, but must arise out of Scripture and be subject to Scripture.

Here are just a few of the passages that make the connection between obedience and the believer's experience. Psalm 1:1 says, "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." In Psalm 128:1 we read: "Blessed is every one that feareth the Lord; that walketh in his ways." Proverbs 12:28 says: "In the way of righteousness is life; and in the pathway thereof there is no death."

What is the proper way to explain this connection?

Our obedience is never a prerequisite of, or a condition unto, or the basis for, or an instrument/means unto, or the way unto covenant fellowship. Good works never obtain, gain, or get covenant fellowship

and experience. We ought never to speak of obedience as being the means or the basis of enjoying covenant fellowship with God.

Good works are the inevitable fruit of faith. When by faith we experience covenant fellowship, that faith then shows itself in good works of gratitude. We cannot but respond in good works of gratitude. Obedience is the way of grateful conduct in the enjoyment of fellowship with God. Enjoying fellowship with God by faith, we will live lives of good works.

Let us not forget that these good works are themselves a blessing of salvation earned by Christ and a gift of God given to us in grace. Ephesians 2:10 says: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”

To express this truth regarding the connection between obedience and experience, we use the phrase “in the way of.” We enjoy and experience covenant fellowship by faith, on the basis of Christ, and in the way of good works. Older theologians had at times used the word “condition” in explaining these truths.⁴ But in the controversy over the unconditional covenant in the PRCA in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Herman Hoeksema saw the dangers of using that term and proposed dropping it altogether and instead using the phrase “in the way of.” He wrote, “...we are chosen to faith and to the obedience of faith, and therefore, we are saved through the instrument of faith, and in the way of obedience. That, and that only, is Reformed language.”⁵ Later in the same series of articles he wrote, “But let me suggest that instead of the Pelagian term ‘condition’ we use the term ‘in the way of.’ We are saved in the way of faith, in the way of

4 Cf. David J. Engelsma, *Federal Vision: Heresy at the Root* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2012), 110-119, for quotations from some who used the word “condition” in the sense of “necessary means.” Engelsma writes, “Having recognized that orthodox Reformed theologians in the past used ‘condition’ in such a sense (necessary means of salvation) as did not compromise the gospel of salvation by grace alone, I add that even then the use of ‘condition’ was not only an improper use of it, but also theologically risky. It lay open to misunderstanding and misuse, as though salvation depended upon something the sinner must do” (117).

5 Herman Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” *Standard Bearer* (November 15, 1949), 77.

sanctification, in the way of perseverance unto the end. This term is capable of maintaining both the absolute sovereignty of God in the work of salvation and the responsibility of man.”⁶

Many examples of this language could be given from Protestant Reformed writers through the years. Here is just one example: “In addition, the if/then statements in the Old Testament called the believing Israelite, who was freely justified by faith in the coming Messiah, to thankful obedience to God’s commandments as the way in which he would continue to receive and enjoy God’s covenant salvation. These statements called the godly to their part in the covenant, establishing their covenantal responsibility.”⁷

What undergirds this phrase theologically is the inseparable connection between justification and sanctification. These two are distinct and must be kept distinct. There may be no blending of the two together, so that, for instance, we conclude that we are justified by faith and the works of sanctification. We are justified by faith alone and not by works. Our works have no place whatsoever in our justification. In the matter of our justification, we repudiate all working. While justification and sanctification are distinct, they are connected. Sanctification necessarily follows justification. Those whom God justifies, He also sanctifies. Being justified by faith, and therefore knowing the favor and fellowship of God, we then are sanctified, the fruit of which is our doing good works.

God leads us in this life to glory, in the way of sanctification. In summarizing the Reformed position, Heinrich Heppé writes: “But of course good works are necessary as the God-appointed road, on which by grace we are to attain to the possession of eternal life.”⁸ David Engelsma writes: “...a holy life is a necessity. It is a necessity for final salvation...” And later in the same work he says,

The necessity of our holiness is nothing less than the necessity of God’s salvation of us and of the way He is pleased to save us. God saves by

6 Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” *Standard Bearer* (December 15, 1949), 125.

7 D. Engelsma, *Federal Vision: Heresy at the Root* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2012), 122-3.

8 Heinrich Heppé, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), 580.

sanctifying. The necessary way of salvation in this life is holiness. The necessary way of entering into the final salvation of heaven at death and, in the day of Christ, into the new world is holiness. Only the forgiven have the right to the kingdom. Only the cleansed are fit to receive and enjoy the kingdom...”⁹

Our sanctification does not earn our final salvation, but this is simply the way in which God is pleased to work in leading His children on to glory.¹⁰

What also undergirds the phrase “in the way of” theologically is, as Herman Hoeksema indicated in the earlier quotations, that this phrase maintains both the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man.

On the one hand, the phrase maintains the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation. It clearly indicates that we do not experience fellowship with God *because of* our obedience or even *by means of* our obedience. We experience communion with God by means of faith and because of what Christ has done, that God is glorified as the God of sovereign grace. Thus, our use of the phrase is a jealous safeguarding of the sovereignty of God in salvation.

On the other hand, the phrase also maintains our calling in the covenant: those who live with God as friends in the covenant must serve God. This phrase makes plain that covenant members who walk impenitently in the way of sin and rebellion do not consciously experience fellowship with God. The Canons of Dordt 5.5 says: “By such enormous sins, however, 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...” When we walk impenitently in sin, we do not fall out of the covenant or become the object of God’s hatred. But

9 David J. Engelsma, “Only the Holy Inherit the Kingdom,” in David J. Engelsma and Herman Hanko, *Be Ye Holy: The Reformed Doctrine of Sanctification* (Ballymena, N. Ireland: British Reformed Fellowship, 2016), 102, 109.

10 In connection to eternal life, Herman Bavinck says that the Reformed tradition denies that good works are a “necessity of causality or merit or effectiveness” but affirms a “necessity of presence.” Cf. his *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:255.

our heavenly Father lovingly chastises us so that we lose the sense of His favor for a time.

But, though we lose the experience of God's favor by our evil works, we do not gain it back by our good works. The two are not coordinate. We are restored to the enjoyment of fellowship with God when God sovereignly draws us back. He does so by working faith in our hearts so that we come to God in sorrow over our sins and trusting in Christ and His finished work. Restored to the experience of fellowship with God by faith in Christ, how can we not show our thanks to God in good works! We must, we can, we want to, and we do—by God's grace!

The Error

The matter of “in the way of our obedience” arose in recent years in the PRCA because of an error taught in the churches. The error being taught was that the believer's good works of obedience were spoken of in language that placed them in the category of the *basis* of fellowship with God or the *means* of fellowship with God. Good works were made to be something other than the fruit of faith and fellowship with God. They were no longer the way of grateful conduct in fellowship with God, but were made to be the way of access unto that fellowship.

The error was first identified in a minister's sermon on John 14:6. The text teaches that Christ alone is the way to the Father, yet the sermon taught that our good works of obedience are part of the way unto the Father. The minister said:

- “The way unto the Father includes obedience.”
- “The way of a holy life matters. It is the way unto the Father.”
- “...He is the way, your way unto Me, through the truth which He works in your hearts, through a godly life...”¹¹

These statements in the sermon were eventually condemned by the Synod of the PRCA in 2017.

Later, objections were raised against statements in more sermons by the same minister. For example, in a sermon on Lord's Day 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism on the necessity of good works, the minister said:

11 *Acts of Synod of the PRCA 2017*, 75-76.

- “We do good works so that we can have our prayers answered.”
- “We do good works so that we can receive God’s grace and Holy Spirit in our consciousness. So that we can consciously and with awareness receive the grace and Holy Spirit of God.”
- “We do good works also negatively, so that we are not destroyed in our generations.”
- “We do good works that we might remain in God’s church with his people and with our God. The list could go on and on. Many, many good reasons to do good works.”¹²

To give just one other set of examples, in a sermon on Lord’s Day 45 of the Heidelberg Catechism on the subject of prayer, the minister made the following statements:

- “Obedience is required here, obedience that I must perform in order to enjoy fellowship with God.”
- “There’s requisites to fellowship, as we said, for the child of God... There are requirements for him to fellowship, to approaching unto God, coming to the Father.”
- “We truly ask and are heard, and God receives our prayer and gives us—because we keep his commandments and do those things that are pleasing in his sight.”
- “What do the creeds say about the relationship between obedience and fellowship? That there are requirements. That there is obedience required in order that we may have that fellowship, prayerful fellowship with God.”
- “The answer really is very simple. Very simple. If we but meet these requirements a little bit, by the grace of God, of course... then we will enjoy a little of God’s fellowship. That’s the truth. If we meet these requirements a lot, then we will enjoy much of God’s fellowship.”¹³

These and other erroneous statements by the minister were rejected by the Synod of the PRCA in 2018.

Synod in that same year also passed judgment on a “Doctrinal Statement” written by a committee to help the consistory of the above-mentioned minister. Synod declared the “Doctrinal Statement”

¹² *Acts of Synod of the PRCA 2018*, 61-62.

¹³ *Acts of Synod of the PRCA 2018*, 64-66.

was in error because it contained ambiguous language and the same doctrinal error. Synod rejected the following line in the “Doctrinal Statement”: “When the Scriptures, therefore, emphasize the need for a holy life of obedience to experience the fellowship of God, they do so to emphasize the necessity of a living, sanctifying faith for such fellowship. One can have fellowship with the holy God only through a sanctifying faith.”¹⁴

Another sermon preached by a different minister was brought to Classis East of the PRCA in January 2021. In the sermon it was stated: “If any man will hear my voice....he is talking about not the condition to establish a union but he is establishing a condition that deals with communion. Not union, that’s grace, it’s all grace, only grace, but communion, fellowship.” Classis East rejected the statement and judged that this sermon “does constitute teaching the error of conditional covenant theology.”¹⁵

The many erroneous statements of the first-mentioned minister were initially defended by his consistory on the ground that these statements were simply teaching what the PRCA has always taught: that we experience fellowship with God *in the way of* obedience. The PRCA has taught “in the way of our obedience,” but the erroneous statements in the sermons were not teaching that truth. Instead, they were teaching that our good works of obedience are the basis or means of fellowship with God. Good works were made to be something other than the fruit of faith and fellowship with God.

Synod 2018 judged the error of the first minister to be serious: “The doctrinal error of the sermons then compromises the gospel of Jesus Christ, for when our good works are given a place and function they do not have, the perfect work of Christ is displaced. Necessarily then, the doctrines of the unconditional covenant (fellowship with God) and justification by faith alone are compromised by this error.”¹⁶ An error that compromises the gospel of Jesus Christ, that displaces the perfect work of Christ, that compromises the doctrines of the unconditional covenant and justification by faith alone is a serious error!

14 *Acts of Synod of the PRCA 2018*, 81.

15 Minutes of Classis East of the PRCA, January 2021, Art. 41.

16 *Acts of Synod of the PRCA 2018*, 70.

Much could be said about the seriousness of the error, but let me point out one implication of this teaching: it leaves the child of God without hope. If the enjoyment of fellowship with God is dependent upon my good works, then I will not enjoy fellowship with God! How important for the hope of our people that we preach the enjoyment of fellowship with God by faith alone in Christ alone, and that we preach “in the way of our obedience” rightly and carefully!

Concluding Thoughts

I leave you with three concluding thoughts.

1. Confession.

I neither desire needlessly to dredge up sins of the past, nor to sugarcoat the history. As churches we erred grievously, and as churches we have acknowledged that, prior to 2018, consistories, classes, and synods erred.

It must be said of our controversy what is true of any controversy in the history of the church: that it always takes time for the church to work through difficult issues. This was the case with the Synod of Dordt in the 1600s and with our churches in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

But though that is true, that ought not to minimize or take away from our heartfelt sorrow and confession to God for careless language, unclear language, and wrong language that we have used in the past. God forgive us as churches!

God has been so merciful to us as churches. Often in the history of the church, when a church takes wrong decisions with respect to doctrine, the church continues in that way. I am so thankful God spared us from that by the work of Synod 2018 and the broader assemblies thereafter. I am so thankful God has shown us our errors and made us more careful to guard against them. How undeserving we are of that, and how thankful we ought to be to God! In thanks we ought to be ever vigilant, which leads to my second point.

2. Carefulness.

One thing we have learned through this controversy is the importance of being careful and precise in the language we use in preaching and writing. This is a good thing.

Specifically, we must be careful in our use of “in the way of our obedience.” The recent history has shown that that phrase was used to explain and defend erroneous statements that were not expressing “in the way of” but rather “the way to.” We ought to be careful and precise in our use of the phrase, and also make sure that we carefully explain our use of the phrase to our people. And we ought not to be abusing the phrase, inserting it into every sermon on every text, even though the text is not teaching it.

Carefulness does not mean fear, a fear that leads us not to use the phrase at all. Some advocate dropping the phrase altogether, that any use of the phrase is immediately suspect and heretical. We must not be reactionary and unbalanced in our theology. The phrase is necessary to explain properly an aspect of God’s revelation to us in His Word. We may not in fear refuse to preach those passages as they ought to be preached. The phrase has long standing in our churches, with the likes of Herman Hoeksema, Homer Hoeksema, Herman Hanko, and David Engelsma using it. When the idea is found in the text, preach it with confidence. But do so also with carefulness.

3. Conviction.

All that being said, I believe our conviction as churches going forward ought to be the continued, rigorous, unashamed, uncompromising emphasis on the truth of salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.

The unique legacy of the PRCA is the unconditional covenant of grace. And, while the phrase “in the way of our obedience” definitely has a place in our heritage and is necessary to explain an aspect of God’s revelation to us, this has not been the main emphasis of our churches throughout the years.

Do not misunderstand me: I am not saying that we preach only one aspect of the truth of God’s Word and never say anything about the Spirit’s work of sanctification, the demand of good works, practical instruction for the Christian life, and the reward of grace. We must preach these truths! They are an important aspect of God’s gracious salvation of us. He saves us not only by delivering us from sin’s guilt but also from its pollution. We must preach the whole counsel

of God, including His gracious work of justification and His gracious work of sanctification.

My point is this: if the overwhelming emphasis that is coming from our churches is the function of good works and a pushing of the line of the acceptable use of “in the way of,” then something is wrong.

I have no desire to be anything other than distinctively Protestant Reformed (which is to say Reformed, which is to say biblical), and I believe that is the same, earnest desire of our people. Let this continue to be our emphasis: Salvation is all of grace! Including the experience of salvation! We are justified by grace! We are sanctified by grace! We are preserved by grace! We will be glorified by grace! So that you and I have no reason to boast in ourselves, but so that the covenant God of grace receives all the glory! ●

“Committing the Truth to Faithful Men”: A Centennial History of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary

Douglas J. Kuiper

Introduction

Were a bird to fly seven miles southwest of downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan, head toward the tallest hill in that vicinity, and alight on the roof of a building nestled in a grove of trees on that hill, it would be perched atop the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary.

When the seminary building was built in the early 1970s, it was in the country. From seminary hill one could view the skyline of Grand Rapids, and on the Fourth of July it was a fine place to watch fireworks displays. Much has changed in fifty years. The trees are mature; when fully leaved, even Ivanrest Avenue, four hundred feet to the east, is not visible. To the north lies a major shopping mall, a supermarket, and other associated buildings. A housing development, complete with senior citizen home, is located to the west. The city has encroached.

Inside the building many changes have also taken place. An addition to the main building was constructed in 1995, and a second in 2019. Both the original building and the 1995 addition have been significantly remodeled. More to the point of this history, freshman students have joined the student body, senior students have graduated, and other students have discontinued their studies. Faculty members have retired and new faculty members have been added. The library and denominational archives have grown significantly.

What has not changed is the mission of the institution: the training of men for the ministry of God’s Word. In a day when other larger seminaries grant PhD degrees, and award Masters degrees in ministry leadership or in Christian studies, the Protestant Reformed Theolog-

ical Seminary has kept one focus: to train men to be ministers of the Word, pastors and teachers who are committed to the Reformed faith. Chiseled into a cement stone imbedded in the brick by the building's main entry are the words of 2 Timothy 2:2: "And the things that thou has heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." Our seminary exists solely for that purpose.

What has not changed is the seminary's goal to teach men how to exegete God's Word, and how to craft sermons that expound the text of Scripture and comfort God's people by illuminating the gospel in the text and applying the text to the needs of God's church. What has not changed is the seminary's commitment—and the commitment of the denomination that maintains it, the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA)—to the Reformed faith, to the doctrines of sovereign and particular grace, and to the doctrine of God's everlasting and unconditional covenant of grace. What has not changed is the desire of the seminary faculty that the instruction aim at God's glory, and that the students be trained for real life spiritual warfare as they labor in the churches and among God's people.

The mention of what has and has not changed indicates that the seminary has a history. The seminary existed long before the present building: it was founded in 1925, and its centennial approaches. The seminary has a *rich* history: many developments have taken place over the last one hundred years.

Several brief histories of the seminary have been written to date, but no extensive history. Early *Acts of Synods* of the PRCA included a list of the current professors and the subjects they taught, the current students, and the graduates.¹ Herman Hoeksema includes brief references to the origin of the seminary in his early history of the PRCA.² Books commemorating the twenty-fifth, fiftieth, and seventy-fifth an-

1 For one example, see *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches, 1947* (Grand Rapids: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 1947), 126-27.

2 Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: n.p., 1947), 261-62, 271-77, 280.

niversaries of the PRCA contain brief histories of the seminary.³ In her later history of the Protestant Reformed Churches, *A Watered Garden*, Gertrude Hoeksema briefly notes the salient points of this history.⁴ Although Herman Hanko's book *For Thy Truth's Sake* is a doctrinal history of the PRCA, Hanko alludes to the seminary in his concluding observations.⁵ Reports of the Theological School Committee to the annual synod⁶ and news items or articles in the *Standard Bearer*⁷ also regard the history of the seminary. None of these, however, is a comprehensive treatment of the seminary's history.

That no such history was written in the first fifty or so years of the PRCA's existence is understandable. Most in the PRCA knew the essential points of the history well. The history of the present day is rarely written for those who know it and are living it. However, as we approach the centennial of the PRCA, fewer and fewer of us know the details of our history, especially our early history. More and more one must search in books and articles, in archives and minutes of ecclesiastical assemblies and synodical committees, to discover that history. So I write.

3 See *The Protestant Reformed Churches: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary, 1925-1950* (Grand Rapids: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 1950), 29-37; Gertrude Hoeksema, ed., *God's Covenant Faithfulness: The 50th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1975), 90-95; and *Our Goodly Heritage Preserved: 75 Years, 1925-2000* (Grand Rapids: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2000), 84-88.

4 Gertrude Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden: A Brief History of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1992), 101-103, 264-66, 293-99, 335-36, 351-52.

5 Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 415.

6 See *Acts of Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches*, for years 1940-2021.

7 Although this has not always been the custom, updates from "seminary hill" appear in the *Standard Bearer* once or twice a year.

My goal, should the Lord will that it be accomplished, is to devote several articles to the seminary’s history. This historical account will include mention of the curriculum, students, professors, staff, controversies that the seminary endured, oversight of the seminary by the Theological School Committee, and related matters. The articles will cover the history chronologically. This first article will focus on the seminary’s origins and its development through the 1930s. The next article, God willing, will cover the 1940s and 1950s. I anticipate that one article will be devoted to a history of the seminary building.

I write to inform. I write to share my research into a topic of personal interest. And I write so that the members of the PRCA know their seminary better, and can pray for it with better understanding. For the work of committing the truth to faithful men who will be able to teach others also is a weighty work, a heavy responsibility. The professors are weak and sinful humans, not sufficient for these things; our sufficiency is of God (2 Corinthians 3:16, 5). We do the work to which He has called us in the consciousness that we are dependent on His grace, and that only then will the churches be blessed. So, brothers and sisters in Christ, “Pray for us” (1 Thessalonians 5:25, 2 Thessalonians 3:1, Hebrews 13:18).

CHAPTER ONE

1925-1939

This chapter treats the origins and early development of the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA) from 1925-1939. Practical considerations and historical developments are both factors in using the year 1939 as the endpoint of this chapter. The practical consideration is that, if a chapter in a historical survey is to be manageable in length, some endpoint must be established.

Two historical factors also played roles. First, in the fall of 1939 the seminary began to provide instruction in pre-seminary courses, as well as seminary courses. With that, a new phase in the seminary’s history began. Second, the year 1939 held significance for the PRCA from a church-political viewpoint. That was the last year that the churches met together in a classis as their broadest assembly. In September of that year, the first meetings of Classis East and Classis

West were held,¹ and in June 1940 the first meeting of the PRCA Synod would be held. This affected the denomination's oversight of the Theological School. Until June 1939, the school was governed by curators from churches throughout the denomination; after June, it was governed by a Theological School Committee (TSC) that reported annually to Synod.

In examining the seminary's origins, this chapter will note the history of its founding, the rationale for its existence, the curriculum, the facilities and library, the students, the faculty and instructors, a significant controversy that the seminary endured, and the seminary's financial support, and its oversight by the Curatorium.

The Founding

Elsewhere one finds the story of the origins of the PRCA; that story cannot be fully repeated here.² Suffice it to say that in January 1925, the Reverends Herman Hoeksema, Henry Danhof, and George Ophoff were deposed from the office of minister of the Word and sacraments in the Christian Reformed Church by their respective classes, Grand Rapids East (Hoeksema) and Grand Rapids West (Danhof and Ophoff). Their consistories and a sizeable portion of their congregations—Eastern Ave. CRC (Hoeksema), First Kalamazoo CRC (Dan-

1 "Decided that Classis East will meet on Sept. 27, 1939 and Classis West will meet on Sept. 20, 1939." "Minutes of Classis of the PRCA," June 7 and 8, 1939, Article 67 (Wyoming, MI: PRCA Archives, 147:7). The official minutes of the meetings of the combined consistories and the general Classis of the PRCA are found in the Archives, 150:v1; English translations are found in the Archives 145-147. These locations will not be repeated throughout this article.

2 The reader is referred to Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: n.p., 1947), 11-263; Gertrude Hoeksema, ed., *God's Covenant Faithfulness: The 50th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1975), 13-61; Gertrude Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden: A Brief History of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1992), 1-127; and Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 47-66. A perusing of early volumes of the *Standard Bearer* will also provide a historical overview.

hof) and Hope CRC (Ophoff—Riverbend, now Walker)—continued to recognize these men as their pastors. The consistories of the three churches came together as “Combined Consistories” to treat matters that pertained to the three churches in common. At their meeting on March 6, 1925, the highest priority of these consistories was their united appeal to Synod 1926 regarding the decisions of Synod 1924 about common grace.³ In addition, they were concerned to inform other congregations in the CRC of what had led to the formation of the PRCA, of maintaining relations with a group of believers in Coopersville, MI, and of ordaining Candidate Benjamin Danhof to the ministry of the Word.⁴

The matter of training men for the ministry first came up at their next meeting, on April 21, 1925. Article 9 records the planting of the initial seed that would sprout into the seminary: “The training of ministers of the Word is discussed. It is decided to appoint a committee that will serve with advice at the next meeting. Committee: Revs. Ophoff and Hoeksema.”⁵

The seed sprouted quickly. The committee reported at the following meeting (May 6); its report is duplicated here in full. In the section “The Curriculum” (below, page 54) the reader will find explanatory comments about this report.

The committee met and drew up a course of study which was presented to the gathering.

Elementary Course

I.

- A. Holland. Reading, Writing, Speaking.
- B. Greek. Grammar. Reading.

II.

- A. English. Reading. Composition. Speaking.
- B. Hebrew. Grammar. Reading.

3 The “Act of Agreement” that served as the basis for their union is found in full in H. Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 256-258. The inclusion of the document in full in Hoeksema’s book is significant, because the first page of the “Act” is missing in the official archived record.

4 Minutes of Combined Consistories, March 6, 1925.

5 Minutes of Combined Consistories, April 21, 1925.

III.

- A. Old Testament History.
- B. New Testament History.

The committee is of the opinion that there are students for this course.

IV. Advanced Course.

- A. New Testament.
 - 1. Greek. Reading. Forms.
 - 2. Exegesis. Proper. Introductory. Questions.
- B. Old Testament.
 - 1. Hebrew. Reading. Forms.
 - 2. Exegesis. Proper. Introductory. Questions.
- C. Dogmatics.
 - 1. Dogma Geschichte (History of Dogma).
 - 2. Dogmatics.
 - 3. Confessions.

And for both classes:

V. Krans. Essays and sermons.

Moreover the committee expressed the desirability of establishing a Student Fund and of organizing more churches.

Motion is made to treat the report in regard to the instruction of the students seriatim. Adopted.

Now the report is treated and adopted without change.

The various courses in which instruction will be given will be divided among the three ministers Hoeksema, Danhof, and Ophoff.

Student Fund. The committee had expressed the desirability of establishing a student fund, and to collect \$2000.00 per year for this purpose.

It is moved to adopt this proposal of the committee.

A substitute motion is made "to establish a student fund".

Thereupon an amendment is made to add to this that \$2000.00 per year will be collected according to the number of families in the congregations.

The amendment and the substitute motion are adopted.⁶

6 Minutes of Combined Consistories, May 6, 1925.

The seed also sprouted quickly in that, at its June 4 meeting, the combined consistories decided to examine the applicants “in regard to their physical and spiritual condition and their qualifications for the training.”⁷ The following men applied, and most requested financial aid:

Gerard Borduin, Grand Rapids; requested aid.
Bert Bos, Grand Rapids; requested aid.
Andrew De Vries, Grand Rapids.
Theodore De Vries, Grand Rapids; requested aid.
Jacob Doorn, Grand Rapids; requested aid.
John Griffioen, Grand Rapids; requested aid.
Cornelius Hanko, Grand Rapids.
J. R. Kuyvenhoven, Kalamazoo; requested aid.
Richard Veldman, Chicago; requested aid.
William Verhil, Grand Rapids; requested aid.
L. Vermeer, Grand Rapids; requested aid at the August meeting.
Gerrit Vos, Grand Rapids.

Ten of these twelve men were admitted to the seminary; the minutes of the combined consistories notes that Bert Bos and Jacob Doorn were “doubtful,” and of them the later record says nothing more.⁸ This apparently explains why both Gertrude Hoeksema and Cornelius Hanko (one of the first students) place the number of initial students at ten.⁹ Herman Hoeksema places the number of initial students at

7 Minutes of Combined Consistories, June 4, 1925.

8 Minutes of Combined Consistories, June 4, 1925.

9 G. Hoeksema, *God's Covenant Faithfulness*, 92; Cornelius Hanko, *Less Than The Least: Memoirs of Cornelius Hanko*, 2nd ed, ed. Karen Van Baren (Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2017), 77-78. Cornelius Hanko identifies the ten initial students, but his identification does not exactly correspond to the record of the minutes of the combined consistories. Both Hanko and the combined consistories identify G. Borduin, A. De Vries, J. Griffioen, C. Hanko, R. Veldman, L. Vermeer, W. Verhil, and G. Vos. Hanko mentions an Andrew Kuivenhoven, while the minutes mention a J. R. Kuivenhoven. I do not have an explanation for this disparity, but it must be presumed that the reference is to the same man. In that case, the only substantial difference between the two lists is that the minutes of the combined consistories mention a Theodore De Vries, while Hanko mentions

eight.¹⁰ Exactly why Hoeksema says there were eight, when the record clearly indicates ten, cannot be explained with certainty. Possibly the explanation is that two men dropped out already in the first year. All three writers—Herman Hoeksema, Gertrude Hoeksema, and Cornelius Hanko—agree that the seminary instruction began in June 1925.¹¹

Important details still needed to be addressed. The Kalamazoo church overtured the combined consistories at their meeting on August 5, 1925, that “a better arrangement must be made and more system must be brought in the work. A closer bond must be laid between the church and the school.”¹² The three ministers and four elders were appointed to give advice in the matter at the next meeting. The committee met on August 5, 1925, and reported to the combined consistories at their meeting on November 3, 1925. The consistories decided: 1) to appoint the three ministers as a faculty for the school; 2) to ask every congregation to appoint one man to a committee of oversight (the Curatorium); 3) to mandate the Curatorium to treat matters of oversight that arise between meetings of the combined consistories; and 4) to mandate both the faculty and the Curatorium to draw up respective constitutions.¹³

The Rationale

But was a new seminary, part of a fledgling group of churches, providing instruction by men who were experienced pastors although not particularly trained to provide seminary instruction, really necessary? Would not an education at Calvin Theological Seminary, the theological school of the Christian Reformed Churches, have served as well?

an Arie Griffioen. The Curatorium minutes do not refer to Arie Griffioen until 1927 (Minutes of June 1, 1927, Art. 19). A certain Mr. De Vries, with no first name or initial indicated, appeared at the November 12, 1927 and June 5, 1928 meetings of the Curatorium, seeking admission. Perhaps this is the Theodore De Vries of which Rev. Hanko spoke.

10 H. Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 262.

11 H. Hoeksema identifies “June,” *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 262; G. Hoeksema refers to “the summer months,” *God’s Covenant Faithfulness*, 92; C. Hanko, *Less Than the Least*, 78.

12 Minutes of Combined Consistories, August 5, 1925, Art. 12.

13 Minutes of Combined Consistories, November 3, 1925, Art. 6.

The overwhelming conviction of the leaders of the new denomination of churches was that yes, of course, a new seminary was needed and, no, an education at Calvin Theological Seminary would not have sufficed. For the founding fathers in 1925, these answers were self-evident, and the questions themselves silly. We who live a century later must appreciate that.

One could argue that Calvin Theological Seminary in 1925 would have provided a substantive education that was generally committed to biblical orthodoxy. One evidence for this was the presence on the faculty of men such as Louis Berkhof, Foppe Ten Hoor, and Samuel Volbeda. Another evidence was the expulsion of Ralph Janssen from the faculty in 1922, indicating that the seminary would hold an orthodox view of Scripture and miracles.¹⁴

In fact, Calvin Theological Seminary was no alternative at all. For one thing, that the seminary of the same churches that had deposed Revs. Danhof, Hoeksema, and Ophoff, and of the same churches that had refused to examine Candidate Benjamin Danhof, would then willingly train followers of these men for ministry in the PRCA was doubtful.

Nor did the ministers or prospective students for ministry in the PRCA desire this. The students left the CRC because they rejected the error of common grace that the CRC synod of 1924 adopted. If the error were peripheral to the mainstream of Reformed doctrine and orthodoxy, perhaps the students could have studied at Calvin. However, the error of common grace was not peripheral; it regarded sovereign grace, the foundation of Reformed orthodoxy. Of course, they could not study at Calvin. Cornelius Hanko recognized this as a student: “For some time already I had felt a call to the ministry... With that in mind I had enrolled in a seminary preparatory course at Calvin College. Since the controversy with Rev. Hoeksema had come to a head, and I was a defender of his position, I spoke to him about my problem.”¹⁵

14 For a detailed study of the history of the Janssen case and its relation to the origins of the Protestant Reformed Churches, see Herman C. Hanko, “A Study of the Relation Between the View of Prof. R. Janssen and Common Grace” (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, thesis), 1988.

15 C. Hanko, *Less than the Least*, 77.

Also the ministers and consistories of the PRCA recognized this. Whether they needed a *trained* ministry was not the question; Reformed churches had long emphasized that need.¹⁶ But trained by whom? Having recognized a foundational error in the CRC, and having rejected that error, the founders of the PRCA realized that they must train their own future ministers. Only those who understood and appreciated the defense and development of the truth of sovereign, particular grace over against common grace could preach in the PRCA. Such an appreciation implied, if it did not absolutely require, that one be trained for ministry in the PRCA by PRCA ministers. In the words of Gertrude Hoeksema, the Revs. Danhof, Hoeksema, and Ophoff “realized the importance of training their own ministers immediately, for they understood that a denomination cannot continue without its own source of ministers.”¹⁷

The Curriculum

At their meeting on May 6, 1925, the combined consistories prescribed a course of study that would stand until a pre-seminary preparatory course was adopted in 1939.

Foundational to the entire curriculum was the study of four languages. Greek and Hebrew were the languages in which the Bible was written. Students must know the grammar of these languages, and be proficient in reading the Bible in Greek and Hebrew, in order to understand the Scriptures in their original language and to do the work of exegesis accurately. Dutch and English were the languages in which the truths of Scripture were to be conveyed to God’s people. Dutch services in the PRCA were as common, or even more common, than English services in those early years. Some students came to

16 Article 19 of the Church Order adopted at the Synod of Dordrecht, 1618-19, reads: “The churches shall exert themselves that there are theological students who are supported *ex bonis publicis*.” The main point of this article is not first of all that the students be supported, but first of all that there be students; the provision for support serves this main point. See Richard R. De Ridder, *Translation of Ecclesiastical Manual including the decisions of the Netherlands Synods and other significant matters relating to the government of the churches*, by P. Biesterveld and Dr. H. H. Kuyper (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1982), 164.

17 G. Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden*, 101.

seminary knowing little English, but would be required to preach in English; conversely, some knew relatively little Dutch, but needed later to preach in Dutch.¹⁸

A solid understanding of Scripture required instruction in Old and New Testament history, as well as the courses in dogmatics and the confessions. The Old and New Testament exegesis courses were necessary to ensure that a student could work with a text with a view to preaching a sermon on it. And the requirement that the student write essays and preach sermons in school ensured that he could actually do the work well, and would develop in it during his years in seminary.

Noticeably absent from the list are several courses: Hermeneutics (the principles of Bible interpretation), Church History (not to be confused with history of dogma), Homiletics (principles of sermon construction), and Church Polity. That these courses were nevertheless taught is evident from Hanko’s testimony:

The three ministers, Rev. Danhof, Rev. Hoeksema, and Rev. Ophoff, readily agreed to instruct those men to serve in the churches. The ministers made a schedule according to which Rev. Hoeksema was to teach Monday afternoons the subjects of Greek reading, New Testament exegesis, hermeneutics, and New Testament history. A separate class was held for beginning Greek. Rev. Ophoff consented to teach Wednesday afternoons the subjects of Hebrew grammar, Old Testament exegesis, Old Testament history, and English composition. Rev. Danhof came from Kalamazoo by interurban train Friday mornings

18 Rev. Herman Veldman relates that he attended Dutch services in the CRC until he was in his early teens, but understood very little Dutch, even though his parents spoke the Groninger dialect. Especially in seminary he learned Dutch well, and had to preach in Dutch in his first charge in Pella, IA. See Herman Veldman, interview by Steven R. Key, Summer 1983, transcript “Historical Perspectives of the Protestant Reformed Churches: Seminary Oral History Project” (Archives, 270:2). Rev. Cornelius Hanko also related that he did not know Dutch well. See Cornelius Hanko, interview by Charles Terpstra, 1983-1985, transcript “Historical Perspectives of the Protestant Reformed Churches: Seminary Oral History Project” (Archives, 270:4). All further references to interviews by Steven Key and Charles Terpstra have the same date and archival location.

to teach an introduction to dogmatics, dogmatics, homiletics, and church history.¹⁹

Hanko's testimony is corroborated. The rector's report to the Curatorium in June 1929 indicates that the candidates took their exams in "Dogmatics, Greek and New Testament Exegesis, Hermeneutics, Homiletics, Catechetics, Isagogics, Hebrew and Old Testament Exegesis, Biblical History, Church History, and Church Law [polity]."²⁰ Later Hoeksema introduced a course called Concepts, an exegetical/theological course that treated various major concepts found in Scripture.²¹

The seminary did not have an official pre-seminary program at this time. This means two things. First, the seminary did not have an expanded program that offered a wide range of college level subjects. Second, the students did not gain admission first to the pre-seminary program, and later to the seminary program. That being said, the "elementary course" mentioned above—consisting of Dutch, English, Greek, and Hebrew grammar and reading, as well as of Old and New Testament History—was a means to prepare a student for the more advanced seminary courses. This means that a man might be in seminary for six years, before completing his course of study and being recommended for candidacy.²² Marinus Schipper mentioned in an interview: "I went to the seminary for six years, and much of my first three years was preparatory. We did not have what is now called the preparatory part of the seminary, but to all intents and purposes that's

19 C. Hanko, *Less Than the Least*, 78.

20 Herman Hoeksema, Rector's Report to the Curatorium, June 1929. All Curatorium minutes from 1926 through January 1935 are in Dutch, and are found in Archives 613:8.

21 Curatorium Report, Supplement 2 of the Minutes of Classis, June 2 (should be June 21; see footnote 71 for more information, DJK), 1933.

22 According to the Curatorium records, some men attended only four years. Cornelius Hanko, Richard Veldman, and Leonard Vermeer, all of whom began in 1925 and graduated in 1929, are examples. Others attended only three: Bernard Kok, Andrew Cammenga, and John De Jong all began in 1926 and graduated in 1929. At least some of these men, however, had been preparing for the ministry in the Christian Reformed Church already. But other men, such as George Lubbers, Marinus Schipper, Hubert De Wolf, graduated six years after admission.

what it was.”²³ In fact, this elementary and advanced course mirrors the education provided in other Reformed seminaries of the day.²⁴

One other aspect of the curriculum needs explanation. Point V of the committee report of May 6, 1925, quoted above, refers to “Krans. Essays and Sermons.” In Dutch, the word “krans” refers to a circle or wreath. The Dutch applied the word to a gathering of people to meet to discuss a topic; imagine this gathering sitting in a circle, as it were. In his autobiography, when speaking of his theological schooling in Kampen, Idzerd Van Dellen²⁵ wrote:

We had our weekly meetings of “Krans,” where the students delivered their essays and sermons, and where they were criticized by professors and fellow students. This meeting was attended by all the professors with their wives. It was a social gathering in the aula [a larger room intended to be used for larger, social functions, DJK], and during recess refreshments were served. This weekly meeting was very instructive. Here we learned how to speak in public, and also to give our opinion about the essays or sermons delivered. That was very good practice. Here one could say that “iron sharpeneth iron,” and that so “a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend” (Prov. 27:17).²⁶

In fact, the idea of a “krans” for this purpose seems to have originated with Brummelkamp, and was a part of the seminary in Kampen from its origin.²⁷

23 Marinus Schipper, interview by Steven R. Key.

24 See Joshua Engelsma, *Watchman on the Walls of Zion: the Life and Influence of Simon van Velzen*, (Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2021), 163, for demonstration that this had been the practice at the *Afscheiding* seminary in Kampen, The Netherlands.

25 Idzerd Van Dellen (1871-1965) actively served as pastor in the Christian Reformed Churches from 1895-1940. With Martin Monsma, he is author of the well known *Commentary on the Church Order*. Born and raised in the Netherlands, Van Dellen studied at the Theological School of Kampen before immigrating to America.

26 Idzerd Van Dellen, *In God's Crucible: An Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 39.

27 “Krans,” in *Christelijke Encyclopaedie voor het Nederlandsche Volk*, ed. F. W. Grosheide, J. H. Landwehr, C. Lindeboom, and J. C. Rullmann (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1925), 3:511-512.

In summary, the required courses were the foundational and basic courses that any seminary should provide for students studying for the ministry. The seminary curriculum offered no frills, no electives, no optional courses, but it did offer courses that would prepare a man well for the pastoral ministry. Essentially, the course of study required then was the same as is required today. A few classes have been added since, such as courses in missions and a semester-long internship program, but essentially the curriculum is the same.

These subjects were taught in Dutch or English, depending on what language the instructor preferred, and what language the students could best understand. Herman Veldman recalled that Hoeksema's instruction was mostly in Dutch, and Ophoff's in English.²⁸ By 1937 the Curatorium, which had just adopted English as its official language, informed the Classis that "it is becoming more and more difficult to have our students assimilate the Holland language. It was pointed out by the faculty report that this condition was a sign of the times, and that the implication surely must be felt that the Holland language is gradually and surely making place in our churches for the English language."²⁹

The Facilities and Library

The Lord willing, an entire future article will cover the history of the seminary building, because the location of the permanent seminary building was no small issue in the 1960s and 1970s, and because the current seminary building has its own history. To relate a few salient facts must suffice for now. From June to December of 1925, the seminary met in the basement of the Eastern Avenue CRC. Of that first meeting place, Cornelius Hanko recollects:

The meeting place was not ideal. The classes met in the basement of Eastern Avenue church in a large assembly room with seating capacity for about two hundred people. There were no desks or tables for writing. There was one advantage—a platform with a pulpit. We

28 Herman Veldman, interview by Steven R. Key.

29 Report of the Curatorium, Supplement 6, Minutes of Classis, June 2 and 3, 1937.

had no library, not even one reference work. For books we had to go elsewhere or purchase our own books. But no one seemed to mind.³⁰

After December 1925, the seminary met in the old Oakdale Christian School building near Kalamazoo Avenue and Oakdale Street (within a few blocks of the old Adams Street Christian School). When the First PRC church building was built at the corner of Fuller Avenue and Franklin Street, the seminary met there until 1973.³¹ For providing a room for the use of the Theological School, First PRC was duly thanked, and a rent fee was paid during some years.³²

The lack of a dedicated facility may not have hampered the quality of the instruction, but its inadequacy was certainly felt. This lack continued until 1930. In that year the Ladies Society of First PRC gave the Theological School a gift of \$300, and the Curatorium decided “een School Bibliotheek to beginnen met het geld,” that is, to use the money to begin a school library.³³ The rector reported to the Curatorium the following June: “We received the bookcase and it was already provided with some books. So we can rejoice in the beginning of a library, although the beginning is also small.”³⁴ In 1939 the Reformed Free Publishing Association proposed to expand the library with a set of bound volumes of the *Standard Bearer*, with the Theological School paying the cost to bind them. The offer was graciously received, and the Curatorium expressed its desire to add the latest volume each year.³⁵

The Students

A study of the minutes of the Classis and the Curatorium indicates that during the years 1925-1939, forty-six different men applied for

30 C. Hanko, *Less Than the Least*, 78.

31 C. Hanko, *Less Than the Least*, 78-79; Cornelius Hanko, interview by Charles Terpstra.

32 Minutes of the Curatorium, June 1, 1937, Art 7. All Curatorium minutes from February 1935 through 1960 are in English, and are found in Archives 141: v1.

33 Minutes of the Curatorium, August 26, 1930, Art. 16.

34 Rector’s Report to the Curatorium, June 2, 1931.

35 Minutes of the Curatorium, May 31, 1939, Arts. 5-6, 8.

admission to the seminary, forty two were granted admission, and twenty four eventually became ministers in the PRCA.

To state that the number of applicants was forty six, and those admitted forty two, is to make several judgment calls in areas regarding which the record is not so clear. First, it assumes that Andrew Kuivenhoven and J. R. Kuivenhoven were the same man; that the Arie Griffioen to whom Cornelius Hanko refers was the same man as a 1929 applicant identified only as A. Griffioen; and that the Theodore De Vries to whom Hanko refers was the same man as a Mr. De Vries, with no first name or initial, who thought he was a student but who is told that he should wait awhile.³⁶ The second difficulty is that until June 1927 the faculty admitted the students, not the Curatorium, so that some students' names might not be mentioned in the records.³⁷ The third difficulty is that the record does not make clear whether the students were admitted to the "elementary" or to the "advanced" course of study. For example, Mr. De Vries thought he was admitted, but the Curatorium told him to wait awhile before beginning his studies.³⁸ Also, the Curatorium at one point considered A. Griffioen to be an ordinary student,³⁹ but later denied him admission to study.⁴⁰ The most plausible explanation for these statements is that these men were in the elementary course and were not permitted to take up the advanced course.

The students were a diverse group. Of the ten that formed the first class in 1925, Cornelius Hanko writes: "A unique group it was. Five were married men, two of them with families; five were single." They ranged in age from teenagers to middle-aged men, and Hanko even suggests that Andrew De Vries was "a rather elderly man."⁴¹

36 See footnote 8, including Hanko, *Less Than the Least*, 77-78; Minutes of Combined Consistories, June 4, 1925; Curatorium minutes, June 1, 1927, Art. 19; Nov 12, 1927, Art. 4; June 5, 1928, Arts. 6, 11; and June 4, 1929; and the Classis minutes of Feb. 5, 1930, Arts 31, 34, and 36.

37 Minutes of Classis, June 1927, Art. 14.

38 Minutes of the Curatorium, June 5, 1928, Art. 6.

39 Minutes of the Curatorium, June 1, 1927, Art. 19; "Besloten werd om A. Griffioen voortaan als gewoon student te behandelen."

40 Minutes of the Curatorium, June 4, 1929, Art. 36.

41 Cornelius Hanko, interview by Charles Terpstra. The annual Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America contains a "Necrology," a

No specific amount of prior education was required for entrance into the seminary. Cornelius Hanko indicates that some students had a year or more of college training, while others had only an elementary school education.⁴² When interviewed, Herman Veldman indicated that he had only two years of high school before entering seminary,⁴³ and Marinus Schipper indicated that he finished only the first half of eleventh grade.⁴⁴

The forty-six applicants include twenty four who graduated and were declared to be candidates for ministry in the Protestant Reformed Churches. Twenty one of these were ordained by the end of 1939 (the terminus date for this article; see text box), while three others (John Heys, Sebastian Cammenga, and James Van Weelden) were ordained in the early 1940s. Of these twenty four, only *eight* held the office of minister in the PRCA when they died.⁴⁵ J. G. Kooistra was released from the ministry in the Kalamazoo congregation in 1939 and left the PRCA in 1941,⁴⁶ and John Vander Breggen was deposed from office in

list of ministers who have died while holding office in the PRCA. The entries include birth dates. From it we learn that Cornelius Hanko was 18 when he began studying in the seminary in 1925; John Heys was 26 when he began in 1936; Henry Kuiper was 23 in 1928 (1928 is the first year in which his name appears, but I have found no explicit mention of his formally being admitted to the seminary); George Lubbers was 19 when he began in 1928; Marinus Schipper was 24 when he began in 1930; Herman Veldman was 20 when he began in 1928; William Verhil was 33 when he began in 1925; and Gerrit Vos was 30 when he began in 1925. From the *Banner* we learn that James Van Weelden died on April 18, 2021 at the age of 97, and that he was 17 when he began studying in our seminary. See “In Memoriam: Rev. James William Van Weelden,” in *Banner*, July/August 2021, 23. In an interview, Cornelius Hanko also indicated that Arie Griffioen was in his 40s, and Kuivenhoven was “around his 40s.” Cornelius Hanko, interview by Charles Terpstra.

42 C. Hanko, *Less Than the Least*, 77.

43 Herman Veldman, interview by Steven R. Key.

44 Marinus Schipper, interview by Steven R. Key.

45 These eight, and the years of their deaths, were C. Hanko (2005), J. Heys (1998), H. Kuiper (1961), G. Lubbers (2001), M. Schipper (1985), H. Veldman (1997), W. Verhil (1943), and G. Vos (1968). W. Verhil was the first PRCA minister to die, and the only one to die relatively young; he was 51.

46 Minutes of Classis East, September 27, 1939, Arts. 7 and 16; October November 2021

1945.⁴⁷ Thirteen left the PRCA in 1953 to minister in the Orthodox PRC (the schismatic group), twelve of whom later served in the ministry in the CRC; Richard Veldman returned to the CRC in 1962.⁴⁸

- 1927: William Verhil (Hull, IA); Gerrit Vos (Sioux Center, IA)
1929: Andrew Cammenga (Rock Valley, IA); John De Jong (Doon, IA);
Cornelius Hanko (Hull, IA); Bernard Kok (Roosevelt Park/Southwest, MI);
Richard Veldman (Waupun, WI); Leonard Vermeer (Pella and Oskaloosa, IA)
1932: Peter De Boer (South Holland, IL); Martin Gritters (Holland, MI), Henry
Kuiper (Orange City, IA); John Vander Breggen (Creston, MI); Herman Veld-
man (Pella, IA)
1934: George Lubbers (Doon, IA)
1935: J. Kooistra (Kalamazoo, MI); Andrew Petter (Bellflower, CA)
1936: Hubert De Wolf (Hope, MI); Marinus Schipper (Grand Haven, MI)
1939: John Blankespoor (Orange City, IA); Lambert Doezema (Bellflower, CA);
Peter Vis (Rock Valley, IA)

1, 1941, Art. 8 (Archives 460:1).

47 Minutes of Classis West, September 5, 1945, Art. 32 (Archives 166:2).

48 The names of John Blankespoor, Andrew Cammenga, Sebastian Cammenga, Peter De Boer, John De Jong, Hubert De Wolf, Lambert Doezema, Martin Gritters, Bernard Kok, James Van Weelden, Richard Veldman, and Peter Vis all appear in the chapter “Ministers,” in *Historical Directory of the Christian Reformed Church*, ed. Richard H. Harms (Grand Rapids: Historical Committee of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2004), 139-397, and can be found in the CRC ministers database at www.calvin.edu/library/database/crcmdl/, accessed August 3, 2021. Andrew Petter also left the PRCA with the schismatic faction and later joined the CRC. However, he never served a congregation after being severed from the church in Chatham, ON in 1951. He was a candidate in the Orthodox PRC, but never received a call; and he served that group as seminary instructor for several years, and apparently joined the CRC as a member but not as a credentialed minister. See “Yearbook” in *Acts of Synod, Protestant Reformed Churches of America, 1960* (De Wolf group), 157, as well as other entries in the Acts of Synods 1954-1961 of this group. Finally, Leonard VerMeer left with the De Wolf group, which declared him emeritus in 1955; see *Acts of Synod, Protestant Reformed Churches of America, 1956* (DeWolf group), 52-53. As his name is not found in later *Acts of Synods and Yearbooks* of the De Wolf group, it is presumed that he left them.

As noted above, four applicants were denied admission to the seminary.⁴⁹ To these four must be added Arie Griffioen and a Mr. De Vries, whom we have already met, who began their studies but were apparently refused admission to the advanced course. The minutes do not always indicate why admission was denied.⁵⁰ Either way, that some applicants were denied indicates that the Curatorium screened the applicants, and would not admit merely anyone. Clearly, the denial of admission was not merely because the applicant did not meet educational requirements.

Also notable is the role that the Curatorium asked consistories to play in the process. One who applied for admission was to produce a letter from his consistory expressing its judgment that the man was fit for the ministry. In at least one documented instance, the consistory refused to provide such a testimony and, when the student pressed the matter, finally gave him a letter expressing their reasons for not recommending him for admission, with which reasons the Classis concurred.⁵¹

Even in a seminary, the sad necessity of discipline arises. The studies of three students were concluded as a consequence of their own sins. Andrew Kuivenhoven and Jacob Mellema were expelled in 1926 for their involvement in writing a letter to the Curatorium in which they put Revs. Ophoff and Hoeksema in a bad light.⁵² Because this is part of the controversy in the seminary involving the Danhofs,

49 Those denied entrance were Bert Bos (1925), Jacob Doorn (1925), Abraham Boerkoel (1927, 1928), and Kryn Feenstra (1934). Apparently these never began studies at the seminary in any form. As indicated elsewhere (footnotes 8 and 36), Arie Griffioen and a Mr. De Vries were also denied admission, but the record indicates that they had been students, probably in the elementary course.

50 Minutes of the Curatorium, August 30, 1927, Art. 5; September 9, 1927, Art. 4; June 5, 1934, Art. 16; Minutes of Classis, February 5, 1930, Art. 36.

51 Minutes of the Curatorium, June 4, 1929; Minutes of Classis, February 5, 1930, Art 31, 34, 36.

52 Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 273-275. A skeptic might suggest that Hoeksema could not be completely objective when writing about this event. However, his story is corroborated by the minutes of the Curatorium meetings.

more will be written presently. Another student was suspended for one year for gross public sin. He was told he could reapply for admission after one year, and did so, but apparently was not readmitted, for the record says nothing more of him.

Ten men who were admitted later discontinued their studies for personal reasons such as financial difficulties, nervous strain or other health issues, difficulty learning the foreign languages, and the like.⁵³ One of them, Homer Kuiper, was a nephew of Herman Hoeksema.⁵⁴ Then, as now, a family connection to a professor does not ensure that one will complete one's seminary studies.

Three students finished their formal schooling but did not become ministers in the PRCA, although two of them were declared candidates. Well known is the fact that in 1927, William Verhil and Gerrit Vos were declared candidates for the ministry, before having completed their seminary education. They labored in the churches for two years, and then returned to seminary to finish their degree. Not well known is that a third man, John Griffioen, was declared a candidate at the same time,⁵⁵ and that the church in Doon, IA called him but was "disappointed" in his answer.⁵⁶ Soon afterward he left the PRCA. A John Griffioen later graduated Calvin Theological Seminary in 1932 and served that denomination for over thirty years in the active ministry.⁵⁷ Likely this is the same man.

The other two men completed their schooling. Edward Borst was admitted in 1932 and graduated in 1936.⁵⁸ However, he never received a call to a congregation. Marinus Schipper, who knew Borst both

53 Their names, with the years they studied in the seminary, are: Gerard Borduin (1925-?), Andrew De Vries (1925-?), A. De Borst (1928-1931), J. Plaizier (1928-?), Peter Vander Kooi (1928-1929), P. Zylstra (1928-1929), M. Stouwie (1928-1929), Thys Feenstra (1934-?), Franklin Monsma (1936-1939), and Homer Kuiper (1938-1942).

54 Homer Kuiper, interview by Steven R. Key.

55 Minutes of the Curatorium, June 1, 1927, Art. 23; Minutes of Classis, June 1927, Art 13.

56 Letter of Doon Consistory to Classis of the PRC, August 31, 1927, Supplement to Minutes of Classis, August 31, 1927.

57 *Historical Directory of the Christian Reformed Church*, 214-215.

58 Minutes of the Curatorium, June 2, 1936, Art. 16; and Announcement in *Standard Bearer* (June 15, 1936), 418.

as a fellow student and a brother-in-law, claimed that Borst excelled intellectually, learned several languages, and later worked for the CIA in our nation’s capital.⁵⁹

After completing his schooling, John Hoksbergen sat for his Curatorium exam in May, 1938. The Curatorium was not satisfied, and asked Hoksbergen either to be reexamined in September, or to continue his studies another full year. After the Curatorium examined him a second time, it voted down a motion to declare him a candidate.⁶⁰ A John Hoksbergen graduated from Western Theological Seminary in 1942, and served as minister in the Reformed Church in America until 1975.⁶¹ According to John Heys, this is the same man.⁶²

This history teaches us important lessons. First, the seminary’s purpose—its *sole* purpose—is to train men for the ministry of the gospel. That some men do not graduate from seminary is an effect of that purpose; some men who enter the seminary are not fit for the ministry. Second, not every graduate will receive a call. Prior to 1940, the only graduate not to receive a call was Edward Borst. After 1940, two other graduates did not receive calls. It can happen again. The ultimate indication that the Lord wills a man to be a minister is that he receives a call from a church.⁶³ Third, the Lord permits some men to remain in the ministry for their whole life, but removes others before death, sometimes for reasons unknown to us. Even in the Old Testament, some men were prophets for their entire life (Jeremiah and others), while others apparently prophesied only for a time.

The Faculty and Instructors

As indicated above, the three ministers—Revs. Danhof, Hoeksema, and Ophoff—began giving instruction in June 1925. In November

59 Marinus Schipper, interview by Steven Key.

60 Minutes of the Curatorium, May 31, 1938, Art. 8, 19, 33; September 6, 1938, Arts. 18, 20.

61 Russell L. Gasero, *Historical Directory of the Reformed Church in America 1628-1992* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 107.

62 John Heys, interview by Russell Dykstra, Summer 1983; transcript “Historical Perspectives of the Protestant Reformed Churches: Seminary Oral History Project” (Archives, 270:3). Every subsequent reference to an interview by Russell Dykstra has the same date and archival reference.

63 Belgic Confession, Article 31; Church Order, Article 4.

1925, the combined consistories appointed these three as professors: “The advice of the committee is that we as combined consistories appoint a faculty for the school, and the committee recommends for this purpose the present three professors. Adopted.”⁶⁴

Of course this choice seems to have been obvious. They were the only three ministers in the PRCA, and they had finished their own seminary training. None could prepare men for the ministry as well as they. That the consistories appointed all three men, and not only one or two of the three, is noteworthy. These men were all busy pastors. Hoeksema and Danhof served large congregations,⁶⁵ and the three shared the writing responsibilities in the *Standard Bearer*, which was published at first monthly, then semi-monthly. No one man had time to do all the work himself. Besides, the training of ministers was the work of the three churches as a whole, so it made sense that each church’s minister took up his share of the load.

This appointment of every available minister to the work of training ministers emphasizes that the work of training ministers is the work of the *ministers*. In 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul tells Timothy, whom Paul has trained for the pastorate, to teach other men to do the work also. The fundamental requirement of the seminary professor in the PRCA, therefore, is not that he is highly educated and able to do scholarly work. A professor’s advanced education must serve his ability to instruct. But the fundamental requirement of the seminary professor is his conviction of the Reformed faith, and his ability to be a pastor and preacher.

So the three ministers were full-time pastors, part-time magazine editors, and part-time seminary instructors. Each devoted a half day or at most full day a week to the work of training men for the ministry. The three became two when Danhof left the PRCA in 1926, and the number of professors remained at two until 1973.

The clear indication that the combined consistories appointed the three men as professors makes curious an event that took place

64 Minutes of Combined Consistories, November 3, 1925, Art. 6.

65 First PRC numbered nearly 500 families, and the PRC in Kalamazoo at least 150 families. Only Hope PRC was a small congregation, numbering thirteen families in 1926. Kalsbeek, *A Spiritual House Preserved*, 704.

in early 1933. In late January, the Curatorium met and noted in its report to Classis:

There were not many matters on the agenda. But one matter, which the Curatorium should have treated in the past, yet failed to do so, was not treated and settled. The matter, namely, of appointing our professors. The instructors have done much and strenuous work in the past, because they felt themselves morally obligated to do this work for the welfare of the churches. Yet they had never been formally appointed by the Curatorium, or Classis.

Therefore the Curatorium now comes to Classis with the request that Classis appoint Rev. H Hoeksema as professor of our Theological School The Curatorium also requests Classis to appoint Prof. G. M. Ophoff as professor. . . .⁶⁶

Per Article 14 of the next Classis meeting, the two were appointed professors, “for an indefinite time,” and a salary was stipulated for Ophoff, and an amount to cover Hoeksema’s expenses.⁶⁷

Almost one hundred years later, one wonders what exactly the Curatorium and Classis were doing. Had they not known that the combined consistories appointed these men as the school faculty? Or were they suggesting that the appointment should have been recertified later by the Classis, when the churches organized into a Classis? Did the emphasis fall on the fact that now they would receive a salary? Or on the fact that the appointment was indefinite? The matter of the salary is not the reason; the record indicates that Ophoff had received a salary for his work in the school in previous years. That the Curatorium was unaware of the 1925 decision of the combined consistories seems unlikely. My best guess is that the churches felt

⁶⁶ Report of the Curatorium, Supplement 7, Minutes of Classis, February 1, 1933.

⁶⁷ Minutes of Classis, February 1, 1933, Art. 14. The report of the Curatorium, and minutes of Classis, expressly state that Rev. Hoeksema did not desire a salary but only that his expenses be covered. The reader must remember that the First PRC was a large church which could easily cover the salary of a pastor, while Byron Center PRC, where Ophoff then served, was a small church that was never financially strong.

that, having organized as a denomination, the previous appointment of the combined consistories needed to be reiterated on behalf of the denomination. If the reason was different, we may never know.

The men devoted themselves to the work of training pastors. Both Hoeksema and Ophoff had large capacities for work, but the real reason they served is that they were the only men who could.⁶⁸ Naturally the question arises: can a man do well all the work that these men did? That they did it is clear enough; and that the work was not inferior in quality is also the testimony of all, and an honest evaluation of any who reads their works. But it was not easy.

For one thing, the Byron Center congregation experienced perennial problems during Ophoff's pastorate. These problems, some in the congregation alleged, were the result of Ophoff not giving enough time to his work in the congregation. The consistory defended the pastor in this regard, but the fact remains, as all recognized, that Ophoff was carrying a load that was almost more than a man could bear.

The same was true of Hoeksema. He was a strong man, physically, spiritually, psychologically. For all that, he was only a man, with limitations. He could not do *well* both the work of the school and the work in his own congregation. In the fall of 1930 the Curatorium gave him a leave of absence, so that he could do more work, including family visitation, in his own congregation.⁶⁹

In June 1933, shortly after he and Ophoff were appointed professors indefinitely, Hoeksema submitted his resignation to the Curatorium. In his letter he wrote,

68 For vignettes regarding Hoeksema giving himself to his work, see Gertrude Hoeksema, *Therefore Have I Spoken: A Biography of Herman Hoeksema* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1969), 177, 195, 217. Regarding Ophoff, see C. Hanko, *Less Than the Least*, 75, 80; and the recollection of Ophoff's son, Herman: "My father, in his younger years, was probably one of the easiest men in the world to get along with, but he was over-taxed. He was overworked." Herman Ophoff, Interview by Steven. R. Key.

69 Report of the Curatorium, August 27, 1930, supplement 1, Classis of the PRC, August 27, 1930; Report of the Faculty to the Curatorium, June 2, 1931.

It becomes increasingly difficult for me to do justice to the work in all the various positions in which I am called to labor. The school demands much of my time and effort. In the meantime, I also have a large congregation, in which the Lord has called me to labor as shepherd and minister. And now not to mention our magazine.

That which weighs heavily with me, and becomes increasingly unbearable, [is] that I cannot give those efforts to my congregation, which are needed. The result is, that I see the consequences more and more. There is a gradual but definite decline. And as long as I am pastor of the Fuller Ave. congregation, I feel myself, first of all, responsible for this situation.⁷⁰

The Classis defeated a motion to accept this resignation, and passed a motion to call Rev. Hoeksema to be a full time professor at the seminary.⁷¹ The next Classis meeting was informed that Rev. Hoeksema declined the call to be full time professor, then realized the need of the school for his services, so agreed to continue as part time professor. To this the Classis responded: “It is decided to accept with thanks the withdrawal of Rev. H. Hoeksema’s decline as part time professor, and to declare that, to our minds, the proposal to serve again as part time professor is the proper one.”⁷²

The scenario was repeated in June 1938, when Hoeksema asked the Curatorium for a leave of absence so that he could do more work in his congregation. The Curatorium responded by denying his request and asking the consistory of First PRC to obtain more help for the work in the congregation so that Hoeksema could devote more time to the school. The consistory’s response, understandably, was

70 Herman Hoeksema, Letter to the Curatorium, June 20, 1933, Supplement 3 of the minutes of Classis, June 21, 1933. The Classis minutes list the date as June 2, which would have been a Friday. To the best of my knowledge, the Classis minutes are wrong, and the date was either June 20 (Tuesday) or June 21 (Wednesday). Usually the Curatorium met the day before Classis, so I surmise Classis met on June 21.

71 Minutes of Classis, June 21, 1933, Art. 19. The Curatorium recommended he be given a salary of \$1500, a free home, and expenses, but the Classis minutes indicate his salary was \$1000.00.

72 Minutes of Classis, January 10, 1934, Art. 13.

negative.⁷³ Undeterred, the Curatorium appointed a committee to meet with the consistory as soon as possible. The committee reported that “the consistory stands firm.”⁷⁴

The workload of the two professors was eased somewhat by appointing students to assist with the instruction. The rector’s report to the Curatorium meeting on June 4, 1929 indicates that students Peter De Boer taught English, John De Jong taught Dutch, and Richard Veldman taught basic Greek and Hebrew.⁷⁵ The school’s budget included \$300 in student stipends.⁷⁶ It had been noted earlier that student R. Veldman would receive \$1 per lesson.⁷⁷ In later years, other students also assisted the professors.

All realized that the work was more than two men could reasonably do well, and that the help of students was only minimal relief for the two professors. This was one factor which led the Curatorium in 1938 and 1939 to investigate expanding the school (to provide a pre-seminary course), and to suggest enlarging the faculty.

The Controversy

Many of the annual rector’s reports in the 1930s indicate that the school years were uneventful. The same cannot be said for the years 1925 and 1926. In both the churches and the School, the controversy regarding the attitude and activities of the three Danhofs was felt.

Herman Hoeksema provides four ways in which the Danhofs showed themselves to be at odds, not merely with Revs. Hoeksema and Ophoff, but with the combined consistories.⁷⁸ Only the fourth regards the school, so that alone is our present concern.

At the outset, note that each side blamed the other: “According to Hoeksema it (the conflict) was the fault of Danhof and his two nephews, Ralph and Ben Danhof. According to the supporters of Danhof it was Hoeksema’s fault.”⁷⁹ This article will present Hoeksema’s

73 Minutes of the Curatorium, Sept. 6, 1938, Art. 8.

74 Minutes of the Curatorium, Sept. 6, 1938, Arts. 9, 21.

75 Archives, 613:2.

76 Archives, 613:1.

77 Minutes of Classis, June 1927, Art. 17.

78 H. Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 268-272.

79 Thomas R. Wolthuis, “The Protesting First Christian Reformed Church, Kalamazoo, Michigan: A History” (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theolog-

side as credible. The reason for defending Hoeksema’s view of the controversy is not merely that I serve in the same churches in which Hoeksema served. Rather, the reason is twofold: first, and foremost, I have at hand the minutes of the combined consistories, and Hoeksema’s account accords with what is recorded in those minutes. Second, while a seminarian at the Theological School of the PRCA, Andrew Lanning wrote a significant paper on Henry Danhof, in which he also probed the cause of the controversy. At length, and with substantiated arguments, he concluded that, while a clash of personalities between Danhof and Hoeksema was a factor, Danhof’s attitudes, suspicions of Hoeksema, and subsequent actions were also blameworthy.⁸⁰

From the outset both professors and students noted that Danhof did not cooperate with the other professors in giving instruction. Herman Hoeksema notes that Danhof

entirely disregarded the decisions of the consistories regarding the curriculum. Without even consulting the two other members of the faculty, he proceeded to inform the students as to what he would consider a proper seminary course for them. And, accordingly, he taught whatever subjects he pleased, regardless of the fact that his subjects had been assigned to him by the consistories.⁸¹

Cornelius Hanko’s account is essentially the same, but differs in two respects. First, it is the perspective of a student who could not at that time have been a special friend or confidant of Hoeksema. Second, it is more detailed. In other words, though essentially the same, Hanko’s account stands independent of Hoeksema’s, and yet corroborates it.

ical Seminary, unpublished research paper, 1980), 11. Wolthuis references Hoeksema’s comments to which the previous footnote refers in support of his first statement, and an interview of Jean Durian, nee Danhof, on October 16, 1980, in support of his second statement.

80 Andrew Lanning, “Henry Danhof, Minister of the Gospel: A Study of the Providence of God” (Wyoming: Protestant Reformed Theological School, unpublished research paper), 32-39.

81 Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 272.

The first Friday morning that Rev. Henry Danhof began his classes, he informed the students that he did not intend to come all the way from Kalamazoo to Grand Rapids to teach four subjects. Also, he felt that the students must be prepared for the ministry as fast as possible. He would teach from nine to five, with an hour break for lunch, thus covering eight subjects, four more than he was asked to teach.

The result was that we students diligently took down extensive notes all day Friday. In order to preserve them, we had to type the notes the very next day. Since that was Saturday and some of the men worked, they had no time to prepare for the classes of Rev. Hoeksema on Monday. When students complained to Rev. Hoeksema, he quite properly answered with a shrug of the shoulders, "That is not my problem. I expect you to be prepared for my classes."⁸²

That spirit of independentism Danhof manifested from the beginning. His two relatives, Ralph and Benjamin, usually supported him when he took a stand differing from that of the other two ministers and the will of the consistories.

The second aspect of the history of this controversy in the school is the letter addressed to the Curatorium, intended to be signed by students, which alleged that "Reverend Ophoff shows partiality in class" and "Reverend Hoeksema seems to have a few pets."⁸³ The combined consistories investigated the matter immediately, and found that students Mellema and Kuivenhoven were "instigators of the plot,"⁸⁴ and that B. J. Danhof, pastor in Hull, IA, was influential in it. Consequently, the two students were expelled and a word of censure administered to B. J. Danhof.⁸⁵ Mr. Mellema later confessed his sin to the Curatorium.⁸⁶

Tensions continued, however. Here the account of Hoeksema⁸⁷ is not only helpful but essential, because the minutes of the combined

82 Hanks, *Less Than the Least*, 80.

83 H. Hoeksema reproduces the letter in full; see *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 273-274.

84 H. Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 275.

85 Cornelius Hanks gives a brief account in his book *Less Than the Least*, 82-83, but a fuller account in his interview by Charles Terpstra.

86 H. Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 277.

87 H. Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 277-288.

consistory meeting in August 1926 are not available. At that meeting Danhof reported that the school difficulties had been removed and . . . that he resigned.⁸⁸ At the meeting in November, B. J. Danhof and his elder left the meeting in protest before the consistories took up the main points of the agenda, and the Curatorium reported “that Rev. H. Danhof has not changed his mind in regard to his resignation.”⁸⁹

Thus four ministers and one candidate in the PRCA became two ministers only, three instructors in the seminary became two, and the way was opened for a more peaceable environment in the school. Periodically other issues arose, but the rector’s report often included a note that the school year was completed with God’s blessing and that peace prevailed.

The Finances

That the school was a denominational seminary means, among other things, that the denomination completely supported the school. It did so by assessing a certain amount per year to each family. In the early years, with two part time professors and no dedicated school building, the school was inexpensive to run. “Inexpensive,” that is, when comparing the school’s total budget⁹⁰ to what a working man’s salary may have been. The total budget for 1930 was \$2200. Assessments per family in the early years were in the range of \$1.50 to \$2.00 annually.

But these were the years of the Great Depression and the beginning of World War II. The reader must not suppose that the members of the PRCA did not bend over backwards for the support of the school; as with all other aspects of the denomination’s finances, and the cause of Christian education, they did.⁹¹ Perhaps this explains why the treasurer

88 H. Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 278-279.

89 Minutes of Combined Consistories, Nov. 3, 1926, Art. 7.

90 In 1929 the budget was \$2285; see Minutes of the Curatorium, February 5, 1929, Art 18. In 1930 it was \$2200; see Minutes of the Curatorium, Sept. 17, 1929, Art. 12, and Minutes of Classis, September 18, 1929, Art. 10. The figure included \$2000 in salary for Ophoff, \$100 expenses for Hoeksema, and \$100 for printing student material. In 1935 the total expenses for the school were \$1512.37; see Minutes of the Curatorium, Jan. 7, 1936, Art 15.

91 See G. Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden*, 103, for a fuller expression of the economic hardship of the times.

reported periodically that the school was short of funds,⁹² or soon would be if the churches did not pay their assessments.⁹³ Perhaps the most urgent notice is that of the treasurer to the meeting of the Curatorium on June 1, 1937:

Our treasurer, Rev. D. Jonker, reports that he has a balance on hand of \$47.79, but also that he must pay \$300.00 on bills due. Also that he must shortly pay school rent, plus repay overpaid assessments, plus pay Rev. G. M. Ophoff's salary, plus pay one of our student instructors. Further he reports that various churches failed to pay even part of their assessments.⁹⁴

Evidently Classis' response to the treasurer in June of 1927 did not deter him from reporting financial shortfalls in the future: "The treasurer of the curatorium reports that there are not sufficient funds in the treasury of the Theological School. Decided to appoint a committee to make arrangements for this matter. Committee: the aforementioned treasurer."⁹⁵

Because the school was supported by the denomination, it has been and is yet today the practice of the PRCA not to charge tuition to students who intend to enter the ministry in the PRCA, and to charge only a nominal tuition fee to students from other denominations. However, during the Depression years, the Curatorium passed a motion to ask a \$25 per year tuition fee of each student.⁹⁶ What is not clear is whether this was a suggested amount, or an absolute requirement. The fee was raised in 1939, and any ambiguity about whether the fee was optional

92 Minutes of Classis, June 1927, Art 12; Curatorium Report to Classis, Supplement 5 of Minutes of Classis, Dec. 2, 1931.

93 Report of the Curatorium, supplement VI of the minutes of Classis, June 5 and 6, 1935; Report of the Curatorium, Supplement XIII of the minutes of Classis, Jan. 8 and 9, 1936; Report of the Curatorium, Supplement 13 of the meeting of Classis, Jan. 13 and 14, 1937.

94 Minutes of the Curatorium, June 1, 1937, Art. 14.

95 Minutes of Classis, June 1927, Art. 12.

96 Minutes of the Curatorium, June 4, 1935, Art 23: "Voorgesteld om van alle studenten aan onze school, een "tuition fee" te vragen van \$25.00 per jaar. Dit voorstel werd afgestemd."

was removed: Classis adopted the proposal of the Curatorium that “a tuition of \$70.00 per annum should be required of each student.”⁹⁷

The first mention of a stipend for the professors is in Article 15 of the minutes of the combined consistories, November 3, 1926: “Instruction from Eastern Ave. The consistory requests that Rev. G. M. Ophoff be paid \$500 per year for his work at the school.”⁹⁸ Note that the consistory bringing this recommendation was not that of Hope’s consistory, a small congregation that could barely support its pastor, but that of Eastern Avenue’s consistory, the largest congregation of the three, which carried the bulk of the fledgling denomination’s financial burden. The combined consistories saw the wisdom of the recommendation, and granted it.

Treating Eastern Avenue’s request, the Curatorium decided to recommend to the combined consistories that Hoeksema also be paid the same amount. (By this time, Danhof had resigned as professor, so no request for his support appears.) Hoeksema’s response to the Curatorium’s suggestion is recorded: “H. Hoeksema refuses this. He does not need it.”

Ophoff’s salary was increased substantially to \$2000 by 1928 and 1929, but the school was unable to pay it in full during the Depression years; hence it was reduced to \$1500, then to \$1000,⁹⁹ then \$800.¹⁰⁰ When the two men were appointed professors in 1933, Ophoff was given \$800 salary and Hoeksema \$200 for expenses.¹⁰¹ Later, in 1939, when a proposal was passed to adopt a pre-seminary program and expand the faculty, the salary for each professor was set at not less than \$1500 annually.¹⁰²

97 Minutes of Classis, January 11 and 12, 1939, Art. 17; see Report of Curatorium, Supplement 5.

98 Minutes of Combined Consistories, Nov. 3, 1926, Art. 15.

99 Minutes of the Curatorium, December 1, 1931, Art. 5.

100 Minutes of the Curatorium, Sept. 6, 1932, Art 14; Minutes of the Curatorium, Jan. 31, 1933, Art 12, verified by Minutes of Classis, Feb.1, 1933, Art. 14.

101 Minutes of Classis, Feb. 1, 1933, Art. 14.

102 Minutes of Classis, January 11 and 12, 1939, Art. 17; see Report of the Curatorium, Supplement 5.

The Curatorium

This article concludes with comments about the oversight of the Theological School by the Curatorium, as it was known then. Gertrude Hoeksema's treatment of this subject is brief: "The Curatorium, or board of trustees, had the oversight of the theological school. This body met when the classis of the denomination met—three times a year. They also conducted the examinations of these new candidates."¹⁰³ To this some relevant details can be added.

At the meeting of the combined consistories on November 3, 1925, at which meeting the three ministers were first appointed as faculty for the school, the committee to bring advice recommended appointing four men to a committee of oversight. Rather than adopt that proposal, the consistories decided that "one member be appointed out of each congregation, and every congregation appoints its own member. This committee will be the committee of oversight (Curatorium)."¹⁰⁴

Until 1939, when Classis met for the last time as the broadest assembly of the PRCA, the Curatorium consisted of one member of every congregation, appointed by his consistory. When the denomination organized into two classes in the fall of 1939, the curators of Classis East (one from every church) functioned as the Theological School Committee,¹⁰⁵ until the first Synod in 1940 appointed four ministers and four elders from the churches in Michigan.¹⁰⁶

That the Curatorium consisted of one man from every church had several practical implications. First, the size of the Curatorium increased as new churches were added to the denomination. Five men—one each from Byron Center, Eastern Ave., Hope, Hull, and Kalamazoo—comprised this committee when it was first formed in 1925.¹⁰⁷ In 1939, the denomination had twenty-one churches, so the Curatorium had twenty-one members.¹⁰⁸ The second consequence was that the Curatorium met only when the Classis met. Classis met three times a year in the years 1927-1930, and twice a year (January or February and June) from 1931-1939. The Curatorium ordinarily met

103 G. Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden*, 102.

104 Minutes of Combined Consistories, November 3, 1925, Art. 6.

105 Minutes of Classis, June 7, 1939, Art. 9.

106 *Acts of Synod 1940*, Art. 93.

107 Minutes of Combined Consistories, February 3, 1926, Art. 6.

108 Minutes of Classis, June 7, 1939, Art. 2.

the afternoon and evening prior to that meeting of Classis, beginning its sessions at 3:30.¹⁰⁹

The consistories were free to pick their own delegate to the Curatorium, but he must be the minister or a currently serving elder. At first every man was appointed for a one-year term, though a man could be reappointed as long as he was still an officebearer. The Curatorium and Classis eventually recognized the drawbacks of this arrangement. In 1930 the Classis appointed seven curators to four-year terms. Now the problem was that they specified no length of term of the other nine curators, nor of any future curators. Besides, elders in some churches served two-year terms as elder, and therefore could not serve a four-year term on a Curatorium that must be comprised of ministers or currently serving elders.¹¹⁰ So Classis decided in the end to appoint curators for two-year terms, leaving to each consistory to propose its minister or an elder.¹¹¹

The work of the Curatorium involved every aspect of the oversight of the school. As of June 1927 it approved men for entrance into the seminary; previously the faculty had done so.¹¹² Each month that the school was in session, two men were appointed to visit the school. Periodically it gave the faculty advice on how to improve their instruction. It oversaw the finances. One aspect of the work of the Curatorium until 1939 was unique: the examination of the graduates with a view to candidacy.

Our current practice is to subject every seminary graduate to two public, oral examinations: one by synod, to demonstrate the man's competency to graduate and be declared a candidate; and another by classis, after he has received and accepted a call, to permit him to take up the work of the ministry.¹¹³ However, before the churches

109 Curatorium Report to Classis, Supplement 5, Classis meeting December 2, 1931: “It was decided that the Curatorium would meet from now on at 3:30 in the afternoon before Classis.” Though not explicitly stated, the point is that Classis began in the morning, and the Curatorium would meet the previous afternoon and into the evening if necessary.

110 Overture from Hope to Classis, June 4, 1930; see Minutes of Classis, June 4, 1930, Arts 20 and 21.

111 Minutes of Classis, August 27, 1930, Art. 13.

112 Minutes of Classis, June 1927, Art. 14.

113 See Church Order Art. 4, and the decisions appended to it.

had a synod, the Curatorium conducted what is now the synodical exam.¹¹⁴ While the Curatorium usually met the day before Classis, its June meeting was extended, if men were to be examined. Then the Curatorium met for several days, and gave a far more thorough examination than even our Synod gives today, covering every single subject taught in the seminary.¹¹⁵

How could the body do this work effectively, when it was comprised of twenty-one men scattered from Michigan to California while the seminary itself was in Michigan? Mainly, as noted above, by meeting two or three times a year just before Classis; but also through the means of a *Curatorium Contractum*, a contracted Curatorium. After the Classis began meeting twice a year because of the Great Depression, when business required attention between the meetings of Classis, all the curators in Michigan met to do the work of the whole, and then reported their work to the entire Curatorium.

The Curatorium sought Classis' approval of this arrangement:

The Curatorium informs the Classis that because matters may arise in regard to the school between Classis meetings that need immediate attention, we have appointed a Curatorium Contractum from the Curators in the neighborhood of Grand Rapids, to treat such matters as may possibly arise. The Curatorium requests that Classis approve this action.¹¹⁶

Classis approved.¹¹⁷ Incidentally, both the general Classis and Classis West have on special and preauthorized occasions conducted their business through a Classis Contractum.¹¹⁸

114 See the indication of this in the *Acts of Synod 1940*, Art. 18: "Since, as was previously stated, the work of the former Curatorium now belongs to Synod, the examination of Student J. Heys, who has completed the prescribed course at our School, occupies much of Synod's time."

115 Minutes of the Curatorium, May 31, 1939: Arts 25, 31, 33, 40, 42, 43-44.

116 Supplement 21, Minutes of Classis, December 2, 1931.

117 Minutes of Classis, December 2, 1931, Art. 49.

118 The general Classis gave prior approval for a classis contractum at the same meeting at which it approved the Curatorium contractum; see Minutes of Classis, December 2, 1931, Art. 43. Classis West gave prior approval to

This contracted Curatorium met several times, and reported its work to the Curatorium as a whole. In May 1932, it reported to the Curatorium that it had not needed to meet during the previous months;¹¹⁹ in January 1934, that it examined Mr. John Hoksbergen with a view to admitting him to the school;¹²⁰ and in January of 1936 that it did the same to Mr. Peter Vis.¹²¹ Beginning in January 1936, the Curatorium decided that the report of the contracted curatorium should always appear in full in the minutes of the Curatorium.¹²²

The existence and work of the Curatorium underscores that the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches is not the private endeavor of a few men, nor do the professors have the final say. As ought to be the case with every ecclesiastical endeavor, the work is supervised because it is the *denomination's* work.

It is fitting, then, that the work be done in accord with prearranged regulations. To this end, two constitutions were drawn up almost immediately: one for the faculty, and another for the Curatorium.¹²³ These documents were revised over time, but still today both the Theological School Committee and the faculty have their own constitutions to regulate their work.

The beginnings were humble, and the fruit was small from an earthly perspective (only eight of forty-two students labored in the PRCA ministry until their death), but the Lord prospered it. And He would continue to lead and direct in the years ahead. ●

a meeting of a Classis Contracta to examine Candidate Homer Hoeksema; see Minutes of Classis West, September 7, 1949, Art. 16. Significant points, church politically, are that in both instances the Classis gave prior approval to such a meeting, and provided the specific mandate for the meeting. No one should suppose that a Classis contracta can be held today without prior approval of Classis, regardless of the circumstances for calling the meeting.

119 Minutes of the Curatorium, May 30, 1932, Art. 8.

120 Minutes of the Curatorium, January 9, 1934, Art. 11.

121 Minutes of the Curatorium, January 7, 1936, Art. 14.

122 Minutes of the Curatorium, January 7, 1936, Art. 13.

123 Minutes of Combined Consistories, February 3, 1926, Art. 7.

Calvin's Only Letter to Luther

Cory J. Griess

On January 20, 1545, John Calvin sent a letter to Martin Luther. The letter and the circumstances surrounding its writing and reception ought to be more well known than they are. Set in its historical context, the letter reveals in a unique way Calvin's high view of biblical worship, hints at the significance of the difference between Calvin's and Luther's views of worship, and also uncovers something of the relational dynamics between Luther and other Reformers toward the end of his life. What follows is the letter itself, and my setting forth of its context, content, and significance.

Letter from John Calvin to Martin Luther, January 20, 1545¹

My honored father—Being assured that many of my fellow-countrymen in France, having turned from the darkness of popery to the pure light of the Gospel, have, notwithstanding, been backward to change their open profession, and therefore continue to pollute themselves with the horrors of popery, as if they had no knowledge of pure doctrine,—being informed of this, I could not refrain from assailing such sloth and indifference with the severity which I think they deserve. For what kind of faith is that which remains buried in the recesses of the soul, and never declares itself by an open confession? What kind of witness is that which shrinks concealed behind a hypocritical respect for catholic idolatry? But I will not here discuss this matter, of which I have treated in two little writings, from which you may easily learn, if you be pleased to look over them, what my opinion is, and upon what grounds it rests. Some of our brethren, aroused by reading these papers, have awaked from the slumber in which they were sunk, and begun to consider what it is their duty to do. But since it is a hard thing either to exercise such self-denial as to expose one's life to danger, or to bring upon ourselves the hatred of the whole world, through opposition to its customs and opinions, and to suffer the loss of country and property

1 English translation taken from Paul Henry, *The Life and Times of John Calvin, The Great Reformer*, (R. Carter & Brothers, 1852), 2:11-13.

by a voluntary exile, so it is that many have found themselves unable to persevere in their resolution. They suggest however other excuses for their conduct, and it is plain that they are only anxious to find a pretext for yielding. While they thus vacillate to and fro, they seem desirous of learning your opinion, which, honoring it as they ought to do, will have great weight with them. They have therefore entreated me to despatch a trusty messenger to inquire your sentiments on the subject. This I have been unwilling to refuse, assured as I am that it is of importance to their best interests to find themselves supported by your judgment, and delivered from their present state of uncertainty; and still further, feeling as I do that the same help will be of great use to myself. I therefore beseech you by Christ, my very honored father in the Lord, out of regard for them and for me, to endure the trouble of reading, in the first place, this letter which is written to you in their name, and my own two little books. This you may do for pass-time in your leisure hours, or may commission some one to do it for you, and then make you acquainted with the principal points. In the second place, I would beg you to state to us, in few words, your opinion on the subject. It is against my will that I thus disturb you, occupied as you are with so many important and such various affairs; but I am convinced that, according to your wonted kindness, you will pardon me, while I only yield to necessity in laying before you this request. Would to God that I could hasten to you, were it to enjoy but a few hours of your conversation! Much should I prefer it, and far more useful would it be to speak with you personally, not only on this, but on many other affairs. I hope, however, that that which is not allowed us on earth, will soon be granted us In the kingdom of heaven. Farewell, very renowned man, and faithful servant of Jesus Christ, and my, at all times, revered father! May the Lord continue to guide you by his Spirit to the end, for the common good of his church.

Comments on Calvin's Letter

This is the only letter Calvin ever wrote to Luther. The two never met one another, though of course they were very well aware of each other. Calvin was twenty-six years younger than Luther and viewed Luther as a kind of spiritual father. It is a striking note of history that they never personally communicated beyond this letter. And even with regard to this letter they did not really communicate because Luther never saw the letter. Calvin sent it to Luther through Melanchthon and left it up to Melanchthon to judge whether it was wise to give

the letter to Luther or not. Why Calvin took this approach, and what Melancthon did with the letter will be discussed below.

Calvin was prompted to write the letter by a request of French Protestants who wanted Luther's opinion on a matter. Calvin had already given the French Protestants his own advice concerning the same matter and had done so with great conviction. Some were offended at what Calvin had said, even as others simply disagreed with him. The French Protestants wanted to hear what *Luther* would say about the subject. But having no way to contact Luther, and being in communication with Calvin, they asked Calvin to contact Luther on their behalf. What the matter was comes out in the letter itself as Calvin informs Luther of the occasion for his writing. The issue concerned French Protestants who, in Calvin's view, were compromising their confession by participating in Roman Catholic worship. They did this to avoid persecution from the Roman Catholic state. In the political context, the French state would punish those who did not go to and participate in the Mass. Many French Protestants participated to avoid persecution. They argued that they could in good conscience attend and participate in the Mass because in their heart they were worshipping the true God truly, not participating in idolatry. Thus, what did it matter what the outward man was doing?

Calvin informs Luther in the letter that hearing about this, he "could not refrain from assailing such sloth and indifference with the severity which I think they deserve. For what kind of faith is that which remains buried in the recesses of the soul, and never declares itself by an open confession? What kind of witness is that which shrinks concealed behind a hypocritical respect for catholic idolatry?"² Indeed, Calvin relates to Luther that he had answered queries about this matter "in two little writings, from which you [Luther] may easily learn, if you be pleased to look over them, what my opinion is, and upon what grounds it rests."³ These two tracts (along with a few sermons from Calvin on the subject) have been republished in a book by Protestant Heritage Press titled, *Come Out From Among Them: The Anti-Nicodemite Writings of John Calvin*.⁴

2 Henry, *John Calvin*, 11-12.

3 Henry, *John Calvin*, 12.

4 John Calvin, *Come Out From Among Them: Anti-Nicodemite Writings*

Calvin informs Luther that after he sent these two tracts to the French Protestants their response was mixed. Some refused Calvin's words immediately. Others were at first stirred up to stand for their confession and show themselves openly as Protestants. Over time, however, many of these did not persevere. Now, they have written to Calvin to ask Calvin to ask Luther to give his opinion on this matter. In doing so, Calvin believes the French are looking "to find a pretext for yielding."⁵ In the letter Calvin asks Luther to read his two Anti-Nicodemite writings and give his own opinion on the issue.

The letter from Calvin to Luther reveals the importance Calvin placed on the believer's worship. In his work, *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church*,⁶ Calvin declared that right worship was the great reason for the Reformation, even subordinating justification by faith alone to this chief motive. In worship one publicly makes known who one is. In worship, one fulfills his highest duty to God. For Calvin, to conceal who one is is bad enough, but then for a true believer to pretend to be the opposite, an idolator, was inconceivable. For the French Protestants to avoid persecution, they were required not merely to keep to themselves, but positively to confess they were something they were not. Though their hearts were purportedly not in this idolatrous worship, Calvin said, there must be a union between heart and outward confession.

Those who disagreed with Calvin appealed to Nicodemus who was converted but continued as part of the Sanhedrin until making an open show of his faith later. Calvin's requirement was too severe. For this Calvin called them Nicodemites and titled one of his two tracts, "Answer of John Calvin to the Nicodemite Gentlemen Concerning Their Complaint That He is too Severe."⁷ Nicodemus was wrong in Calvin's view and so were they. But this was not merely Calvin's view of the matter. There was agreement among the Reformers with

of John Calvin (Dallas: Protestant Heritage Press, 2001).

5 Henry, *John Calvin*, 12.

6 John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, trans. Henry Beveridge (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

7 Calvin, *Come Out From Among Them*, 97-125.

Calvin on this point.⁸ True worship inward and outward was imperative for the believer.

The letter draws our attention to another doctrinal issue when we ask why the French Protestants wanted Luther's opinion so badly. The answer is that Luther's view of worship led the French to wonder if Luther would be more willing to let them compromise with Romish worship than Calvin. Luther's view of worship was that if something was not expressly forbidden in Scripture, it was allowed. Calvin's view was that if something was not explicitly commanded, it was not allowed. Luther's view led him to accept minor aspects of traditionally Roman Catholic worship: candles, vestments, etc. For all Luther's invective against popish worship, the French apparently knew Luther's view and saw him as more compromising in this regard.

The letter also reveals something about how Calvin and Luther thought of one another. On Calvin's part, we observe that the tone throughout the letter is humble and respectful. Calvin places himself under Luther. Both at the beginning and at the end Calvin addressed Luther with utmost respect: "My honored father,"⁹ and "I therefore beseech you by Christ, my very honored father in the Lord."¹⁰ The fact that Calvin would even assent to the request of the French to ask for Luther's opinion on the matter is very striking. Calvin is well established as the theologian of the Reformation. Luther is an old man. He will die the next year. Yet Calvin is willing publicly to ask for Luther's opinion on both the issue and his own writing.

Yet, the reception of the letter, or lack thereof, reveals the disregard Luther had for the Swiss Reformers. When Calvin sent the letter to Melanchthon and asked Melanchthon to use his judgment regarding whether or not to give it to Luther, Calvin revealed the fact that he recognized Luther was unhappy with him. The letter was written in 1545. In October of 1544 Luther had published a work against the Swiss Reformers' view of the Lord's Supper (especially Zwingli's,

8 Allan L. Farris, "Calvin's Letter to Luther," *Canadian Journal of Theology*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1964): 127, footnote 18, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/cjt/10-2_124.pdf. The opinions of Melanchthon, Bucer, and Vermigli were later attached to Calvin's writings showing broad agreement.

9 Henry, *John Calvin*, 11.

10 Henry, *John Calvin*, 12.

but Calvin does not view himself as excluded).¹¹ This debate had left Luther and Melanchthon more and more divided as Melanchthon increasingly sided with Calvin on the issue. Rather than leave the debate in the past, Luther had revived it and with vehement language. He accused the Swiss theologians of being blasphemous and destroyers of souls.¹² Everyone was treating Luther with kid gloves by this point and Calvin here is no exception. In fact, Melanchthon decided it was too risky even to give Calvin's letter to Luther, because Luther was so unstable and Melanchthon's own relationship with him had deteriorated. Melanchthon was so discouraged about Luther's vehement writing on the Lord's Supper that he said in a letter to Bullinger that Luther "revives the war on the subject of the Lord's Supper. Cease therefore, to hope for the peace of the churches."¹³ Melanchthon sent Calvin his own opinion instead, agreeing with Calvin on the issue.

Calvin writes at the end of the letter, "Would to God that I could hasten to you, were it to enjoy but a few hours of your conversation! Much should I prefer it, and far more useful would it be to speak with you personally, not only on this, but on many other affairs. I hope, however, that that which is not allowed us on earth, will soon be granted us in the kingdom of heaven."¹⁴ Indeed, it is lovely to think of these two pillars communing in glory now, free of sin and division. ●

11 Farris, "Calvin's Letter to Luther," 125. Luther's work was titled, *A Short Confession on the Holy Sacrament Against the Fanatics*.

12 Farris, "Calvin's Letter to Luther," 124.

13 Farris, "Calvin's Letter to Luther," 126.

14 Henry, *John Calvin*, 12-13.

Book Reviews

What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage, by Wayne Grudem. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2021. Pp. 110. \$7.99 (softcover). ISBN-13: 978-1433568268. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma]

Westminster Theological Seminary graduate Wayne Grudem's Bible says to him, not only that a spouse's adultery and a spouse's desertion are grounds for divorce and remarriage, but also that abuse, "whether physical or verbal/emotional"; similarly abuse of children; "extreme, prolonged verbal and relational cruelty"; "credible threats of serious physical harm"; "incorrigible drug or alcohol addiction"; "incorrigible gambling addiction"; and "incorrigible addiction to pornography" are grounds for divorce and remarriage.

As though these grounds were not sufficient to dissolve the bond that my Bible teaches is broken only by the death of one of the married persons (Romans 7:2, 3; 1 Corinthians 7:39), Grudem's Bible expands the legitimacy of divorce and remarriage to include marital cases that someone or other judges to be "dysfunctional beyond repair" (59-61). A married man or woman, unhappy with his or her present mate, or desirous of

a new relationship with a woman or man more attractive, who cannot find a ground for divorce and remarriage in all these possibilities is lacking in imagination. And the church must cravenly approve, indeed officiate at, the (adulterous) remarriage.

In addition, even if a man or a woman has abandoned his wife or her husband and remarried without any of the many grounds in Grudem's Bible, Grudem's Bible approves the adulterous remarriage, if only the two adulterers confess their sin of adultery, preferably with a tear or two. The church and its members must accept and approve what Matthew 5, Matthew 19, Mark 10, Luke, and 1 Corinthians 7, in most Bibles, condemn as ongoing adultery.

Grudem grounds all this marital lawlessness on what he regards as his novel explanation of 1 Corinthians 7:15: "But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace."

His explanation is that under certain circumstances a believer may divorce the mate whom he or she judges to be an unbeliever. "In such cases," the believer is no longer married. God then gives her or him the right to remarry.

Grudem's explanation of the text, on which all his lawless theology depends, is mistaken from beginning to end. In the first place, his explanation of the text is not novel. Any number of scholars interested in dissolving the bond of marriage have explained the text as does Grudem.

In the second place, Grudem's interpretation of the text is wonderfully in error. The text is not giving any ground at all either for divorce or for remarriage. It is simply recognizing that, despite the will and behavior of a believing wife, her husband may wickedly leave her. In this case, the abandoned believer is "not under bondage." This means, not that she is no longer married to him, but that she is not guilty of living in disobedience to the Word of God concerning marriage; she is not living in sin, even though she is not living with her husband, as the apostle has commanded earlier in the chapter. According to the inspired Bible, being under bondage is enslavement to sin. It

is not the institution of marriage, as Grudem's explanation of the text implies.

The opposite of being under bondage in the text is being in a spiritual condition of "peace." Peace is not the freedom to remarry. It is the spiritual state of having a good conscience before God. Even though her husband has left her, and likely has remarried, the abandoned mate is at peace with God.

Grudem's "novel" exegesis suffers also from its failure to interpret the text in light of the context, a fundamental rule of biblical interpretation. Specifically, he ignores verses 10, 11. This passage teaches that if a wife leaves her husband on the one ground of divorce permitted in all Bibles except Grudem's, namely, his fornication, she has two options, and two only: remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband (who has remained her husband even though he has committed adultery and even though his wife has left him in divorce). Her remarriage is not an option.

The second passage in 1 Corinthians 7 that Grudem has ignored, but in light of which verse 15 must be explained, is verse 39: "The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband

liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord.” Marriage is a bond for life. Only death allows for the remarriage of a married woman or man.

In light of all that precedes in the little book, and which is the

message of the book, the appeal to the church at the end, that the church should call for “high moral standards” in marriage is mere hypocrisy (73). Other Bibles than Grudem’s do not countenance hypocrisy. ●

A Rebuttal of Common Grace and the Well-Meant Offer, by Sonny L. Hernandez. Lexington, KY: Trinity Gospel Church, 2021. Pp. 167. \$12.00 (hardcover). ISBN-13: 979-8510179583. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma]

Dr. Sonny L. Hernandez takes no prisoners. The opening line of this little book on common grace is, “The Bible does not teach that God’s glorious gospel is an offer to all men without exception, nor does it teach that God’s grace is common” (6). Within a few paragraphs, the author states the truth in the bluntest language: “God ordained the salvation of the elect and the reprobation of the wicked (Romans 1:28; 9:17, 18, 21, 22)” (7). Several pages into the book, Hernandez, who is unafraid of controversy—an understatement—states, “the doctrine of the well-meant offer is an ill-begotten progeny of Arminianism” (10).

No one will mistake the book’s thesis: “God’s grace is always salvific or efficacious in its

character, and is reserved exclusively for the elect. Exegetically and theologically, God’s grace is the essence of the gospel, and it’s His salvific favor and love towards those for whom Christ died. The reprobate will never receive God’s grace, and the notion of common grace is a myth” (27).

Undoubtedly, the power of this assault on the theory of common grace, if it is not also the bulk of the book, is its exegesis of the leading texts in the controversy over a common grace of God. The book is a battle of the texts, and, therefore, the crucial battle. Dr. Hernandez exposes the erroneous, and sometimes shoddy, exegesis of the passages that are commonly appealed to in support of the theory of a common grace of God.

These passages include Matthew 5:44, 45; Ezekiel 18:23, 32; and 2 Peter 3:9.

Eye-opening is the crassly Arminian heresy of the doctrine of common grace of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) by its adoption, or approval, of the report of Murray and Stonehouse in 1948. Hernandez quotes the OPC doctrinal statement at length. A re-reading of this statement of a universal, saving grace of God reminds one who has last read the OPC confession long ago that the stated doctrine of the OPC on common grace makes the confession of the doctrine by the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 look almost orthodox in comparison. “It is his [God’s] will and, impliedly, his pleasure that all turn and be saved” (65). Explaining 2 Peter 3:9, concerning God’s longsuffering “to usward” in the matter of the end, not willing that any of “us”—us, us, us!!!—perish, the OPC is on record before the entire Reformed and Presbyterian church-world as confessing that those to whom He is longsuffering “cannot be restricted to the elect” (71). Rather, “He is longsuffering in that, or because, He does not wish that any men should perish, but rather because He wills or wishes that all

should come to repentance” (71). This theological thinking is not only an error in the doctrine of salvation; it is also gross, obvious false doctrine regarding eschatology: If the coming of Christ awaits the coming to repentance of all humans, Christ will never come.

The official doctrinal position of the OPC on the basis of its explanation of Matthew 23:37 is appalling. According to the OPC, as the Messiah of God, Jesus willed, and still does will, the salvation of every inhabitant of Jerusalem, and presumably of every human alive at the time, as also of every human who ever lived or would live. Since Jesus is God, this is the will of God, not only of the Savior in His humanity, but also of God Himself.

It is surely, therefore, a revelation to us of the divine will as well as of the human. Our Lord in the exercise of his most specific and unique function as the God-man gives expression to a yearning will on his part that responsiveness on the part of the people of Jerusalem would have provided the necessary condition for the bestowal of his saving and protecting love...(52).

Since the will of Jesus, which is the will of God, who is (saving) love and who is almighty, is the will for the salvation of all without exception, it is but a short—and inevitable—step from the adopted doctrine of the OPC to the universalism of Karl Barth and Jurgen Moltmann. Were I a minister in the OPC, I would take this step sooner rather than later. I would find it intolerable to confess a God who loves all with a saving love in the Savior Jesus Christ who is frustrated by the unbelief of any whom He loves and for whom the Messiah has died.

Such a gross compromise of the gospel of sovereign grace, which gospel has its origin in election, by such an influential Presbyterian church as the OPC shuts the mouth of all who might object to Hernandez' book with the question, "Why must we have yet another, hard-hitting polemic against the theory of a common grace of God?" If such a fatal compromise of the gospel of grace is abroad in the OPC and in all the ecumenical circles in which the OPC plays a leading role, there cannot be enough such books as that of Hernandez, nor can they be strong enough.

Chapter 3 engages one who is evidently a "Calvinistic Baptist"

on the theory of common grace. Chapter 4 allows the Reformed and Presbyterian creeds to speak to the issue. Chapter 5 demonstrates that fallen mankind has lost the image of God, so that there is no refuge for common grace in the retention of the image in all humans. An appendix proves that the rejection of a common grace of God has deep and strong rootage in the Christian and the Reformed tradition in that prominent theologians denied that the fallen sinner retains anything of the image of God in which man was originally created. John Owen, for example, wrote: "They cannot prove that man, in the condition and state of sin, doth retain any thing of the image of God" (140).

Hernandez is at pains to ward off the usual charge against those who deny the well-meant offer, that they are guilty of "hyper-Calvinism": "Christians are commanded to preach the good news to all men, promiscuously and without distinction (Acts 10:42). Therefore, this book rejects the well-meant offer and common grace notions, but it also rejects hyper-Calvinism, which teaches that professing Christians should only preach Christ to men that they think are elect" (34).

One may on occasion find himself disagreeing with the author's application of the rejection of common grace without any damage to the rejection itself. Hernandez proposes that the rejection of a common grace of God implies the denial that "Christ's death was sufficient for all men without exception" (8). This is a subject on which good men have differed, depending upon what they understood by "sufficiency," but it must be recognized that the Canons of Dordt confesses that "the death of the Son of God...

is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world" (Canons, 2.3).

Adding to the appeal of the book's defense of the sovereignty of grace in salvation is that the author is himself a convert from Rome (124).

The book leaves no prisoners in its battle against the doctrine (within the camp) of salvation by the will of man. It also purposes to deliver those who are captives of, and captivated by, this un-Reformed theory. ●

The Heritage of Anglican Theology, by J. I. Packer. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2021. Pp. 372. \$39. 99 (hardcover). ISBN-13: 978-1433560118. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma]

This is a book that had to be written: the history, tradition, theology, and appalling apostasy of the Anglican Church, by Anglican theologian, J. I. Packer.

The origin of the book is the question, "What is Anglicanism," in terms of "doctrine, worship, institutions, vocation, and personnel?" The main concern, as one would expect from Packer, is Anglican theology.

The account of Anglicanism's earliest days in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries is as fascinating as that history actually was: Henry VIII; Mary; Elizabeth; Laud; Cranmer; Whitgift; and others.

There is a lengthy, thorough treatment of the rise of the Puritans in the Anglican Church and of the intense struggles of the loyal churchmen against the Puritan upstarts. Packer's description of the conflict between the Anglican establishment and the fiery Puritans is gripping: "Hooker [the establishment Anglican] preached in the morning,

and then Travers preached in the afternoon. And Travers—a feisty, fiery young Puritan—made it his business in the afternoon sermons to challenge things that Hooker had said in the morning sermon” (112). Church attendance had to have been exciting in those days.

Although his heart was with the evangelicals in the Anglican Church, Packer’s membership remained in that false church. And he knew. According to Packer’s own description of that Church, in modern times the Church has been dominated by various forms of heresy, which Packer describes as “Anglo-Catholicism,” which was one with Rome with the exception of actual union; the “Broad Church theology,” which among other false doctrines embraced Darwin’s evolutionary theory with all its implications regarding the inspiration of Scripture and the doctrine of creation; and sheer “modernism,” which denies the inspiration of Scripture outrightly and the deity of Jesus. Packer acknowledges that the Anglican Church of the present day not only tolerates this modernism, but also is under the control of this unbelief.

Packer damns this doctrinal history of the Anglican Church with faint praise. In all its accep-

tance of various forms of false doctrine the Church showed itself “flexible.” The reality is its manifestation of all three marks of a false church: the preaching and teaching of a false gospel; the corruption of the sacraments; and the failure to exercise Christian discipline.

With regard to the Arminianism of much of so-called “evangelicalism” in the Anglican Church, the judgment of the old Packer differed radically from that of the younger Packer. Whereas the young Packer had condemned Arminianism as false doctrine, the old Packer of this book denied that Wesley’s Arminianism was a “fundamental” error. Toplady was wrong in his condemnation of Wesley.

Packer sounds a favorite motto of the Puritans as a reason for hope on the part of evangelicals who remain in the Anglican Church today (109). What he overlooks is that evil in the church, unchecked by discipline, also “endures”—and conquers.

This reviewer comes away from Packer’s favorable treatment of the “heritage” of the Anglican Church with three powerful impressions. First, if ever a Reformed theologian or congregation is tempted to

minimize the importance of the “regulative principle” of worship, the history of worship in the Anglican Church corrects the mistake. Anglicanism feels free to worship God in its public services of worship as the latest innovative bishop (or, perhaps his wife) desires. The result is a religious circus.

Second, the history of the Anglican Church from Elizabeth I to the present day is that of an

ecclesiastical ship tossed doctrinally and with regard to public worship by every wind of doctrine and of liturgy—with J. I. Packer uncomfortably, but determinedly, in the ecclesiastical boat.

And, third, when Packer comes at last to the “calling” of evangelicals in the Anglican Church, he grievously overlooks the real calling: leave a false church. ●

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