

## Editor's Notes

The faculty of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary is pleased to present another issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*.

Several of the articles in this issue are the written version of past speeches. Every member of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, and many of her friends, are aware of the doctrinal controversy that the PRCA has endured in recent years. Some decisions of Synod 2018 addressed issues in the controversy. Prof. Brian Huizinga's article in this issue reflects what Synod 2018 said about the relationship between our obedience and our enjoying of covenant fellowship with God. He also demonstrates that the clarification Synod gave to the matter accords with statements of notable theologians of the PRCA throughout her history. This article is a revision of a speech that Prof. Huizinga gave in Hull, IA in October 2022.

The next three articles are the written, and in some instances expanded, version of speeches that Rev. John Marcus and Prof. Ronald Cammenga gave at a conference in Mexico during the summer of 2022. A footnote at the beginning of Rev. Marcus' first article gives more information about the conference. The doctrinal subject of the conference was the image of God in mankind. Rev. Marcus presents two articles, one regarding why God created mankind in His image (for fellowship!), and the other regarding the effect of the fall on that image (completely lost, and restored only by grace).

While Rev. Marcus' second article underscores the relevance of the topic for theological reasons (it makes necessary a sovereign, divine work of salvation), Prof. Cammenga's article demonstrates how our awareness of and gratitude for being restored to God's image must affect our entire life in relation to God and our neighbor.

Emeritus Prof. David Engelsma submits a contribution regarding the Presbyterian theologian Robert Dabney's view of the well-meant offer of the gospel. Prof. Engelsma points out where Dabney went wrong in teaching this doctrine. In one respect, Prof. Engelsma notes, Dabney's view differed from many proponents of the well-meant

offer today: Dabney denied that God was expressing a desire for the salvation of every single human who hears the gospel.

My articles on the history of our seminary will continue in every November issue, God willing, until the history is completed. This issue contains the first installment of the history of Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches as an ecclesiastical body.

Book reviews are an important part of any theological journal. Three of the books reviewed in this issue regard modern-day “Calvinism,” better known as “Kuyperianism.” Two regard the history and work of other Reformed denominations; two regard biblical studies; and one regards the paradoxical life of the paradoxical theologian, Karl Barth.

May the book reviews whet your appetite to read good books.

May the articles strengthen your desire to live a godly, Christian life, founded on sound doctrine.

May this issue be another occasion for you to remember our seminary in your prayers. Many of you do, we know, and for this we are thankful.

Finally, may the name of our faithful, covenant God be exalted in our words and lives.

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# Synod 2018 of the Protestant Reformed Churches and Holy Scripture: Enjoying Fellowship in the Way of Obedience

Brian L. Huizinga

This article concerns one element of the important decision that was rendered by Synod 2018 of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA) regarding covenant theology. Synod 2018 was very important in the history of the PRCA because it answered a lengthy protest, and in so doing provided the churches with important and fairly extensive doctrinal explanations in the realm of covenant theology. There was controversy over the relation between two things: (1) our enjoyment or experience of covenant fellowship with God, and (2) our good works of obedience, that is, our life of holiness according to the law as the sanctified children of God. How do we relate the fellowship that we enjoy with God and our obedience? Synod answered that question.

In answering the question, Synod not only spoke in negative terms by expressing what the relation is *not*, but significantly, for the welfare of the churches, Synod also spoke positively and expressed what the relation *is*. And that is important. It is always good and necessary to be polemical by exposing and refuting all lies that are contrary to the truth of God. However, the negative is never primary, but must always serve the revelation of God's truth, and truth is positive. A mere polemic that rails against some error but never sets forth the beautiful positive expression of the truth will not build up the church in her faith, nor will it even accomplish the intended goal of removing the error. Truth is one; error is multifaceted, and will keep returning in one form or another. The church needs to know and be established upon the truth, the whole truth of God's Word, and the truth is positive.

The value of the decisions of Synod 2018 on the question of the relation between our enjoyment of covenant fellowship and our obedience is that synod, in its defense of the unconditional covenant, explained what that relation *is* positively. Synod said something *positive* about the regenerated believer's sanctified life of obedience lived according to the law of God. This was Synod 2018's *summary* statement: "Properly expressing the relationship between obedience as the necessary way of the covenant and the experience of covenant fellowship is: We experience fellowship with God through faith (instrument), on the basis of what Christ has done (ground), and in the way of our obedience (way of conduct or manner of living)."<sup>1</sup> The following year, a protest came to Synod 2019 contending that although the decision of Synod 2018 was not erroneous, and although the language of Synod 2018 was the language of Herman Hoeksema, one of the founding fathers of the PRCA, yet the language of Synod 2018 was not distinctive enough and must be changed. Synod 2019 rejected that protest and maintained the important positive teaching of Synod 2018.<sup>2</sup> This article deals with the last phrase of synod's *summary*—that simple, historic, positive teaching of Herman Hoeksema and the PRCA that has been maintained through all our history: We enjoy covenant fellowship with God in the way of obedience.

This teaching of the PRCA is not universally embraced. Following the schism of 2021, a small group that formerly belonged to the PRCA now curses its former denomination as the great whore of Babylon that despises God, Christ, and the gospel. Many members of the PRCA have heard a refrain of opposition from those who have joined themselves to that group, which refrain goes something like this, "The PRCA teaches covenant fellowship in the way of obedience—that is Federal Vision heresy! The PRCA denies the gospel! The PRCA does not want Christ! The PRCA denies justification by faith alone! The PRCA teaches salvation by the law! The PRCA teaches that you become God's friend by obeying Him! The PRCA is all about man!" The purpose of this article is not to interact with those stones that are hurled at the PRCA any more than David interacted with the stones that Shimei, by God's bidding, hurled at him.

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1 *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the PRCA 2018*, 74.

2 *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the PRCA 2019*, 65-67.

My purpose is to open up the Bible. Controversy and schism are painful for the church, *very* painful for some families and marriages. However, from a theological point of view, controversy is always good and the fruits of it are exciting, because when God gives His church humility during controversy, He then sharpens our understanding and generates a more fervent and focused study of the confessions and ultimately the Scriptures. I need that, and you need that. None of us has mastered theology. My purpose is to honor the legacy of the great Reformation of the sixteenth century in which God through the Reformers brought the church back to the Bible. I intend to demonstrate the biblical basis for the teaching of Synod 2018. Therefore the title of this article is “Synod 2018 of the Protestant Reformed Churches and Holy Scripture: Enjoying Covenant Fellowship in the Way of Obedience.”

### **Enjoying Covenant Fellowship**

We begin with the concept “enjoying covenant fellowship.” We are referring to sweet communion, the delightful experience of God’s love, the wonderful assurance of God’s nearness, blessing, and favor. To experience covenant fellowship or communion with God is sweetness to the soul. In the well-known words of Psalter 203, stanza 1, we sing of “sweet communion,”<sup>3</sup> and in Psalter 28 (entitled “Fellowship with God”), we express how sweet that communion is to us when we sing, “My inmost being thrills with joy, and gladness fills my breast” (stanza 3) and, “The path of life Thou showest me, of joy a boundless store, is ever found at Thy right hand and pleasures evermore” (stanza 5). Some churches sing as their concluding doxology, “May the grace of Christ the Savior, and the Father’s boundless love, with the Holy Spirit’s favor, rest upon us from above. Thus may we abide in union, with each other and the Lord, and possess in sweet communion joys which earth cannot afford.”<sup>4</sup>

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3 All references to the Psalter in this article are to *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and Added Chorale Section* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1927). The metrical selections of the Psalter are those of the 1912 *Psalter* published by the United Presbyterian Board of Publication and Bible School Work, Pittsburgh, PA.

4 *Psalter*, 393.

Enjoying this sweet communion with God is the Christian *life*. Enjoying covenant fellowship is not like regeneration. Regeneration occurs in a *moment*. The elect sinner is spiritually dead, and in a one-time event never to be repeated, the Spirit sovereignly enters the dead sinner's heart and makes him alive. Furthermore, enjoying covenant fellowship is distinct from justification. Justification is a legal *verdict* rendered by the judge in the courtroom: "Innocent!" Our covenant fellowship with God is, however, our *life* with God, even as fellowship is God's own life that He enjoys within Himself as the triune God. Fellowship with God is the most beautiful description of the Christian life from regeneration and conscious faith all the way to glorification, when that communion will be perfected in heaven and uninterrupted by our sin.

Scripture depicts this life as walking with God as friends. James 2:23 calls the believer, like Abraham, "the friend of God." Genesis 5:24 says of Enoch, and Genesis 6:9 says of Noah, both representing all believers, that they "walked with God." In 2 Corinthians 6:16, God promises His people, "I will dwell in them, and walk in them [that is, in the midst of them, among them], and I will be their God and they shall be my people." You can easily picture two people, like Joseph and Mary, walking together side by side down a path enjoying one another's company, as they open their hearts through communication. That is their *life* together. So we walk with God as His friend-servants. We know His secrets of love for us revealed in the gospel of Christ. We taste His goodness and tokens of love in Christ through the sacraments. We know His favor and blessings, are assured of His presence and protection, and are firmly persuaded that He is with us and constantly works all things together for our good.

Sweet communion with God! Knowing and enjoying God—that is our *life*! Is that not amazing! The believer shudders to think of the life of the unbeliever, which is death, for we sing in Psalter 203, stanza 5, "To live apart from God is death." The believer is overwhelmed with gratitude to think of his own life. How great and glorious God is, and how small and sinful we are. What a wonder that anyone can say, "This is my life—to walk in fellowship with God!"

## Relating Our Obedience

### *Not Ground*

How do we relate our obedience to our experience of covenant fellowship? First, our obedience is not the *ground* or *basis* for the fellowship we enjoy with God. Christ in His perfect work is the basis or reason for all that we have and enjoy in God's covenant. In its summary statement, Synod 2018 said, "We experience fellowship with God...on the basis of what Christ has done (*ground*)."

Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, with His life-long obedience, suffering, atoning death, and victorious resurrection, is our righteousness. God eternally elected His people *in Christ*, and Christ has come and earned for His elect body membership in God's covenant and every blessing in that covenant through time and eternity. *Because of* who He is (His person) and *because of* what He did (His works), *He* is the one and only Mediator between God and sinners. Because of *Him* we are reconciled to God, brought nigh unto God, and can live our life in fellowship with God. 1 Timothy 2:5 teaches, "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." Belgic Confession Article 23 states that we do not "trust in anything in ourselves, or in any merit of ours, relying and resting upon ["upon" indicates *ground*] the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which become ours when we believe in Him. This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities, and to give us confidence in approaching to God..."<sup>5</sup>

We do not enjoy covenant fellowship with God *because* we obey Him, that is, on the ground or basis of our obedience. We have sweet communion with God *because* of Christ, who paid the penalty for all of our sins and obtained perfect righteousness for us so that in Him we have access unto God. If you ever want to thank, credit, and praise someone for your covenant fellowship with God, do not thank, credit, or praise yourself, but Christ. *He* is worthy of all adoration world without end.

I will draw a picture for your mind and will keep adding elements as we go. First, picture God in heaven above, and you on the earth

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5 Belgic Confession 23, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: PRCA, 2005), 51-52.

beneath. To be sure, God is omnipresent, but Scripture teaches us to think of God as ruling from His throne above us in heaven as His dwelling place. Because Jesus is the only ground or basis for covenant fellowship, He is the only one who can come between you and God so that you can enjoy God. So, picture God in heaven, you on earth, and Jesus between you.

### *Not Instrument*

Second, our obedience is not the instrument through which we enjoy covenant fellowship with God; faith is. Synod 2018, in its summary statement, taught, “We experience fellowship with God through faith (instrument).”

In order for us to experience covenant fellowship, God must perform a miracle. He must graft His elect people into the living Mediator Jesus Christ by a true and living faith so that with our whole being—heart, mind, soul, and strength—we are unbreakably united to Christ. Then, by the word of the gospel, the Spirit of God must quicken within us the conscious activity of faith so that we actually believe—we know and trust in Jesus. United to Christ and believing in Christ by the instrument of faith, we *receive!* We receive Christ’s righteousness, His Spirit, and all the blessings stored up in heaven. We receive all the sweetness of God’s goodness. Faith is unique. It is the instrument of *reception*. Repentance is not the instrument of salvation whereby we receive from God, neither are good works. *Faith* is the instrument, and faith alone *receives*.

Scripture ties reception to faith and teaches that by faith believers receive. After Jesus called thirsty sinners to Himself and promised that the one who believes in Him shall have rivers of living water flowing out of his belly, the inspired John connects believing and receiving when he writes, “(But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified)” (John 7:39). This is also the teaching of Galatians 3:2, “This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?” and of Galatians 3:14, “That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” Belgic Confession Article 22 instructs us that



“faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits,” and faith “is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness,” and “the Holy Ghost kindleth in our hearts an upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits...”<sup>6</sup>

Let us return to the picture. God is in heaven. You are on earth. Christ is between you and God. Now, *faith* is the vertical channel that connects your heart to God, His Word and promises, by running through the Mediator Christ. Because you are *Christ’s* by faith, you are *God’s*. Everything you have in the covenant, principally the Spirit, you receive through the instrument of faith for Christ’s sake. Believing, you receive.

### *Way of Conduct*

Third, our obedience, while not the ground or instrument, is the *way of conduct* in covenant fellowship with God. As you walk through your life in fellowship with God, enjoying Him *because of* Christ, and enjoying Him *through* faith, you enjoy Him *in the way of* obedience. Once again, Synod stated: “Properly expressing the relationship between obedience as the necessary way of the covenant and the experience of covenant fellowship is: We experience fellowship with God through faith (instrument), on the basis of what Christ has done (ground), and in the way of our obedience (way of conduct or manner of living).”

Chosen by God, redeemed by Jesus, and renewed by the Spirit in God’s covenant, we friends of God are quickened unto obedience to God’s law. Obedience is the *way*, or the *path* on which we walk. Obedience describes our *grateful conduct* in fellowship with God, our manner of living. How *must* we, and by God’s almighty grace, how *do* we live when we walk in sweet communion with God? Synod taught, “Obedience is the life of the covenant as God’s justified and sanctified friend-servants delight in walking in obedient friendship with their Friend-Sovereign, to whom they are beholden for all the good works they do, and not He to them.”<sup>7</sup>

One finds many other names for this path of obedience. It is the way of *light* or the way of the *antithesis*—if you obey, you will be

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6 Belgic Confession 22, in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, 50.

7 *Acts of Synod 2018*, 74.

different in this world of darkness, perhaps even in your own family. It is the way of *suffering*—if you obey God, you will bear a heavy cross for Christ’s sake and suffer reproach in the world, perhaps in your own family. It is the *narrow* way—if you strive to obey all of God’s commandments, you will often find yourself on a very lonely and unpopular path. It is the way of *sanctification*. This was Herman Hoeksema’s favorite designation (see the appendix for instances), likely because by it he sought to underscore that this way of obedience is never the way of perfection in this world, but the way of constant and strenuous struggle for the believer who yet carries with him his sinful flesh. As Lord’s Day 44 of the Heidelberg Catechism teaches, “...even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of this obedience; yet so, that with a sincere resolution they begin to live not only according to some, but all the commandments of God.”<sup>8</sup> By calling the path of obedience the path of *sanctification*, we emphasize the necessity of ongoing, daily repentance in the mortification of the old man, and the continual quickening of the new man in a life of good works.

Before we return to our picture, it is important to understand that sweet communion is *not* enjoyed by those who depart from the path of obedience and walk impenitently in the other way, the way of iniquity. Synod stated, “We do not experience covenant fellowship as we continue in disobedience. We experience covenant fellowship in the way of obedience....”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the elect, regenerated covenant member who for a time departs from the good way and continues in the way of disobedience remains in a state of grace, united to the Savior in an unbreakable bond, and has a genuine experience of the love of God. However, that experience of God’s love is not the enjoyable one of sweet communion. It is the bitter and agonizing experience of God’s heavy hand of chastisement.

When David walked impenitently, he was not enjoying fellowship with God. God was not sweetly reassuring David and giving that impenitent king the sense of His divine favor. God was displeased with His son David and was crushing his bones one by one so that

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8 Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 44, in *The Confessions and The Church Order*, 133.

9 *Acts of Synod 2018*, 72.

David cried, “My bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long... For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me, my moisture is turned into the drought of summer!” (Ps. 32:3-4). When Jonah walked impenitently, he was not enjoying fellowship with God. God was sore displeased and stirring up the seas all around Jonah, who was then cast into the darkness of the waters so that he cried, “I am cast out of thy sight” (Jonah 2:4). In fact, if any man says, “I have fellowship with God and I enjoy the assurance of my salvation,” while he deliberately walks in darkness, Scripture condemns him as a liar. 1 John 1:6 teaches, “If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not the truth.” To experience Jehovah’s chastening as an impenitent elect sinner, as David and Jonah did, is to experience Jehovah’s *love*, but the experience is one of extreme anguish and distress of soul. That is not the sweet experience of covenant *fellowship* and *communion*. We enjoy fellowship with God *in the way of obedience* to Him.

Now we return to the picture. God is in heaven. You are on earth. Christ is between you and God as Mediator. Faith is the vertical channel that connects you to God through Christ and keeps you in communion with God. By faith you receive the Spirit and enjoy fellowship with God. Because the Spirit always makes faith *fruitful*, you bring forth the fruits of good works of gratitude, and those good works are the horizontal path that stretches out through time under your feet and on which you walk.

We are attempting to draw a picture, but a picture is static. If we turn the static image into a video and press the “play” button, we can watch footage of the Christian life. You are walking now. Time is passing now. You are walking in fellowship with God like Adam, Enoch, and Abraham. God is your Friend-Sovereign to whom you are united by faith in Christ and from whom you receive all good things. You walk in fellowship with God in the station and calling He gave you—that is your life! And as you walk, enjoying communion with your God in heaven through faith in Christ, on what path do you walk? The path of obedience! That path is no basis, that path earns you nothing, that path is no instrument for reception. Rather, that path describes the manner in which you conduct yourself while enjoying fellowship with God.

Before turning to Scripture, I conclude this explanation by referencing two helpful distinctions found in past decisions of PRCA synods. First, Synod 2016 distinguished two uses of the word “way” and stated, “Sometimes, in Scripture, the word ‘way’ refers to the conduct or ‘way of life’ of a person [examples given]. Other times, in Scripture, the word ‘way’ refers specifically to how we have access to the Father, sometimes referred to as the objective basis of our salvation, which is the person and work of Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:20).”<sup>10</sup> Our obedience is not the meritorious *way of access unto God* (think ‘vertically’ in the picture we are drawing) and how we come to God (that ‘way’ is Christ in whom we believe, John 14:6). Rather, obedience is our *way of grateful conduct* in fellowship with God (the horizontal path on which we walk).

Second, with careful precision, Synod 2018 called obedience *the fruit of faith in fellowship*<sup>11</sup> (for short: fruit of faith). The protest that came to Synod 2019 seeking to jettison the phrase “in the way of obedience,” used different language and called obedience *the fruit of experiencing fellowship by faith* (for short: fruit of fellowship). The protestant stated, “I believe that it is important and would be helpful for synod to replace all such indistinctive language with distinctive language that clearly and consistently indicates that the only relationship between obedience and fellowship is that obedience is the inevitable fruit of experiencing fellowship with God by faith alone,” and “it must be clear that *all* of our obedience comes *after* (as the inevitable fruit of) our experience of covenant fellowship by faith....”<sup>12</sup> The protestant said that obedience is *the fruit of the experience of fellowship*, and that all obedience comes *after* the experience of fellowship. But listen to Synod 2018, “But, obedience is *the way of*, that is to say, *the way of grateful conduct* in the experience of covenant fellowship, because obedience is a necessary *fruit* of our faith in Christ through which faith we have fellowship with God.”<sup>13</sup> Obedience is not the *fruit of experiencing fellowship*, as the protestant said, but the *fruit of faith* in fellowship.

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10 *Acts of Synod 2016*, 49-50.

11 *Acts of Synod 2018*, 81.

12 *Acts of Synod 2019*, 214-16. Emphasis protestant’s.

13 *Acts of Synod 2018*, 72-73. Emphasis synod’s.

The difference is not merely subtle and inconsequential. Synod 2019 essentially said to the protestant, your distinctiveness is your own *personal* distinctiveness and you are trying to lead and bind the churches where God will not lead and bind us. *Our* distinctiveness will be Reformed, and we will stand with the Reformed confessions that teach us to conceive of obedience as the fruit of *faith*.<sup>14</sup> Insisting that obedience must always be understood as the *fruit of experiencing fellowship*, and that obedience always comes *after* the experience of fellowship, raises the question, “Is the believer’s obedience ever a part of his life *in* fellowship with God? Or, as we walk in fellowship with God through time, is obedience never *in* fellowship, but always *after* fellowship, *after* fellowship, *after* fellowship?” Synod said: Obedience is a fruit of faith *in* the experience of fellowship, so that as you walk with God you are obeying God.

### **Biblical Proof**

In grounding the teaching of Synod 2018, I will not quote Protestant Reformed writers of the past to demonstrate that the teaching of Synod 2018 is the historic teaching of the PRCA. In an appendix to this article, you can find a series of such quotations. Neither will I go through the Reformed confessions to ground the teaching of synod in the official doctrine of the Reformed faith. Regarding these confessions, note that the Heidelberg Catechism makes very plain in its third section that the whole Christian life lived by saved believers is a life of grateful obedience. Furthermore, the Canons of Dordt 1.8 teach that “God hath chosen us from eternity, both to grace and glory, to salvation and the way of salvation, which He hath ordained that we should walk therein.”<sup>15</sup> The Canons clearly distinguish “salvation” and “the way of salvation.” There is the whole reality of “salvation” as accomplished by Christ and applied by the Spirit to the believer throughout his life all the way unto his final glorification, *and* there is the “way of the salvation.” The “way of salvation” is the way of good works unto which God has created us in Christ, and which He has before ordained that we who are saved in Christ should walk therein.

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14 See Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Days 24 and 32; Belgic Confession, Article 24.

15 Canons of Dordt, 1.8, in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, 156.  
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This article will provide the *biblical* grounds for the teaching of the PRCA. Appeal could be made to specific passages. Synod 2019 quoted Proverbs 12:28, “In the way of righteousness is life and in the pathway thereof there is no death,” and Proverbs 16:31, “The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness.”<sup>16</sup> However, we ought to go beyond the simplistic approach of finding passages that use the precise words “in the way of.”

First, Scripture clearly brings two things together and makes them both part of one path: fellowship and obedience. That is, Scripture not only teaches that our *life* as ordained by God is walking in *fellowship* with God, but that our *life* as ordained by God is walking in the way of *obedience* to God. For example, Psalm 119 repeatedly refers to God’s commandments as His “ways,” and the biblical term *way* emphasizes that the whole course of our life all the way to the grave must be one of obedience to God. We find this usage in Exodus 18:20, “And thou shalt teach them ordinances and laws, and shalt shew them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do,” and Judges 2:17, “And yet they would not hearken unto their judges, but they went a whoring after other gods, and bowed themselves unto them: they turned quickly out of the way which their fathers walked in, obeying the commandments of the Lord; but they did not so.” The path of life for us on this earth is the way of obedience. In contrast to this way of obedience, Psalm 1 speaks of the other path and calls it “the way of sinners” and “the way of the ungodly” that “shall perish.”

The verb Scripture uses with “way” is “walk,” which emphasizes the entire, ongoing, active life of the believer. Obedience for the covenant member is not to be momentary, rare, or occasional, something only for Sunday, or something to take seriously only when under the direct supervision of parents or other authority figures. Then obedience is not a *path* but is more like stepping stones spaced a great distance apart, and the child of God goes through life touching one here and one there. Rather, because obedience must define our entire *life*, Scripture depicts that life as walking down a path. Even as walking in the way of darkness does not refer to “daily sins of infirmity,”<sup>17</sup> of which we are all guilty, but to an entire life characterized by corruption and

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<sup>16</sup> *Acts of Synod 2019*, 66.

<sup>17</sup> Canons of Dordt, 5.2, in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, 173.

rebellion against God, so also, *walking in the way of obedience* refers to the believer's whole active life of loving and serving God. Thus 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." Paul does not merely speak of *doing* good works, but of *walking in them*. Though we do not walk in them perfectly, having only a small beginning, we firmly resolve to be obedient and we do begin to live according to all the commandments of God.<sup>18</sup> Scripture then, makes plain that obedience is the path of life, marked out by God for each one of us from eternity, so that God's purpose for His elect children, which He accomplishes in them by His grace, is not occasional obedience, sporadic obedience, or seasonal obedience, but a *life* of obedience.

As demonstrated earlier, Scripture teaches that our whole life is a life of *fellowship*. On what path then will believers walk when they walk in covenant fellowship with God? On the path of obedience! What characterizes a believer's life while walking in communion with God? Grateful obedience! The requirements of those who walk in covenant fellowship with God are "to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Micah 6:8). Scripture paints a picture of the Christian life using a path, and it brings together on that one path both fellowship with God and obedience. What God has joined together let not man put asunder.

Second, many passages that touch on God's covenant inseparably connect our enjoyment of God as our God in the covenant *and* our obedience. Many of these passages can be found in the book of Ezekiel, which is not surprising because Ezekiel was written to Jewish captives in Babylon who for years had walked as stubborn rebels in the ways of disobedience, boasting: "God is our God! We have fellowship with God, and we always will because we have the temple!" Then God cast Judah into Babylon. Ezekiel 36:24-28 is representative (other passages include 11:19-21, 37:23-28). As you read the passage, notice the sovereignty of God who graciously promises, "I..."

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18 Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 44, in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, 133.

24. For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land.

25. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you.

26. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

27. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.

28. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Verse 27 speaks of obedience, walking! Walking caused by God! Then verse 28 teaches that God's people will "*dwell*," and that is the language of the covenant in which believers consciously enjoy God's fellowship, knowing that God is their God and they are His people. Who knows God as their God? Those who walk in His statutes and keep His judgments.

The same teaching is found in the prophecy of Jeremiah, which has the same historical context as Ezekiel. God showed Judah during Jeremiah's day what He had taught their fathers generations prior when He took them out of Egypt (Jer. 7:23). Then God said, "But this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people: and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well unto you." When God says, "Obey My voice, and I will be your God," He does not mean, "My covenant is conditional and depends not upon My promise but upon your obedience, therefore, if you obey Me, then I will take you into My covenant and be your God." Nor does God mean, "If you obey Me, then you can earn more experiences of My conditional love." Rather God is teaching, "*I am* your God. I have loved you from eternity. I have sovereignly and graciously brought you out of Egypt and incorporated you into My covenant, and led you into the promised land! Now, as you live with Me in My covenant, obey Me! And it is only as you are walking in that way of obedience that you will know Me as your God, and it will be well with you. Those who go a whoring after the gods of the heathen Canaanites and take their wives in marriage walk in the way of rebellion that I detest. In that way they will not know Me



and it will not be well with them.” Remember the picture we drew. We walk with God, enjoying Him and all the experiences of His love for Christ’s sake through the instrument of faith *and* as we walk in the fruits of that faith—obedience!

Finally, this doctrine is taught in the Psalms. The Psalms begin with it in Psalm 1:1-2, “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. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.” Blessed! Do you know who is blessed and happily experiencing the loving favor of God? It is that man who believes in Christ and is justified freely for His sake. True as that may be, the psalmist does not say that. He identifies the blessed man according to his manner of life, his conduct. He is *not* the man who walks in the path of the ungodly, but he *is* the man who walks delighting in God’s law. The Psalms *begin* here, with this inviolable principle of God, in which He ties two things together: (1) His blessing, and (2) obedience. We have blessing, we enjoy assurance, we know God’s favor as our covenant God, only as we walk in the way of obedience. Again, Psalm 119:1 teaches, “Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord.”

If anyone finds offensive this teaching that we enjoy covenant fellowship with God and the blessings of God *as* we walk in the way of obedience, and they willfully reject it as Federal Vision heresy or salvation by law, then I ask for honesty. Some reject this teaching ignorantly, as they foolishly follow authoritative-sounding human voices. But for those who willfully reject this doctrine, the plea of honesty is, please stop singing the Psalms. Your Psalm-singing is hypocrisy.

Listen to Psalter 65 stanzas 3-4, “He who walks in godly fear, in the path of truth shall go. Peace shall be his portion here, and his sons all good shall know.” As you walk in the way of obedience, you not only have God’s blessing now, you can expect it in the future. And, “They that fear and love the Lord [love is the essence of obedience] shall Jehovah’s friendship know, He will grace to them accord, and His faithful covenant show.” If I were to preach those exact words, someone would likely object: “You are making your love a condition, and teaching that if you love God, then God will be your friend.” But those are not my words, those are the inspired psalmist’s. Who has

ever imagined heretical conditional theology when singing Psalter 65? We know the truth! We enjoy God's friendship, blessings, and grace as we walk in the way of obedience.

In Psalter 278 stanza 5 we sing, "Those who His gracious covenant keep, the Lord will ever bless, their children's children shall rejoice, to see His righteousness." Whom does God bless? Those who keep His covenant by loving Him and keeping His commandments. Should someone respond to the psalmist, "You are making obedience the *reason* God blesses you," the psalmist would say, "No, the obedience of the promised Christ is the reason God blesses me; my obedience is the way in which I walk grateful for God's blessings and confident that, for the Messiah's sake, more of them are coming to me and the generations following! And when I go off that path of obedience into rebellion, I may have no confidence that God has divine blessings in store for me."

This is Parenting 101. The Psalms *begin* here. The Israelites taught their children doctrine by singing, even as God taught those Israelite parents and now teaches us as we sing the Psalms. At this point I quote one of our spiritual predecessors in the faith, a mother, not a father. When Gertrude Hoeksema was teaching the Bible lesson dealing with the home of Isaac, Rebekah, Esau and Jacob, and how they were all lying and scheming against each other, she wrote of Rebekah, "She could have gotten the whole family together and talked about being blessed by God only in the way of obedience."<sup>19</sup> What godly mother has not trained up her child with that doctrine? It is the doctrine of the Spirit. We enjoy fellowship with God and His blessings only in the way of obedience.

### **Why Obedience is the Way**

First, because God is a holy God, we enjoy fellowship with Him only in the way of obedience. What other way could there possibly be with a holy God? God is holy, commands us to be holy, and graciously makes us holy by His Spirit. He will not walk with you as a friend and give you delightful experiences of His love while you walk in the way

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<sup>19</sup> Gertrude Hoeksema, *Show Me Thy Ways: Grade 4* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1988), 90. Gertrude was the wife of Homer C. Hoeksema and the daughter-in-law of Herman Hoeksema.

He abhors. God hates the profanity and carelessness of antinomianism. We are not nearly as holy as God, yet we ourselves will not walk in communion with a friend or family member who walks in the way of rebellion. To deny the doctrine of fellowship in the way of obedience is to deny the holiness of God.

Second, because God makes faith fruitful, we enjoy fellowship in the way of obedience. If you enjoy sweet communion with God, you have *faith*. It is impossible to know and delight in God without faith. And if you have faith, the Spirit will make your faith *fruitful*. It is *impossible* to have true faith in Christ, and fellowship with God, without fruits of thanksgiving.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, that man who walks in fellowship with God by faith will also love God, adore God, fear God, and love his neighbors for God's sake, as God requires in His law. To deny the doctrine of fellowship in the way of obedience is to deny the efficacy of the Spirit in the fruitfulness of faith.

Third, because God is a personal being, we enjoy fellowship with Him in the way of obedience. God does not have fellowship with rocks, flowers, or waterfalls, any more than we do. Neither does He fellowship with the dead, any more than we do. Fellowship presupposes *living people*. The covenant is a *living relationship*, and as you live in that beautiful relationship with God, God is constantly loving you, and the fruit of that love is that you are alive in Christ and loving, obeying, and serving God. There is then this continual dynamic of fellowship in mutual bonds of love. And in all that activity of mutual love, God is sovereign so that all of the fellowship is *of* God, and *through* God, and *to* God. To deny the doctrine of fellowship in the way of loving obedience is to deny God is a personal God.

Finally, because God seeks His own glory, we enjoy fellowship in the way of obedience. The purpose of God in saving us is to take us into His covenant by a wonder of grace and consecrate us unto Himself so that we cleave to Him and render to Him grateful returns of ardent love. Why? Because that fruitful life of love, as opposed to a walk in the unfruitful works of darkness, magnifies God's grace and brings glory to His name! By obedience we manifest to the hostile world around us that we belong to God and are His party in the world,

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<sup>20</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 24, in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, 107.

fighting for His cause and living for His truth. Even as God sends the rain down from heaven to water the earth so that it may bring forth and bud (Is. 55:10), so also He sends forth His Word from heaven to His covenant people and it never returns void but accomplishes His purpose (Is. 55:11). That purpose is that we not only know Him but *live unto* Him in all good works, bringing forth and budding to the eternal praise of His grace (Is. 55:12-13). After all, all things are not only “of God” and “through God,” but also “to God,” (Rom. 11:36). To deny the doctrine of fellowship in the way of obedience is to deny God the glory He deserves.

### **Conclusion**

My prayer is that this article transcends the theoretical, and becomes practical and doxological to the reader. We live in a very dark world that increases in lawlessness. But worse, wickedness appears in the church, and in my own soul, and in yours.

If you are not living the life described in this article, then stop in your tracks, now! Repent! Find forgiveness in the cross, and find in the living Lord the resolve to walk in a new and holy life. May God give it!

If you are like so many believers, struggling to live the Christian life, bearing heavy burdens, and discouraged by your own meager holiness and constant unfaithfulness, then cling to God’s promise, “I will be your God.” That simple but profound covenant promise means that the infinite God who is the overflowing fountain of all good will be everything to us in Christ. Look up! Behold your God! He is yours, believer. Finding Him to be your strength, love Him and one another, and walk in the way of obedience to the glory of His name. And be happy. Miserable is that man who denies God and walks in sin. Happy is the people whose God is the Lord and who walk in holiness.

### **Appendix**

What follows are numerous quotations lifted from two of our forefathers in the Protestant Reformed Churches. I limit myself to two authors. The first is our leading forefather, Herman Hoeksema, whose name is widely known and who was used by God, arguably more than any other, to shape the PRCA theologically. The second is his son, Homer C. Hoeksema, a second-generation theologian whom

God placed in our seminary and used in the PRCA to carry on the faith of his biological and spiritual father. The quotations I have lifted from these two men demonstrate that the doctrine of the PRCA today is the exact same doctrine the PRCA has always confessed since God gave her a beginning in the 1920s.

None of the quotations that follow were located by means of an electronic search engine. I have no doubt that if anyone were to employ such a tool, and search, for example, the *Standard Bearer*, the list below would quickly grow.

As these quotations demonstrate, the preceding article to which this list is an appendix, presents the historic doctrine of the PRCA. We have always expressed positively the relation, on the one hand, between enjoyment of covenant fellowship with God, our experience of God's blessings, our assurance of our salvation (all of which are essentially the same), and, on the other hand, our obedience or sanctified life by the phrase "in the way of." This is good Reformed language that keeps us from veering into error on either side of the road of orthodoxy. This language, "in the way of," and the theology it communicates, is one element of our precious covenant doctrine that distinguishes it from various other erroneous conceptions. Many presentations of covenant theology either teach some form of salvation by works (we have fellowship with God *because of* or *by* our obedience, which is a meritorious condition) or some form of antinomianism (we believers are not obligated or able to bring forth fruits of obedience to God). The PRCA has always taught that we enjoy covenant fellowship with God in the way of obedience, *only* in the way of obedience.

[Editor's note: the sources of the quotes are provided only in the form of book and magazine titles and pages. Most of the books to which reference is made were published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association of Jenison, MI. References from *Triple Knowledge* are from the three-volume set, not the ten-volume set. Hoeksema's chapel talks are published by the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary.]

### **Herman Hoeksema (1886-1965)**

1. During a time of growing conflict over the doctrine of the covenant in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Hoeksema wrote a series

of editorials in the *Standard Bearer* entitled “As to Conditions.” In that series he opposed conditional theology and the term “condition,” and taught, “We are not chosen, and therefore, we are not saved on condition of faith, or of the obedience of faith; but 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” (*Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, p. 77).

2. Hoeksema rejected the common conception of a covenant of works with Adam, in which Adam by his obedience could merit fellowship with God and the blessings that Christ now bestows upon the elect. Hoeksema wrote, “But matters surely do not stand thus. Adam in Paradise stands in God’s covenant. He also possesses life. Moreover, only in the way of obedience will he be able to keep the life which he possesses....” (*Believer’s and Their Seed*, p. 68, 1997 ed.). Hoeksema related Adam’s life of covenant fellowship with God and Adam’s obedience, and he taught that Adam enjoyed God as his friend only as he walked in obedience.
3. 2 Peter 1:10 teaches, “Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure, for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall.” Commenting on the believer’s assurance of salvation as taught in this passage, Hoeksema wrote, “The way of sanctification is the sole way to the assurance of our calling and election. And the way of sanctification is a way of struggle and strife, a way of self-denial and battle. Therefore, brethren, rather give diligence, strive with all the power of the grace of God that is in you. That you may walk the way of light, which is the way of your calling. Then you will stumble nevermore! In that way there is assurance! And joy eternal!” (“Assurance Through Diligence,” in *Standard Bearer*, 3:507). Those words were written in 1927. In a little work entitled *Wonder of Grace*, published seventeen years later in 1944, Hoeksema gave the same explanation of 2 Peter 1:10. He emphasized that the believer enjoys assurance “only” in the way of sanctification: “But here we must remember that this testimony of the Spirit that we are the sons of God is heard by us through the gospel and only in the way of sanctification, the way of God’s precepts, the

way of repentance and conversion, the way in which the Spirit leads. In the way of sin and corruption, the way of the world and of the flesh, the Spirit does not witness with our spirit that we are children of God. On the contrary, in that way we grieve the Spirit, and we receive the testimony that we are still in our sins. If, then, we would make our calling and election sure, we must give diligence to walk in the way of light and righteousness, to fight the good fight of faith, according to the calling wherewith we are called” (*Wonder of Grace*, 118). A page later he adds, “Every day he has need to live close to the Word of God in the Scriptures, to fight the battle of faith, that he may walk as a child of light in the midst of a world of sin, in order that in that way he may be conscious of the testimony of God’s Spirit assuring him of his personal salvation. Only in that way, but in that way surely, can he walk in the glad assurance that he is Christ’s, and that nothing can ever separate him from the love of God!” (*Wonder of Grace*, 119).

4. In an article entitled “Living from Principle,” Hoeksema taught that the believer enjoys God’s blessings in the way of obedience: “But in spite of appearances, the fact remains that only he will be blessed that never forsakes principle. For, blessing is not in things, but in the favor of God. And God’s favor is upon His people, as they walk in His way and keep His precepts.” (*Standard Bearer*, 14:53).
5. In his exposition of Lord’s Day 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism, Hoeksema emphasized that the way of sanctification is the exclusive way in which the believer enjoys the assurance of his salvation: “But He works that assurance of faith in our hearts, so that we are confident that we are in the faith, not in the way of sin but in the way of sanctification only. For thus we read in Romans 8:12-16.... From this it is very plain that the testimony of the Holy Spirit, and therefore the assurance of faith, cannot possibly be our experience, unless we walk in the way of sanctification, not living after the flesh, but mortifying the deeds of the body.” (*The Triple Knowledge*, 3:51).
6. Commenting on Romans 8:1, Hoeksema wrote, “Walking after the Spirit is the necessary characteristic of them who are in Christ

Jesus. Why? Because we cannot be in Christ in the legal sense without being in Him in the vital sense. We cannot be justified without being sanctified. Therefore, he who is in Christ also walks after the Spirit. Nor can we have peace and say we are in Christ unless we walk after the Spirit. The assurance of our being in Christ is in the way of sanctification. The way of our being blessed is that we walk in sanctification. And the fruit of this walk in sanctification is that we say, ‘There is no condemnation for me.’” (*Righteous by Faith Alone*, 308).

7. In his exposition of 1 John 1:6, Hoeksema taught that covenant fellowship with God is enjoyed in the way of light, that is, the way of holiness: “Here he states that therefore if we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not the truth. That of course, follows from the preceding statement that God is a light; and therefore, if we have fellowship with Him, we must and do walk in the light. And if we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not the truth.” (“Chapel Talks on 1 John,” 20). Later, in his comments on 1 John 3:21, Hoeksema taught that believers receive many blessings from God, not *because* they obey Him (as if their obedience were the ground), but *as they walk in the way* of obedience to Him, “It stands to reason: if we do not walk in the way of God’s commandments, and then pray, we do not pray for the proper things, do not pray for grace and for spiritual blessings, do not therefore then keep His commandments. But if we keep His commandments, then certainly we shall walk in the way of sanctification, and our desire shall be for the spiritual blessings of salvation. In the way of keeping His commandments we shall look for forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. And whatever we pray in that respect, in that way, in the way of keeping His commandments and doing things that are pleasing in His sight, we shall certainly receive those things” (“Chapel Talks on 1 John,” 159-160).
8. In John 14:23 we read, “Jesus answered and said unto him, if a man love me, he will keep my words, and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him and make our abode with him.” Hoeksema wrote a meditation on this passage and its teaching



of God's covenant, entitled "God's Abode with Us." The last two pages explain the relation between our covenant fellowship with God and our love for God as manifested in the keeping of His Word. Hoeksema concluded by succinctly stating, "And in the way of keeping His Word we taste His blessed fellowship" (*Communion with God*, pp. 14-15).

9. Finding quotations from Hoeksema is simple. However, the teaching that we enjoy God's fellowship, the assurance of our salvation, and manifold blessings "in the way of obedience/sanctification" is not merely a phrase found in Hoeksema's writings, but it is the expression of his theology. Hoeksema always taught the theology contained in that phrase. He taught the theology that the believer who walks with God and enjoys fellowship with God has a calling to consecrate himself to God in loving obedience to God, and that he does so by the Spirit. Passages could be multiplied; here are just a few.
  - "And the idea of the covenant is briefly expressed in the term friendship, or bond of friendship between God and man. In that bond God is the Friend-sovereign, Who reveals Himself to man, leads him into the secrets of His counsel, opens His heart to him, and causes him to taste His blessed grace, and man is the friend-servant of God, who dwells in His house, walks and talks with Him, loves Him with his whole being and consecrates himself and all things in the house of God to His praise and glory. Indeed the covenant is the essence of religion!" ("The Idea of the Covenant," *Standard Bearer* 22:462). Again, he explained the manner in which we live in the covenant as that of loving obedience, in which we devote ourselves to God according to the demand of His law. Throughout Hoeksema's works, including the aforementioned, he always spoke of God as *Friend-Sovereign* and man as *friend-servant*. God is sovereign, and man is servant. One of the many important reasons for that designation of Hoeksema is that he is teaching that man is always under God and always has a calling to obey God. The friend-servant walks with and enjoys communion with his Friend-Sovereign *in the way of or on the path of* obedience.

- Hoeksema always taught what our Baptism Form calls man's "part" in the covenant. Man has a calling to serve God in obedience as he lives in the covenant. In that connection, Hoeksema famously rejected the idea that God's preservation of believers can be compared to a man who goes to sleep in a Pullman car and is awakened by the angels at the station of heaven. He wrote, "Some seem to think that this conception of preservation and perseverance is very Reformed indeed. God, they say, must do it all, and any conception as if man himself must put forth effort in order to be saved and to persevere in the midst of the world is considered Arminianism. Yet this is not the case. The grace of preservation never works this way. God's part of the covenant, although He performs it alone and unconditionally, never excludes man's part for the simple reason that the grace of God always works in and through man as a rational, moral agent." (*Standard Bearer* 26:389). Hoeksema identifies the believer's "part" in the covenant as trusting, loving and obeying God: "They fulfill their part of the covenant of God, and walk in new obedience, cleaving to the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, trusting in Him, and loving Him with all their hearts...." (*Triple Knowledge* 2:709).

### **Homer C. Hoeksema (1923-1989)**

1. In connection with Isaiah 43:1-2, which teaches that the covenant God is with His people in the water and fire, Hoeksema asked how it is possible to live in peace and without fear. In his answer he made a crucial distinction between "because of" and "in the way of." He wrote, "First, by walking in God's ways and being faithful in the midst of the world. In the way of sin and unfaithfulness there is no peace.... As Isaiah admonished Judah, walk in God's ways, and you will be safe. Not *because* you walk in his ways are you safe, but *in the way of* walking, for your walking in his ways is the work of his grace in you." (*Redeemed with Judgment*, 2:102).
2. Isaiah 55:11 teaches, "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth, it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it." Commenting on this passage, Hoeksema emphasized that

obedience is the only way in which believers experience God's mercy. He wrote, "In the way of seeking the Lord, he experiences that Jehovah has mercy upon him and that God will abundantly pardon. We must emphasize that *only* by walking in God's ways and adapting himself to God's thoughts can he experience the mercy and forgiving grace of God in Christ Jesus. That this is the sole and indispensable way is explained particularly in verses 8 and 9." (*Redeemed with Judgment*, 2:377).

3. In explaining the peace of Isaiah 57:19-21, Hoeksema wrote, "Through faith he gives us the grace to live according to his commandments, to do his will, to walk in the ways of righteousness, and to live the life of holiness unto the Lord, so that increasingly we enjoy the peace of God in the way of obedience to him." (*Redeemed with Judgment*, 2:413).
4. In an article entitled "Sanctification and Assurance," Hoeksema taught, "Nevertheless, the exclusive way of assurance is the way of sanctification. Outside of the latter there is no assurance possible. Without holiness no man shall see the Lord! And without holiness, therefore, no man can be sure that he shall see the Lord! Why? The root answer is that the Spirit of adoption, the Spirit Who assures us of our salvation through the Word is the HOLY Spirit, and He always operates as such. He operates to assure the people of God, therefore, only in the sphere of holiness, in the light, not in the darkness of sin and corruption." (*Standard Bearer*, 64:286).
5. The obedience and prosperity of Abraham's servant who was sent to find a wife for Isaac is a good illustration of the inviolable principle that we enjoy God's presence, guidance, and blessing only in the way of obedience. Hoeksema wrote, "Certainly this does not mean that the servant's work is first, and that the Lord's guidance follows the obedience of man. This is never true. The Lord our God is always first, and His work of grace is always before our obedience. But from the perspective of our perception, as a matter of believing experience, if we do not walk in the way of God's fear and God's precepts, we have no reason to expect that the Lord will guide us and prosper us in the way. The Lord is not with the wicked, and the Lord our God does not walk in

wicked ways. He is the perfectly righteous and Holy One. He is too pure of eyes to behold iniquity. He will have no fellowship with sin. This principle is inviolable with the Lord. Therefore it is always true that if we do not walk in the way of God's precepts, we have no reason to expect that the Lord will guide us in the way. We cannot turn to paths of wickedness and then expect that the Lord will adapt Himself to our wicked ways, because He will never do so. Conversely, when we do walk in His ways, we may expect that He will guide and prosper us, and that in this way we will also experience His grace. Abraham's servant knew this. Walking in the Lord's way, he experienced the Lord's guidance." (*Unfolding Covenant History*, 2:224-225).

6. Throughout Hoeksema's entire explanation of the sin of Achan recorded in Joshua 7-8, we find this doctrine of covenant blessings in the way of obedience. He explained how Joshua, according to Joshua 1:7, "had been promised the presence of the Lord only in the way of obedience to the law of Moses...." (*Unfolding Covenant History*, 4:299). He noted that "The whole incident serves to show that the people of the Lord can conquer the kingdom of darkness only so long as they are faithful to His covenant; in other words, they can expect the victory from the Lord only in the way of covenant obedience" (300). Again, "This entire history also makes plain that only in the way of faith, and therefore in the way of holiness and obedience, can the children of Israel receive the land" (306). And once again, "The entire history shows emphatically that they could not take the city in their own strength, and that if the Lord did not fight for them, they would go down to defeat. This indicates that the Lord gives them the victory in the way of covenant obedience and in the way of the battle of faith" (307).
7. In connection with Israel's history at Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim, Hoeksema wrote, "The land of Canaan would be the most blessed land on earth if the children of Israel would walk in the Lord's way" (*Unfolding Covenant History*, 4:311). He added, "The blessing will be upon them if they obey and love the Lord their God. That is the only way in which the blessing of God's grace can be received and enjoyed, but the curse will be upon them if

they turn aside, if they depart and follow after other gods. That is forever the way of God's curse. The reason is very apparent. The children of Israel could not say, 'We are Abraham's children. We are the chosen people. We have the land of Canaan and the blessing of God, no matter what is our way.' If they did that, they would be the most accursed people among all the nations. Only in the way of righteousness could they know and experience and taste that they were the people of the living God" (313). Finally, "To set before them blessing and cursing also means that Moses clearly shows them the way. The way to blessing is the way of obedience, and the way of the curse is the way of unbelief, rebellion, and idolatry" (314).

# The Image of God and Fellowship<sup>1</sup>

John Marcus

God, having accomplished our redemption at the cross, also applies it to us personally by renewing us in His image. That renewal touches our personal lives, and in particular our fellowship with Him and with one another. This article first shows that God gave us His image at creation, and restored it to us when He saved us, in order to have fellowship. Second, it demonstrates that the result of our renewal in Christ's image is that we experience true fellowship with God. Lastly, it shows that our renewal in the image of Christ is progressive.

## Created and Renewed for Fellowship

That God created Adam and Eve after His image implies that they were created for fellowship. This is evident in the first place from the fact that they were created in the image of the triune God. God the

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1 The two articles from Rev. J. Marcus and the one from Prof. R. Cammenga were originally presented at a three-day conference held at the Universidad Juan Calvino (John Calvin University) seminary, located in Mexico City and connected with the Iglesia Presbiteriana Independiente de México (Independent Presbyterian Church of Mexico). The conference was held on August 23-24, 2022.

The subject of the conference was "The Image of God in Man." Approximately thirty people attended the speeches, and as many as 150 people throughout Mexico tuned in to the livestream. The in-person attendance was low as a result of remaining effects of COVID-19 and because the conference was held mid-week. Most speeches were given in English and translated into Spanish by local translators. [Ed: I understand, however, that Rev. Marcus, who lived in Mexico City during his youth, gave his speeches in Spanish.]

The purpose of the conference was to encourage contact with this small denomination of churches. Professor Misael Custodio is the PRCA's primary contact at the seminary. He and other professors also pastor local churches. These saints in Mexico desire to be faithful to the Word of God and to uphold the doctrines of the sixteenth-century Reformation. It is our prayer that the papers presented would be used by Christ in the building of His church throughout the world.

Father loves the Son with perfect love through the Spirit. God the Son loves the Father with perfect love through the Spirit. All three divine persons, being of one and the same essence, agree with each other perfectly and in every respect. The three persons have perfect fellowship within the Godhead.

When the triune God created Adam and Eve, the three persons together said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). So, when the triune God of fellowship created mankind, He did so with the goal of fellowship. He created us for fellowship with Himself. That is why God spoke with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. Fellowship was a central purpose in Adam and Eve’s creation.

Also showing that mankind was created with the goal of fellowship is the fact that God gave Adam a companion. God did not create Adam to exist alone; He gave Adam a helper that was fitting for him. When Adam had surveyed all the animals, he realized that he himself had no companion. Genesis 2:20 says concerning Adam that “there was not found an help meet for him.” So, God caused a deep sleep to fall upon him, and God formed Eve from Adam’s side. Furthermore, Genesis 2:24 speaks of that marriage fellowship when it says, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” God created man and woman to enjoy fellowship with one another in marriage. Of course, marriage is a picture of the fellowship that the church has with Christ her bridegroom.

Marriage is not the only way in which fellowship is expressed, but marriage is the most basic form of expressing fellowship in society. Strikingly, the Bible mentions the image of God in close connection with God creating humans as male and female, with a view to marriage: Genesis 1:27 says, “So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him; *male and female* created he them” (italics added for emphasis). Other structures in society, including families, and tribes, and nations, grow out of that original marriage structure.

Evidently then, God created mankind with the goal of fellowship. That humans have personal fellowship with our Creator, the triune God, is the foremost goal. But God also gave Eve to Adam with the same goal: that they have fellowship with each other, and help each other serve God in covenant fellowship.

The Westminster Larger Catechism, Question and Answer 20, expresses a number of ways in which God made Adam and Eve for fellowship.

Q. What was the providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created?

A. The providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created, was the placing him in paradise, appointing him to dress it, giving him liberty to eat of the fruit of the earth; putting the creatures under his dominion, and ordaining marriage for his help; affording him communion with himself; instituting the Sabbath; entering into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, of which the tree of life was a pledge; and forbidding to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.<sup>2</sup>

The article mentions marriage, which clearly involves the idea of fellowship. More importantly, the article mentions “communion with himself,” which explicitly points to man’s fellowship with God. Moreover, the mention of God’s institution of the sabbath again points to the enjoyment of fellowship with God as man enjoyed spiritual rest on the sabbath.

Not only did God *create* us to fellowship with Himself, but God also *redeemed* us and *renews* us in His image for the same purpose. The apostle John gives fellowship as the reason for declaring the gospel: “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 Jn. 1:3). The apostles declared the gospel for the purpose of fellowship...” Notice: “and truly our fellowship *is* with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

Fellowship is close association involving mutual interests. Fellowship is a sharing of life with God. God loves us and we love Him. He seeks our good and we seek His glory. He hates sin and loves righteousness and we do the same. He rejoices in His peculiar treasure and we rejoice in our gracious Savior.

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2 Westminster Larger Catechism 20, in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1958), 137-38.



The only explanation for being able personally to fellowship with God is His gracious work of salvation. We love Him because He first loved us and chose us in eternity. We love Him because in His love He sent His only-begotten Son to die for us. We love Him because He shed abroad His love in our hearts by His Spirit. Our personal fellowship with the Creator of the universe is possible only through the work of the Spirit of Christ. We have fellowship with God as He restores us in the image of His Son Jesus Christ. So we read in Romans 8:29, “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.” Christ causes us and many brethren to have fellowship with God. That God calls us brethren implies that we are part of a family of brothers and sisters living in fellowship. Fellowship is the goal of our creation and of our redemption. If we do not personally experience fellowship with God and His people, something is wrong with us.

### **The Experience of Fellowship in Calling, Justification, and Glorification**

Romans 8 not only shows that God predestined many brethren to “be conformed to the image of His Son,” but it also points to the fact that God will cause this to be our personal experience. Every single one of His elect people will experience fellowship with Him through being conformed to the image of Christ. This is indicated by Romans 8:29-30. Fellowship begins with God’s foreknowledge of us in eternity: “For whom he did *foreknow*, he also did predestinate ...” Foreknowledge is not simply knowing ahead of time who would believe and then predestining them to be conformed to Christ’s image. Rather, foreknowledge involves God taking active delight in us and loving us even before the world began. Having such a delight in us, God predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son. Or, we could say, delighting in us, God determined beforehand to cause us to experience covenant fellowship with Himself.

How does God bring us into the personal experience of fellowship with Himself? By conforming us to the image of Christ. Romans 8:30 explains in detail how God carries out His plan of conforming us to Christ’s image: “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.” God predestined us before the world began; but, our first personal experience of being conformed to the image of Christ happens when God calls us: “whom he did predestinate, them he also *called*...” The Spirit of Christ first causes us to be regenerated and then calls us. That is, He illuminates our minds so that we become aware of our sinfulness, understand our need for Christ, and thus by faith look to Him for salvation. God calls us out of darkness into His marvelous light. Our calling is the beginning of God’s work of actually conforming us to the image of Christ. By His powerful work, we begin to show forth the image of Christ.

Next, God causes us to know His favor towards us as His dear children: “whom he called, them he also *justified*...” By His Spirit, God tells us we are perfectly righteous for the sake of Jesus Christ. By His Spirit, He adopts us as His dear children in Christ. By the work of the Holy Spirit, we are conformed to the image of Christ so that we say to God, “Abba, Father” (Rom. 8:15).

But having justified us, God will also certainly glorify us: “and whom he justified, them he also *glorified*.” The beginning of this glorification is evidenced in our sanctification. God begins to conform us to the image of Christ already in this life; but He will give us the fullness of Christ’s image when He takes us to glory. God begins to make us holy through the life-long process of sanctification and will make us perfectly holy in heaven. In the holiness of heaven, we will be perfectly consecrated to God in covenant fellowship.

Romans 8:30 presents the golden chain of salvation. Everyone whom God has predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, He will certainly call, and justify, and ultimately glorify. Now we experience the beginning of covenant fellowship with God. In glory, we will experience fellowship in its fullness. This is and will be the personal experience of every believer.

### **Growth in Fellowship**

The first establishment of fellowship between us and God is by grace. But by the same grace we also grow in our fellowship with God in this life. God, by His grace, sanctifies us more and more. The Westminster Larger Catechism teaches this in Question and Answer 75:

Q. What is sanctification?

A. Sanctification is a work of God's grace, whereby they whom God hath, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time, through the powerful operation of his Spirit applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them, renewed in their whole man after the image of God; having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts, and those graces so *stirred up, increased, and strengthened*, as that they *more and more* die unto sin, and rise unto newness of life" (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup>

The result of this process of sanctification is that we die more and more unto sin. Not only that; but more and more we rise unto newness of life. More and more we hate sin and flee from it, and more and more we love God and live according to His will in good works.

That is the result of the glorious work of the Spirit of Christ renewing us after His image. Having forgiven our sins, Jesus Christ also renews in us the image of God so that we grow in our personal experience of fellowship. Colossians 3:10 expresses this growth: "And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him." God gives us a personal covenant knowledge of Himself. He does not give it all at once; but rather He renews us in that knowledge gradually. We could translate this verse as follows: "Which *is being renewed* in knowledge after the image of Him that created him."

Thus, by God's grace, as we are conformed to the image of Christ, we will put off the old man and put on the new. In that way we will experience deeper fellowship with God and deeper fellowship with His people. For example, as we put off the old man and put on the new, we will "put away lying" and "speak every man truth with his neighbor" (Eph. 4:25). As we put off the old man and put on the new, we will not let "the sun go down upon [our] wrath" (Eph. 4:26). As we put off the old man and put on the new, we will "steal no more" but rather we will "labor, working with our hands" so that we "have to give to him that needeth" (Eph. 4:28). As we put off the old man and put on the new, we will do as God calls us to do in Ephesians 4:31-32: "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind

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<sup>3</sup> Westminster Larger Catechism 75, 166-67.

one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.”

As we are conformed to the image of Christ, we will see this more and more in ourselves. We will grow in fellowship with God and His people. We will manifest the righteousness and holiness of the image of Christ. And, by seeing the evidences that God has restored us to His image, we will become more sure of our calling and election in Him.

May God grant us to see the image of Christ being renewed in us to the glory of His name.

# The Loss of God's Image in the Fall

John Marcus

This article treats the loss of God's image in the fall of mankind into sin. This topic is important because what we believe about the image of God and what we believe about the fall affects what we believe about our salvation. If we believe that Adam's fall caused mankind merely to be weak and that Adam lost only part of the image of God, the door is left open for denying total depravity and jeopardizing the truth of salvation by grace alone. But if we know that through the fall mankind became spiritually dead and completely lost the image of God, we do and will give all glory to God for our salvation, knowing that He alone is able to restore us to life.

This article will first note what was included in the image of God, so that we understand what was lost in the fall. Second, it will show that when Adam and Eve fell, they lost God's image completely. Third, it will show that by nature mankind is now totally depraved and that corruption is passed on to our children.

## God's Image Lost in the Fall

What did Adam and Eve lose in their fall into sin? The first clue as to what happened to mankind in the fall comes from God's threat to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden: "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:17). God explicitly threatened Adam and Eve with death that would come upon them the very day they ate of the forbidden fruit. Though Genesis 2 and 3 do not explicitly say that Adam and Eve died that day, God did immediately declare the curse, and sent Adam and Eve out of the garden. Before the fall, they were able to fellowship with God in the garden in the cool of the day. After the fall, God would not allow them in the garden. To enjoy the fullness of sweet fellowship with God, they would have to wait until God brought them to the heavenly paradise. So we have a clue

that the threatened death involved the loss of fellowship with God. Already here, there is a hint of the loss of God's image.

Other passages of Scripture confirm that God carried out His threat. We read in Romans 5:12, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." When Adam sinned in the garden of Eden, he did so as the legal and covenant representative of the entire human race. So when Adam sinned, we all died in him. Another conclusive passage is Ephesians 2:5: "Even when we were dead in sins, [He] hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved)." The clear implication is that before God made us alive together with Christ, we were spiritually dead, the cause of our death being Adam's sin.

That mankind's death is spiritual is clear from Ephesians 2:5, "we were dead in sins..." What is this spiritual death? What does it mean to be dead in sins? It is to have no life. To find out what happened when we died spiritually, we can ask, "What is that spiritual life which Adam lost for himself and the human race? What was lost in the fall?"

To understand what was lost in the fall, we can note what is restored to us in salvation. In the fall, we lost the image of God. We know that we lost the image of God in the fall because that is what God restores to us in salvation. This teaching is based on two Scripture passages. The first passage is Colossians 3:10: "And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him." The knowledge unto which God renews us is said to be "after the image." Knowledge is therefore part of God's image. The second passage is Ephesians 4:24: "And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." To say that the new man is created "after God" again refers to being created after God's image. The image of God therefore consists of righteousness and true holiness. Putting these two Scripture passages together, we conclude that salvation restores in us knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. Salvation restores us in the image of God. In the fall, therefore, mankind lost the image. This was part of our spiritual death.

### **The Image Lost Completely: Confessions**

The result of our spiritual death is that fallen mankind no longer had communion with God. This is the result of Adam's loss of the

image. When mankind lost knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, we lost communion with God. The image of God is intimately connected to spiritual life and communion with God. John Calvin says, “the image comprehends everything which has any relation to the spiritual and eternal life.”<sup>1</sup> Having lost the image of God, fallen man cannot fellowship with God. The Westminster Larger Catechism explains man's condition after the fall this way: “He is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually...”<sup>2</sup> Notice, fallen man is “*utterly indisposed*...to all that is spiritually good”; even worse, “he is...*opposite* unto all that is spiritually good” (emphasis added).

Communion and fellowship with God is the greatest spiritual good we can enjoy. But fallen man is opposed to and wants nothing to do with that communion. Fallen man hates God. The Westminster Larger Catechism describes our spiritual death in the fall as the loss of communion with God: “What misery did the fall bring upon mankind? A. The fall brought upon mankind the *loss of communion with God*, his displeasure and curse; so as we are by nature children of wrath, bond slaves to Satan, and justly liable to all punishments in this world, and that which is to come.”<sup>3</sup> The Catechism thus implies that losing the image of God means that fallen man cannot have communion with God. Knowledge, righteousness, and holiness are absolutely necessary for covenant fellowship with God.

Belgic Confession Article 14 makes the same point:

But being in honor, he understood it not, neither knew his excellency, but willfully subjected himself to sin, and consequently to death and the curse, giving ear to the words of the devil. For the commandment of life which he had received he transgressed; and by sin separated himself from God, who was his true life; having corrupted his whole nature; whereby he made himself liable to corporal and spiritual death. And being thus become wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways, he hath lost all his excellent gifts which he had received from God, and

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1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, transl. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983 reprint), 1.15.4; 1:165.

2 Westminster Larger Catechism 25, in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1958), 140.

3 Westminster Larger Catechism 27, 140. Emphasis added.

retained only a few remains thereof, which, however, are sufficient to leave man without excuse; for all the light which is in us is changed into darkness, as the Scriptures teach us...<sup>4</sup>

The fall stripped mankind of those “excellent gifts” he had received from God. What excellent gifts? For one, the fall stripped mankind of God’s image.

### **The Image Lost Completely: Calvin**

To what extent mankind lost the image of God was lost in the fall is a controversial issue. Did the fall erase the image of God completely? Calvin says, “Wherefore, although we grant that the image of God was not utterly effaced and destroyed in him, it was, however, so corrupted, that any thing which remains is fearful deformity...”<sup>5</sup> It might appear at first that Calvin holds that the image was not utterly effaced, and that every man possesses it. Note three points in response to this.

First, the proper understanding of Calvin’s words “although we grant” is “even if we do grant this...” His main point is, even if we grant that the image of God was not utterly effaced and destroyed in mankind, it was, however, “so corrupted, that anything which remains is fearful deformity.”

Second, later in the same section of his *Institutes*, Calvin says, “Therefore, as the image of God constitutes the entire excellence of human nature, as it shone in Adam before his fall, but was afterwards vitiated and almost destroyed, nothing remaining but a ruin, confused, mutilated, and tainted with impurity, so it is now partly seen in the elect, in so far as they are regenerated by the Spirit. Its full luster, however, will be displayed in heaven.”<sup>6</sup> While Calvin describes the image as “almost destroyed,” he goes on to say, “nothing remaining but a ruin, confused, mutilated, and tainted with impurity.”

Third, note Calvin’s point that the image of God “is now partly seen in the elect.” Where is the image of God partly seen? Not in ev-

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4 Belgic Confession, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 38-39.

5 Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.4; 1:164.

6 Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.4; 1:165.



ery fallen human being, but in the elect. Why is the image now seen partly in the elect? Calvin says, "in so far as they are regenerated by the Spirit."<sup>7</sup> Calvin evidently does not believe that the image of God is displayed in the reprobate wicked.

Calvin is rightly understood as teaching that the content of the image has been completely lost. True, he refers to "anything which remains," by which some have understood Calvin to teach that some of the image of God remains in fallen mankind. Nevertheless, Calvin called that which remains "fearful deformity." As noted above, our Belgic Confession similarly says, "he hath lost all his excellent gifts which he had received from God, and retained only a few remains thereof." And the Canons of Dordt say, "There remain, however, in man since the fall the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, or natural things, and of the difference between good and evil..."<sup>8</sup> The best way to understand this is that fallen mankind continued to be human beings. Since mankind is now fallen, he has no ability nor desire to return to God. It is best, therefore, to view the content of the image of God as having been completely lost. Holding this view enables us to see that the only way for us to be saved is by grace alone.

### **Total Depravity the Result**

Mankind's loss of God's image in the fall results in the total depravity of fallen man. When Adam had the image of God in the garden of Eden, he loved God, and was righteous and holy. But when Adam fell, he and mankind became haters of God, unrighteous, and unholy. The Westminster Larger Catechism explains this in Question and Answer 25: When Adam fell, mankind became "utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually; which is commonly called original sin, and from which do proceed all actual transgressions."<sup>9</sup> When it says that mankind became "opposite unto all that is spiritually good,"

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7 Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.4; 1:165.

8 Canons of Dordt, 3-4.4, in *The Confessions and the Church Order*), 38-39.

9 Westminster Larger Catechism 25, 140.

the Catechism expresses that mankind not only lost the image of God, but also took upon ourselves the image of the devil.

This is taught in Ephesians 2:1-3:

And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins: Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.” Here we have a description of the image of the devil in those who are lost. The wicked, having this image of the devil, walk “according to the prince of the power of the air.

When Adam and Eve fell into sin, they not only lost the image of God, but also took on themselves the image of the devil.

That corruption of Adam and Eve has been passed down from parents to children throughout the ages. The Westminster Larger Catechism says in Question and Answer 26, “How is original sin conveyed from our first parents unto their posterity? Original sin is conveyed from our first parents unto their posterity by natural generation, so as all that proceed from them in that way are conceived and born in sin.”<sup>10</sup> We are all conceived and born in sin. By natural generation, we are totally depraved.

All which brings us back to the necessity of being born again from above. Jesus says, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). When we are born again from above, God again restores in us His image. That image is not yet restored in us perfectly; but we have a small beginning. One day, we will be conformed perfectly to the image of Jesus Christ.

Knowing the doctrine of the loss of the image in the fall, we put all our hope in Jesus Christ alone. Only the Spirit of Christ can restore to us again the image of God which was lost in the fall. Salvation is by grace.

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<sup>10</sup> Westminster Larger Catechism 26, 140.

# The Moral Implications of the Image of God<sup>1</sup>

Ronald L. Cammenga

## Created as God's Image-bearer

One of the most fundamental questions that a person can ask is: "Who am I? What is my fundamental identity? What makes me different from a rock or a tree, from a dog or a cow?"

The Bible answers that question. The answer is that man was made in the image of God, the *imago Dei*. God made man in such a way that man resembles God. From this point of view, man is the highest of all the creatures that God made. No other creature was made in God's image. Only man was made in the image and after the likeness of God, as we read in Genesis 1:26-27. He was such an image of God that he was the very likeness of God. If you had looked at man in Paradise, you would have seen God in him. The resemblance was striking and unmistakable.

This is man's nobility in comparison to all other creatures! This is man's glory in distinction from all the animals! This is man's privilege shared by no other earthly being! What an honor, that of all the creatures that God made, only one creature—man—was made in God's image. He of all the other creatures, whether beast or bird, whether animate or inanimate, is God-like.

And then, man is not a dead, lifeless image. Not like Andrew Jackson's image stamped on a United States twenty-dollar bill. Not like my lifeless image as it appears on my Michigan driver's license. Not the "dumb image" of some false deity that is carved, crafted, molten, or sculpted, and before which its worshipers bow. Rather, Adam was a living image-bearer. As a living, breathing being, and further as a rational-moral, thinking-willing being, man was uniquely

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1 This article is an expanded form of one of the speeches I was privileged to give at a conference that was held in Mexico City, August 22-24, 2022, at the Universidad Juan Calvino, the seminary of the Independent Presbyterian Church of Mexico. The general subject of the conference was the *imago Dei*.

the image-bearer of the Creator God. There was no other creature quite like him.

Created in God's image, man was made to stand in a conscious relationship to God. That especially set man apart from every other earthly creature. The only other creatures capable of standing in such a relationship to God were the angels. But of all the earthly creatures, man alone was made to know God, to love God, to serve God, and to stand in a covenant with God. Answer six of the Heidelberg Catechism says that "God created man good, and after His own image, in true righteousness and holiness, that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal happiness to glorify and praise Him."<sup>2</sup> And even though in the fall the image of God was lost, regenerated man once again bears the image of God. In him, the image of God has been restored so that man once again stands in a conscious, covenantal relationship to God.

Man was not the only creature made in the image of God. Also the angels were created in God's image. We are not told that explicitly in the Bible. But from what the Bible says about the angels, we deduce that the angels are also image-bearers of God. They, too, are rational, moral creatures who, like human being, can stand in a conscious relationship to God. They, too, truly know God. They, too, live in righteousness before God. And they, too, are holy in their being, consecrated to and like God.

In more than one place, the Bible calls the angels "sons of God." To be a son or a daughter means that you are in the image, and therefore image-bearers, of your parents who have begotten you. This is what we read in Genesis 5. Verse 1 of the chapter reminds us that man was made in the image of God: "This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him." Verse 3 begins Adam's genealogy. Take note of what verse 3 says about Adam's son: "And Adam lived an hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his image, and called his name Seth."

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2 Heidelberg Catechism, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 85.

Children bear the image of their parents. We often see that in their physical appearance: a son looks like his father, or a daughter looks like her mother. But that children are in the image of their parents includes more than their physical appearance. It includes their personality, their mannerisms, their character strengths and weaknesses—all these belong to the image of their parents of which children partake. Sometimes that can bring a sparkle to the eyes of the parents. At other times, that can be very painful for Christian parents, who must discipline their children on account of the same weaknesses and sins to which they are inclined.

In several places in the Bible, the angels are called “the sons of God.” Both Job 1:6 and 2:1 speak of “the sons of God,” that is, the angels, presenting themselves before God. Job 38:7 informs us that the angels witnessed God’s creation of the earth and rejoiced over God’s creative work, at which time “the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.”

Like the angels, man was created in God’s image. But in comparison to the angels, man is destined to be a clearer likeness of God. For although we were originally created a little lower than the angels (Psalm 8:6), we are destined to be exalted higher than the angels and will rule over and judge the angels in the new heavens and earth (1 Cor. 6:3).

### **The Loss of the Image of God**

The result of the fall was that man lost the image of God. This is the creedal, Reformed view of the fall and its consequences. The Westminster Larger Catechism teaches this:

Q. 25. *Wherein consisteth the sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell?*

A. The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consisteth in the guilt of Adam’s first sin, the want of that righteousness wherein he was created, and the corruption of his nature, whereby he is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually; which is commonly called *original sin*, and from which do proceed all actual transgressions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The Westminster Standards* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commissions Pub-  
April 2023

The Heidelberg Catechism, in Lord's Day 4, teaches that as a consequence of the fall, man "deprived himself and all his posterity of those divine gifts" with which he had been created.<sup>4</sup> And in Article 1 of the third and fourth heads of the Canons of Dordt, we are taught that although "man was originally formed after the image of God," the result of his revolt against God and abuse of the freedom of his will was that "he forfeited these excellent gifts, and on the contrary entailed on himself blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgment, became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections."<sup>5</sup>

Man's original sin was many things. It was disobedience and rebellion; it was rejection of God and embrace of the Devil rather than God; it was covenant breaking, choosing the friendship of the Satan over friendship with God; it was unbelief; it was rejection of the word of God; it was Adam's abuse of his position as head of the human race.

But man's original sin was also discontent. Man was not satisfied to be the image-bearer of God. He lusted to be God: "For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5).<sup>6</sup> Ever since the fall of man, that has been the goal of man, to be his own god—to be God in the place of God. It is his ambition to decide for himself what is good and what is evil. He will do as he pleases and be answerable to no one but himself. That will finally be *the* great sin of the antichrist.<sup>7</sup> He will proclaim himself to be God and presume to himself the glory

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lications, 2007), 38.

4 Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 4, in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, 86.

5 Canons of Dordt, 3-4.1, in *The Confessions and the Church Order*, 166.

6 The KJV says that the Devil's lie to Adam and Eve was, "ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." The plural "gods" is likely due to the fact that the Hebrew word for God is ordinarily a plural, אֱלֹהִים. This is the case, for example, in Genesis 1:1 where the KJV correctly translates, "In the beginning *God* (in the singular) created the heaven and the earth." As in Genesis 1:1, the translation in Genesis 3:5 ought also to be "God," with the reference to the true God. "God" is the translation of the NKJV, RSV, NIV, and ESV.

7 Consult such passages of Scripture as Daniel 7:25; 8:10-12; 11:36-37; 2 Thessalonians 2:4; and Revelation 13:14-15.

and worship of God. “God is not God,” he will say, but “I am God. God is not to be worshiped, but I am to be worshiped.” And the vast majority of people will hail him as God and bow down before him.

Not only did fallen man lose the image of God, but the image of God in man was replaced by the image of the Devil. This is Jesus’ teaching in John 8:44, “Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.” The Devil, Jesus says, is the father of the unbelieving, wicked Jews who rejected Him as the Son of God, the One who in an altogether unique respect was in the image of His heavenly Father. That means that they were the children of their father the Devil. As we have seen, children are in the image of their father, their parents. The wicked Jews resembled their spiritual father, and especially resembled him in their rejection and hatred of the Son of God.

Other Scriptures support this teaching. In Acts 13:10, Paul rebuked the apostate Jewish sorcerer, Elymas, or Bar-Jesus, and said to him, “Thou child of the devil.” As a wicked, unregenerate person, Elymas was in the image and likeness of his father the Devil. In Ephesians 2:3, after teaching in verse 1 that we are by nature “dead in trespasses and sins,” the apostle says, “and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.” By nature we are “children of wrath.” That is the same thing as saying that by nature we are the children of the Devil. This is what the members of the church *were*, but *now* we have been quickened, *now* the Holy Spirit has renewed and regenerated us, *now* the image of God has been restored in us. We are God’s children and as His children, we bear His image—the image of the Father who has begotten us. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin speaks of our “regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God that had been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam’s transgression.”<sup>8</sup>

It would be profitable to read through the first epistle of John and note all the times that we are referred to as those who have been “born

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8 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.3.9; 1:601.

of God,” or, as the “children,” or, “sons of God”: 2:29; 3:1, 2, 9, 10; 4:6, 7; 5:2, 4, 18, 19. Frequently, we are addressed as God’s “little children,” or “my little children”: 2:1, 12, 13, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21. These expressions underscore the truth that in regeneration the image of God is restored in us. As those who have been “born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13), we are God’s image-bearers.

Since the fall, and the loss of the image of God, man in his wickedness denies that he was made to be the image-bearer of God. This belongs to the “ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). Wicked man denies God and denies that he is called to be the image-bearer of God. This is, of course, a prominent feature of the grievous error of the teaching of evolution. “There is no God,” says the evolutionist, “who by His almighty power created all things, who commanded so that what He commanded came into existence” (Ps. 33:9). Evolution rules out the existence of God in whose image man could have been made. Instead, man is in the image of the animal. Man is the highest of all the animals, the most sophisticated animal, the animal with the greatest ability to communicate, the animal with imagination and creativity. But in the end, man is only an animal.

Not only does wicked man deny that he was made in the image of God, but modern man remakes God into the image of man. The ungodly even refer to God as “the man upstairs.” Sadly, this is also the case with much of contemporary Christianity, which brings God down to the level of man, while at the same time elevating man above God. God’s will is not sovereign, so that what He wills always comes to pass; but man is able to resist and frustrate the will of God. God is not the almighty King who rules over men and nations, but He is a helpless beggar who pleads with man to open his heart to Jesus. God does not know ahead of time all that is going to happen because He has determined all things, but He is forced to react to what happens in the world. He is not sovereign over even the evils of earthly life; but those evils come despite His will and are ultimately from the Devil.

No, emphatically no, to this practical atheism! God is not in the image of man; we are the image-bearers of God. God is not in our likeness; we are in God’s likeness.



This is our privilege! This is our honor!

But with privilege comes responsibility. What are the moral implications that follow from our being image-bearers of God? How must our creation and recreation as God's image-bearers affect our everyday life? Practically, what is our calling as those who bear the image of God? I point out some of the moral implications of the image of God, first, with regard to ourselves; secondly, the implications with regard to our brothers and sisters in the church; and, thirdly, the implications for our life in relation to the world in which we are called to live.

### **The Moral Implications of the Image of God for Ourselves**

What, to begin with, are the moral implications of the image of God for ourselves as regenerated Christians?

What a wonder! What an amazing fact! Think of it, sinner that I am and sinner that you are: we are also image-bearers of God. What an incomprehensible and mysterious reality! This is my fundamental identity as a child of God. As a child of God, I have been remade in God's own image, so that I know Him, love Him, live in fellowship with Him, walk uprightly before Him, and am consecrated to Him in holiness of life.

This is how we must look at ourselves. And this proper view of ourselves must impact every aspect of our life, whether we are a working man, a businessman, a doctor, a teacher, a wife and mother in the home, a student in high school or university—whatever our earthly calling, we are image-bearers of God.

What a difference this makes, as the apostle points out in the contrasts to which he calls attention in the first part of Ephesians 2. We *were* dead in trespasses and sins; but now we *are* alive (“quicken,” he says) unto God. *In time past* we walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience. *In time past* we all *had* our conversation among them, in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind. We *were* by nature the children of wrath, that is, we lived as those who were image-bearers of the Devil. *But* God in His mercy towards us, when we *were* dead in our sins, *has quickened* us together with Christ—by grace we *are* saved! He *has* raised us up and *has* made us sit together with Christ in heavenly places.

This, now, is how you must look at yourself. For all your weaknesses and sins, you are a child of God. God is your Father. As His child, you bear His image—the image of your Father. And you are called to live as His image-bearer. You must never forget who you are!<sup>9</sup>

This is the remedy to all drunkenness and drug addiction. Drunkenness and drug addiction are grievous sins against the image of God. The child of God who falls into these sins may never justify them, never minimize them, nor give excuses for committing them. They are terrible sins because they defile the image of God in us. God is not staggering drunk. God is not a drug addict living in his own imaginary world, out of touch with reality.

This is also the remedy to all sexual impurity, whether we are single or married. There are so many temptations to sexual sin in our day—more than ever before. To a great extent that is due to the internet and all the temptations that are the click of a mouse away. Men, mostly men, have become addicted to pornography, which is splashed across the internet. They do not merely fall into this sin, but they go looking for this sin and give themselves over to it. And before long, they are ensnared by pornography, with all the catastrophic results in their personal life and their family life. Once again, we must never minimize the seriousness of this sin. It is a terrible transgression against the image of God in us. It is dragging the *image of God* into the filthy gutter of immorality.

The same is true of sexual relations before marriage, as well as sexual relations of those who are married with those to whom they are not married. The world promotes this sin, excuses it, and is even amused by it. In many parts of our country and in many other countries, it is common for young people—and some not so young—to live together even though they are not married. But again, this is a horrible sin exactly because we have been made in the image of God. As God's image-bearers, we are called to holiness, if unmarried, with

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9 I am reminded of the elderly widow with whom I once visited, who in the course of our conversation said that she never told her considerable number of children when they were teenagers and were off with their friends on a Friday or Saturday night, “Don’t do this and don’t go there.” She simply said to them as they went out the door, “Remember who you are!” At that point, my own parenting skills underwent some modification.

a view to marriage, and if married, within the bonds of holy wedlock. The warning of the apostle in 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 17 is, “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.” The question “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?” might just as appropriately have been the rhetorical question, “Know ye not that ye are the image-bearers of God?” How can one who is God’s image-bearer, recreated in true righteousness, *holiness*, and knowledge, give himself or herself over to unholiness and immorality?

Condemned are the evils of homosexuality and lesbianism. The LGBTQ+ movement gains headway in our day, exerting influence on government and politics. It is responsible for gaining widespread acceptance of their wicked lifestyles. Laws are passed that give them special privileges and a protected status as a minority group. Employers may not refuse to hire them. Those selling houses or renting apartments may not “discriminate” against them. And the church, rather than reproofing the world with Elijah-like boldness, succumbs to the spirit of our age. Rather than calling these men and women to repentance, the church largely approves their disobedience to God’s law as revealed in creation and in His Word.

This is a sin against the image of God in which we have been created. From the very beginning, human image-bearers were distinguished as male and female. Although both the man and the woman were God’s image-bearers, they were God’s image-bearers as male and female according to Genesis 1:27, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” Sexual distinction is tightly joined to creation in the image of God. As males and as females, we are called to be God’s image-bearers.

There is open rebellion against the will of God, who relates our sexual differentiation to our being His image-bearers. In our world today, one’s gender is viewed as arbitrary and open to the personal choice of the individual, whether he or she will identify as a male or as a female. The thinking is promoted that gender assignment at birth is random and the designation of someone as male or female may not

fit with the gender they later choose as that with which they desire to identify. “Gender dysphoria” is identified as a sense of unease that people may have because of a mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity. When the gender that one was assigned at birth conflicts with what one feels physically and mentally, or is most comfortable with, the result can be unnecessary distress and discomfort. A person’s assigned gender at birth is viewed as arbitrary as choosing between two different types of athletic shoes, or choosing between one style of dress or another.

This is open rebellion against God who assigns our gender at the very same moment that He causes us to be conceived in our mothers’ wombs as His image-bearers. No one can be a faithful image-bearer of God who rejects the gender that God has assigned to them.

There is a warning here regarding our entertainment, what we watch on television as well as on the computer or any digital device. We must not allow ourselves to be entertained by programs that contain these sins for our viewing pleasure. No image-bearer of God may allow himself or herself to enjoy viewing such sins and justify it as entertainment. The psalmist says in Psalm 101:3, “I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes.” And the apostle Paul ends the long catalog of sins in Romans 1, culminating with the vile sin of homosexuality, by saying: “Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, *but have pleasure in them that do them*” (Rom. 1:32).

That we are God’s image-bearers is also something that we ought to remind ourselves of and remind other believers of when we become depressed and despairing. You are a child of God; you have been made in the image of your heavenly Father. And because you are, God will never forsake the work of His own hands. He will never forsake His own child. That was true of the first image-bearers of God, Adam and Eve. When they sinned against God, He did not leave them in their sin. He did not in wrath destroy them as they deserved. But as a loving Father, He sought out His children, His image-bearers. He does the same with us. Even in our greatest falls, He preserves us. And in His love for us as His children and image-bearers, He restores us again. That ought to dispel our fears and that ought to encourage us when we are discouraged.

It ought to be plain that although in regeneration the image of God is restored to us, this does not mean that we become perfect and sinless, restored to the condition of Adam as God's image-bearer before his fall into sin. That, of course, is not the case. Because our sinful nature remains with us all our lifetime, there is a constant struggle between the new man in us who "is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him" (Col. 3:10) and "the old man with his deeds" (Col. 3:9). In Colossians 3, the apostle describes the conflict between the old man and the renewed and regenerated man. Calvin reflects on this situation: "But because it pleases God gradually to restore his image in us, in such a manner that some taint always remains in our flesh, it was most necessary to provide a remedy."<sup>10</sup> Calvin is treating the fourth and fifth petitions of the Lord's Prayer in this section of the *Institutes*. The "remedy" to which he refers is the remedy of the forgiveness of sins and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. This remedy God has put in place until the image of God is perfected in the life to come.

In another place, in connection with the image of God in the Christian, Calvin refers to the growth of those who are reborn in Christ: "Now this is not to deny a place for growth; rather I say, the closer any man comes to the likeness of God, the more the image of God shines in Him." Just as the babe is an image-bearer already at conception and birth, yet room remains for growth and development, so also is there room for growth and development in the life of the reborn child of God. Calvin adds: "In order that believers may reach this goal [the goal of "integrity and perfection," of which he has just spoken], God assigns to them a race of repentance, which they are to run throughout their lives."<sup>11</sup>

### **The Moral Implications of the Image of God in Relation to Our Fellow Image-bearers**

As image-bearers we also stand in relation to other of God's children who have been renewed in His image and who are our fellow image-bearers.

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<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.45; 2:911.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.9; 1:601-602.

First, we are related to our husbands and wives who are fellow image-bearers with us. This is how husbands must look at their wives, and how wives must look at their husbands: my spouse is an image-bearer of God, as much an image-bearer of God as I am. This is the fundamental and spiritual equality of husbands and wives in marriage, as Genesis 1:27 makes plain: “So God created man [human beings] in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” Both original human beings, the man and the woman, were created in the image of God. The man is not the image-bearer of God, while the woman is not; nor is the man more nearly the image of God than the woman, so that she is beneath the man. Both men and women are equally image-bearers of God. For this reason, God requires the death penalty whether one kills a man or a woman, according to Genesis 9:6: “For in the image of God made he man.” No less than the man, the woman is God’s image-bearer. Whoever sinfully takes her life must bear the consequence of snuffing out the life of one who is an image-bearer of God.

This equality does not rule out headship, authority, and submission. We are alike image-bearers of God and yet He is still over us as our heavenly Father. He does, of course, exercise His authority over us in love and for our good. So, too, the headship of the husband in marriage does not rule out his authority over his wife. Because she is equally an image-bearer with her husband, a wife is not justified in dismissing the lawful authority of her husband. Similarly, parents exercise authority over their children, even though, like their parents, the children are image-bearers of God. Scripture plainly teaches that although the angels are image-bearers of God, rank and authority is also a reality in the angel world (Rom. 8:38; Eph. 1:21; and Col. 1:16).

This is the remedy to all abuse of one’s spouse or of one’s children or the children of others, whether that abuse is verbal, physical, or sexual. A husband is the head of and has authority over his wife. He is her head, not her tyrant. That he is her head in no way justifies his brutalizing of her. Christian husbands must never forget that their wives are as much image-bearers of God as they are. And they must always respect their wives because they are renewed in the image of God. Parents must have the same respect for their children; adults and young adults must have the same respect for the children of others.

This is how Christian school teachers must view their students. The boys and girls, or the young adults, in their classrooms are God's image-bearers. This thought must govern the teachers in their instruction and discipline. They are dealing with God's image-bearers.

There is an implication here for the young people in the church. They must date and marry someone who, like them, has been renewed by the Spirit of God in His image. They must date and marry someone who is a Christian like themselves. This is the will of God for marriage, that two who are in His image, who stand in a conscious relationship of love and friendship with the Lord, enter into the covenantal relationship of Christian marriage.

That this is how Christian parents must view their children, and how godly children must view their parents, is evident from the fifth commandment of God's law. Referring to this commandment, the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 6:1, "Children, obey your parents *in the Lord*." "In the Lord" means that Christian parents have been renewed in the image of Lord. As His image-bearers, they love and serve the Lord. Because their parents are image-bearers of the Lord, godly children ought to be motivated to obey their parents.

On the part of the parents, this is the remedy to overly harsh discipline that aims not to correct the children but to harm them, to make them pay for their sin against you. That is a grievous sin on the part of Christian parents, a sin that they must repent of and confess to God and to their children. We must never forget that our children are image-bearers, no less the image-bearers of God than are we their parents.

This ought also to be an incentive to Christian couples to bring forth children. It is striking that after reading that God made man in His own image, we immediately read God's command in Genesis 1:28, "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it." That command of God applies still today. God is a Father with many children. Christian parents ought to have the desire to bring forth as many children as possible, regarding covenant children as blessings from God. Genesis 1:28 says that God "blessed them" with the blessing of fruitfulness. That does not mean that every Christian couple ought to have ten or twelve children. There are multiple, legitimate reasons on account of

which Christian couples cannot have as many children as they might otherwise desire, including, but not limited to, the wellbeing of the mother. Nevertheless, if we view covenant children as image-bearers of God, we are not going to limit the size of our families for selfish and carnal reasons, as is certainly a temptation in our materialistic age.

This is also how we ought to view our fellow church members. This is the remedy to strife and schism in the church. This does not mean that I overlook the sins of my fellow church members. But it does mean that I may not strive with my brothers and sisters in the church for wrong and selfish reasons. I may not live in envy of them for what they have and what God has not been pleased to give me. I may not exalt myself in pride over other brothers or sisters. I may not allow personal and personality differences to separate me from them. In my life in the church, I regard all my brothers and sisters as image-bearers of God. That will ensure the unity of the church.

This applies in a special way to elders and pastors in their labors with God's people. There is a horrendous evil in the church today—not just in the Roman Catholic Church—of abuse. It may be verbal. But often it is physical and sexual abuse. That those who are in positions of authority prey on members of the church in this way is a scandal. As the apostle says in 1 Corinthians 5:1, this is such an evil that should “not so much as be named among” us. The church must take this evil seriously when it comes to light. Officebearers who commit such sins must be disciplined and be put out of office in the church. They must also be reported to the civil authorities. The church must cooperate with the state in any investigation and in legal action that may be taken against clergy who abuse their pastoral office in order to victimize those who are most vulnerable.

That the members of the church are image-bearers of God ought also to impact our dealings with those members of the church who have special needs. They, too, are image-bearers of God. This is how we must view those members of the church who are disabled, whether physically or mentally. Even with their very limited physical and mental capacities, they are still image-bearers of God. And they must be cared for and treated as God's image-bearers.

This is how we must view those unborn members of the church who are *severely* disabled. Perhaps prenatal testing shows that they are going to be severely physically and/or mentally handicapped.



The advice of the doctors is that the couple consider “terminating the pregnancy”—abortion. Or, perhaps, a member of the church has been in a coma, or lies day after day, even year after year, in bed unable to communicate or do anything for themselves. They may be totally unresponsive, not able to move any of their limbs, perhaps not even able to breathe on their own. Sometimes we say that they are “vegetables.”<sup>12</sup> We should never say that! We should never think that! They are not vegetables! They are in their limited capacity image-bearers of God. Snuffing out their lives is as much murder in the sight of God as shooting or stabbing someone else and violently ending their life. Injecting them with chemicals that stop the function of their vital organs, refusing to give them needed medication, or starving them to death is murder. Such “euthanasia” was a widespread evil perpetrated by Nazi Germany, and once again today also some advocate the death of those who are considered unproductive members of society and a drain on its resources.

This is why Christians must oppose a number of forms of birth control, and not only abortion and euthanasia. Many forms of birth control, besides the “morning after pill,” destroy a fertilized egg. When this is done, a murder has taken place—the destruction of the life of one who is in the image of God. This, too, falls under the judgment of God in Genesis 9:6, “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.”

Christians must have a high regard for the sanctity and dignity of life. That dignity is not that man is the highest of all the animals, so that a baby in the womb is just a bunch of cells and can be regarded merely as fetal material. But babes in the womb, like the aged and the infirm who have nothing to contribute to society, are image-bearers of God.

### **The Moral Implications of the Image of God with Regard to Those Outside the Church**

Lastly, the biblical truth that man was made in the image of God must also inform our attitude toward our neighbors outside the church, the ungodly and unbelieving world in the midst of which we are called by God to live. Indeed, our confessions teach that fallen man has lost—

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<sup>12</sup> My Mexican audience informed me that this is also the word that is often used among them to refer to such persons.

lost *entirely*—the image of God. The image is not just tarnished. It has not merely suffered damage. It is not broken or cracked. But fallen man has no saving knowledge of nor love for God; he is not righteous in his works and way; and he is not holy in his being, consecrated to God.

Nevertheless, although fallen man has lost the image of God, he still retains the capacity to bear the image. Even after Adam's fall, he is a rational, moral creature. The result of the fall was not that man became an animal, a brute beast. He remains a man. And as a man, if it is God's will, he is capable of once again bearing God's image.

That this is how we must regard the children of this world is plain from a passage like James 3:9, "Therewith [with the tongue] bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude [that is, image] of God." This fact bears on how we live in the world and treat even unbelievers. Those unbelievers may be our own relatives, our neighbors, our co-workers, or our classmates at university. They may even be those who have threatened or harmed us in some way. Calvin says that "we [must] remember not to consider men's evil intention but to look upon the image of God in them, which cancels and effaces their transgressions [against us], and with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them."<sup>13</sup>

The outstanding sin that is forbidden is murder. It matters not whether that murder is committed in a fit of rage, or whether it takes place in the process of committing a robbery, or while driving under the influence of intoxicants, or while deliberately paying someone back for something that they have done to you. Perhaps you murder them yourself. Or, like king David, you might have others commit the murder for you—you pay them in some way for doing your dirty work. Either way, you are a murderer. Genesis 9:6 calls for the execution of those who commit murder because in the image of God He originally made man. God's law in Exodus 21:12 is, "He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death." The unwillingness of society today to carry out the will of God with respect to the murderer is not due to society's reluctance to take the life of another human being, whether by hanging, the electric chair, or lethal injection. Rather, it is society's unwillingness to regard the one who has been killed as one who was made in the image of God.

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<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.6.; 1:697.

All racism and bigotry are forbidden because all human beings alike were once made in the image of God. This was true of all the human beings who were scattered after the confusion of tongues and the initial separation of the races as a result of God's visitation of arrogant men at the tower of Babel. This includes the racism and bigotry of the Germans and the Japanese in World War II, as well as the racism that was practiced in South Africa by the Dutch, or in Uganda, Venezuela, or elsewhere. There certainly are cultural and racial differences between the races. There can be no doubt about that. But no race is a superior race to any other and all races trace their origins back to the man whom God made in His own image. The apostle Paul teaches in Acts 17:26 that God "hath made of one blood all the nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth."

Condemned also is the unjust war that aims at subduing and enslaving another people, or stealing their natural resources, or grabbing their land or perhaps their access to the sea. This was the case with Hitler and the German war machine, and was the case with their eventual allies the Japanese. This was the case with Soviet Russia under the rule of the bloodthirsty Joseph Stalin. And this is the case today with Putin's war in the Ukraine. Putin has blood on his hands, and if the grace of God does not convert him, he will one day pay dearly for all his bloodshed. He is responsible not only for the deaths of thousands of Ukrainians, but also thousands of Russians whom he has sent to their deaths in his unjust war. God will judge him in this life and in the life to come.

Because our fellow human beings have the capacity to bear the image of God, we Christians have the responsibility to witness to them. We have the privilege of witnessing to them of our noble creation by God and our disobedience and fall that resulted in the loss of the image of God. We have the privilege to witness to them of the saving work of our Lord Jesus Christ, who as the only begotten Son of God is the "express image" of God His Father (Heb. 1:3), who paid for our sins and earned for us the right to be the sons and daughters of God—the right to bear His image (John 1:12). We have the privilege to witness to them of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, who through the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments, restores to us and preserves in us the restored image of God. We have the privilege to witness to

them of the glorious consummation to which we look forward, when our elder brother will return and take us up into the new and heavenly Paradise, in which God will be our God and we will be His people forever—the image of God in us having been perfected.

# Dabney on Proposals of Mercy

## David J. Engelsma

The Southern Presbyterian theologian Robert L. Dabney (1820-1898) attempted to defend the false doctrine that today is popularly known as the “well-meant offer of the gospel,” in an essay that he titled, “God’s Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy.” The book in which the essay appears and from which I quote is *Discussions, Volume 1: Evangelical and Theological* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 282-313. It is fitting that the article appears in a publication of The Banner of Truth organization.

What Dabney thought about what is now called the “well-meant offer of the gospel” is significant. Dabney was a conservative Presbyterian theologian in the nineteenth century. He is regarded as one of the two greatest conservative Presbyterian theologians of that century, if not of all time. Conservative Presbyterians regard Dabney as authoritative regarding the Reformed faith. Dabney’s defense of the doctrine now known as the “well-meant offer” should not go unchallenged, therefore, for the sake of the confession of the gospel of grace in Presbyterian circles.

Before noting the erroneous aspects of Dabney’s view, one point needs emphasizing regarding what Dabney did *not* teach. It is noteworthy and disconcerting to the contemporary proponents of the theory of a “well-meant offer of the gospel” that Dabney refused forthrightly to affirm a will of God to save the non-elect. Such a will of God the bold, if not brazen, Calvinistic advocates of a “well-meant offer” *do* affirm. As a Presbyterian theologian, Dabney recognized the full-blown Arminian heresy implicit in such an affirmation. The proponents of the “well-meant offer” who *do* affirm a will of God for the salvation of all humans, cannot, therefore, appeal to Dabney for support of their Arminian doctrine of their gracious offer to all humans. On the contrary, Dabney condemned their doctrine of the “well-meant offer” as the Arminian heresy. He rejected it.

Yet Dabney himself went wrong by teaching the well-meant offer. Dabney’s doctrine was that God has “pity,” or “compassion,”

upon all, at least, upon all who hear the gospel. But since this pity, according to Dabney, is a pity that desires the salvation of all humans, Dabney, in spite of his better, Reformed instincts, made himself guilty of the error of the “well-meant offer” theology. That is, he taught a will of God for the salvation of the non-elect, despite his expressed objection to the doctrine as the Arminian heresy. The title of his essay expresses the error: “*Proposals of Mercy.*” The necessary source of serious, merciful proposals of salvation to all humans is a will of God for their salvation. Dabney’s indiscriminate proposals of mercy are the same as the contemporary “well-meant offer.” The implications of Dabney’s proposals of mercy, to which I come shortly, prove this assertion beyond all doubt.

Dabney opened his essay by observing that the argument for their heretical theology that is based upon these (alleged) indiscriminate proposals of mercy, that is, a “well-meant offer,” is the strongest argument for the Arminian heresy in the Arminian arsenal (282). The controversy over the issue of indiscriminate proposals of mercy, or a “well-meant offer,” is not a tilting at windmills, but a life-or-death jousting between Reformed orthodoxy and the Arminian heresy.

Heroic as were his efforts to defend indiscriminate proposals of mercy, that is, a “well-meant offer,” without bluntly and expressly affirming a saving (ineffectual) love of God for all humans, Dabney could not avoid committing himself to this doctrine of Arminianism, indeed to a bold, explicit *statement* of this heresy. He fell into the heresy, almost against his will. Remember, he rejected the doctrine of a will of God for the salvation of all humans. Nevertheless, he fell into this heresy necessarily. He could not escape doing so. For this belongs to the essence itself of the doctrine of indiscriminate proposals of mercy, or the “well-meant offer.” If the gospel is indiscriminately a proposal of mercy, or a “well-meant offer,” to all hearers, then God loves all humans with a love that wills (desires!) their salvation. And then the saving love of God is ineffectual in itself, because many to whom God mercifully proposes salvation perish in unbelief. Thus, the notion of indiscriminate proposals of mercy is the compromise of the Reformed faith, and of the gospel of salvation by grace, in its entirety.

Regardless that Dabney avoided stating that God *loves* all humans, and that with a love that desires (wills!) their salvation, the truth is that

a saving pity—a pity over the unsaved state of humans—is love. This love desires the salvation of the objects of this pity, or compassion. A father pities his child living in unbelief and unholiness because he desires, or wills, the salvation of his child. Pity is a *strong* desire for the deliverance of the object of the pity.

So much was Dabney himself committed to the reality that God’s pity for all is a loving will of God for the salvation of all that, in the first part of his essay, which is largely philosophical, he found it necessary to defend himself against the charge that this will of God, expressed in indiscriminate proposals of mercy, is frustrated by the will of the sinner. This, of course, would be the denial of the sovereignty of God in salvation and the making of the will of God dependent upon the will of the sinner.

Dabney’s solution to this serious problem was to deny that God’s indiscriminate proposals of mercy are frustrated by the contrary will of sinners. They are frustrated, but they are frustrated by other desires, or wills, of God Himself. In God there is a will to save all humans in pity for all of them. But there are other wills of God. These other wills in God over-rule His will to save all, so that His will to save all is not realized. One desire or will of God frustrates the other desire or will of God: “God does have compassion for the reprobate, but not express volition to save them, because his infinite wisdom regulates his whole will and guides and harmonizes (not suppresses) all its active principles” (309).

This solution to Dabney’s problem of a will of God to save all that is not realized is as God-dishonoring as the Arminian doctrine that the will of the sinner frustrates the will of God to save him. For Dabney’s solution has God at loggerheads with Himself. With one sincere will or desire He wills the salvation of all humans; with another will, He contradicts this will to save all. One divine will frustrates another divine will. One is inclined to advise Dabney’s god of indiscriminate merciful proposals to make up his mind. On the other hand, one is tempted to sympathize with him for not being able to make up his mind.

Dabney’s solution of this problem that a will of God (for the salvation of all) is over-ruled by other wills of God (that only the elect be saved) is the denial of that attribute of God that Christian theology

has described as the “simplicity” of God. God’s perfections are not only in harmony with each other, but also they are one in Him.

Theologically, such a conception of God as having two wills in conflict *regarding the salvation of sinners* is unbiblical. The God of Scripture is not of two minds or wills, forever at odds with Himself whether He shall do this or that. Particularly with regard to the salvation of sinners, He has and carries out the one will of election. The mystery of His will of the salvation of guilty, lost sinners made known to us in the Scriptures is “according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself” (Eph. 1:9). God has one will, one good pleasure, and one purpose for the salvation of sinners in His pity, and this is the decree of election.

Ephesians 1:5 calls this will of God for the salvation of sinners “predestination.” Rightly translated, this verse makes God’s love the motivation of this predestination: “In love, having predestinated....” “Love” in the text includes all aspects and manifestations of love, specifically pity, so that the text can rightly be understood to say, “In pity, having predestinated us.” The pity of God is particular, for the elect, and for the elect only. And this pity is effectual; it saves every one upon whom it falls. Nothing and no one frustrates it, least of all God Himself.

Well aware that he was skating on thin orthodox ice with his indiscriminate proposals of mercy, Dabney avoided declaring in so many words that God *loves* all humans and wills their salvation. This was, in fact, his doctrine, but he was much more cautious in teaching it than are the defenders of the theory of a “well-meant offer of the gospel” today.

Nevertheless, Dabney could not successfully escape committing himself to the Arminian doctrine that God loves all humans with a love that desires, and thus wills, their salvation. He committed himself to this heresy by appealing to Ezekiel 18:32 as a biblical basis of his indiscriminate proposals of mercy (307, 308). Ezekiel 18:32 has been the favorite passage of the Arminians since the time of Jacob Arminius himself. The text reads: “For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.”

The right understanding of the text is not here my concern. My concern is to note that the text teaches a will of God for the salvation of



sinners and that this saving will of God has its origin and explanation in the love of God for these sinners. This understanding of Ezekiel 18:32 is indisputable. If now Dabney's doctrine of indiscriminate proposals of mercy is founded upon Ezekiel 18:32, Dabney's doctrine is the teaching of a saving love of God for all humans without exception and of a will of God for the salvation of all without exception. Undeniably, according to Dabney, this love and this will are ineffectual, for whatever reason. And this is sheer Arminianism, Arminianism with a curious twist perhaps, but Arminianism.

Similarly revelatory is Dabney's appeal in defense of his doctrine to Luke 19:41, 42, Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem (308, 309). This passage too was appealed to by Dabney in support of his doctrine of indiscriminate proposals of mercy, or, in the language of today, a "well-meant offer" of salvation. Whatever the right explanation of the passage may be, it obviously teaches a love of Jesus for sinners and His will, or fervent desire, that these sinners be saved. This was the explanation of Dabney. Christ weeps over the reprobate (Dabney used the word). Christ "felt...tender compassion" for these reprobates. His compassion concerned the "doom of reprobation," that is, the compassion of Jesus in the passage concerned the salvation of sinners. And according to Dabney's interpretation of the passage, this love and will of Jesus concerning the salvation of sinners fails to save many of them. The love of Jesus "lament[s] those whom yet it did not save."

So much was Dabney's doctrine of indiscriminate proposals of mercy one with the Arminian heresy of universal, ineffectual, saving grace in the gospel that Dabney taught universal atonement. He taught universal atonement *as the necessary implication of his doctrine of indiscriminate merciful proposals*. Dabney taught universal atonement on the basis of John 3:16: "For God so loved the world," etc. (309-313). John 3:16 surely proclaims a saving love of God and a will to save from sin. This saving love and this will to save were expressed and manifested above all in the incarnation and death of Jesus. According to Dabney, this love and this death had as their object and (would-be) beneficiary the "world" of *all humans without exception, particularly including Judas Iscariot*. This understanding of John 3:16, in defense of his doctrine of indiscriminate proposals of mercy, exposes Dabney's doctrine of indiscriminate proposals of mercy, as it does today the

theory of a “well-meant offer of salvation,” which likewise implies universal atonement.

According to its proponents in the Reformed camp themselves, including Robert L. Dabney, the doctrine of a “well-meant offer of salvation,” described by Dabney as “indiscriminate proposals of mercy,” necessarily implies universal atonement.

By this time, candid Presbyterian and Reformed theologians must acknowledge the relationship between the doctrine of a “well-meant offer” to all to whom the gospel comes—Dabney’s indiscriminate proposals of mercy—and the heresy of universal atonement. This relationship is evident in the content itself of the two doctrines. If God loves and sincerely desires the salvation of all humans, as is the doctrine of the “well-meant offer,” He must have expressed this desire or will in a death of Christ for all. At the very least, He must have made the fulfillment of this desire possible in a death of Christ for all. If the cross is anything at all, it is the revelation and expression of the love and saving will of God for sinful humans.

In addition to the intrinsic meaning of a “well-meant offer,” or indiscriminate proposals of mercy, the history of the theology of the doctrine of a “well-meant offer” demonstrates the friendly relationship between the “well-meant offer” and universal atonement. In the case of Dabney himself, the doctrine of indiscriminate proposals of mercy led an otherwise Calvinistic theologian to deny the third point of the five points of Calvinism: limited atonement.

Similarly, the history of the doctrine of a “well-meant offer” in the Christian Reformed Church (CRCNA) demonstrates that the doctrine of a “well-meant offer” leads to, indeed demands, the heresy of universal atonement by a confessionally Reformed Church. In a series of articles in the *Reformed Journal* magazine, beginning in 1962, CRCNA professor Harold Dekker contended that Christ died for all humans without exception. Among other grounds adduced by Dekker for this heresy was the decision of the CRCNA in 1924 that God is gracious to all humans in a “well-meant offer of salvation.” Against the Reformed tradition of the CRCNA and against the creedal testimony of the second head of doctrine of that denomination’s confession, the Canons of Dordt, Dekker argued that the universal grace of the doctrine of a “well-meant offer of the gospel,” which the CRCNA had adopted in

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1924, necessarily implies universal atonement. The CRCNA approved both Dekker's argument and the doctrine of universal atonement.

By their silence concerning the controversy and its outcome in the CRCNA, of which controversy and outcome they were well aware, the Reformed community of churches worldwide, which for the most part itself is committed to the doctrine of a "well-meant offer," made itself complicit in the CRCNA's approval of the heresy of universal atonement. *On the basis of the doctrine of a "well-meant offer of salvation—Dabney's indiscriminate proposals of mercy!*

The doctrine of a "well-meant offer" implies universal atonement. This is evident in Dabney.

Dabney was at pains, and at some length, explicitly to reject and refute any explanation of John 3:16 that limits the humans who are part of the "world" to the elect.

In the course of his defense of his theory of indiscriminate proposals of mercy, which today goes by the name of a "well-meant offer of grace," Dabney made one appeal to the Reformed confessions (307). That appeal, significantly, is to Canons, 3-4.8: "As many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called..." "Unfeignedly" translates the Latin original, "*serio*," which means "seriously." God's call in the gospel is serious. It confronts all to whom it comes with God's serious command that they repent and believe. But a "serious" call is not necessarily a merciful call intending the salvation of the one to whom the call is given by God. God seriously called Pharaoh to let God's people go with the divine intention thereby to harden the heart of the Egyptian monarch (Ex. 7; Rom. 9:17). And in Romans 9 the apostle refers to this call of Pharaoh in order to illustrate and substantiate the apostle's doctrine that the purpose of God's call of the reprobate by the gospel is to harden them in their unbelief, not to save them.

According to Dabney, the meaning of the Canons is that in the external call of the gospel God's "purpose" is that the call save all to whom it comes. The serious call is "a solemn and tender entreat[y]" on the part of God to all to whom the call comes, an "evidence of a true compassion" with regard to their lost estate (307). Regardless that Dabney made this compassion a desire of God to save all to whom it comes, including those who perish, that is frustrated by another, more compelling will of God, his appeal to the article puts him squarely

in the doctrinal camp of the Arminians. The Arminians explained the serious call of the Canons, 3-4.8 as a gracious offer of God to all to whom it comes, in the sincere desire, or will, of God to save them all. Exactly this was also the doctrine of Dabney's indiscriminate proposals of mercy. The Reformed churches drew up and adopted the Canons to refute and condemn this doctrine of universal grace in the preaching of the gospel.

That the compassionate call of the gospel—the proposal of mercy—expressing God's will for the salvation of its objects, and manifesting pity for them in their lost condition, is particular and efficacious is the plain teaching of Romans 8:30: "Whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called...them he also glorified." The merciful call is restricted to the predestinated. It is also effectual: it accomplishes the glorification of those who are called.

The lesson that Presbyterian Christians must take away from Dabney's defense of the "well-meant offer," which is the modern description of Dabney's indiscriminate proposals of mercy, is a solemn, urgent warning. Even a theologian as otherwise sound as Dabney and as determined to avoid the Arminian error of universal, ineffectual grace, could not avoid falling into the most grievous errors of the Arminian heresy.

His downfall was his erroneous conception of the call of the gospel as an indiscriminate proposal of mercy, or a "well-meant offer of salvation."

Let all Reformed and Presbyterian Christians, indeed all who would confess salvation by grace alone, and thus glorify God, take heed!

# History of Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America

## 1. Eras

Douglas J. Kuiper

This article begins a history of Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America (PRCA) as an ecclesiastical body. To be clear, the focus of these articles is not on Classis West as a geographic area, nor on the churches of Classis West; it is on that body that convenes at least twice annually, called “Classis West.”

A history of Classis West presupposes a history of its sister, Classis East. Perhaps the sister’s history will be written one day. But the history of Classis West will be written first. One reason is that the research has already been done; in the capacity of stated clerk of Classis West (2009-2017), I extensively researched the archives and prepared the first (2015) edition of the index of the minutes of Classis West.<sup>1</sup>

1 “Index of the Minutes of Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America: September 1939 to March 2015.” The index is prepared in both print and electronic forms; the electronic version is updated annually. The index is considered to be a “semi-private” document; every consistory has a copy of it. Copies are not made available to the general membership of the PRCA; however, members who have a compelling reason to study the index may ask their consistory to use its copy. It is understood that the consistory will pass judgment on the validity of every individual request. See Minutes of Classis West, March 4, 2015, Art. 20.

Henceforth, footnoted references to the minutes of Classis West will be abbreviated as MCW, to the minutes of Classis East as MCE, and to the minutes of the classis of the PRCA as MCPRCA. Because these ecclesiastical bodies are not the broadest assemblies in the PRCA, and often deal with personal matters and matters of discipline, their minutes are not distributed publically. All references to the minutes and supplements are to documents found in the PRCA archives, some of which are considered confidential. These articles attempt to present a history without betraying confidentiality.

Furthermore, at any given time in the PRCA's history at least two-thirds of her members have resided within Classis *East*. Most members of the PRCA envision denominational life from a western Michigan perspective. To inform the one-third of what life in the PRCA is like in Classis East seems less beneficial than to inform the two-thirds about the PRCA as it is represented outside of Michigan.

Besides, the flavor of life in Classis West and of the meetings of Classis West are distinct from that in the East. The churches in the West are generally smaller and more isolated than the churches in the East. Fellowship with those from other congregations has been limited.<sup>2</sup> The semiannual meetings of Classis West are an opportunity for ministers to see other ministers in their own denomination and to fellowship with other PRCA members outside their own congregation. Delegates stay overnight in the homes of families of the host congregation, sometimes with other delegates from other churches whom they can get to know better. Officebearer conferences, often held the day before the meeting of classis, provide another way and another day of enjoying fellowship. Consequently, legendary stories are born of delegates riding go-karts during classis meeting breaks, of delegates dealing with snoring colleagues in the same bedroom, of blizzards that isolated the delegates in the host congregation for several days longer than anticipated, and more. Life in Classis West has a unique character.

Finally, although the same could be said of Classis East, some decisions of Classis West either set precedent for the churches as a whole, or at least have implications for the churches as a whole. Relating the history of Classis West involves setting forth some of these decisions, so that they are more widely known.

This article will give a broad overview of the history (eras) of Classis West. The Lord willing, future articles will explain the work of classis, note major issues that it faced over the years, and attempt to convey a

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Although the minutes and supplements are not open to public access without prior permission, the stated clerk publishes the main decisions of the meetings in the *Standard Bearer*.

2 Today it might not seem so. Modern technology, especially internet-based phone and face-time programs, virtually bring into one's own presence those who live far away. But remember that the classis will be eighty-four years old in 2023, while the widespread use of such technology is not much more than twenty years old.

sense of the warm fellowship that the delegates have enjoyed at office-bearers' conferences and the meetings of classis.

My years as a pastor in Classis West were among the happiest years of my life, in part because I came to know an entire segment of the PRCA that I had not previously known. These articles are a tribute to those years, and dedicated to the congregations of Randolph, Wisconsin and Edgerton, Minnesota, which I had the pleasure to serve.

### **Background, Boundaries, and Membership**

As a distinct federation of churches, the PRCA was formed in January 1925.<sup>3</sup> The broadest assembly of these churches in the years 1925 and 1926 was the quarterly meetings of the combined consistories of all the PRCA congregations. By the end of 1926 the denomination numbered ten churches,<sup>4</sup> making the meeting of the combined consistories cumbersome. From 1927 to 1939, the broadest assembly was the classis of the PRCA, attended by two delegates from each church in the federation. The classis of the PRCA met for the last time on June 7-8, 1939. By then the denomination numbered twenty-one churches, located as far east as western Michigan and as far west as the greater Los Angeles area. The time had come to divide into two classes and have an annual meeting of synod.

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3 For various reasons, the official date is given as 1924. One reason is that in 1924 synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America adopted the Three Points of Common Grace, to which doctrine the founding pastors of the PRCA objected. A second reason is that the Reformed Free Publishing Association, an organization devoted to publishing literature that opposed common grace, was formed in the late summer of 1924. A third reason is that in December 1924 Classis Grand Rapids East declared Herman Hoeksema to be suspended. Nevertheless, it was not until January 1925 that the consistories of the Eastern Ave. CRC, Hope CRC, and First Kalamazoo CRC met together to conduct business that pertained to the churches in common.

4 Article 2 of the meeting of combined consistories on November 3, 1926, reads: "Article 2. Rev. G.M. Ophoff presides. Represented are: Byron Center, Doon, Eastern Ave., Grandville Ave., Hope, Hudsonville, Hull, Kalamazoo, Munster and Waupun." Because these meetings represented the broadest ecclesiastical assembly at the time, a printed copy of the minutes is found in our seminary library as well as in the PRCA archives.

Articles seven and eight of this final meeting read: “Article 7. The report of the committee in regard to the organization of a synod and the divisions of the classis is read by Rev. H. Hoeksema and received for information. Article 8. Decided to treat this report seriatim. Points 1 to 10 are adopted. Decided to adopt the report in its entirety.”<sup>5</sup> The first of these ten points recommended that “the present meeting of classis be regarded as the last general classical meeting,” and the second that “the first synod be convoked the Wednesday of the last full week in May, 1940” with First Grand Rapids PRC as the calling church. Other recommendations regarded the length of the fiscal year of the denomination, who would be official functionaries after Classis June 1939 adjourned and before Synod 1940 met, and other formal matters. The ninth recommendation was that “Classis East and West each have their first meeting the last Wednesday in September, with Fuller Ave. the calling church for the former, Hull, Iowa for the latter.”<sup>6</sup>

From September 1939 to the present, the PRCA have held an annual synod as the broadest ecclesiastical gathering, and the consistories have sent delegates to the meetings of Classis East and Classis West.

The decision to divide the denominational classis stated which churches would belong to which regional classis: “1. Classis East shall comprise the churches of Michigan and Illinois, numbering eleven churches and 767 families. 2. Classis West shall comprise the churches of Iowa, Minnesota and California, numbering ten churches and 222 families.”<sup>7</sup> The ten churches that sent delegates to the first meeting of Classis West (Appendix A) were the two in California (Bellflower and Redlands), seven in Iowa (Oskaloosa, Pella, Orange City, Sioux Center, Hull, Doon, Rock Valley), and one in Minnesota (Edgerton).<sup>8</sup> Not explicitly stated, but understood, was that the dividing line between those churches in Classis East and in Classis West was the Mississippi River.

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5 Minutes of Classis of the PRCA (MCPRCA), June 7-8, 1939. A printed copy of the minutes is also found in our seminary library.

6 MCPRCA, June 7-8, 1939.

7 MCPRCA, January 11-12, 1939, Art. 7, and Supplement 1.

8 MCW, September 20, 1939, Art. 3.



Between 1939 and 1953 classis grew by two churches: Manhattan, Montana<sup>9</sup> was organized in 1939, and Lynden, Washington in 1951. The 222 families became 359, with a total membership of 1668.<sup>10</sup>

Classis West was severely decimated by the split of 1953, the story of which will be told presently. The effect of the schism was that two out-lying congregations (Bellflower and Manhattan) and five congregations in Iowa (Oskaloosa, Orange City, Pella, Rock Valley, and Sioux Center) left the PRCA. The churches of Doon and Lynden remained largely intact (Lynden numbered only six families at the time), while those of Edgerton, Hull, and Redlands lost their ministers and a significant number of families. The total number of families in classis decreased from 359 to 99. Whereas eleven ministers had served the twelve churches before the schism, only one served the five immediately after the schism (although two more were soon added).<sup>11</sup> Classis West had always been smaller than Classis East; now it was much smaller. Classis East had eleven churches and ten ministers.<sup>12</sup>

A lasting effect of the schism was the moving of the boundary line between Classis East and Classis West. The impetus for this was Doon's request that Classis West overture synod to change the classical boundaries to include the churches of South Holland and Oak Lawn, Illinois, and Randolph, Wisconsin in Classis West.<sup>13</sup> Classis adopted this motion, thereby declining Edgerton's request to return to the former practice of having one general classis, not two regional classes and a

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9 "Although it was often referred to as Manhattan, the town of Manhattan was ten miles away," said Cornelius Hanko, who served this congregation from 1945-1948. More specifically, the church was in Churchill, Montana. See Hanko's description of this area in his book *Less Than the Least*, ed. Karen Van Baren, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Jenison: RFP, 2017) 164-66.

10 *Acts of Synod 1952*, 116.

11 *Acts of Synod 1952*, 105; *Acts of Synod 1954*, 75. Rev. H. C. Hoeksema was the only pastor in Classis West to remain faithful to the PRCA. Within months after the schism, Rev. H. Veldman moved to Edgerton, and Rev. H. Kuiper to Redlands.

12 *Acts of Synod 1954*, 74.

13 Minutes of Classis West, April 7, 1954, Arts. 15, 20; Supplement 4. Henceforth I will use the abbreviation MCW to refer to Minutes of Classis West, and MCE to refer to Minutes of Classis East.

synod.<sup>14</sup> Synod 1954 favored the request of Doon and Classis West, but referred it to Classis East for its input; if Classis East agreed, the change of boundary should go into effect in March 1955.<sup>15</sup> Classis East neither opposed the concept, nor immediately agreed to it, because the denomination was “in a period of flux.”<sup>16</sup> Synod 1955 decided, however, to implement the change immediately, citing the urgent need of Classis West, and the authority of synod to draw the boundaries.<sup>17</sup> So classis grew by three churches.

In 1962 the denomination formally incorporated in the State of Illinois. The corporation’s By-Laws state this about classical membership and boundaries:

The Protestant Reformed Churches in America shall further consist of congregations represented in various classes, according to the regulations prescribed in the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches. At the organization of this corporation, there shall be two such classes, Classis East and Classis West, the boundary between them being the eastern boundary of the state of Illinois. The constituting of new classes, as well as the fixing of classical boundaries, shall at all times be subject to the final determination of the synod.<sup>18</sup>

To this date the boundaries remain the same . . . with an exception added. When Peace PRC was formed in 1988, it was located in Lansing, Illinois. The eastern border of the city of Lansing is the Illinois/Indiana border. In 2015, anticipating the day when it would move out of Lansing into Indiana, yet desiring to remain part of Classis West, Peace PRC sought and obtained synod’s prior approval to remain in Classis West

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14 MCW, April 7, 1954, Arts. 16, 24; Supplement 5.

15 *Acts of Synod 1954*, Arts. 19-21.

16 MCE, January 5, 1955, Art. 11. Classis East treated the matter already at its meeting of July 7, 1954, but deferred action until January 1955 so that it could wait for a verdict in the First Church legal matter, and because it saw the possibility of more churches being organized west of the Mississippi River, which would help Classis West. See MCE, July 7, 1954, Arts. 41-42.

17 *Acts of Synod 1955*, Arts. 91, 94, 96.

18 *Acts of Synod 1962*, Art. 70, Supplement X. The By-Laws are printed in full in “The Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America,” 2020 edition, 118-129. This is the loose-leaf green binder.

when it relocated. Synod worded its decision carefully: in approving this request, it did not change the boundaries, but made an exception to the By-Laws.<sup>19</sup> The effect is that, after Peace moved to Dyer, Indiana in 2018,<sup>20</sup> it remained in Classis West. Yet under these circumstances the minister of its closest neighboring congregation, Cornerstone PRC in Dyer, Indiana, cannot serve as Peace's moderator when it is vacant; though the two churches are less than two miles away, they are in different classes.

Several churches were added to classis soon after the schism of 1953. Pella, Iowa was reorganized in 1955; Loveland, Colorado was received in 1958; and the congregations in Isabel, South Dakota and Forbes, North Dakota were received in 1960. By 1965, ten years after the classical boundaries were redrawn, Classis West numbered twelve churches and 239 families.<sup>21</sup>

To these were added the congregations of Edmonton, Alberta (Canada) in 1975, and Trinity, Houston, Texas in 1977. During the same decade the congregations in Oak Lawn and Forbes disbanded, in 1972 and 1977 respectively.

The decade of the 1980s saw three churches formed: Immanuel, Lacombe, Alberta (Canada; 1987); Peace, Lansing, IL (1988); and Bethel, Roselle, Illinois (1989). The only church organized in the 1990s was Cornerstone PRC in Dyer, Indiana (1999), a daughter of the South Holland Church. This congregation found property in Indiana, however, and so became part of Classis East. Two congregations were taken off the membership roll in the 1990s: in 1994, classis declared the congregation in Isabel to be outside the federation, and in 1998 Trinity Houston disbanded.

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, three congregations were organized: Calvary, Hull, Iowa in 2007; Covenant of Grace, Spokane, Washington in 2009; and Heritage, Sioux Falls, South Dakota in 2010. Disbanding were Pella (2001) and Bethel Roselle (2021).

In sum, throughout its history Classis West has included a total of twenty-six churches. One of them, Pella, was reorganized after the 1953 schism and subsequently disbanded again. In total, twelve churches

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<sup>19</sup> *Acts of Synod 2015*, Art. 54.

<sup>20</sup> *Standard Bearer*, October 1, 2018, 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Acts of Synod 1965*, 182.

withdrew or disbanded. As of early 2022 classis has fourteen member congregations and 734 families.<sup>22</sup> Always it is God that gives the increase, both numerically and spiritually.

### **Eras: Foundations and Growth (1939-1953)**

The first era of the history of classis was its formative era. During these years classis made decisions that set trends for later years. In addition, classis faced certain issues more during these years than it would later.

The first meeting of classis was held on September 20, 1939, in Hull, Iowa. At the beginning of each of the three sessions, a Psalm was sung (Psalms 89:3, 97:7, 119:3), and at the conclusion the delegates sang Psalm 133:3. The reference is to Dutch Psalms; not until its fourth meeting did classis sing from the 1912 *Psalter*. Also interesting is that the practice was to sing *one* stanza, rather than several. After the first classical meeting was duly constituted, it made three procedural decisions that remain the practice of classis to this day. First, it appointed as president that minister whose last name was first alphabetically (Rev. Andrew Cammenga), and then said “henceforth the presidency shall be arranged by alphabetical order.” Second, it stipulated that “the official language of Classis shall be the language of the land” (that is, English, as opposed to Dutch). Third, it defeated a request to meet three times a year, thus committing itself to the practice of two regular meetings each year.<sup>23</sup>

The main business of the first classis was the examination of Candidates J. Blankespoor and P. Vis, who had accepted calls to the churches in Orange City and Rock Valley, Iowa, respectively. After informing

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<sup>22</sup> *Acts of Synod 2022*, 248.

<sup>23</sup> MCW, September 20, 1939, Arts. 6, 7, and 19. Article 7 read in the original, “Voorstel dat de officieele taal der Classis zal zijn de taal des lands.” The minutes through Article 7 were recorded in Dutch, and from Article 8 on, in English. The decisions to have the ministers serve in alphabetical rotation and to meet twice annually was classis’ application of Article 41 of the Church Order. That article permits the ministers to serve as president in rotation, or to be elected at the gathering, providing he did not preside at the last meeting. The same article requires classical meetings to “be held at least once in three months, unless great distances render this inadvisable.” From Redlands, California to Orange City, Iowa is about 1600 miles. In the days of travel by train, this was certainly a great distance.

the men of the joyful news, classis sang Psalm 134:3. Another weighty matter was on the agenda: the early emeritation of Rev. Henry Kuiper, of which more later.<sup>24</sup>

The classical minutes during these years reflect the times. First, most of the churches were small. In 1942 four of eleven churches had less than twenty families; by 1949 Orange City and Bellflower were eleven and fifteen families, respectively, and five more churches had less than thirty families. Only four churches had more than thirty families. Both the small size of many churches, as well as the need to recover from the Great Depression and World War II, made for financial struggles. Recognizing that the pastors needed to make sufficient money to devote themselves to their calling even in such times, in 1944 classis advised every consistory that requested subsidy to raise the salary of its pastor to a minimum of \$1400.<sup>25</sup> A year later the church visitors reported that in every church in Iowa they “gave emphasis to the need of better salaries for the ministers.”<sup>26</sup>

Second, traveling long distances in those days was more difficult than today. Today one can fly from Chicago to Los Angeles or Seattle or Edmonton, major cities near the outposts of classis, in a relatively short time. Vehicles are more reliable, and interstate highways make for faster driving. Seventy or eighty years ago, things were much different. For this reason, classis always met in the eight churches in Iowa and Minnesota. Never did the delegates travel to California or Montana for a classical meeting. Not that these churches never invited classis; classis’ response to Redlands’ invitation to host the March 1950 meeting was, “Classis decides to thank Redlands for their kind invitation, but to inform them that we deem it unwise to have our spring meeting there.”<sup>27</sup>

Another indication of the difficulty in travel is that classis held only one special meeting in this fourteen-year span, and that meeting was a *classis contracta*. Special meetings are held only when a matter is pressing, and cannot wait. Such was the case with Doon’s request to the meeting on September 7, 1949, that classis convene a special meeting to examine Homer C. Hoeksema, Doon’s pastor-elect. Classis

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24 MCW, September 20, 1939, Arts. 31-38.

25 MCW, March 1, 1944, Arts. 24, 29.

26 MCW, March 7, 1945, Art. 9, Supplement I.

27 MCW, September 7, 1949, Art. 12.

appointed a committee of Revs. Doezema and Petter to advise how it should proceed. Referencing the church order authority Johannes Jansen, the committee reported:

A classis-contracta is defined as a gathering of neighboring churches for special cases which demand attention before the next gathering of classis, that is, cases which have been determined by a previous classis and which are of such a nature that it is expected that they can be properly treated by such a classis-contracta. In Holland examples were given such as the approving of ministerial credentials, which often required considerable investigation and discretion. Literally a classis-contracta is a contracted or a reduced classis. All the churches are notified and are free to send delegates but are not bound to attend. It is expected that only the neighboring churches will attend.<sup>28</sup>

Classis then appointed September 28 as the date of the *classis contracta*, required the churches in Iowa and Minnesota to send delegates, and left to the discretion of the other three whether to send delegates or not. To be clear, no regularly scheduled meeting of classis can simply become a *classis contracta* for convenience sake; the designation of a *classis contracta*, and the agenda for that meeting, must be determined by the previous classis.<sup>29</sup>

Third, classis' minutes during these years remind us that the churches were primarily located in rural, agricultural areas. This is reflected in the date of the fall meeting of classis. During these years classis invariably met the first week of March. The fall meeting was usually held the first week of September. The delegates from Montana preferred to meet in October so they could finish the wheat harvest; classis compromised, meeting the last week of September in 1944 and 1946.<sup>30</sup> But other churches found that the later date interrupted the catechism and society seasons, which had already started, and classis eventually decided to continue to meet in early September.<sup>31</sup>

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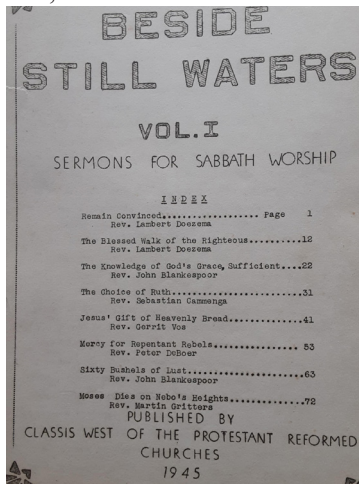
28 MCW, September 7, 1949, Supplement IV.

29 The minutes of classis specifically fixed the date for September 28. However, the records of the *classis contracta* indicate that it was actually held on September 27.

30 MCW, March 1, 1944, Art 36; September 5, 1945, Arts. 16-17.

31 MCW, March 5, 1947, Art. 18. The impression must not be given that

Finally, the minutes reveal the regularity and necessity of reading sermons. The elders of vacant churches had to be ready to read a sermon because those churches were not given classical appointments every week. Elders also had to read if their pastor was on vacation, on classical appointment, attending synod, or sick. In the 1930s the denominational classis had required each minister to submit reading sermons annually for this purpose.<sup>32</sup> After the division into two classes, each appointed its own committee to gather and distribute reading sermons,<sup>33</sup> and the two committees kept in contact with each other about their work.<sup>34</sup> The fruit of this work was the publication of six volumes of reading sermons, bound into three books, entitled *Beside Still Waters*.<sup>35</sup>



classis has fixed dates on which it meets. The classical rules of order require that each classis set the date and place of its next meeting. To say that Classis West meets on a certain week of March and September is not to state a rule, but is to observe a historical norm.

32 MCPRCA, December 2, 1931, Art. 66; June 27, 1933, Art. 11; January 9, 1935, Art. 6; January 8, 1936, Arts. 7-8. This list is partial, but includes the most relevant minutes.

33 Classis West's first committee was the Revs. Petter and Lubbers; see MCW, September 11, 1940, Arts. 30-31. Not until 1954 did classis appoint a consistory, that of Edgerton, MN, as the consistory to be the committee; see MCW, January 21, 1954, Art. 23.

34 MCW, March 5, 1941, Art. 9; September 1, 19643, Art. 14.

35 MCW, March 7, 1945, Art. 13; September 5, 1945, Art. 15; March 6, 1946, Arts. 14-15.

Classis also approved the publication of another sermon booklet “for our boys in the Armed Forces”<sup>36</sup>—yet another reminder of the character of the times.

So much for the character of these years. More can be said about those issues that classis faced that interested the denomination as a whole. These include church political matters, missions, contact with other churches, and emeritus. Usually classis dealt with these matters in response to overtures from the various consistories.

The church political matters were many, but only one will occupy our time. When church visitors make their annual visit to the churches, they ask a series of questions.<sup>37</sup> The tenth question to the full consistory is “Is family visitation conducted faithfully, so that each family receives an official visit once a year?” The presence of this question is the fruit of an overture of Sioux Center’s consistory, through classis, to Synod 1941.<sup>38</sup>

The PRCA had begun actively doing mission work in the United States and Canada in the 1930s. In the 1940s many of its young men entered the armed forces. In 1943 the consistories of Hull, Pella, and Sioux Center asked classis to overture synod to call a “camp pastor” (military chaplain). Classis responded by overturning synod to make the army camps be the first field of labor for a missionary, when one would accept the call.<sup>39</sup> Synod eventually decided not to do this, as it would conflict with the constitution that governed mission work.<sup>40</sup>

After World War II Dutch immigrants were entering Canada in large numbers, and the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) was sending men to labor among them. At the behest of Doon’s consistory, Classis West urged the mission committee to send a Protestant Reformed man who could speak the Dutch language to labor among them, thinking that especially those immigrants who came from the Liberated (Schilderian) churches would be more open to our

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36 MCW, September 6, 1950, Art. 8; March 7, 1951, Art. 9.

37 See “Questions for Church Visitation,” in “The Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America” (loose-leaf green binder), 2020 edition, 133-36.

38 MCW, March 5, 1941, Art. 18.

39 MCW, March 3, 1943, Art. 39.

40 *Acts of Synod 1943*, Art. 90.



denomination than the CRCNA.<sup>41</sup> Eighteen months later, the consistory of Hull was more urgent in asking classis to overture synod “to put forth every effort as soon as possible to obtain a missionary to labor among the Holland immigrants in Canada.” Classis did so with some changes to the wording of the overture,<sup>42</sup> and synod acted favorably regarding the essence of the overture; in fact, the mission committee came with a similar request that was adopted.<sup>43</sup> Today one might not give these requests a second thought. Of course, we should do mission work, and of course, Dutch immigrants were a logical object of such work! It should not be overlooked, however, that the pastor of Doon PRC in 1947 was John Blankespoor, and of Hull PRC in 1949 was Andrew Cammenga, both of whom left the PRCA in 1953. The possibility exists, though a firm assertion must be demonstrated, that these men were hoping for the PRCA’s quick growth, and were not overly concerned with the doctrinal differences of the PRCA and the Liberated. Doon’s overture came to classis two weeks before Klaas Schilder’s 1947 tour of the western churches; Hull’s overture came almost eighteen months later.

An overture from Classis West to synod in 1944 pointed the PRCA in the direction of foreign mission work, something the denomination had not done to that point. Recognizing that the PRCA was not able to take on a foreign field of its own, but also that the church was always to be obeying Christ’s great commission, the consistory of Manhattan asked classis to overture Synod 1944 to find an existing foreign mission work that the PRCA could support. This classis did,<sup>44</sup> and Synod 1944 was agreeable.

Turning from missions to contact with other churches, in 1940 classis faced a request to begin correspondence with the Orthodox Presbyterian Churches (which at the time was four years old) and the Reformed Churches of America (tracing its history back to the colonial era). The desire was to point out the errors in these denominations. Classis dealt with this matter at several successive meetings, deciding

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41 MCW, September 3, 1947, Art. 14.

42 MCW, March 2, 1949, Art. 22. Hull’s overture, from which the quote comes, is Supplement IX.

43 *Acts of Synod 1949*, Arts. 64-66.

44 MCW, March 1, 1944, Art. 9.

finally not to correspond with the denominations but to use pamphlets and periodicals to point out their errors and point them to the truth.<sup>45</sup>

Later that decade classis approved an overture from Bellflower and forwarded it to synod to ask the synod of the CRCNA to reconsider its actions of 1924 and 1926. The overture is commendable: it clearly expressed the conviction that the doctrine of common grace does not accord with Scripture, and that the subsequent history of the PRCA demonstrated her right to exist. It was motivated by the realization that the PRCA kept growing numerically as more and more people left the CRCNA. Strikingly, the pastor of Bellflower at the time was Rev. Lambert Doezema, who would leave the PRCA four years later in the schism of 1953, and would enter ministry in the CRCNA in 1961.

Lastly, Classis West dealt with issues of emeritation during this era. In this regard it was distinct from Classis East. Classis East also addressed many matters of church polity, as well as some regarding mission work and contact with other churches; however, it had no occasion to address issues of emeritation.

When the denomination was divided into two classes, Classis West inherited the case of Rev. Henry Kuiper, who had served the church in Orange City until 1938. Experiencing poor health—which was at least intensified by the stress of the ministry, if not caused by it—Rev. Kuiper sought and was granted a temporary release from the ministry. Orange City was given permission to call another minister. All this was approved by the denominational classis in 1938.<sup>46</sup> The denominational classis did not resolve the question of how to care for Rev. Kuiper’s financial needs; Classis West inherited this lack of resolution. Noting Rev. Kuiper’s young age (34), convinced that he was able to do some work to earn income, yet recognizing that he would not be able to take up the work of the ministry in the near future, classis advised Orange City to cease paying him emeritus support and encouraged Rev. Kuiper to seek other employment.<sup>47</sup> For at least two years, he received some

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45 MCW, September 11, 1940, Art. 33; March 5, 1941, Art. 13; September 10, 1941, Art. 8; March 4, 1942, Art. 5; September 9, 1942, Art. 7.

46 MCPRCA, June 1 and 2, 1938, Art. 33.

47 MCW, September 20, 1939, Arts. 29-38; March 6, 1940, Arts. 32-37; September 11, 1940, Arts. 9-14, 19-25.

support from the emeritus fund, by way of payments made from that fund to Orange City.<sup>48</sup>

An emeritus fund existed, but apparently it was supported only by collections in the churches. Through Classis West, Redlands' consistory overtured Synod 1940 to "establish a fund," that is, to make it more permanent and regular, and to assess each family an annual amount to maintain this fund; Synod 1940 acted favorably, and established a more permanent committee to oversee the fund.<sup>49</sup> The matter was settled in 1940, occasioned by the case of a young but unwell minister.

April 1, 1943, marks the date of the first death of a Protestant Reformed minister; Rev. William Verhil, pastor in Edgerton, died suddenly of a heart attack that morning, leaving behind a widow and a daughter. In God's providence, the funds and the basic structure by which to care for them were in place.

One final tidbit concludes the survey of this era: in 1943 the classical committee reported that the Minnesota Historical Society had requested "complimentary copies of all publications of the Prot. Ref. Churches entering the state of Minn. Purpose of this is historical data for their library. Committee decided to request the various publishers to do so. At this time we can also state that all the publishers have complied with the request."<sup>50</sup>

### **Eras: Controversy and Decimation (The Schism of 1953)**

Until the meeting in March 1951, one finds in the minutes of Classis West no indication of looming trouble. Even the reports of the church visitors suggest that the churches were enjoying peace and unity. Of course, in Classis West as a geographical area matters were different. Klaas Schilder had gained the appreciation of many pastors in classis when he toured the western United States in late 1947. The *Concordia*, a western-based periodical published by the Evangel Society of Hull, Iowa, had been published since 1944. In that magazine, Andrew Petter's fifty-article series examining the doctrine of the covenant had been underway since November 13, 1947. Other

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48 *Acts of Synod 1940*, 77; *Acts of Synod 1941*, 85.

49 MCW, March 6, 1940, Art. 52; *Acts of Synod 1940*, Arts. 62, 91.

50 CWM, March 3, 1943, Art. 24, Supplement VI.

sources also indicate that trouble was brewing. But until March 1951, the minutes of Classis West give no hint of it.

The occasion for the first hint was the provisional adoption of the Declaration of Principles by Synod 1950,<sup>51</sup> and the expectation that Synod 1951 would decisively adopt it.<sup>52</sup> Each consistory had time to digest the proposed document. Most consistories of Classis West did not like it.

Let me tell the story the long way. A classis meeting begins, after opening devotions, by becoming constituted. Unlike consistories, classes and synods are not perpetual bodies; each one comes into existence individually when it is declared legally constituted, and ceases its existence when it finally adjourns. The constituting of a classis meeting involves the receiving of the credentials of every delegation. These credentials are official notices that a consistory delegated certain men to the meeting, and has instructed and authorized “them to take part in all the deliberations and transactions of Classis regarding all matters legally coming before the meeting and transacted in agreement with the Word of God according to the conception of it embodied in the doctrinal standards of the Protestant Reformed Churches, as well as in harmony with our Church Order.”<sup>53</sup> The typewritten credentials fill about half a page of paper, leaving about half the page blank. Heading this blank is the word “Instructions.” In this blank space the consistories are to note any matters regarding their own congregation that they wish classis to treat, matters minor enough that they did not warrant being included in the agenda, but significant matters nonetheless. This might include notice of a discipline case regarding which the consistory seeks classis’ advice, or a need for pulpit supply for a vacant church, or a request to host the next meeting of classis.

Usually, at any given classis meeting, only a handful of consistories have such matters for the attention of classis. Of the eleven consistories

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51 *Acts of Synod 1951*, Arts. 116-117.

52 For a thorough treatment of the content of the Declaration of Principles, as well as the history of its adoption, see David J. Engelsma, *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant: The Declaration of Principles* (Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2013.) The book’s opening chapter is one source for my assertion that “trouble was brewing.”

53 “Classical Credentials,” in “The Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches,” 2020 edition, 145.

that sent delegates to March 1951 meeting of classis, eight (all except Manhattan, Oskaloosa, and Redlands) noted on their credentials that they had a matter for classis to consider, relating to the Declaration of Principles. Lest the former sentence leave the impression that three churches did not have a position on the matter, let it be clear: eight of the eleven indicated on their credentials they sent a communication regarding the Declaration. The other three sent a similar communication, without noting it on their credentials.

Overwhelmingly, most consistories were of a mind that Synod 1951 should not finally adopt the Declaration. Hull's consistory not only sent its own position on the issue, but also the position of several members: protests of five against, and communications from four in favor. The protestants used the same basic template to argue their case; the wording of their protests is not exactly identical, but is very similar, and the outline and arguments are the essentially the same. The same is true of those letters that favor adopting the Declaration; in fact, each of them is an attempt to rebut the arguments of their pastor, John De Jong, who was protesting the Declaration.

Bellflower's consistory argued that Synod 1950 adopted the Declaration "without having the proper occasion for such action, the proper instruction to do so," and asked Synod 1951 "repudiate" the action of Synod 1950.<sup>54</sup>

Doon's consistory asked classis "to overture Synod to adopt the proposed Brief Declaration of Principles without change," but forwarded the protest of a member of the congregation against the actions of Synod 1950.

Edgerton expressed basic agreement with the contents of the Declaration, but asked synod not to adopt it yet, contending that "our churches are not ripe for its final adoption" (referencing the controversy that was swirling) and "the document itself it not ripe for final adoption," because it needed clarifications.

The struggle was on.

Classis read aloud all the documents that came before it during the morning, afternoon, and evening sessions on March 7. On Thursday March 8 it began treating Bellflower's material, because Bellflower

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<sup>54</sup> This quote, and any following quotes that are not footnoted, are found in the supplements of the minutes of the March 7, 1951 meeting.

came first alphabetically. It adopted the six grounds of Bellflower's protests one by one (with some modifications), and then the three points of Bellflower's overture (again with minor modifications). The end result was that Classis West protested the adoption of the Declaration of Principles, and asked Synod 1951 to do three things: "repudiate" the actions of Synod 1950, ask churches with whom we have contact for input on the matter, and take no further action until these other churches respond.<sup>55</sup>

What happened next is an anomaly. In Article 64, classis said:

IN VIEW OF THE OVERWHELMING DOCUMENTARY CRITICISMS PRESENTED BY THE VARIOUS CONSISTORIES IN RE THE PROPOSED DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES, CLASSIS OVERTURES SYNOD TO DECLARE THAT AS CHURCHES WE ARE NOT AT ALL RIPE AND READY TO COMPOSE A DECLARATION, AND THAT THE NEED FOR IT HAS NOT BEEN PROVEN.

The anomaly is threefold. First, as it appears in the quote above, the decision is recorded in all capital letters. Second, the article appears twice in the minutes. Following the first entry, "Article 64," as quoted above, is found this note: "(rewrite Art. 64)." The very next article is again Article 64, rewritten, again in full capitals. Both the capitalizations and the repetition indicate that classis was emphatic. That classis was emphatic is not odd in itself. However, the weight of the decisions of any ecclesiastical body is found in the fact that the ecclesiastical body made that decision, and recorded that decision in its minutes. By repeating it, and putting it in capitals, classis was not adding any inherent weight to its decision. The decision itself was momentous; it was settled and binding, according to Article 30 of our Church Order; and it would not go unnoticed. At the same time, the repetition of the article in the minutes would eventually be buried in archives, waiting for some researcher to discover! The extra attention drawn to this decision in the minutes reflects more on the mind and character of the classical delegates, or specifically the stated clerk, than of the decision itself.

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55 MCW, March 7, 1951, Arts. 48-50, 52-55, 59-63.

The third aspect of the anomaly is that classis did not treat any other of the protests except a letter from Hull's pastor. It did not so much as make further reference to any of the other protests. Clearly, classis had addressed the issues that the other protestants raised, and had agreed with the substance of these issues, because Bellflower's documents raised all the issues. But classis made no formal note that its answer to Bellflower was essentially its answer to all the others, and it did not treat Doon's overture to advise Synod 1951 to adopt the Declaration. Doon pointed out this failure of classis in March 1951 to the following meeting of classis, and was told that the adoption of Bellflower's protest and overture *was* the treatment (rejection) of Doon's.<sup>56</sup>

After quickly treating subsidy requests from small congregations, voting for synodical delegates, and finishing other matters, classis adjourned. The official press release of the stated clerk gives a comprehensive report of the meeting, and includes a verbatim quote of the decision above . . . in normal lowercase type, without repetition.<sup>57</sup>

Synod 1951 made some minor amendments to the Declaration of Principles, and adopted it.<sup>58</sup> Synod concluded its meetings in October of 1951. Ordinarily any protest of the decisions of one synod must be made to the immediately following synod, but because of the late adjournment of Synod 1951, protestants obtained permission from Synod 1952 to bring their protests to Synod 1953.<sup>59</sup> Significant, in light of the fact that this is a history of Classis West, is the fact that those who sought this permission were in Classis West, and they sought Classis' approval to ask synod's permission. Classis noted that its approval was not really needed, and that a person has an inherent right to appeal to synod; but classis forwarded the matter to synod anyway.<sup>60</sup>

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56 MCW, September 5, 1951, Arts. 31-32.

57 *Standard Bearer* 27, no. 13 (April 1, 1951), inserted page; *Concordia* 8, no. 4 (March 29, 1951), 5.

58 The Declaration, as amended, can be found in *Acts of Synod 1951*, 201-208. As this amended version is the final adopted version, and therefore the official version, any other republication of the Declaration should also be this version. Engelsma treats the history of Synod 1951's treatment of the protests, and the outcome, in chapter three of *Battle for Sovereign Grace*.

59 *Acts of Synod 1952*, Art. 145.

60 MCW, March 5, 1952, Arts. 24-27.

One other decision of classis in March 1952 is noteworthy: it refused to treat correspondence from the former Protestant Reformed churches in Chatham and Hamilton, ON, recognizing that the issues raised properly belonged to Classis East, and that the churches had severed themselves from the denomination. Classis' minutes refer to the "Protestant Reformed Church" of Hamilton and Chatham, putting the words in quotation marks as I just did, as if to say that classis recognized the churches were not Protestant Reformed any longer.<sup>61</sup> The noteworthy character of this decision is that classis recognized, at its March, 1952 meeting, which matters belonged to its jurisdiction, and which matters did not. Eighteen months later, it would forget, and enter into matters belonging to Classis East.

The September 1952 meeting of classis was as uneventful as the March 1953 meeting was eventful. Classis in March 1953 had many weighty matters on its agenda, and it met from Wednesday morning through Saturday noon. The first items it treated were protests against Synod 1951's adoption of the Declaration of Principles. This took most of Wednesday and Thursday.

Today it is understood that a protest of a synodical decision must go directly to the next meeting of synod, and need not go through classis. Decades ago it was common that one protesting a decision of synod would send his decision through classis. On the agenda of the March 1953 classis meeting were protests against the Declaration of Principles from Rev. J. Van Weelden, Rev. L. Doezema, and Rev. W. Hofman, and from the consistories of Oskaloosa and Pella. The minutes refer to some of these as "protests," others as "overtures," and others as "communications," but all were objections to Synod 1951's adoption of the Declaration. In response, classis declared "that Classis West express to Synod that we cannot be satisfied with Synod's treatment of the Protest of Classis West since Synod did not answer said Protest by positively indicating the legality of the Declaration with well-motivated grounds," and that "Classis therefore maintains its original position and considers the Declaration to be illegal." Classis argued further that the adoption of the Declaration violated Article 30 of the Church Order.<sup>62</sup> Rev. H. C. Hoeksema not only registered his

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61 MCW, March 5, 1952, Arts. 12-16.

62 MCW, March 4, 1953, Art. 25-26, 33-34.



negative vote, but also entered into the classical record his grounds for voting against the motions.<sup>63</sup>

Synod 1953 delayed treating these protests until a continued session in March 1954, at which time a special study committee was to report.<sup>64</sup> The reasons for this were at least two: first, the material (including other protests from those in Classis East) was lengthy and weighty; and second, the related but distinct controversy regarding Rev. De Wolf's suspension for preaching his conditional covenant view was swirling at the very time that synod met.<sup>65</sup>

In September 1953, classis received communications from Bellflower, Pella, and Oskaloosa regarding the matter of Revs. Hoeksema and Ophoff vs. Rev. De Wolf. The PRCA possess a copy of the minutes of this meeting, but no supplements. Furthermore, the pertinent minutes refer to the adoption of point I of the advice, point II of the advice, etc; but the substance of the advice is not found in the minutes; it is contained in the (unavailable) supplements. The historian must rely on the record of the matter as contained in the letter that Synod 1954 adopted to those who left.<sup>66</sup> There we read that classis stated "that we cannot recognize the suspension of the Rev. De Wolf and the deposition of the elders supporting him, but on the contrary must consider the Rev. De Wolf with his consistory and congregation as the legal and proper continuation of the First Prot. Ref. Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan."<sup>67</sup> Engelsma is correct in describing this as "disorderly," for no protest was lodged with the consistory of First PRC, with whose decision some disagreed. Rather, an entire classis entered into a matter that should not have been before it, and that did not regard a church in its jurisdiction. As Engelsma indicates, the schism that began in First Church spread all the way through Classis West—from Grand Rapids, to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>68</sup> Synod 1954 would declare that "the former Classis West has become schismatic, and severed themselves from the communion of the Prot. Ref. Churches.

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63 MCW, March 4, 1953, Arts. 25, 35, Supplement 12.

64 *Acts of Synod 1953*, Arts. 296-297, 300-301.

65 See chapters four and five in Engelsma, *Battle for Sovereign Grace*.

66 *Acts of Synod 1954*, 62-64.

67 *Acts of Synod 1954*, 63.

68 Engelsma, *Battle for Sovereign Grace*, 113-14.

They have become schismatic in doctrine . . . and . . . because they violated the Church Order.”<sup>69</sup>

The schism worked itself out, historically, when in October 1953 some men who pretended to be the real delegates to the meeting of Classis *East* were not recognized, and walked out. Every minister in Classis West except H. C. Hoeksema, some entire congregations, and many people followed the signal and separated from the PRCA.

### **Eras: Recovery and Stability (1954-1969)**

Four churches—Doon, Edgerton, Hull, and Redlands—called a special meeting of Classis West on January 21, 1954, with the purpose of having classis declare them the faithful and continuing churches of Classis West, and having classis reorganize. Lynden sent no delegates, but was understood to have sided with these other four. At least three other churches were invited—Manhattan, Rock Valley, and Sioux Center—and each conveyed their reasons for not attending. These three were invited specifically because they had not publicly declared that they would follow the De Wolf faction.<sup>70</sup> The only minister in attendance was Rev. H. C. Hoeksema. Rev. H. Kuiper had been readmitted to the ministry and had just taken up his labors in Redlands, but was not a delegate to this meeting. Rev. H. Veldman had just begun his pastorate in Edgerton, and had been delegated, but was absent because of his mother’s death.<sup>71</sup> The work of classis was conducted by one minister and six elders (one elder delegate from Redlands did not come to the meeting).

Several actions of this meeting were unique. Delegates who attend classis for the first time publicly sign the classical Formula of Subscription before it begins its work in earnest.<sup>72</sup> But the previous

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69 *Acts of Synod 1954*, 63-64.

70 MCW, April 7, 1954, Supplement 1.

71 That his mother’s death was the reason for his absence, the supplements indicate. Classis sent him a resolution of sympathy; CWM January 21, 1954, Art. 26, Supplement 9. All other assertions in this paragraph are based on what I found in the archive file of this meeting.

72 A decision appended to Article 53 of the Church Order, adopted by Classis June 1934 and Synod 1944, reads: “The formula for subscription for ministers, etc., shall be transcribed in the minute books of both consistory and classis.” See “The Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches,”

stated clerk, Martin Gritters, who had left with the De Wolf faction, had custody of the official records of classis, including the Formula of Subscription. A new official copy of the Formula of Subscription would have to be prepared (eventually the old was recovered); but in the meantime classis decided “that, since we do not have here the regular form of subscription, those who have not signed the Formula of Subscription orally express their consent after this Formula is read.”<sup>73</sup> This, of course, was never intended to be normal practice; emergency measures must always be understood to be permissible in emergency situations, but never made to be the norm.

Significantly, although these delegates were convinced that they were the continuation of Classis West, they did not assume this; the decisions made at the January meeting were considered provisional, and the delegates asked synod to recognize them as the proper continuation of Classis West. Should synod not do so, many or all of the decisions they made would be moot. This becomes evident in classis’ decision to adopt Edgerton’s request that synod recognize that body of classis as the continuation of Classis West (Art. 6), to appoint a temporary stated clerk to function until the next meeting of classis, and to appoint a finance committee to function only until synod recognized the classis (Arts. 7, 9). Classis also appointed Edgerton’s consistory as the new reading sermon committee (Art. 23). It dealt with other matters as well, some routine business, but all of it necessary to do at that meeting because classis was being reconstituted.

Other meetings in 1954 and 1955 also dealt with matters of “recovery.” In April 1954, as noted above, classis asked synod to change the classical boundaries to include the churches of Illinois and Wisconsin. It also asked synod to update the Church Order (not the decisions as such, but to edit decisions regarding how to implement some of them), and approved drawing up a constitution for the classical committee, which document had not previously existed.<sup>74</sup> At its April meeting,

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2020 edition, 27.

<sup>73</sup> MCW, January 21, 1954, Art. 3. At some point in the past, all the records of Classis West were returned to the PRCA, except the material of the September 1953 meeting. This includes the Formula of Subscription and all signatures affixed to it.

<sup>74</sup> MCW, April 7, 1954, Arts. 22-23.

classis received and responded to correspondence with the Manhattan and Sioux Center churches; correspondence with Manhattan continued at its September meeting, and classis appointed a committee to meet with that consistory if it desired.<sup>75</sup>

Preparing to elect delegates to Synod 1955, classis noted that it was to delegate four ministers and four elders. Having only three ministers (H. C. Hoeksema had just taken the call to South Holland, IL, and the churches of Illinois and Wisconsin were not yet in Classis West), classis elected three ministers and five elders, arguing convincingly to synod that this satisfied the principle of equal representation of classis at synod, that is, each would have eight delegates.<sup>76</sup>

This was the era of litigation. The DeWolf factions in Edgerton, Hull, and Redlands had taken possession of the property of those congregations. The element of these congregations that was loyal to the PRCA used legal means to try to get the properties back, and initially their lawsuits were denied. Later, after the De Wolf group returned to the CRCNA, some of them received their properties again.<sup>77</sup> Litigation was a congregational, not classical, matter; but classis approved the churches in its jurisdiction taking collections for those congregations that were engaged in litigation.<sup>78</sup> It also asked synod to assess the churches so that a fund was available to help such congregations,<sup>79</sup> but synod answered that the needy churches fund (that is, subsidy) already existed, and would be the fund to use if needed.<sup>80</sup>

Two good signs of recovery at the September, 1955 meeting were the examination of Candidate Robert Harbach, who would be Lynden's first pastor,<sup>81</sup> and the news of the impending reorganization of a group

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75 MCW, April 7, 1954, Art. 10; September 8, 1954, Arts. 8-11, 27-29.

76 MCW, March 16, 1955, Art. 45.

77 Edgerton regained its property in 1963, and Hull in 1964. Gertrude Hoeksema, *God's Covenant Faithfulness: The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1975), 40-43. See also

78 MCW, March 16, 1955, Arts. 15-16; September 18, 1956, Arts. 39-40; September 20, 1961, Art. 39.

79 MCW, March 7, 1956, Art. 37.

80 *Acts of Synod 1956*, Art. 171.

81 MCW, September 14, 1955, Art. 29.

in Pella. By letter to classis, this group of people (the letter used the plural “we” but was signed by one) expressed sorrow and repentance for supporting the schismatic group, and requested to be reconstituted as the Pella PRC. Classis responded by authorizing its classical committee to arrange for Pella’s reconstitution as a Protestant Reformed Church.<sup>82</sup> The same classis received a letter from a brother who claimed to be the lone continuation of the Sioux Center PRC and sought legal assistance. Classis directed him to work with Hull’s consistory.<sup>83</sup>

Recovery included addressing formal matters also, providing a framework in which classis would do its work. In addition to adopting a constitution for the classical committee,<sup>84</sup> classis emphatically stated that it would enforce a decision made just before the schism of requiring matters that were to be treated at classis to be submitted to the stated clerk thirty days before the meeting, so that he could prepare and distribute an agenda.<sup>85</sup> Classis forwarded to synod an overture to draw up synodical rules for parliamentary procedure,<sup>86</sup> and later adopted a proposed set for rules for classis modeled after synod’s.<sup>87</sup>

If the first part of this era was characterized by recovery, the second part was characterized by stability. “Stability” is relative, and the word is applied here to classis as a whole. Not since 1953 did classis experience a schism like 1953. Individual congregations suffered grievous internal turmoil, and tension developed between congregations at times; classis helped them when it could. One instance is the meeting of September 15, 1965, which entered into a matter between Oak Lawn and South Holland, relating to the decisions of South Holland’s

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82 MCW, September 14, 1955, Arts. 34-37, 39-41.

83 MCW, September 14, 1955, Arts. 65-66.

84 MCW, March 16, 1955, Arts. 19-28.

85 MCW, March 5, 1952, Arts. 19-21; September 8, 1954, Arts. 45-48. The decision applied to protests, appeals, and overtures, but not to routine matters such as requests for classical appointments and reports of standing committees. Many overtures from consistories had come to classis until this time in the form of “instructions” on the credentials. In fact, Doon’s request to classis in March 1952 to begin this rule, came in the form of such an instruction!

86 MCW, March 7, 1956, Arts. 21-22.

87 MCW, September 17, 1958, Art. 25; September 16, 1959, Art. 10; March 16, 1960, Arts. 8-20.

school board. Although the meetings of March 1951 and March 1953 treated weighty matters, the meeting of September 15, 1965 claimed the largest agenda to date, in length of pages, and after meeting all day on September 15, it did not reconvene to finish its work until March 15, 1966. Note that: the continued session of the fifty-fifth meeting of Classis West adjourned on March 15, and the fifty-sixth meeting of Classis West was convened the next morning!

Every classis meeting opens with singing, the reading of Scripture, and prayer. In 1969 Classis West adopted an overture that called for the devotions to last about thirty minutes, and include a devotional, or brief exegesis, of an appropriate Scripture passage. To accommodate this, classis decided to begin its meetings at 8:30AM rather than 9:00.<sup>88</sup> Classis also changed its practice regarding the specimen sermon of a candidate. Before 1968 a candidate would preach his sermon during the morning session of classis, and would be stopped after twenty minutes. Classis decided to have the host church call a special worship service the evening before classis, and have the candidate preach his entire sermon. Subsequently, when two or more candidates were examined at the same meeting, one would lead the worship service the evening before, and the other(s) would preach their sermon during the sessions of classis.<sup>89</sup>

Classis' reading sermon library continued to grow slowly and be used, and Edgerton's consistory remained the custodian of this library, until Redland's consistory took over in 2012.<sup>90</sup> Classis approved disposing of reading sermons by ministers that have left our denomination or quit the ministry.<sup>91</sup> In addition to a reading sermon library, classis appointed a committee (South Holland's consistory, and later South Holland's evangelism committee) to create a taped sermon library that would enable an elder to lead the preliminary part of the service, then play a taped sermon for the congregation.<sup>92</sup>

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88 MCW, September 3, 1969, Arts. 22-23.

89 MCW, March 6, 1968, Arts. 19-22.

90 MCW, September 5, 2012, Art. 8.

91 MCW, September 2, 1981, Art. 7.

92 MCW, September 21, 1966, Art. 11; March 15, 1967, Arts. 16-19; March 2, 1977, Art. 14.

One sign of stability is the ability to treat routine matters, and to look ahead at how better to serve the churches.

### **Eras: Incorporation (1970-1985)**

This part of classis' history is unique to the west; Classis East has never been received a bequest or been incorporated. Had Classis West never received a bequest, it too would likely not have been incorporated.

In 1976 classis was informed that it was a beneficiary to the estate of the late Cecil Vander Molen from Pella, IA. Should classis not incorporate, it either could not legally receive this money, or would have to pay a significant amount of estate tax. Classis therefore adopted the following resolution of incorporation: "Whereas we for the past 35 years acted as a non-profit corporation, hereby be it resolved as Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America to incorporate formally under the laws of the State of Minnesota and authorize the Classical Committee . . . to implement this decision." Presumably the state of Minnesota was chosen for three reasons: that meeting of classis was held in Edgerton; a lawyer from Edgerton was able to come to the meeting, advise classis, and carry out the legal aspects of incorporating; and the pastor of Edgerton was usually a member of the classical committee, which committee was tasked to implement this decision. The articles of incorporation are included as Appendix B.

While the reception of the estate was pending, classis appointed a board of trustees to sign legal papers. The board was to consist of the "the officers of Classis: president, vice-president, and stated clerk." This would be a rotating board, as the presiding officers of classis constantly rotated. The board was to do only that which any classis specifically mandated it to do. After the estate was settled and the bequest received, there was no need for a board of trustees any longer. Today classis ordinarily appoints the pastor of the church in Edgerton as its registered agent, who is required to do a minimal amount of paperwork: file a form with the state every year.

Because the estate was not settled for nine years, classis authorized its board of trustees to consult a lawyer,<sup>93</sup> and even authorized legal "counsel to take affirmative action to secure distribution of its lega-

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<sup>93</sup> MCW, March 2, 1977, Art. 19.

cy.”<sup>94</sup> The following classis approved the board of trustees’ decision *not* to do this, and sustained a protest against the decision of classis in September 1977.<sup>95</sup> When the estate was closed, classis was informed that it had received a little less than \$200,000.

From 1976 to 1985 the perennial question was what classis should do with this money. Each consistory was encouraged to bring recommendations, and when several did, South Holland’s council was appointed to evaluate them and bring a final recommendation. In 1985 classis decided to give the money to the denomination to be placed in a perpetual fund, the principal of which would remain intact, 30% of the earnings would be added to the principal, and 70% of the earnings be used to help subsidize the emeritus fund. Today, one who reads the finer financial print in the *Acts of Synods* will not find the word “Vander Molen,” but will find evidence of his bequest, as well as the bequest of others, in the description of the emeritus fund.

### **Eras: Subsequent Growth (1986–)**

From 1986 to the present is the era of continued growth and development; no other defining feature can be used to divide this era into smaller periods of time. The history of churches being added and withdrawing or disbanding was noted at the beginning of the article. Concluding the article, various facts can be noted about the ministers who served in Classis West. The seven original ministers in classis included the Revs. A. Cammenga, M. Gritters, G. Lubbers, A. Petter, J. Vander Breggen, W. Verhil, and G. Vos as delegates. To date it has examined forty-five candidates for ministry in the PRCA, as well as two men already ordained in other churches but seeking to serve in the PRCA<sup>96</sup>; all were approved. In connection with those entering ministry in the PRCA who come from other churches, classis overtured synod to adopt a policy.<sup>97</sup>

Classis approved the emeritation of eleven men by reason of age, and the temporary emeritation of two<sup>98</sup> because of the disbanding of

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94 MCW, September 7, 1977, Art. 13.

95 MCW, March 1, 1978, Arts. 17, 28, 31.

96 These were Revs. Audred Spriensma and Jaikishin Mahtani.

97 MCW, March 3, 1993, Arts. 20-22, 25.

98 These were Revs. Jaikishin Mahtani and Dennis Lee.



the congregations they had been serving. It approved the release of four men from their congregations under Article 11 of the Church Order, and one from the ministry altogether under Article 12.<sup>99</sup> Classis was informed of four ministers in its jurisdiction who resigned their office and membership in the denomination, and declared that another congregation, with its pastor, had set itself outside of the federation of the PRCA.<sup>100</sup> It had the sad task of approving the deposition of four men.<sup>101</sup> It advised the suspension of one man, and later acknowledged its error in so doing.<sup>102</sup> Today that man serves profitably again in the pastoral ministry.

Using the 2022 yearbook as a reference, it appears that twenty-two of our thirty-four active ordained men have served at least one pastorate in Classis West; all eleven of our retired ministers have; and sixteen of twenty men listed in the necrology have. The Revs. Herman Hoeksema and George Ophoff never did, as their labors were always centered in Grand Rapids; but both men, and Hoeksema especially, traveled to the West often to preach. Rev. Peter Breen never served in either classis, having joined the PRCA after his retirement. Rev. Marinus Schipper missed his opportunity by a year; he concluded his pastorate in South Holland in 1954, and in 1955 it became part of Classis West.

This article set forth a broad view of the history of classis. The next article, God willing, will create a fictional but realistic meeting of Classis West, and set forth various decisions classis has made about how it will do its work. If space permits, the next article will also treat some of the major issues that classis has faced that set precedent for the denomination.

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99 Released under the provisions of Article 11 were Revs. Dale Kuiper, George Lanting, Steven Houck, and John Marcus; under Article 12, Mark Hoeksema.

100 The men who voluntarily left the denomination were Gerald Vanden Berg, Jon Smith, Meindert Joostens, and Nathan Langarak. Classis declared the congregation of First Edmonton PRC, and its pastor, Martin VanderWal, to have set themselves outside of the denomination. Subsequently, the continuing members of the congregation reorganized as Hosanna PRC.

101 These were John Vander Breggen, Richard Moore, Jaikishin Mahtani, and Brian Feenstra.

102 That man is Rev. John Marcus.

**Appendix A**

*CLASSIS WEST*  
*of the*  
*PROTESTANT REFORMED CHURCHES*  
*September 20, 1939*  
*Hull, Iowa*

Art. 1 Rev. A. Cammenga serves as Pres. pro-tem, while Rev. G. Vos is asked to serve as secretary, pro-tem.

Art. 2 We sang Psalm 89:3 and the chairman reads 1 Pet. 1, after which he leads in prayer.

Art. 3 Credentials are presented and delegates to Classis are shown to be the following:

Pella-Rev. Lubbers-Elder C. Vander Moten

Redlands-Rev. G. Vos

Orange City-Elder W. Kamstra-Deacon De Jager

Oskaloosa-Elder T. Kelderman-G. Rijken

Edgerton-Rev. Verhil-G. Mesman

Bellflower-Rev. Petter

Hull-Rev. Cammenga-Ed. Dykstra

Doon-Rev. Vander Breggen-J. Blankespoor

Rock Valley-Elder J. Kuiper-T. Kooima

Sioux Center-Rev. Gritters-J. Broek.

Art.4. The Formula of Subscription is signed by all delegates to the assembly. The Pres. declares the Classis constituted.

Art. 5. Rev. Kok, Kuiper, and Vermeer are seated with advisory vote, as well as the Synodical delegates ad examine: Rev. De Boer, De Jong, and Schipper.

Art. 6 It is decided that Rev. Cammenga shall serve as Pres. and Rev. Vos, as secretary and that henceforth the presidency shall be arranged according to alphabetical order.

Art. 7 Moved that the official language of Classis shall be the language of the land (*Voorstel dat de officieele taal der Classis zal zijn de taal des lands*) [N.B.: The preceding minutes were written in Dutch. The translation is mine. What follows, including notation of the adoption of Art 7, was written in the English language-D.J.E.] So decided.

- Art. 8 The Classis votes its various committees
- a. Stated Clerk-Rev. M. Gritters
  - b. Assistant treasurer-Ed Dykstra
  - c. Classical Comm-Revs Verhil, Gritters, Cammenga and Vander Breggen. Decided that the two brethren receiving the highest vote, Verhil and Gritters, serve three years, the others two years.
  - d. Nomination of three brethren for Classical Deputies ad examina, to be appointed by the next Synod. Primi are the brethren Revs. Verhil, Cammenga and Lubbers; respective secundi: Gritters. Vander Breggen and Vos.
  - e. Church visitors
    - 1) California - Vos and Petter
    - 2) Midwest - Revs. Verhil and Cammenga and respective secundi - Vander Breggen and Gritters.
  - f. Classical appointments: Revs. Lubbers, G. Mesman and T. Kooima
  - g. Rev. A. Petter is appointed to thank the ladies of Hull Church for their splendid service and hospitality.
- Art. 9 Instruction Doon - See Suppl 1 in re delegation to Synod. Motion is made to delegate to Synod according to Doon's instruction, with their change that every year only one half of them will be newly delegated.

## Appendix B

STATE OF MINNESOTA  
DEPARTMENT OF STATE

To All To Whom These Presents Shall Come, Greeting:

Whereas, Articles of Incorporation, duly signed and acknowledged under oath, have been recorded in the office of the Secretary of State, on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of March, A.D. 1976 for the incorporation of CLASSIS WEST OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMED CHURCHES IN AMERICA under and in accordance with the provisions of the Minnesota Nonprofit Corporation Act, Minnesota Statutes, Chapter 317;

Now, Therefore, I, Joan Anderson Growe, Secretary of State of the State of Minnesota, by virtue of the power and duties vested in me by law, do hereby certify that the said Classis West of the Protestant Reformed

Churches in America is a legally organized Corporation under the laws of this State.

Witness my official signature hereunto subscribed and the Great Seal of the States of Minnesota hereunto affixed this twelfth day of March in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and seventy-six.

(w.s.) Joan Anderson Growe

Secretary of State

ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION  
OF  
CLASSIS WEST  
OF THE  
PROTESTANT REFORMED CHURCHES IN AMERICA

We, the undersigned, being duly appointed by Classis West for the purpose of formally incorporating Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America under and pursuant to the non-profit corporation laws of the State of Minnesota, M.S.A. 317 and Acts Amendatory thereto. Whereas, for the past 35 years, the Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America has acted as a De Facto corporation and now desires to formally incorporate and adopt the following Articles of Incorporation, to-wit:

I.

The name of this Corporation by which it shall be known is: CLASSIS WEST OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMED CHURCHES IN AMERICA.

II.

The object and purpose of this Corporation shall be the promotion of the Christian Religion according to the uses and tenets of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America. We recognize as the fundamental principles of this corporation the Doctrine and Government based on: The Bible as the infallible Word of God, and as founded on the Bible the formulas of Unity: Being the Thirty-seven Articles of the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of the Dordrecht Synod against the Remonstrants, and the Church Order of Dordrecht, 1618-19, as from time to time revised, amended, and interpreted by the Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America.

III.

We irrevocably appropriate to the maintenance of the above mentioned Unity and Church Order and Government forever such real and personal estate of this Classis, all of which may hereafter be acquired, and declare that to these objects alone it shall be applied.

IV.

This Corporation shall not afford pecuniary gain incidentally or otherwise, to its members.

V.

The period of duration of this Corporation shall be perpetual.

VI.

The location of this Corporation's registered office shall be Edgerton, Minnesota.

VII.

The name and address of the incorporators shall be:

James Slopsema, Edgerton, Minnesota;

Richard Moore, Doon, Iowa; and,

Jason Kortering, Hull, Iowa.

VIII.

The first Board of Trustees of said Corporation shall be:

Mark Hoeksema, President - Forbes, North Dakota;

Marvin Kamps, Vice-President - Redlands, California;

David Engelsma, Stated Clerk - South Holland, Illinois.

IX

This Corporation shall have no capital stock.

X

The private property of the officers and names of this Corporation shall not be liable for the Corporation's debt.

XI.

The Articles of Incorporation may be amended by a majority vote at a regular meeting of the corporation, provided that 15-days previous notice has been sent to each member stating the desired change; provided, however, that the purpose and object of this Corporation is not subject to change.

XII.

In case of dissolution of the Corporation, the property and moneys belonging to the Corporation shall be donated, after liquidation, to such religious or Christian Educational purposes which are exempt to Internal

Revenue Code 501 (c) (3) and as may be decided upon by the members of the Corporation at a meeting called for the purpose of dissolution and further to be in conformity with the laws of the State of Minnesota.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, we have hereunto subscribed our names as the Classical Committee of said Corporation this 5th day of March, 1976.  
(w.s.) James Slopsema  
(w.s.) Richard Moore  
(w.s.) Jason Kortering  
STATE OF MINNESOTA)  
COUNTY OF ROCK)

On this 5th day of March, 1976, before me, a Notary Public, in and for said County, personally appeared James Slopsema, Richard Moore, and Jason Kortering known to me to be the same persons mentioned herein, and who executed the foregoing instrument, and severally acknowledged that they executed the same freely and for the intents and purposes therein mentioned.

(w.s.) Benjamin Vander Kooi  
State of Minnesota  
Department of State

I hereby certify that the within instrument was filed for record in this office on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Mar., A.D. 1976, at 8 o'clock A.M. and was duly recorded in Book V-44 of Incorporations, on page 11.

Joan Anderson Growe  
Secretary of State  
(Notary public – Minnesota  
Rock County  
Commission Expires July 19, 1978)

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## Book Reviews

*Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition: A Systematic Introduction*, by Craig G. Bartholomew. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021. Pp. xiv + 362. \$35.00. Softcover. ISBN: 978-1514003640. Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.

*Calvinism for a Secular Age: A Twenty-First Century Reading of Abraham Kuyper's Stone Lectures*, ed. Jessica R. Joustra and Robert J. Joustra. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022. Pp. xx + 224. \$27.99. Softcover. ISBN 978-1514001462. Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.

Of late, there has appeared a spate of intriguing works on Reformed, Christian worldview with special attention paid to the Dutch Reformed theologian, Abraham Kuyper. These volumes include *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* by Peter S. Heslam, and Richard J. Mouw's *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction*; *All That God Cares About: Common Grace and Divine Delight*; and *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace*.

Now two worthy volumes are added to the list: *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition* (hereafter, *Contours*) and *Calvinism for a Secular Age* (hereafter, *CSA*). *Contours* examines the cultural thought of Kuyper more broadly, drawing on his Stone Lectures throughout. *CSA* sticks more closely to an examination and explanation of the Lectures themselves, chapter by chapter and topic by topic.

Whereas the content of *Contours* is the work of one author, *CSA* is the work of a number of authors, each examining one of the topics of Kuyper's six lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in the United States in 1898. The author of the first chapter of *CSA*, which introduces the reader both to Kuyper and to the subject of worldview, is Richard J. Mouw. The title of the chapter is, "Kuyper and Life-Systems," that is, "Worldviews." As is indicated by the short list of his contributions to the subject of a Calvinistic worldview mentioned in the opening paragraph of this review, Mouw has become a champion

of the Kuyperian worldview, especially as this worldview finds its source and power in Kuyper's doctrine of a common grace of God.

The recent appearance of many books and articles on a Christian worldview with appeal to Abraham Kuyper begs an explanation. Richard Mouw exclaims that the present is "a Kuyperian moment" (*Contours*, ix). The worldview books themselves appeal to the fact that it has become obvious that the modernist theology that Kuyper viewed as *the* enemy of the Reformed faith and life, indeed the enemy of the *Christian* faith and life, is an aggressive, all-comprehensive system of thought and life. It can, and *must*, be resisted by an alternative worldview. Protestantism offers only one such worldview, that of Calvinism, and, it is supposed, Calvinism as proposed in the worldview thinking of Kuyper. His Stone Lectures then are a ready-made bible of worldview. Adding to the appeal of Kuyper's call to worldview thinking and action is the success of his program: he became prime minister of the Netherlands. He also achieved one of the main goals for his own day of his worldview: equal public funding of the Christian schools with the state schools.

Theologians and philosophers in the tradition of the worldview-thinking of Abraham Kuyper are convinced that the present is the time of the Holy Spirit's playing upon the strings of Kuyper's aeolian (common grace) harp (cf. Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism*, "Sixth Lecture: Calvinism and the Future." This reviewer is concerned lest Calvinistic churches mistake seductive, if noisy, merely human music for the lovely sounds of the divine Musician.

Not to be overlooked in explanation of the popularity today of the Kuyperian worldview is its spiritual source and power: a common grace of God. This unusual, universal grace enabled Kuyper to enlist the cooperation of Roman Catholics and other doctrinal foes of Calvinism for the implementation of a Reformed worldview. It also offered the hope of some practical success of a Calvinistic worldview, Calvinists having been a minority in the Netherlands in Kuyper's day, as they are a minority in North America today. Kuyper's worldview would not have had any legs in the Netherlands of his day if it had to have run by the power of Calvinism's genuine, particular grace.

According to Kuyper, in the first lecture, on "Calvinism as a Life System," it is "the great principle" of the Calvinistic worldview that



“there is ... a common grace by which God, maintaining the life of the world, relaxes the curse which rests upon it, arrests its process of corruption, and thus allows the untrammelled development of our life in which to glorify himself as Creator.” All opposition to this theory is “Anabaptism,” that is, world-flight (Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*). It must not be overlooked that this “great principle” of the Kuyperian worldview is the denial of the truth of total depravity, and such a denial as permits, if it does not require, the Reformed Christian to cooperate with the ungodly in the thinking and doing of nothing less than worldview.

Both *Contours* and *CSA* accurately emphasize the importance for the Kuyperian worldview of a common grace of God. *CSA* is representative in its explanation of the achievements of modern science:

Kuyper addressed this issue [“learning so much from people who did not know Jesus Christ”] directly in his teaching about common grace. He argues that if sin were left unbridled and unfettered, it would destroy everything. Instead, God gives common grace to all, to prevent evil from coming fully to the surface. In common grace, God gives gifts to people regardless of their beliefs ... Because of God’s common grace, we can learn from one another in a pluralistic society and collaborate on scientific research cross worldviews, cultures, and nations (*CSA*, 88).

When *Contours* addresses the importance of a common grace of God for the Kuyperian worldview, as, for example, in affirming Kuyper’s assertion of a future renewing of the creation, the appeal to a common grace is both unnecessary and erroneous (*Contours*, 35-45). Biblically, it is not a common grace of God that will resurrect and renew the present creation of heaven and earth, but the “special” grace of God in the risen Jesus Christ—the same grace that will raise from the dead the bodies of elect humans. “The earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God” (my translation of the Greek of Romans 8:19, where the English, “creature,” translates the Greek, *ktisis*). To attribute the coming renewal of the creation to any power than that of the risen Jesus Christ is to rob Jesus Christ of His honor in the full work of salvation. He is the Savior, not only of elect humanity, but also of the creation. And He

does not save and renew the creation by some common grace, but by the same grace by which He raises the elect from the dead (see also Philippians 3:20, 21).

Neither is it a common grace that upholds and governs the creation and its history after the fall of Adam. Rather, it is God's wisdom and power of providence, as confessed by all Reformed churches, including their philosophers and theologians, in Lord's Days 9 and 10 of the Heidelberg Catechism. The execution of this providential power in all of history and regarding every sphere of human life is not grace to all humans, but only to those to whom God is Father "for the sake of Christ His Son" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 9). The grace of providence is as particular, that is, uncommon, as is the grace of salvation. This consideration by itself alone is the refutation of the Kuyperian worldview and the indictment, doctrinally, of the message of *Contours* and *CSA*.

The subject of the two books, it must be kept in mind, is Kuyper's *cultural* common grace. The subject is not the grace of salvation, which for Kuyper is particular. At the same time that he was proposing a cultural common grace, Kuyper was the vigorous proponent and defender of particular grace with regard to God's work of salvation. The application of these two doctrines of grace to the life of the Reformed believer was, and is, contradictory: in the (vast) sphere of common grace, which he shares with the ungodly, the believer is one with the ungodly and is called to cooperate with him *in a spiritual cause*; in the (restricted) sphere of the particular grace of salvation, in which sphere believer and unbeliever are enemies, the believer is called to live the antithesis. *CSA* takes note of this contradiction in Kuyper and, I may add, in his disciples: "The tension between Calvin's doctrine of common grace and that of the antithesis in Kuyper is never really resolved and can be seen reflected in some of the differences between thinkers after him" (*CSA*, 122).

The sole "resolution" of the "tension" between Kuyperian common grace and creedally Reformed particular grace is the rejection of one or the other. The human mind, whether regenerate or unregenerate, cannot confess both "A" and "anti-A," unless that mind is seriously unsound. That the theology of common grace has by this time won the day, undermining, minimizing, and even openly rejecting the doctrine

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of particular grace, in those circles in which Kuyper's doctrine of common grace is maintained and developed, is evident to all observers. Herman Hoeksema's forthright, utter, and uncompromising rejection of common grace has been blessed by God with the preservation in the Protestant Reformed Churches of the particular grace of God set forth in the Canons of Dordt.

None of this criticism of the two books under review, or, for that matter, of Kuyper's book, *Lectures on Calvinism*, is to deny the value in the careful reading of them. The issue itself of Christian worldview recommends them to Reformed persons, indeed to Protestants. Interspersed in the two works on Kuyper's worldview are any number of fascinating accounts of Kuyper's life and ministry, a life and ministry that were significant for the development of the Dutch Reformed tradition, including the Protestant Reformed Churches. Among these are a stirring account of Kuyper's warfare against the modernist theology in Europe in his day and his role in the church reformation movement known as the *Doleantie*. Regardless that its worldview is not that of common grace and regardless that the purpose of its life in all the spheres of earthly life is not "to change the world" (*CSA*, 42) or to "renew modern society and reform its cultural institutions" (*CSA*, 134), the Reformed faith, or Calvinism, is a worldview. Kuyper was right when he stated as the purpose of his worldview thinking: "to show forth the lordship of Christ over all things" (*CSA*, 15). Calvinism is not only the confession of the sovereignty of God over all the life of His child. It is also the *life* of the confession of this sovereignty *lived*. And this life is one, unified, holy life of thought and behavior in all the God-ordained spheres of earthly life, as a comprehensive calling to glorify God in these spheres. In Kuyper's words:

Wherever man may stand, whatever he may do, to whatever he may apply his hand, in agriculture, in commerce, and in industry, or his mind, in the world of art, and science, he is, in whatsoever it may be, constantly standing before the face of his God, he is employed in the service of his God, he has strictly to obey his God, and above all, he has to aim at the glory of his God ("Second Lecture: Calvinism and Religion," in *Lectures on Calvinism*).

This Calvinistic life is not anabaptistic withdrawal from the spheres of education, business, art, science, and even politics. Kuyper was right and honorable to become prime minister of the Netherlands, except that he gave up the more important labor of minister of the gospel to do so. As Kuyper in his day and as the two books under review here warn, the Christian life is not withdrawal from what may be called human cultural life, in distinction from the life of the church and religion. The biblical principle is: “in the world, but not of the world.”

These two books should occasion disagreement. They will not cause disappointment in the reading.

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*Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction*, by Cory C. Brock and N. Gray Sutanto. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022. Pp. xxii + 322. \$36.99. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1683596462. Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.

One effect of *Neo-Calvinism* will be the encouragement of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA) to devote more attention to a critique of the theology of the second and third points of common grace adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1924. This aspect of the doctrine of common grace concerns the formation of Christian worldview, whereas the first point proposes the Arminian doctrine of salvation in a well-meant offer of salvation to all.

*Neo-Calvinism* contends that the worldview of the Reformed, Christian faith is formed and promoted by Abraham Kuyper’s and Herman Bavinck’s theory of common grace. This doctrine holds that there is a favor of God toward and a power of God working in all humans that warrant, if they do not require, Christians to cooperate with the ungodly in order to bring about a Christian culture and society, if only outwardly. This venture of the union of the church and the world is called the “Christianizing” of society. The power of this ambitious program is a common grace of God. This grace of God is distinct from saving grace, which is particular, for and in the elect only. As the name expresses, it is common to believers and unbelievers alike. Unlike the grace that is particular, for the elect only, common grace does not save, although the defenders of common grace find it impossible to keep

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common grace from straying into the sphere of salvation. Defending their common grace, the authors of *Neo-Calvinism* assure the reader that “God desires, after all, that none should perish” (219). Such a grace is not merely cultural, desiring that Van Ruisdael paint *The Storm*, but a would-be saving grace, desiring that all men be saved by Jesus Christ.

With a careful, extensive reading and study of a selection of the works of Kuyper and Bavinck, the authors demonstrate that the founders of neo-Calvinism were these Dutch theologians. From the writings of these Dutchmen, the authors make plain what neo-Calvinism *is*, something usually assumed, rather than explained. The “neo” in neo-Calvinism is not a much-needed new defense and application of the old, doctrinal Calvinism of the Canons of Dordt and the Westminster Standards. Not at all! But it is a new adaptation of the old, creedal Calvinism to a novel end or purpose: Christianizing the world. The avowed purpose of the new Calvinism is the forming of a Christian culture (a way of thinking and life) of nations. For Kuyper and Bavinck, this meant the Netherlands; today, for the authors of *Neo-Calvinism*, it means the United States, if not all the nations of the entire world.

Obviously, the Christianizing of the world, even though it does not include the salvation of the inhabitants of the world, or even of the small nation of the Netherlands, is an enormous undertaking. Since it is off-limits to assign this task to the saving grace of God, as common grace is by definition non-saving, the book follows Kuyper and Bavinck in assigning the work of Christianizing to a non-saving, non-biblical, non-creedal, “common grace” of God—a grace that may accurately be called “cultural grace.”

The entire motivation and activity of neo-Calvinism depend upon a common grace of God. It is difficult, indeed impossible, to exaggerate the importance of common grace for neo-Calvinism. Common grace is simply fundamental to neo-Calvinism. Rightly understood, neo-Calvinism *is* common grace, and common grace *is* neo-Calvinism. Already in the introduction, the authors appeal to common grace as “offering the possibility of human development, of progress in the richness of human life and civilization. Common grace marks an era between the curse of the world and the second advent of Christ,

wherein God gifts moral, epistemic, and natural goods to the world, maintaining in high degree an organic creaturely unity despite the curse” (14). What this encomium to common grace is asserting is that common grace relaxes, if it does not nullify, the curse of Genesis 3 and the separation and warfare between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent of Genesis 3:15. Common grace enables the believer to unite with the unbelieving world in the grand, God-glorifying calling of Christianizing the world.

At every significant point throughout the book, over and over again, appeal is made to a common grace of God. One entire chapter is devoted to “Common Grace and the Gospel” (212-249). The role and power of common grace in the neo-Calvinistic thinking of the authors, and of much of the Reformed and evangelical Christianity of our day, are indicated in the opening words of the chapter, a quotation of Abraham Kuyper:

Common grace [is] that act of God by which negatively He curbs the operation of Satan, death, and sin, and by which positively He creates an intermediate state for this cosmos, as well as for our human race, which is and continues to be deeply and radically sinful, but in which sin cannot work out its end (212).

Evident in Kuyper’s description of common grace is its denial of the total depravity of the unregenerated world. The judgment upon the ungodly world that it is “deeply and radically sinful” is misleading. By virtue of Kuyper’s common grace, the human race is not totally depraved, but partially good. It is now a race that would have been totally depraved, were it not for the working of common grace.

This error is basic to the purpose of Kuyper and his disciples, namely, that the church unite with the world in the spiritual activity of Christianizing the world. There must be a basis of the union of church and world in this godly calling. The church cannot cooperate with a world that is totally depraved. Common grace, therefore, is the overt denial and rejection of the antithesis, the spiritual separation of the church and the world and the warfare between the two adversaries. The biblical calling of the church and of the believer with regard to worldview is not, “Unite with the world on behalf of the accomplishment of one of two grand purposes of God in history—the Christianizing

of the world.” But the urgent calling of the church and of the believer is, “Come out from among them, and be ye separate.” In the heeding of this admonition is not merely the *wellbeing* of the citizens of the kingdom of heaven, but their *being*.

With the breaching of the antithesis, churches are opened up to the devastating influences of the wicked world. The culture of the totally depraved world compromises, and then destroys, the Christian culture, that is, the thinking and way of life of the church and its members. This has happened in Kuyper and Bavinck’s Free University and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN). The authors of *Neo-Calvinism* are culpable for not noticing the cultural effects of common grace upon the university and churches of the founders of the common grace worldview: surrender of all the fundamentals of Calvinism as confessed in the Reformed creeds; denial of the inspiration of Scripture; openness to the theory of evolution; feminism; approval of sodomy; and, generally, wholesale conformity to the world of the ungodly. As for the GKN, that once glorious denomination of Reformed churches is no more. The theory and practice of common grace destroyed it.

Thus, we refute Dr. Kuyper, Dr. Bavinck, and *Neo-Calvinism*.

Virtually the only biblical proof for the worldview of neo-Calvinism that the book adduces is Romans 1:18-32, the revelation to the ungodly of the eternal power and Godhead of God in creation. What Brock and Sutanto overlook is that this revelation does not serve to unite church and world by a common grace of God. Rather, God’s purpose with this revelation is to leave the unbelieving world without excuse (v. 20). The world does not respond to this revelation by uniting with the church in Christianizing the world, but by holding it under in unrighteousness (v. 18). Indeed, by this revelation, God hardens the wicked world in their unbelief and perversity, particularly sodomy and lesbianism (vv. 24-32).

Although a book review is not the place for theological dispute over worldview, a reviewer would be derelict did he not challenge the very idea itself of *Neo-Calvinism*. The genuinely Reformed worldview is not, and may not be presented as, the culture of a common grace of God. To do so is an insult to the gospel. Must the gospel of the cross and resurrection of Christ go begging for a worldview to a common

grace of God—a grace (if it existed) that is essentially different from the grace of the cross? The one, holy worldview of the Christian, and therefore, Reformed, religion is the culture of the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. The Reformed worldview is that of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By definition, this is not the worldview of common grace. Common grace is not the grace of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Common grace is a grace shared by reprobate unbelievers.

What the distinctive worldview of saving grace is must be set forth in detail in another forum than this book review. This is the urgent calling, and privilege, today of the theologians of the PRCA, the other Calvinistic churches being committed to the theory of common grace and its worldview.

The confession of the Reformed faith is, “I am determined to know no other worldview than that of Jesus Christ crucified and risen.” This is a worldview of special, particular, saving grace. And this is a worldview that the ungodly world hates and opposes. Today, as the blind can see, this world is exerting itself mightily to remove every vestige of Christianity from the prevailing worldview. And unfaithful, or cowardly, Reformed and Calvinistic churches are cooperating with the world by actively de-Christianizing the culture by an anti-Christian worldview. This is emphatically the case in Kuyper and Bavinck’s Netherlands.

*Neo-Calvinism* is an informative, provocative, significant study of a subject of the utmost importance to every Calvinistic church and Christian. Along the way, the reader learns something, but not everything, about the theology of two Reformed giants.

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*History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, 1920-1980: Decade by Decade*, by William J. Edgar. Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2022. Pp xiv + 414. \$29.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1943017478. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.



Christians ought to be interested in the history of conservative Christian denominations other than one's own.<sup>1</sup> Christ's universal and spiritual body is broader than any one denomination. Besides, one can both learn lessons and take warnings from the history of other federations. That, generally, is a reason to read this book.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America (RPCNA) has its roots in seventeenth-century Scottish Presbyterianism, and more specifically in the Covenanter movement. Thus the RPCNA is distinct from the PCUSA, PCA, and OPC. A distinctive feature of the Scottish Presbyterians was their National Covenants—public, communal, written covenants with God to serve Him faithfully and not let the king or civil government intrude in the government of the church. They began making these covenants when King Charles I was attempting to impose changes on the church in Scotland. In Scotland the Covenanters were no small force, numbering some 100,000 members in 900 congregations at one point. Some Scottish Covenanters moved to the American colonies, and in 1798 organized into a North American denomination, from whence descends the RPCNA.

As the subtitle *1920-1980* suggests, Edgar's book is not a complete history of the RPCNA but a continuation of previously published histories.<sup>2</sup> Yet the subtitle piqued my curiosity. Born in 1924, the Protestant

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1 For the purpose of this article, "conservative" refers to a denomination 1) that considers Scripture to be God's inspired revelation and the only authority for faith and life, 2) whose confessions are orthodox, and 3) that consciously adheres to and regulates itself by those confessions.

2 W. M. Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007). This is a reprint of a work originally published in 1888. Another denominational history is that by David M. Carson, *Transplanted to America: A Popular History of the American Covenanters to 1871* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, ca. 1980). William Edgar then wrote a volume to supplement this history, entitled *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, 1871-1920: Living by its Covenant of 1871* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, 2019). The present volume picks up where the previous ended.

William Edgar was a pastor in the RPCNA for over thirty years, and served as interim president of Geneva College, an institution of the RPCNA. He is not to be confused with a different William Edgar who was a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

Reformed Churches of America (PRCA) existed in the same country as the RPCNA, during the same decades that this book covers. Both denominations are known for their commitment to Psalm singing in divine worship services and their refusal to let members join secret societies. Do the histories, doctrines, and practices of the PRCA and RPCNA have other parallels? Answering this question was my interest in reading the book.

### Summary

Each of the book's six chapters treat one decade in the history of the RPCNA. A general characteristic of the denomination during these years was a steady decline in membership, accompanied by the perennial question what to do about it (xiv). Each chapter's title indicates what primary ecclesiastical or political forces affected the RPCNA's history in that decade. In the 1920s, it was the "Forward Movement," a movement within the denomination that worked hard to make it relevant in a post-World War I society. Wrote a committee, "We need the forward movement to relate our Church to the program of all Christendom" (2). This committee would help guide the denomination in matters of world missions, local witnessing, benevolence, and education.

In the 1930s the Great Depression and the looming of World War II affected the denomination, and social factors (temperance among them) played a significant role. In the 1940s it was the war itself, including the drafting of many young men into the service. This decade saw the proposal of new mission and evangelism endeavors in the RPCNA, not only in obedience to Christ's great commission but also in an attempt to stem the membership decline (Edgar uses the word "decay," 144).

Denominational factors and American society both affected the RPCNA's history in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The chapter on the 1950s includes reference to the use of Navigator evangelistic methods. This was a time of expansion, not in total membership, but in several of the denominational institutions. The end of the 1960s saw the merger of the RPCNA and the Associate Presbyterian Church. The 1970s witnessed a distinct movement away from the Covenanter roots and emphasis.

Each chapter in the history of the RPCNA has its own characteristics. Yet each chapter in the book records the history of foreign and local mission work, denominational institutions, church political issues, doctrinal controversies, and significant congregational matters during that decade.

RPCNA institutions that receive attention in each chapter include its theological seminary in Pittsburgh; Geneva College in Beaver Falls; the Aged People's Home in Pittsburgh; the magazine *Covenanter Witness*; and the annual gathering of women's missionary societies. The latter, to be clear, are not societies of women missionaries, but societies of women who promote and support missions.

During these years the RPCNA had mission fields in Turkey, Syria, Cyprus, China, and Japan; for shorter periods of time it also labored in other foreign fields, primarily in the Middle East and Asia. In this connection, the names of two men are of interest. First is that of J. G. Vos, son of the famed Geerhardus Vos. J. G. Vos was both a notable missionary in the denomination and later a professor at Geneva College. In addition, Spiros Zodhiates, a native Greek speaker who has published some commentaries on New Testament books, was connected with the denomination through its missions in western Asia.

The denomination had domestic mission stations among the Indians in Oklahoma, the Jews in Philadelphia, and African-Americans in Selma, AL. Each mission's story is an interesting read, but that of the Selma mission is most intriguing. The RPCNA mission had a front row seat during the Selma march for minority voting rights in the 1960s!

The denomination successfully defended itself against dispensationalism, Arminian revivalism, and faith healing in the 1920s. Other controversies that it faced include close communion, millennial issues, and Bible translations in the 1950s. The close communion controversy was really the question whether only members of the RPCNA could partake, or whether the church's session (consistory) could permit others to partake. In PRCA parlance, we would say that the debate was over "closed" or "close" communion. The former had been the practice; the latter became the practice in the 1970s. Open communion, emphatically, was not the issue.

The RPCNA has permitted women deacons since the late 1800s, but discussion whether this was proper continued into the 1900s. As

late as the 1970s, some argued it was not proper (297), but as late as 2002 the denomination reaffirmed its stand (306). However, the denomination steadfastly refused to permit women to be elders (105-107, 307). And, while women deacons are permitted, most churches do not and would not have them.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the book, the Covenant of 1871 gets attention. This Covenant was a public declaration of faith in Christ and a public resolution to obey Him. In the 1920s some alleged that the churches had broken the Covenant, having disregarded it as a thing of the past. The perennial concern of some was that the denomination's dwindling membership was God's judgment on it for its breaking of the Covenant. The year 1954 saw a renewal of that Covenant. And by the end of the 1970s the Covenant of 1871 was completely replaced.

The RPCNA took seriously the calling to bring God's Word to bear on political and societal issues. It addressed temperance, racism, economics, swearing allegiance to the US Constitution, political dissent, and other matters.

The Afterward quickly surveys developments in the RPCNA from 1980 to the present. It documents steady growth since the 1980s, in contrast to the steady decline of the 1920s to 1980. The denomination remains committed to exclusive Psalmody and *a cappella* singing in worship. While several Bible versions might be found in church pews, none has officially replaced the KJV. The use of public schools has not been prohibited, but many parents prefer homeschooling to either the public or Christian schools.

Not every man who loves his denomination can write its history objectively, presenting both its strengths and the weaknesses. Edgar does. The reader senses that he has been introduced to the real RPCNA, warts and all.

## Conclusions

The RPCNA is a conservative denomination with Scottish roots that has existed in North America for over three hundred years. The denomination has distinctive doctrines, outlooks, and practices that originate in its Scottish heritage. By contrast, the PRCA has Dutch

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3 I am indebted to Mr. Tom Reid, member of the RPCNA, for some historical facts not included in the volume.

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Reformed roots. It also has different distinctives than the RPCNA. But both are conservative, and both are striving to maintain their heritage.

This reviewer read the book as chronicling the RPCNA's struggle to retain its Scottish heritage while at the same time being a faithful witness to twentieth-century America. In that sense the story was something like the history of the PRCA. But the struggle played out in the two denominations in very different ways.

For one thing, while the PRCA and RPCNA share certain distinctives, they implement them differently. Both are committed to Psalm singing in the worship service. But the RPCNA is committed to exclusive Psalmody, to the exclusion even of spiritual songs and non-Psalm doxologies.

For another, because of their history and background, the two denominations have different viewpoints on certain issues. In writing and practice, the RPCNA puts more emphasis on Christ as king of all nations than does the PRCA. The PRCA has only Article 36 of the Belgic Confession as its confessional basis; the RPCNA has an expanded chapter in its Testimony devoted to the subject. Bringing the news of Christ's kingship to the nations motivates her in her mission work. Her view that Christ is king of the USA motivates her to address political, social, and moral issues in light of Scripture. In working this out, she appears in some respects to be amillennial, and in others to be postmillennial. And the RPCNA, as noted, permits women deacons.

Members of the PRCA will quickly look askance at a denomination that leans toward postmillennialism and permits women deacons. We should not assume, however, that the RPCNA is becoming liberal.

For one thing, certain postmillennial tenets have always been part of Scottish Presbyterianism. Furthermore, the RPCNA does not promote the Kuyperian notion of common grace postmillennialism; it does not look for the full perfection of God's kingdom on earth; and it views the preaching of the Word, not the Christianization of various political structures, as the means by which God's kingdom is expanded. Its unique views in this regard motivate it to bring God's Word to bear on political and societal issues. Consequently the RPCNA is more aggressive than the PRCA in publicly stating its positions on issues, not only in sermons and magazines, but in documents sent to political leaders.

Members of the PRCA might hear of the RPCNA's position regarding women deacons with alarm. In other denominations, women deacons led to women elders, and that led to women ministers. It is encouraging to hear that the RPCNA has resisted opening the eldership to women in the past, has never faced the question of ordaining women, and is not facing either question currently. Furthermore, many, perhaps most, RPCNA congregations do not agree that women may be deacons, and so will not elect them. And the denomination is again reconsidering the Scriptural propriety of women being deacons. Where else would you find that, than in the RPCNA?

In the end, the book reinforced four points. First, the RPCNA sincerely endeavors to be faithful to Scripture. Second, it has maintained its doctrinal and practical distinctives because it is convinced that they are biblical. Third, it has resisted pressure to depart from biblical faithfulness in order to grow more quickly or to be more relevant in society. Finally, it has addressed problems, including decline in church membership, and made some adjustments along the way, without compromising scriptural and confessional fundamentals.

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*The Gospel and the Gospels: Christian Proclamation and Early Jesus Books*, by Simon Gathercole. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022. Pp xxiv + 576. \$55.99. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0802877598. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.

### **Background and Value**

For centuries, the Christian church has received the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as God's inspired and authoritative word regarding Jesus' earthly life and ministry. Yet these are not the only documents that purport to be records of Jesus' earthly life and ministry. At least thirty other known documents, part of the larger body of writings called the New Testament Apocrypha, are called "gospels." Some give a very different picture of Jesus than do the four inspired accounts. They ask us who believe that the four biblical accounts are the only inspired and truly canonical accounts of Christ's ministry, how do you *know*? What if you are *wrong*? What if the apocryphal gospel accounts also contain truth about Jesus? What if not everything in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is true?

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One scholar that foists such questions on the Christian church is Bart Ehrman. Born an Anglican, he is now an “agnostic atheist”<sup>1</sup> who has rejected the divine inspiration of Scripture. He teaches that early Christianity was a diverse conglomeration of ideas, encompassing many different views. Every “gospel” account, including those in the New Testament Apocrypha, is a valid testimony to the historical Jesus. Over time, one form of Christianity gained supremacy over other forms. Church leaders then rewrote history to make it appear that this form had always been dominant, and other forms heretical. In this way the four gospel accounts came to be considered the exclusive accounts of Christ’s ministry. Christianity *as we think of it today* won the battle, and Christianity *as it was understood in the first century* lost.<sup>2</sup> Betraying his own rejection of true Christianity, Ehrman thinks it ironic that the form of Christianity that “won” centuries ago has lost in the end; for “Christianity” today is a mixed bag, a hodge-podge of ideas, all valid. This, Ehrman says, is what Christianity was meant to be.

Ehrman’s views are a threat to Christianity, and therefore to Reformed Christianity. They are a form of the apostasy that the New Testament Scriptures foretold (Matt. 24:11, 24; 2 Thess. 2:3, 10-12; 2 Peter 2:1). They are a threat to any member of these churches who is unable or reluctant to defend Christianity and the true Scriptures. They are a threat to any young person who goes to college, including many Christian colleges today, and hears new ideas about Christianity. It may seem ironic, but it is in fact true: one who understands the twenty-seven books of the New Testament to be the inspired word of God is being guarded against this threat! One who is willing to consider new ideas is in danger.

We do well to know not only what the threat is, but also how Bible-believing Christians have responded to it. Gathercole surveys various approaches early in the book (2-12). Some have argued that the apocryphal gospels were written later than the inspired accounts, that

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1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bart\\_D.\\_Ehrman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bart_D._Ehrman), accessed February 21, 2023.

2 For more unedifying reading on this subject, confer Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

they originated in heretical groups who intended to portray themselves as within mainstream Christianity, and that they were often written anonymously. In addition, the literary form of the apocryphal accounts significantly differs from the inspired accounts, and the theology (doctrine) of the apocryphal gospels is quite at odds with that of the four.

Gathercole takes a different approach by arguing two theses (15):

*Thesis 1: The four New Testament Gospels share key elements of theological content that mark them out from most of the noncanonical Gospels.*

*Thesis 2: The reason why the four New Testament Gospels are theologically similar to one another is that they—unlike most others—follow a preexisting apostolic “creed” or preached gospel.*

The next 480 pages of his work contain an explanation and defense of these two theses. Following this defense is an extensive bibliography (thirty pages) and several indices.

The value of Gathercole’s book is apparent. First, he rises to the defense of orthodox Christianity, and the gospel accounts on which orthodox Christianity rests. Second, he sets forth a sound argument that differs in approach from the arguments other conservative scholars have used to make their case.

## Summary

In his introduction, Gathercole surveys the issue that he will address, explains how other Christian scholars have addressed it, and tells us his theses. The rest of his book compares the four inspired gospel accounts with seven apocryphal gospels, and evaluates the results of his comparison. The seven apocryphal books are the Gospel of Peter, Marcion’s Gospel, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Judas, and the Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians.

Part One is entitled “The Topics of Comparison.” In the first chapter, Gathercole explains why he has chosen these eleven books: the four, because they are the genuine Christian gospel accounts; and the seven, because they are well known, accessible, constitute a representative sample, and include a variety of theological viewpoints (33).



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In the second chapter, he sets forth the four essential components of the Christian gospel that are his standard of comparison: whether the apocryphal gospel views the historical Jesus as the divinely anointed Messiah; whether it teaches that Christ's death had a true, saving benefit; whether it teaches that His resurrection had a true, saving benefit; and whether it presents Christ's work as the fulfilling of the Old Testament Scriptures. Gathercole calls these four aspects of the gospel the "kerygma," a Greek word referring to the content of the gospel. He refers to 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 to justify that these are four components of the gospel. Chapter three explains in some detail why these are the points of comparison.

Gathercole devotes a chapter to each of the inspired and apocryphal gospel accounts. These eleven chapters comprises Part Two, "Description." Each chapter evaluates that gospel account in light of the four components of the kerygma. The chart at the end of the review is an at-a-glance summary of his findings, though it is not able to give the reasons for his conclusions.<sup>3</sup> One who reads chapters eight through fourteen, treating the seven apocryphal gospels, will also learn more about those writings.

The final two chapters summarize Gathercole's finding; these comprise Part Three, "Comparison and Conclusion." Chapter fifteen restates where each gospel account falls in relation to the four points of comparison. In this way Gathercole demonstrates his first thesis; all four inspired gospel accounts include all four aspects of the kerygma. None of the seven apocryphal accounts includes each of the four aspects. Some of them appear to include one or two aspects, but in such cases they redefine that gospel component according to the heresy that the gospel account promotes. For example, the Gospel of Truth and the Gospel of Philip speak in some way of a saving significance of Christ's death—but that saving significance is *not* the salvation of sinners from the guilt and curse of sin, into fellowship with God. The theological content of each of the four inspired accounts differs from that of the seven apocryphal accounts.

In his final chapter Gathercole supports his second thesis. He demonstrates that the kerygma as set forth in the inspired gospels is

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3 The chart is my creation, not Gathercole's, and is considered my intellectual property under copyright by virtue of its publication in this volume.

older than the written gospel accounts; Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all gave written expression to what believers had already understood, and what was being orally proclaimed. To restate, the gospel to which these four accounts give a united witness was not merely one version of Christianity, but was the *only* version of Christianity that the early church knew and believed. The apocryphal accounts set forth a fundamentally different gospel, one that the early church rejected. The Christianity of the fourth and fifth centuries was not merely a dominant form of Christianity; it was orthodox Christianity, in distinction from heretical views of God and of Jesus.

### Evaluation

Gathercole proves his two theses, demonstrating what he intended to demonstrate. He does so in a scholarly way, so that the liberals ought to listen to him. He also does so in a biblical and gospel-centered way, so that true believers will listen to him. His proof does not merely amount to a few pages of demonstration; it fills many pages, and is the result of careful, thorough analysis of the documents.

Bart Ehrman and the like will not be convinced by Gathercole's efforts. Believing humans can appeal to the minds of unbelievers, but cannot change their hearts. Yet Gathercole's work demonstrates that Ehrman and others are wrong, and stumble over the true Christ. If these persist in rejecting true Christianity, they will do so to their spiritual peril; this is the Christian gospel, the kerygma, in its application to unbelievers. Christians ought to pity such unbelievers, and pray that God turn them in His mercy and give them grace to confess true Christianity and the inspiration of Scripture.

I highly recommend the book as a solid defense of the orthodox and long-standing view that Christianity has only one true form. The book is not written in a popular style; it appeals to the advanced scholars more than to the layperson. But interested laypeople could read it with profit.<sup>4</sup>

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4 For a popular book—that is, a much easier read—I suggest Peter J. Williams' book *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018). However, Williams does not interact with the apocryphal gospels as extensively as does Gathercole.

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**Caveat**

In the process of demonstrating his claims, Gathercole indicates his position on two issues that sets him at odds with me and my colleagues. I state this, not so much for the benefit of the scholarly reader of this review, but the layperson who is not as aware of these issues. The first is the relation of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to each other (the so-called “synoptic problem”). The second is a textual critical issue regarding the ending of the book of Mark.

Gathercole treats Mark’s witness to the kerygma before treating Matthew’s witness. He also suggests that Matthew and Luke partially depend on Mark (484-86). This is not the place to explain the issue at length. However, it is reasonable to say that, while each of the four inspired gospel accounts set forth the same gospel, they came into existence independently of each other.

Some English translations of the Bible indicate that Mark’s gospel account ends with Mark 16:8, because some Greek manuscripts conclude the gospel account there. In fact, Greek manuscripts witness to five different endings of Mark. Gathercole indicates that Mark’s gospel probably ended with 16:8 (114-16, 136). We are convinced, however, that the Holy Spirit also inspired Mark 16:9-20.<sup>5</sup>

Gathercole’s position on these issues does not affect his two theses, or his insistence that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are inspired and canonical gospel accounts, while the other seven are not. This book remains a rousing defense of the four canonical gospel accounts, and these four only, as the inspired record of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, who by His death and resurrection effectually saved His people.

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5 Jeffrey T. Riddle provides a fine defense in his article “The Ending of Mark as a Canonical Crisis,” *Puritan Reformed Theological Journal* 10, 1 (2018): 31-54.

Summary of Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel and the Gospels: Christian Proclamation and Early Jesus Books* (Eerdmans, 2022). Chart created by DJK, February 20, 2023.

	Is Jesus the Christ?	Jesus' death: historical? saving?	Jesus' resurrection: historical? saving?	Did Jesus fulfill the O.T. Scriptures?
Matthew	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mark	Y	Y	Y	Y
Luke	Y	Y	Y	Y
John	Y	Y	Y	Y
Peter	N	Note 1	Note 1	N
Marcion	Note 2	Note 2	Note 2	N
Thomas	N	N	N	N
Truth	N	Note 3	N	N
Philip	N	Note 3	N	N
Judas	N	N	N	N
Egyptians	N	N	N	N

“Thesis 1: The four N. T. Gospels share key elements of theological content that mark them out from most of the noncanonical Gospels” (15, 465).

“Thesis 2: The reason why the four N. T. Gospels are theologically similar to one another is that they—unlike most others—follow a preexisting apostolic ‘creed’ or preached gospel” (15, 480).

Note 1: The Gospel of Peter is a fragment. It mentions the fact of Jesus’ death and resurrection. It is not clear from the fragment whether Jesus’ death and resurrection have saving significance.

Note 2: No extant copy of the Gospel of Marcion exists; it is recreated by church fathers who quote it in order to refute its teachings. In accordance with Marcion’s heresy, it views Jesus as the Christ of the good, loving God, not of the evil, just God. Any reference to

an effect of Jesus' death and resurrection is made in the context of Marcion's heretical views.

Note 3: Any portrayal of the historical and saving character of Jesus' death in these gospels must be understood in light of the Valentinian heresy that they represent.

Note 4: The Gospels of Judas and the Egyptians are clearly part of a Gnostic corpus.

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*Typology—Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns: How Old Testament Expectations are Fulfilled in Christ*, by James M. Hamilton Jr. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022. Pp xxiii + 405. \$39.99. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0310534402. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.

Biblical typology is the study and interpretation of biblical types. A type is a person, event, or institution of the Old Testament that is historically real (not merely symbolic), but that also points to a future, higher reality. To use Hamilton's definition, "Typology is God-ordained, author-intended historical correspondence and escalation in significance between people, events, and institutions across the Bible's redemptive-historical story (i.e., in covenantal context)" (26).

Some types involve people: Adam is a type of Christ. Others involve events: Israel's deliverance from Egypt is a picture of our deliverance from sin's bondage. Still others involve institutions: the Levitical high-priesthood, as well as the sacrifices and ceremonies of the law, foreshadow the work of Jesus Christ establishing the foundation for God's covenant, and pouring out covenant blessings on His people.

Not every type in Scripture points ahead specifically to Christ's person or work. Elijah was a type of John the Baptist. Some types are negative: the heads of Old Testament antichristian world-powers were types of Antichrist. But many types do point to Christ's person or work; every type, either positively or negatively, points to some gospel truth.

All of which is to say that typology is an important subject in biblical studies, and a new book on typology is worth reading to see what additional light it sheds. That such a book is written by James Hamilton commends it too: Hamilton is professor of biblical theology

at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, and has authored several other books regarding Old Testament interpretation.

## Summary

No book can say everything that could be said about typology. Hamilton limits his approach in three ways. First, he focuses on types that point directly to Christ's person and work. Second, he treats "author-intended" typology, that is, he argues that the inspired human writers intended their narrative to be understood typologically. Third, he restricts himself to "promise-shaped typology," by which he means that "God's promises shaped the way the biblical authors perceived, understood, and wrote" (4). The human writers believed God's promises and saw God progressively fulfilling them throughout history.

The book's opening and closing chapters guide the reader in determining how the book's inspired writer presents a type. In chapter one Hamilton sets forth two features of typology: historical correspondence between events, persons, and institutions, on the one hand, and on the other, the escalation in significance that occurs when patterns are repeated (19). One notes historical correspondence by the reuse of significant terms or phrases, the repetition of a sequence of events, and the observation of a common significance ("covenantal import"). Hamilton's thesis in chapter eleven is that Moses organized the book of Genesis using a chiasmic structure, and that "later biblical authors learned the literary strategies employed by Moses and imitated his methodology," 332. Within these chiasmic sections one finds repeated themes, terms, and phrases; in other words, understanding the chiasmic structure will enable one to find the typical elements.

For those unfamiliar with the term, a chiasm is a literary device in which one restates his idea in several steps, moving from more general to more specific, and then restates them with increasing generality or broadness as many times as he stated them more specifically. Chiasms are an effective rhetorical and literary device, and one characteristic of Hebrew poetry.

Hamilton's conviction that the writers of Scripture used chiasms to present their record of God fulfilling his promises is so strong, that he imitates the structure in his book. Every chapter is chiasmically

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arranged, “and the chiasm helps me communicate the significance of what I am saying” (28).

In the heart of the book, chapters two through ten, Hamilton applies these principles to various biblical types. Chapters two through six treat typical persons: Adam, Priests, Prophets, Kings, and the Righteous Sufferer (Joseph, Moses, David, and the servant of Jehovah in Isaiah). Typical events are treated in chapters seven (creation) and eight (exodus), while typical institutions are covered in chapters nine (the Leviticult, that is, the Levitical priesthood and the temple-related ceremonies and sacrifices), and ten (marriage).

### Positives

Hamilton’s work is commendable for several reasons.

First, many scholars today think that the supposed history recorded in Scripture is really myth. Hamilton does not. His view of typology follows from his understanding that the history is real.

Second, Hamilton understands that Christ is the heart of all God’s promises, and so considers the mother promise of Genesis 3:15 to be foundational: “The life and death struggle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent is *the* plot conflict that informs the whole of the biblical narrative” (9). In faithful Israel, the elect remnant, Hamilton finds the continuation of the seed of the woman (145). And, ultimately, Christ is that seed.

Third, Hamilton continually finds the fulfillment of these types in Christ’s person or work. He views Christ’s work as having as its goal the realization of God’s covenant, and views typology as both revealing God’s covenant presence with His people in the Old Testament, and as pointing to the final realization of that covenant. This comes out prominently in his chapters on the Leviticult and marriage.

In the main, Hamilton views and applies typology correctly. Bible students will not always agree whether this or that is a type (Hamilton had no reservations about making Joseph a type, 177-178; Protestant Reformed ministers can be found on both sides of the question). In other particular details, one might take a different approach than Hamilton. But his principles are good, and his application of the principles is sound in the main. He also uses the New Testament Scriptures to help identify and explain types—a necessary aspect of studying types.

One significant point that undergirds Hamilton's work is the thought that the human writers of Scripture, particularly of the *historical* books, were *conscious* of the typology. While Hamilton seems to *overstate* this point (more in a moment), to *understate* it would also be wrong. While the New Testament church has a fuller understanding of how God realizes His promises than did Old Testament believers, Hamilton underscores that the Old Testament saints did understand it. Looking at the shed blood of the sacrificial lamb, the Israelites understood that a Lamb would be provided. And Abraham understood that God's promise to give the land of Canaan to him and his seed would be fulfilled in heaven.

### **Underlying Weaknesses**

The book has two underlying weaknesses, in this reviewer's judgment. The first regards what criteria are needed to determine a type. To say that repetition of terms and phrases, sequences of events, and escalation in significance are found in types is one thing; they are significant points *when* a thing has been determined to be a type of another. But these alone do not make a type. And Hamilton overstates the matter, I judge, in finding types in too many places.

Three examples. First, it is fair to say that both Noah and Moses, in their own way, pointed to Christ. And God preserved both in an ark, with a view to preserving His entire covenant seed. But that both stories have an ark theme does not make Moses a "new Noah" (20, fn. 34; see also 111-115); in other words, Noah was not a type of Moses.

Second, marriage *is* a picture of God's covenant. Both the deep sleep that came on Adam when God made Eve, and that which came on Abraham when God made His covenant with Abraham, testify that God instituted marriage and establishes His covenant without man's help. And marriage is a picture of God's covenant. But the repeated instance of deep sleep should not be one ground on which to present marriage as a picture of God's covenant (306).

Third, in chapter six Hamilton points to many instances of righteous people suffering in the Old Testament. The fact that they suffered does not inherently mean that they were types of Christ; rather, the explanation for their suffering is that Christ lived in them. The correspondence between a type and that to which it points follows from the



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fact that the one is a type of the other. But Hamilton's book assumes that the correspondence is evidence of the type.

Having previously commended Hamilton for insisting that the Old Testament human writers understood the types and looked for their fulfillment, I now insist that at times Hamilton pushes his thesis too far by assuming that the inspired writer understood more than he did. This is the book's second weakness.

To be clear, Hamilton acknowledges the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, and posits that "we can determine the intent of the divine author of Scripture by determining the intent of the human author of Scripture" (28). Although his assertions regard the human writer, he understands that what God intends to teach us in a passage (its theological or spiritual meaning) must be consistent with the words of the passage itself as penned by humans (the grammatical meaning). But when all is said and done, typology is not a matter of seeing what the human writers understood about God's promises, events, and patterns. Rather, typology is about noting what God is teaching us. What God is teaching us does not *contradict* what the human writers said, but it does *transcend* what they said. The Old Testament writers were mystified by some of their own writings (1 Peter 1:10-12). I do not suggest Moses knew little about God's promises and how He was fulfilling them; but Hamilton would have the reader think that Moses knew much.

## Conclusion

The book regards a specialized aspect of the study of God's Word. The average layperson would probably turn to a book of a different genre (doctrine, church history, practical or ethical matters) to read in his spare time. Those laymen who have a basic understanding of typology and desire to learn more would benefit from reading the book. Any seminary student or pastor would also benefit. Although the book contains Hebrew and Greek words, a knowledge of these languages is not necessary to understand Hamilton's point.

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*Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict*, by Christiane Tietz, translated by Victoria J. Barnett. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xvii + 448. \$36.95. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780198852469. Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.

It is rare, even for one who has worked in theology for many years, and who has read voraciously in theology and in the lives of outstanding theologians, to come across a book of theology, which is at the same time a biography of a renowned theologian, that is virtually impossible to lay down. Such was the case with *Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict*. The book is fascinating with regard to Barth's unique, nominally Reformed theology and gripping with regard to the Swiss/German's, shall we say, "paradoxical" life.

Regarding Barth's life, the honest reviewer must begin with its impenitent wickedness. For some forty years Barth lived in a more or less public, and in a more or less freely acknowledged, adulterous relationship with his theological assistant, Charlotte von Kirschbaum. In a crass act that was characteristic of the man, he took his lovely paramour into his home, openly to share his marital life with his long-suffering wife, Nelly, and his five children. His marital and sexual life was the grossest *menage a trois*. Barth made no defense of this violation of the seventh commandment other than the declaration that his love for von Kirschbaum was irresistible and that his need for her help, at such close quarters, in the writing of his *Church Dogmatics* was great. Barth dedicated one of the later volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* to von Kirschbaum. In his explanation of the seventh commandment in his dogmatics, Barth gave no excuse for such marital misbehavior. He explained the commandment as requiring monogamous marriage. Throughout his life, when pressed, he freely admitted that his conscience bothered him. But he continued in his unseemly conduct with his mistress to the very end of his life, and beyond. At his instruction, von Kirschbaum was buried with Nelly and Barth in the same family plot.

What accounts for this gross, public sin on the part of a confessedly Christian theologian of world-renown? Barth's life, let us say, was "paradoxical." The book does justice to this aspect of Barth's life. An

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entire chapter is devoted to “A Troubled ‘*Menage a Trois*’: Charlotte von Kirschbaum” (177-198).

Other aspects of the life of Barth were also highly unusual. Virtually alone in Germany, where he was teaching theology, Barth stood up publicly to Adolf Hitler and condemned Nazism as violation of the first commandment of the law of God. For his opposition to Hitler, particularly his refusal to take the Nazi oath of unconditional submission to Hitler, Barth was threatened with punishment and forced to flee to Switzerland. There he wrote vigorously against Hitler and Nazi Germany, under the threat of retaliation by the Gestapo. What accentuated his courage was that many of his colleagues supported the Nazi state and its doings, to their dubious advantage, whereas others, although personally enemies of the Nazi leader and his rule, yielded to Hitler and his anti-Christian government out of fear.

During World War II, Barth volunteered to serve in the army on behalf of the defense of Switzerland. A picture in the book—one of many that illustrate various aspects of Barth’s life—shows the middle-aged, slightly ridiculous Barth in full military garb, complete with a helmet that nearly covers his face, ready to withstand the invading German army (292, “Barth as a soldier”). Barth refused the offer of a safe desk job. He was prepared, if not eager, to fight on a bloody battle-field. His was a “life in conflict.”

Barth’s ecclesiastical and theological life was as conflicted as his personal life. The conflict began with warfare pitched against the sheer liberalism of nearly all the Protestant church and theologians in Europe, and in Germany in particular. The liberalism was advanced unbelief. Man was all. The Bible was a collection of merely human documents, filled with errors. Jesus was nothing but a more-or-less good, exclusively human example, if He ever existed. The reigning theologian was the raging liberal, Adolf von Harnack. Harnack responded to Barth’s attack on his liberalism with anger: “Adolf von Harnack ... was outraged” (123). Especially by a commentary on Romans, Barth threw a bomb on the theological playground of liberal theology, especially in Germany, as the saying had it.

Against the theology that proclaimed man as the be-all and end-all of religion, of the *Christian* religion, Barth exalted God—God revealed in Jesus Christ. In the commentary on Romans were so

many references to God that the printer ran out of “G’s” (122). And Barth proclaimed God as the “Wholly Other,” that is, as infinitely and qualitatively different from man. The essence and purpose of theology are not the comfort, or even the salvation, of man, but the glory of God. The message of the comfort of man, even though this comfort is attributed to Jesus, is for Barth merely “religion”; the message of Himself, by God Himself, is the gospel.

This message of Barth, unique except for the preaching of a young Reformed minister in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in America (who taught the orthodox doctrine of predestination), about the same time as Barth’s doctrinal struggle in Germany (the first edition of the commentary on Romans was published in 1919), the book emphasizes and defends as the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Is it any wonder that the Reformed student of theology has a hard time to lay the book aside?

Notwithstanding his Reformed emphasis on the Godhead of God, Barth was a universalist, that is, he taught that God loves all humans with the love of salvation and that He gave Jesus as the Savior of all without exception. Explicitly, Barth affirmed that Jesus had “also died and risen for [Adolf Hitler]” (291). This reference to Hitler “irritated” Barth’s disciples, not so much because it was heretical, as because it made the hated and detested Hitler the object of the grace of God. At the core of this universalism was Barth’s novel doctrine of predestination: Jesus is the elect and the reprobate on behalf of all humans. This, for Barth, is the truth of “double predestination” (369–371). In Jesus, all are the elect of God, including, explicitly, Judas Iscariot.

This universalism enabled Barth to envision his beloved, but unbelieving, Mozart in heaven, entertaining the angels, and even Jesus, as he had captivated Barth in the world: “if I should ever come to heaven I would first of all ask after Mozart and only then after Augustine and Thomas, Luther, Calvin and Schleiermacher.” And the heavenly choir must be silenced in deference to the melodic music of Mozart: “When they [the angels] are together *en famille* they play Mozart and . . . then too our dear Lord listens with great pleasure” (346, 347).

Because of his insistence that salvation depends not upon the will of the sinner but upon the sovereign will of God, Barth was charged then, as he is still today, with teaching that all humans will be saved. But this clear implication of the love of God for all and of the saving

work of Jesus on behalf of all, Barth repudiated. He denied that his theology is that of universal salvation. “Barth once pointedly answered the question as to whether he taught universal reconciliation [salvation—DJE]: ‘I do not teach it, but I also do not not teach it’” (371). How to account for this contradictory nature of Barth’s theology of the death and resurrection of Christ for all in the sovereign love of God for all, which does not (clearly and definitively, according to Barth) imply the salvation of all? The theology of Barth was, let us say, “paradoxical.”

A concluding chapter of the book is a brief but thorough and accurate summation of Barth’s dogmatics, some twelve thick volumes and more than nine thousand pages of narrowly typeset pages, in which Barth reworked all of Christian, nominally Reformed, doctrine. And then his dogmatics remained unfinished; he aged and died before he could get to eschatology. Because the original volumes were bound in white canvas linen, and in view of the vast size of the dogmatical work, the books that Barth himself named *Church Dogmatics* became known as the “White Whale,” or “Moby Dick.” This reviewer’s complete set has black binding, but is just as huge. Has there been a black whale? An especially learned, interesting, and instructive feature of the “Black Whale,” as I suppose of the “White Whale” original, are the paragraphs in still smaller print interspersed in the text, containing the exegesis of Scripture and the intriguing church tradition bearing on the subject currently being treated. We are informed that these sections of the *Church Dogmatics* are especially the contribution of von Kirschbaum, although they certainly passed Barth’s muster.

Of interest to this reviewer is the question whether Barth had some influence on my mentor, Herman Hoeksema. Hoeksema informed me that he was reading Barth in the German original. Publicly, in the *Standard Bearer*, Hoeksema challenged Cornelius Van Til’s judgment that Barth’s theology was simply a “new modernism.” Hoeksema contended that it was too soon to make such a damning judgment. Indicating where his attraction to elements of Barth’s theology lay, Hoeksema borrowed Barth’s famed phrase describing God, “the Wholly Other,” in his own writings.

In addition, there was Hoeksema’s inclination to attend the conference featuring Barth at the University of Chicago early in 1962.

About the same time, Barth appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine*, which cover is pictured in the book (384). As though to accentuate the paradoxical nature of the life of Barth, his stern face on the cover of the secular magazine was counter-balanced by a picture in the article itself of Barth laughingly drinking a beer in a Chicago nightclub. At the time of Barth's conference in Chicago, I was the only student in the Protestant Reformed Seminary. In his dogmatics class with me, Hoeksema commented on the Barth conference and mused that he would like to attend. Having not yet read Barth and being almost ignorant of him—I was still very young—I did not respond. I regret that I did not respond with enthusiasm to the suggestion. I am convinced that had I shown interest, Hoeksema would have shut down the seminary and made the trip, with me in tow, to Chicago. My regret is not so much that I could have met and heard the famous theologian, although that is now appealing, but that I can envision Hoeksema engaging in a debate with Barth over Barth's un-Reformed doctrine of predestination, and consequent universalism, perhaps publicly.

The old, Dutch Reformed theologian in controversy with the aged, nominally Reformed! German theologian before an audience of thousands! What response this might have drawn from the hundreds of notable theologians present at the conference is, of course, unknown, and forever unknowable. It would have made my day—and seminary experience.

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*Reformed Mission in Southern Africa: The Way Forward*. Ed. Rob van der Kooy. Pretoria, South Africa: GKSA Evangelisation Publications Fund, 2022. Pp. 312. (Free in electronic form at [rvdkooy1@gmail.com](mailto:rvdkooy1@gmail.com).) Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.

As described by the editor in his introductory comments, the book is a collection of twenty-four articles by different authors on his churches' work of missions in southern Africa. The articles "attempt to take stock, evaluate past work done in the light of the Scriptures and reflect on the way evangelization is done and should be done in the future" (5).

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The denomination of Reformed churches whose work of missions is evaluated and promoted is the Reformed Churches in South Africa, the initials of whose original Dutch name are GKSA. These are the churches made up largely of the descendants of the Dutch immigrants to South Africa in the seventeenth century. These churches figured significantly in the history of the society and nation of South Africa down the years to the present.

Although the “mission” in the title of the book includes some work with the Muslims, cults, and members of apostate churches (the charismatics, for example), the subject is mainly the work of the GKSA with the black heathen of the country. Particular aspects of the idolatry of these heathen, which make the work difficult, are demonology and ancestor worship. In exposing demonology and advising how the missionary must deal with it, the author, Flip Buys, urges the Western churches to take the presence and operations of demons much more seriously than they presently do (“The Relevance of Reformed Perspectives on Demonology in Africa,” 99-108).

The difficulties of the work are enormous. Apart from the almighty grace of Jesus Christ, one would be inclined to describe the difficulties as insuperable. In addition to the deeply ingrained idolatry itself is the fact that the many tribes speak different languages. This means that the missionaries must learn different languages for the work. Besides, there is no translation of the Bible in the languages of these tribes. The missionaries or their sending church must make these translations themselves. They are producing these, not in written form, because of the difficulty of producing the printed pages of Scripture in the languages of the tribes, but in oral form.

As if all of this were not enough, the work of the largely white, Dutch Reformed churches is bedeviled by the history of apartheid in the history of South Africa. Blacks in South Africa are hostile to all whites, including white missionaries who have a care for their souls, because past white governments have pursued the policy of separate institutions, including churches, for whites and blacks. Black troublemakers stir up the black would-be audiences of the missionaries to regard the mission labors of the white missionaries as a form of the subjection of blacks on behalf of continuing white supremacy. One of the black missionaries of the GKSA and author of a chapter in the

book, Sipo Phungula, recounts that during a night service of the mission labor of the church “the gangs came with guns, stood outside the venue, smoking dagga, swearing and insulting the preacher as he was preaching” (125). The same author mentions that as recently as 1996, two of three young men were “gunned down on the church premises” immediately following a tent campaign of evangelism (124).

In the face of all these obstacles and dangers, it is a remarkable instance of the work of the Holy Spirit that the GKSA give themselves to the work of mission.

The articles vary in soundness. There is a definite tendency on the part of some to compromise the fundamental truths of Christianity as found in the creedal Reformed faith in the interests of gaining acceptance by their heathen audiences. One author is somewhat dismissive of the “sound doctrine contained in the three Reformed symbols of unity” in favor of “personal experience with the Living Christ and the Holy Spirit,” although, to do him justice, he qualifies his dismissal by speaking of “*only* sound doctrine,” etc. (141).

One writer contends that by His “general grace” God was “merciful” to the ungodly nations, not only in giving rain and crops, but also when in their unbelief they “danced around the fire in the Kalahari in their ignorance and distress,” that is, in their superstitious worship of their idols (113).

Others are heartwarmingly uncompromising in calling for the proclamation and teaching of the gospel as confessed in the Reformed faith. In an article titled “*Re-form*-ation and Translation: Commissioned to Confess the Cross in Cape Town,” missionary pastor Simon Jooste calls for the church and state to be separate, whereas in the past the church functioned too much as a servant of the policies of the state. He condemns postmodernism with its denial of objective truth and righteousness, especially regarding biblical sexual norms, as a threat to the mission of the GKSA. He calls for the “Three Forms of Unity” to have an authoritative rule both in the work of missions and in the existence of churches formed by missions. As Jooste himself puts it, “I set forth a recovery of the church’s unique Great Commission mandate through the lens of the Reformed confessions in its cruciform key.” Concluding with an impassioned proclamation of the cross of



Christ, Jooste declares: “the conditions necessary to enter heaven: nothing” (200-213).

A Dutch Reformed believer in western Michigan reads the book with thankfulness for this work of missions, with sympathy for the struggles and hardships of the work, and with amazement at the perseverance of the GKSA in the work, the weaknesses of some notwithstanding.

The educator who edited the book, Rob van der Kooy, is not without knowledge of and appreciation for the Protestant Reformed Churches. This goes far to explain why he granted this reviewer the privilege of writing the long “Foreword” to the book.

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