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Published twice annually by the faculty of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary:

Cory J. Griess (corygriess@gmail.com)
Brian L. Huizinga (b.huizinga@prca.org)
Douglas J. Kuiper, Editor (doug.kuiper@prca.org)

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Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary
4949 Ivanrest Avenue
Wyoming, MI 49418
USA
www.prcts.org
(616) 531-1490

Editor's Notes

With the retirement of Barry Gritters this past June, the faculty of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary is down to the "routine" staffing of three professors. The past nine years saw a transition from the third generation to the fourth generation of faculty in the seminary's history. The current faculty thank God for our retired colleagues and the role they played in helping us take up our work. Retired professors may still write in this *Journal*, and we hope they will.

This issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* includes articles on church liturgy, doctrine, and history. In the first article, Cory Griess surveys the history of the church's inclusion of confession and absolution in its worship service, and focuses on Calvin's teaching regarding repentance, confession, and absolution. The informative historical and theological sections pave the way for a plea that Reformed churches return to the practice of including a time of confession and absolution in public worship.

The doctrinal article regards the relationship of election to reprobation in the supralapsarian presentation of God's decrees. In a research paper for a seminary dogmatics class, Aaron Van Dyke investigated the charge that the supralapsarian presentation gives equal priority to election and reprobation. Surveying what many supralapsarians have said about the relationship of election and reprobation, he concludes that none explicitly stated that reprobation is coordinate to election, but that they also have not explicitly opposed the notion. He then demonstrates that no such charge could be laid against the modified supralapsarianism of Herman Hoeksema; indeed, his view opposed this charge.

The church historical article is my fourth and final installment of the history of Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America. My goal is next to resume my history of our seminary, which was interrupted by this history of Classis West.

Seven book reviews are included. A book on the authority of the Septuagint receives an extended review and significant critiques. The reviewer of *Why Everyone Should Be Religious* finds that the book promotes natural theology but, in the end, exposes its failure. Other books that are reviewed treat the doctrine of Scripture, the rise of

higher criticism, and the state of American northern Presbyterianism in the 1930s. Marco Barone critiques two books on critical theory in the same review.

"Bring the books!"

-DJK

PRTJ 60,1 (2026): 3-27

"No Common Solace": Confession and Absolution in Calvin's Theology and Reformed Practice

Cory J. Griess

In some way, the Great Reformation of the sixteenth century reformed almost everything in the church's doctrine, worship, and life. The Reformers believed that the Roman Catholic Church had built a kingdom on the foundation of the traditions of men and that the church needed to be rebuilt again upon the foundation of sacred Scripture. Yet if, after examination in the light of the Word of God, some practice could be refashioned for a use that was scriptural, the Reformers were ready to purify and retain it. This is evident in how they treated the Roman Catholic practice of auricular confession.

The Fourth Lateran Council (1213) mandated that church members twelve years old and older confess their sin to a priest, fulfilling a sacramental obligation. Failure would result in excommunication from the Roman Church. For the Reformers, of course, this "sacrament" could not remain in the Reformed church. Yet, these men were not ready to tie the practice of confession and absolution to a rock and cast it into the sea. Luther, famously, retained a time of voluntary private confession.[1] Calvin, too, saw the benefit of confessing our faults one to another (James 5:16). In fact, Calvin promoted confession to another believer and/or minister even if he did not see biblical justification to *require* it. In Strassburg, after seeing Bucer's example, Calvin visited the homes of his members before the Lord's Supper so that they could confess their sins as part of their preparation for the sacrament. Though he was not able to continue this practice in Geneva, he desired to continue it, and he promoted the benefit of the practice to the end of his days.[2] Writing to Farel in 1540, Calvin spoke of the Reformation

1 See Luther's section on private confession of sin (to the pastor) and absolution in his Small Catechism; for instance, *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 25.

2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559 edition, ed. John

mindset with respect to confession of sin:

> That the examination of which I have spoken [for confession before the Lord's Supper] may excite some scruple in the hearts of good Christians, does not surprise me. It is indeed no new thing that pious souls should fear our falling back into superstition, whenever they hear of our establishing anything which has even a remote similarity to popish inventions….I may express the wish that they would be somewhat more careful to separate the good wheat from the chaff and the tares. I have often told you, that I should have thought it unwise to abolish confession in our churches, unless the rite which I have lately introduced had been established in its place.[3]

Yet the Reformers, especially the second generation, saw a right place for public confession of sin and the subsequent absolution of the gospel chiefly in the public worship services of the church. As shown below, there was a tradition of confession and pardon *in worship* in the history of the Christian church to which the Reformers could hearken back. Both this history and their theological understanding of the worship service led them to substitute public corporate confession and pardon for the private practice in the Roman Church. As Abraham Kuyper said, "Hence, they [Calvin and the Reformed fathers after him] substituted the general absolution for the personal confession in the gathering of believers, without discouraging people in the least from confessing their sins to one another or to their minister."[4] Baly's conclusion was the same: "the end result of Protestant work on repentance did amount to a *de facto* substitution of corporate confession and absolution for the private, auricular practice."[5]

T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1:637-38 (3.4.13).

3 John Calvin, "Letter to Farel, March, 1540," quoted in Paul Henry, *The Life and Times of John Calvin the Great Reformer,* trans. Henry Stebbing (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1859), 1:142.

4 Abraham Kuyper, *Our Worship*, ed. Harry Boonstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 152.

5 Anita Jean Baly, "Confession and Absolution in the Sixteenth Century: Prayers to Serve a Turn" (PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1990), 135-36.

This article investigates why, how, and to what extent the Reformers gave a place to public corporate confession and absolution in the worship services of the church. The article has three main sections. First, I trace the history of confession and absolution in worship from the early church through the Dutch Reformed tradition. Second, I focus on Calvin's theology of repentance, confession, and absolution in public worship as he wrote of it in book three of his *Institutes.* Third, I advocate for a recovery of the practice of public corporate confession of sin and absolution in contemporary Reformed liturgies by answering two main objections and showing how the practice aligns with the main principles of Reformed worship.

The Trajectory of Public Confession and Absolution from the Early Church through the Dutch Reformed Tradition

Early Church

Already in AD 100 public confession of sin was a distinct part of the corporate worship of the church. "The Didache", the earliest church order that has come down to us, says, "In the congregation (in church) thou shalt confess thy transgressions."[6] "The Didache" also later references public confession of sin in church associated with the celebration of the Lord's Supper.[7] Schaff comments that this is "the earliest mention of public confession of sins" after James 5:16.[8] How formal or informal this practice was, and whether it was a widespread practice, we cannot say. Nonetheless, "The Didache" gives clear evidence that there was a practice of public corporate confession of sin in worship from the earliest days of the post-apostolic church.

Later in the post-apostolic period there was a liturgical practice of confession and absolution recorded in German churches. As far back as the 900s the German churches practiced the *Offene Schuld* (public confession). After the sermon, they held a time of confession in which the preacher would call on people who had raised their hands to confess sins. The minister declared a general absolution of the guilt

6 Philip Schaff, *The Oldest Church Manual Called The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (London: Pendelburys, 2001), 179.

7 Schaff, *Church Manual*, 208-209.

8 Schaff, *Church Manual*, 179.

of sin after this was finished.[9]

Medieval Church

In the medieval Roman Catholic Mass, the confession and absolution remained part of the church liturgical practice. However, it took a hierarchical turn. The *confetior*, which is still part of the Mass today, is a liturgical prayer of confession of sin. After it was said, absolution was pronounced. Originally each worshipper was involved. However, as time went on, the process became an interaction between the ordained. Just as the elements were taken away from the people, so were confession and absolution of sin. As time went on and Catholicism developed penance as a sacrament of confession and absolution, the peoples' confession of sin turned into a practice performed outside of the worship service.[10]

Sixteenth-Century Reformation Generally

The sixteenth-century Reformation was a return to public, corporate, confession of sin and pardon. The *confetior*, which had become merely the priests' private confession of sin in preparation for the mass, was "put on the lips of the laity," making liturgical confession no longer the private work of the priest, but a "public act of the congregation."[11] For the reformers this was the doctrinal implication of the priesthood of all believers, just as much as congregational singing was. Just as singing praise, once the privilege of the hierarchy alone, was returned to the people, so confession and absolution in church. And just as they saw the recovery of congregational singing was a return to the practice of the early church, so public corporate confession of sin and pardon.[12]

9 Baly, "Confession and Absolution in the Sixteenth Century," 20.

10 Baly, "Confession and Absolution in the Sixteenth Century," 22-25. There are other possible precursors to what is found in Reformation liturgies that could be investigated. One is called the *apologiae* and another is called the *prone*.

11 Daniel Hyde, "Lost Keys: The Absolution in Reformed Liturgy," *Calvin Theological Journal* 46, no. 1 (April 2011): 143.

12 Note the end of the title of Calvin's church service that contained a confession and absolution: "The Form of Church Prayers and Hymns with the Manner of Administering the Sacraments and Consecrating Marriage

As a result there was a kind of "Cambrian explosion" of corporate liturgical confession and absolution in the liturgies of the sixteenth century. Though evidence of the same may be found in the Lutheran and Anglican branches of the Reformation, in the Reformed stream the practice is ubiquitous.

Martin Bucer

The liturgy of Martin Bucer, produced in Strassburg in 1524, contained a corporate confession of sin and an absolution declared by the minister at the beginning of the service. Bucer published a revision of his liturgy in 1539, giving three options for the confession: a short, medium, or long form, the latter of which confesses sins against each of the ten commandments in succession.[13] The medium form reads:

> Almighty, eternal God and Father, we confess and acknowledge that we, alas, were conceived and born in sin, and are therefore inclined to all evil and slow to all good; that we transgress thy holy commandments without ceasing, and ever more corrupt ourselves. But we are sorry for the same, and beseech thy grace and help. Wherefore have mercy upon us, most gracious and merciful God and Father, through thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ. Grant to us and increase in us thy Holy Spirit, that we may recognize our sin and unrighteousness from the bottom of our hearts, attain true repentance and sorrow for them, die to them wholly, and please thee entirely by a new and godly life. Amen.[14]

Bucer's absolution made use of various verses of Scripture. Here is an example after reading a verse from the epistles:

According to the Custom of the Ancient Church." Emphasis added.

13 The employment of the ten commandments in sixteenth-century liturgies, namely, as "first" or "third" use of the law, is a fascinating study in itself. Different from Bucer, Calvin had the confession and absolution before the law that came after the sermon and was sung. The ten commandments functioned in their third use in Calvin's liturgy.

14 Martin Bucer, "The Strassburg Liturgy," in *Liturgies of the Western Church*, ed. Bard Thompson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 168. The original liturgy was entitled *Grund and Ursach;* the revision, *Psalter mit aller Kirchenubung*. Notice in this confession and others there is a confession of our sinful nature. Notice also that the goal of forgiveness unto a godly life is in this prayer.

> Let everyone, with St. Paul, truly acknowledge this [his sin] in his heart and believe in Christ. Thus, in His name, I proclaim unto you the forgiveness of all your sins, and declare you to be loosed of them on earth, that you be loosed of them in heaven, in eternity. Amen.[15]

John Calvin

Calvin borrowed much of his liturgy from Bucer.[16] Bucer functioned as Calvin's mentor for three years when Calvin pastored the French speaking congregation in Strassburg after the authorities in Geneva banished him from the city. Both in Strassburg and in Geneva (after he was called back), Calvin used a liturgy that contained a corporate confession of sin. For this he borrowed Bucer's medium length form of confession quoted above. In Strassburg, Calvin's liturgy had also called for an absolution following confession. He wanted the same in Geneva, but the people there had difficulty distinguishing the absolution from the priestly corruption of it in the Roman Catholic Church. To make their disagreement known, when Calvin was almost finished reading the form for confession, they would stand up to interrupt, preventing him from giving the absolution. Wanting to keep peace, Calvin removed the absolution from the liturgy.[17] As in Bucer's liturgy, the confession and absolution occurred at the very beginning of the worship service. Calvin's absolution (Strassburg, 1545) is as follows:

> Let each of you truly acknowledge that he is a sinner, humbling himself before God, and believe that the heavenly Father wills to be gracious unto him in Jesus Christ.
>
> To all those that repent in this wise, and look to Jesus Christ for their salvation, I declare that the absolution of sins is effected, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.[18]

15 Thompson, *Liturgies*, 170.

16 With some influence from William Farel's, titled *The Manner and Way*. Farel also had a confession and absolution in his liturgy. See Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngey, eds., *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2018), 195-211.

17 Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 303.

18 Thompson, *Liturgies*, 198. Calvin's Strassburg liturgy was published

John à Lasco/Martin Micronius

In 1555, John à Lasco produced a church manual titled *Form and Method*.[19] This manual contained directives and forms for liturgy. À Lasco was a Polish reformer who came to London in 1550 at the invitation of Thomas Cranmer. In London there were a number of so-called "stranger" congregations.[20] These were churches made up of foreign refugees fleeing persecution on the continent. Edward VI allowed these congregations to act independently of the Church of England. À Lasco functioned as a kind of overseer of all these foreign congregations, one of which was Dutch (now the oldest historically Dutch Reformed congregation in the world). One of the ministers in this Dutch-speaking congregation was Martin Micronius. Micronius published a liturgy based on à Lasco's church manual.[21] As we will see, through Dathenus, these two, à Lasco's manual and Micron's liturgy, had much influence on Dutch Reformed liturgy.[22]

In both *Form and Method*, and in Micron's liturgy, there is both a confession and absolution after the reading of the law. The confession is as follows:

> O eternal God and most gracious Father, with all our heart we humble ourselves before your Divine Majesty, against which we have sinned so heinously. Therefore, we publicly and sincerely confess that we are not worthy to be called your children anymore. For in addition to being born and conceived in sin, we are also incapable of doing any good and entirely prone to evil. So we have transgressed your commandments in many ways, not honoring you according to your worthiness, and not loving our neighbor according to your command. Therefore, considering your severe justice, we confess that we are deserving of eternal condemnation; and that we would be wholly lost, if your boundless mercy (by which you come toward all repenting people,

in 1545, even though he was again in Geneva by that time. The Strassburg liturgy is actually older than his 1542 Genevan liturgy, in use already in 1541.

19 Found in Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 458-516.

20 For more on these congregations see, Andrew Pettegree, *Foreign Protestant Communities in Sixteenth-Century London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

21 Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 456. The liturgy is found in the same book on 517-42.

22 Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 457.

> even while they are still afar off) did not by far transcend your justice. Will you be gracious to us, through your beloved Son Jesus Christ alone, who stands surety with his merits. Do not remember our sins. Instead, having forgiven them, receive us (who have been converted to you through sincere repentance) in grace. For you did not desire the death of the sinner, but rather that he should repent and live. And when you have thus received us in grace, endow us with your Holy Spirit, so that we may no longer provoke you to anger. And remove the heart of stone from us. Create in us a new heart, which is soft, made out of flesh; and on which you write your law, so that we may from now on live in accordance with it, as it complements children of the light, walking always before you in a newness of life, for the honor of your name and the edification of your Church, through the same, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.[23]

Following this confession came what Micronius called "the loosening and binding of sins."[24] Here there is a distinguishing form for absolution, containing not only a declaration of pardon to repentant sinners but also a declaration of guilt to those who are unrepentant:

> Since it pleases the eternal God to receive in grace the truly repentant who confess their sins, and to leave in their sins those obstinate, evil men who cover up or excuse their sins, therefore we must sincerely confess our misdeeds. As many as are among you, who are ashamed of their sins and regret them; and further, who firmly believe and trust that all of them are fully forgiven solely by the merits of Christ; and moreover, who decide from now on to mortify their earthly members and to follow the heavenly things—to these same ones (because they believe in the Son of the living God), I declare from the Word of God that their sins are forgiven in heaven through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forevermore. Amen.
>
> But as many as are also among you who still take pleasure in their sins, and who do not want to confess or change their lives; or maybe they confess them already, but nevertheless seek another help of salvation, other than the matchless merits of the benefit of Christ the Lord, because they love the darkness more than the light, and do not believe in the name of the only begotten Son of God—I declare to these

23 Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 521-522.

24 Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 522.

> same ones, also from the Word of God, that all their sins are bound in heaven and they shall not be absolved of them unless they repent.[25]

The Palatinate Church Order/Petrus Dathenus

When Frederick III commissioned the Heidelberg Catechism, he did so as part of a broader work entitled *The Palatinate Church Order*. This church order included a liturgy for the Reformed church worship services of the Palatinate. Ursinus was the primary author not only of the Heidelberg Catechism, but also of the liturgy. In 1563 the Catechism and the liturgy were published together, along with other forms and form prayers. A Dutchman by the name of Petrus Dathenus was near Heidelberg at the same time, having also been commissioned by Frederick III to help reform the church in the Palatinate. Dathenus was a Dutch theologian who spent time ministering in the Dutch "stranger" church in London with à Lasco and Micronius under the reign of Edward VI. During the subsequent rule of bloody Mary, Dathenus had to flee to Germany. Through Frederick's urging he ended up in Frankenthall, just outside of Heidelberg. Here Dathenus produced the liturgy that would later become the Dutch Reformed liturgy, approved with some changes by the Synod of Dordt (1618-19). Dathenus' liturgy drew heavily from the Palatinate liturgy published by Frederick III, with evident influences also from à Lasco and Micronius.[26]

The Palatinate liturgy, and that of Dathenus, called for a corporate confession of sin and subsequent absolution. While the Palatinate liturgy did not prescribe a reading of the law, in Dathenus' liturgy the reading of the law is the first element in the service, with confession and absolution immediately following.[27] Interestingly, Dathenus' liturgy does not give a *form* for confession or absolution, but rather simply calls the minister to

> take the opportunity to exhort the congregation to repentance and the confession of their transgressions, as well as to faith in the evangelical promises of Christ. He [the minister] substantiates both

25 Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 522.

26 All of these liturgies in turn looked back to Calvin's Strassburg liturgy especially.

27 Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 607-609.

> with testimonies from Scripture. He proclaims God's punishment to the unrepentant and God's grace in Christ to the repentant believers.[28]

DeRidder tells us that the Reformed ministers in the Netherlands, all of whom used Dathenus' liturgy, commonly used Micronius' forms for confession and absolution referenced above to carry out these directives.[29]

Second Helvetic Confession

Besides the Reformation *liturgies*, there was one Reformation *creed* that spoke of public corporate confession and absolution in worship, the Second Helvetic Confession (1566). In chapter 14, Article 4 of the Second Helvetic Confession, Bullinger wrote on "Sacerdotal Confession and Absolution." After repudiating the Roman Catholic notion of penance, Bullinger spoke favorably of confessing sins privately to a minister if one's conscience is greatly burdened. However, he also spoke favorably of the practice of confession and absolution in worship: "just as we also fully approve of that general and public confession of sins which is usually said in Church and in meetings for worship."[30]

The Second Helvetic Confession is a significant Reformation creed and its approval of a public corporate confession and absolution is significant. As Ronald Cammenga points out,

> The Second Helvetic Confession was officially recognized by Reformed Churches throughout Europe and beyond. It was the first international Reformed confession.…[It] became the official confession of Reformed Churches in Scotland, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Germany, France, the Netherlands, North America, South

28 Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 626. Notice the influence of the London liturgies in the declaration to the repentant and the unrepentant.

29 Richard DeRidder, "A Survey of the Sources of Reformed Church Polity and the Form of Government of the Christian Reformed Church in America" (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1983), 68.

30 Second Helvetic Confession, in *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes,* Volume 3: *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds,* ed. Philip Schaff (Baker, 1983), 263. The English translation is from https://www.ccel.org/creeds/helvetic.htm.

America, and elsewhere.[31]

The inclusion of this positive commendation of public corporate confession and absolution in a Reformation creed so widely accepted only confirms the ubiquity of the practice in Reformed worship services.

Dutch Reformed History

Among the Dutch Reformed, the practice of confession and absolution in the worship service was carried on in the churches through the use of Dathenus' liturgy. In fact, the Synod of Wesel in 1568 officially called for public corporate confession and absolution:

> As each church sees fit…a public and solemn confession of guilt shall be made and a humble prayer of forgiveness for the people shall be offered, either before or after the sermon. Each minister shall offer this prayer either according to the inspiration of the Spirit, or if he wishes, by using the formulary of the church of Geneva or of some other church.[32]

Subsequent history reveals the loss of liturgical confession of sin and absolution in the Dutch Reformed tradition. Through form prayers produced by Dathenus[33] and Jan Utenhoven (not form prayers

31 Ronald Cammenga, "The Second Helvetic Confession," *Standard Bearer* (March 1, 2015), 254.

32 Richard DeRidder, *The Church Orders of Sixteenth Century Reformed Churches in the Netherlands*, (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1987), 82-83. Remember that Dathenus had not included a *form* for confession and absolution but had only called for both to be part of the worship service.

33 Dathenus' liturgy contained not only a time of confession of sin as mentioned above, but also two other prayers of confession of sin for later in the service (see Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 626-633). The prayers of confession of sin were in use all the way to the time of Abraham Kuyper and are included in the Psalter that he, Herman Bavinck, and Frederick L. Rutgers published shortly after the union of the Afscheiding and Doleantie churches: *De Berijmde Psalmen, met Eenige Gezangen: in Gebruik bij de Gereformeerde Kerken in Netherland* (Maasluis: Uitgevers-Genootschap, 1913). These prayers are also included in the early editions of the Dutch Reformed liturgy in the United States. See for example, *The Constitution of*

specifically for confession and absolution), a kind of corporate confession of sin continued in the Netherlands even after the influence of the Synod of Wesel; however, absolution was effectively abandoned after the Synod of Middleburg in 1581. When the question was put to the Synod whether or not there should be a public proclamation of forgiveness to the penitent and the binding of sins to the impenitent, the Synod answered: "since the binding and loosing of sins takes place sufficiently in the preaching of the Word, it is therefore unnecessary to introduce a separate form for this."[34] The Synod's declaration that the binding and loosing from sin was sufficiently performed in the sermon was effectively a "recommendation to abandon a singular practice, which hitherto had been prevalent."[35] Writing in 1911, Abraham Kuyper said,

> In fact, in our churches absolution has completely disappeared, and public as well as private confession of sin has been completely unregulated and left to the whim of ministers or believers. Slowly the belief grew that the confession and the forgiveness of our sins were purely between God and our conscience.[36]

There were attempts to revive the practice in Dutch Reformed history. Kuyper himself sought to revive the practice in his book *Our Worship*. There Kuyper called for a liturgy that includes: (1) a brief exhortation calling to mind one's sins; (2) a common confession of sin, preferably to be sung metrically; and (3) a public declaration of

the Reformed Dutch Church in the United States of America: With an Appendix Containing Rules and Orders of the General Synod, From 1794-1815 (New York: George Forman, 1815), 79-90. Kuyper refers to two of these liturgical prayers specifically as the "Confession of Sin"; *Our Worship*, 140. Rightly, the traditional Dutch Reformed liturgy has been criticized for being stuck in the "guilt" section and not moving to the "grace" or "gratitude" section of Christian experience. See Christopher Dorn, *The Lord's Supper in the Reformed Church in America: Tradition in Transformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 30-31. Adjustments made to the liturgy over the years have been good in this regard.

34 DeRidder, *Church Orders*, 291.

35 DeRidder, *Survey of Sources*, 67.

36 Kuyper, *Our Worship*, 148.

forgiveness for all who sincerely confessed their sins, coupled with a declaration of judgment for all who persist in their sins.[37] There was also an attempt in the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) in 1928 to revive the practice. The attempt created a firestorm in that denomination so that the attempt to revive the weekly practice was finally abandoned.[38] However, as late as 1987, the CRC's *Psalter Hymnal* still contained a Lord's Supper liturgy that included a separate confession of sin and declaration of pardon.[39] Some Reformed and Presbyterian congregations currently have a separate confession of sin and declaration of pardon in their liturgy, but in general the practice has fallen on hard times.

In the Protestant Reformed Churches there has never been an attempt to revive the practice. Yet Herman Hanko, who advocated an occasional use of the ten commandments *after* the sermon as a guide to gratitude, commented in the *Standard Bearer* that if that were to take place, "there ought to be some other provision made at the beginning of the service, for 'confession of sin' and 'absolution.'" Hanko concludes, "these things are…worth pondering a bit."[40]

Calvin's Theology of Confession and Absolution

Though Calvin does not stand alone representing the Reformed tradition, Calvin was the primary writing theologian of the Reformed movement. His influence upon other reformers of his own and subsequent generations was significant. This influence undoubtedly extends to liturgical understanding and practice. Calvin's liturgies lay behind the liturgies of all the Reformed churches of Reformation-era

37 Kuyper, *Our Worship,* 153.

38 For the history, see Hyde, *Lost Keys*, 153-160.

39 *Psalter Hymnal* (CRC Publications, 1987), 972.

40 Both quotations from Herman Hanko, "Our Order of Worship," *Standard Bearer* (May 1, 1984), 343. Hanko sees the reading of the law before the sermon and the singing of a Psalm about forgiveness as taking the place of confession and absolution. If a minister chooses to shift the place of the reading of the law to after the sermon occasionally (as Hanko advocates), then he says a separate confession and absolution is needed. When the reading of the law is before the sermon, Hanko says, confession and absolution are not needed. Yet, the reading of the law by itself is not a confession, and the singing of a Psalm about forgiveness is still very different from absolution.

Europe. For Calvin and those who were influenced by him, liturgical reformation displayed right doctrine. The same was true specifically regarding Calvin's understanding of a separate confession and absolution in the worship service. In this second part of the article, I will explain Calvin's theology of confession and absolution as found in the 1559 *Institutes*, showing that the manner in which confession and absolution was carried out in the Reformed worship service displayed Calvin's Reformed theology, developed in opposition to Rome's theology and in accord with the Word of God.

Confession

The meaning of the New Testament Greek word ὁμολογέω, which stands behind the English word "confess,"[41] teaches us that to confess our sins is to say the same thing about our sin that God says about it, namely, that it is sin. The New Testament Greek word μετανοέω, which stands behind the English word "repent," teaches us that to repent of our sins is to change our mind about our sin, to turn away from it and toward God.[42] Calvin normally understood repentance very broadly, including one's entire life of sanctification.[43] But there is a turning in one's soul away from sin and to God (contrition) in Calvin's thought as well, which is closer to our later understanding of repentance in a narrower sense.[44] Either way, to Calvin, repentance often includes confession. And when he conceived of repentance more narrowly, confession is often its synonym.

Calvin began his treatment of confession and repentance by contrasting confession and repentance in the Roman Catholic theological system with its place in his own system. In Roman Catholic theology, repentance is three things: "contrition of heart, confession of mouth, and satisfaction of works."[45] Indeed, in Rome repentance (which includes confession) is a meritorious ground for forgiveness: "But they say that there are many helps by which we may redeem sins:

41 As in 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

42 Calvin, *Institutes,* 1:597-98 (3.3.5).

43 See Calvin, *Institutes,* 1:597-98 (3.3.5).

44 "Now the hatred of sin, which is the beginning of repentance…" Calvin, *Institutes,* 1:614 (3.3.20). See also 3.3.19.

45 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:623 (3.4.1).

tears, fastings, offerings, and works of charity [all of which are part of repentance to Rome]. With these we must propitiate the Lord."[46] This repentance then must "balance in the scales"[47] the weight of the offense to be worthy of the assurance of pardon. Here, Calvin said, "truly miserable consciences are tormented,"[48] never sure that their confession and repentance has been deep enough, tearful enough, or extensive enough to be worthy of pardon. In contrast, Calvin spoke of repentance as no ground for pardon, but (as is hatred of sin) only *the way to it*. He said:

> And we have said…that forgiveness of sins can never come to anyone without repentance, because only those afflicted and wounded by the awareness of sins can sincerely invoke God's mercy. But we added at the same time that repentance is not the cause of forgiveness of sins. Moreover, we have done away with these torments of souls which they would have us perform as a duty. We have taught that the sinner does not dwell upon his own compunction or tears, but fixes both eyes upon the Lord's mercy alone.[49]

Confession and repentance are not meritorious grounds for forgiveness. Rather, they are the necessary way to a faith that lays hold of Christ for forgiveness. By calling us to repent, God is not calling us to reach a certain bar of purity in repentance that will make repentance able to merit forgiveness. Rather, God merely "indicates in what direction men should proceed if they wish to obtain grace."[50] Repentance is a means to arrive at pardoning faith. Seeing one's own sin, a man ought to be "very much displeased with himself."[51] But then he is not to turn that displeasure into a kind of energy with which to win God's favor, but instead "to hasten to God and yearn for Him, in order that, having been engrafted into the life and death of Christ,"[52] one may live for God out of love for Him. Calvin viewed confession

46 Calvin, *Institutes,* 1:651 (3.4.25).
47 Calvin, *Institutes,* 1:625 (3.4.2).
48 Calvin, *Institutes,* 1:625 (3.4.2).
49 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:626 (3.4.3).
50 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:614 (3.3.20).
51 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:615 (3.3.20).
52 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:615 (3.3.20).

and repentance as the means God uses to draw His people into seeking refreshment in Himself by faith. In other words, Calvin saw confession and repentance as part of God's fatherly goodness to His people, and the way He gives Himself over to them in their experience.[53]

To whom should we confess? To God, not a priest—as David did in Psalm 32 and 51.[54] Yet, Calvin said, whoever confesses to God should be prepared to confess to God and men *when it is scripturally necessary*, that is, "as often as either divine glory or our humiliation demands it."[55] Calvin saw three times when it was necessary to confess to men. First, private confession should be made to another, preferably a minister, "for our own sake" when the conscience is burdened, and we need to open our soul to another (James 5:16). Second, a confession of sin, sometimes private, sometimes public before the church, should be made "for our neighbor's sake" when we have offended him by our sins.[56] Third, we ought to confess audibly, in public corporate worship, which Calvin says "ought to be ordinary in the church."[57]

Absolution

Calvin called the public declaration of pardon that follows public corporate confession of sin "absolution" (*absolutio)*.[58] Gibson and Earngey define absolution in the Protestant tradition as the "ministerial

53 "The Lord has determined to have pity on men to the end they may repent." Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:614 (3.3.20).

54 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:634 (3.4.9).

55 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:634 (3.4.10).

56 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:636 (3.4.12).

57 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:635 (3.4.11). According to Calvin, this ordinary part of the worship service is used "extraordinarily" when there is either a specific sin that the congregation is guilty of together, or when there is some chastisement the congregation feels the Lord is placing upon them as a body. Then, the general liturgical confession is to be made more specific. Calvin himself produced a prayer of special confession for use during plagues, wars, and other adversities. Dathenus used this particular prayer from Calvin in his liturgy as one of the regular prayers of confession for after the sermon. See Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, 605-606.

58 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:638 (3.4.14). The Latin can be found at https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutio1/institutio1/Page_412.html.

declaration of forgiveness of sins through the gospel."[59] This is certainly what it meant for Calvin.

First of all, Calvin took seriously that the absolution was to be a *declaration* of forgiveness. Recall the language in Calvin's liturgy above: "To all those that repent in this wise, and look to Jesus Christ for their salvation, *I declare that the absolution of sins is effected,* in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."[60] One scholar comments, "The Calvinistic formula is much stronger than those which figure in all the other Christian liturgies. It has indeed not just the form of a wish but of a proclamation."[61] The reason for this is that Calvin understood the declaration of absolution the same way he understood the declaration of the gospel in the preaching of the Word. It was an authoritative declaration on behalf of God Himself, binding to some men the responsibility for their sins and loosening from others the responsibility for their sins before God. It is the minister's calling and responsibility to declare this: "The ministers themselves have been ordained witnesses and sponsors of it [assurance of divine mercy] to assure our consciences of forgiveness of sins, to the extent that they are said to forgive sins and loose souls. When you hear that this is attributed to them, recognize that it is for your benefit."[62]

Secondly, Calvin taught that the *power* in this declaration is the power of God in His Word: "But when it is a question of the keys, we must always beware lest we dream up some power separate from the preaching of the gospel…any right of binding and loosing which Christ conferred upon his church is bound to the Word."[63] When the minister does not declare the testimony *of the Word*, there is no power. But when he declares what the Word says, God Himself is acting in it, accomplishing what the Word says.

The testimony of the Word is specifically that *repentant believers* are loosed from the guilt of their sins. Thus, the declaration must be made this specific way, as Calvin's absolution shows: "To all those that repent in this wise, and look to Jesus Christ for their salvation,

59 Gibson and Earngey, *Reformation Worship*, xliii.

60 See footnote 18.

61 André Schlemmer, quoted in Hyde, *Lost Keys*, 146.

62 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:636 (3.4.12).

63 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:639 (3.4.14).

I declare….” By the testimony of the Word itself regarding who is forgiven and who is not, “the messengers of the gospel can through faith promise forgiveness of sins to all in Christ; they can proclaim damnation against all and upon all who do not embrace Christ.”[64] The certainty is found in the Spirit’s testimony to the conscience of those who are what the Word says the forgiven are: repentant sinners. “Thus, he who, functioning as a herald, publishes what has been dictated to him from the Word of God cannot err.”[65] In the Roman Catholic system the power to bind and loose was lodged in *the priest himself*. The priest was to determine if the confession was deep enough, genuine enough, and complete enough to be worthy of forgiveness. Thus, the binding or loosing of the consciences of God’s people “depends on the discretion of the priest [who, Rome teaches,] can determine nothing from the word of God.”[66] But when the declaration that repentant sinners are forgiven is made through ministers, the Word by the Spirit measures the case itself. Just as in the Lord’s Supper there is assurance to the one who partakes in the way of repentance and faith, so in the preaching and absolution there is assurance in the declaration for the one who receives it by faith.

Third, Calvin’s teaching regarding absolution is that this power to declare on behalf of God the binding and loosing of sins is the same as the power of the *keys of the kingdom*. Calvin saw Matthew 16:19[67] and John 20:23[68] as referring to the key power of the preached Word. By reading the form for absolution, the minister preached that Word as much as he did in the sermon. The power of the key of preaching, for Calvin, was in fact a power to bind sin to people’s charge and loose people from the guilt of their sins. “What ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven….”

Fourth, Calvin’s understanding regarding absolution was that the charge to declare this binding and loosing of sin is given to *ministers* in

64 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:647 (3.4.21).

65 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:649 (3.4.22).

66 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:648 (3.4.22).

67 “And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19).

68 “Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained” (John 20:23).

the church especially. Any believer can declare God's Word to another for their comfort, and Calvin called brothers and sisters to confess and declare forgiveness to each other in some instances, following James 5:16. Yet God has appointed certain men in the church to receive confession and to declare the gospel of forgiveness as part of their office, making declaration on behalf of God. It behooves the church then, to whom the keys have been given, to employ their ministers to call for confession and to declare forgiveness especially in public corporate worship.[69]

Benefits of Confession and Absolution in Worship

For Calvin, the benefits of this liturgical confession and absolution are three. First, it gives voice to what ought to be the state of God's people's hearts, knowing that they come before the holy God in worship:

> Besides the fact that ordinary confession has been commended by the Lord's mouth, no one of sound mind, who weighs its usefulness, can dare disapprove of it. For since in every sacred assembly we stand before the sight of God and the angels, what other beginning of our action will there be than the recognition of our unworthiness?[70]

If we come to church properly, conscious that we appear before God, the desire to confess will immediately be in our hearts. By this comment, Calvin endorsed too the placement of confession and absolution toward the beginning of the worship service.

Second, the benefit is that if we are not conscious of the fact that we appear before God, a "public rite of confession" helps "our complacency, our drowsiness, or our sluggishness."[71] We are not always spiritually awake when we come to church. This liturgical process can awaken us to the One in whose presence we are, and prime our spiritual pumps, so that we are spiritually involved in the rest of the service: "In short, with this key a gate to prayer is opened both to individuals in private and to all in public."[72]

69 Calvin, *Institutes,* 1:637 (3.4.12).

70 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:635 (3.4.11).

71 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:635 (3.4.11).

72 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:636 (3.4.11). Abraham Kuyper repeats this senti-

Third, and chiefly, confession and absolution function as a pastoral work of the Great Shepherd to free His people from their anxious fears, and to assure them of His love for them. Fascinatingly, Calvin said that the process of public corporate confession and absolution gives the child of God to be "set free from the anxiety *(trepidatione)* that formerly tortured him."[73] Here Calvin made much of the "loosing" power of the keys. He pictured, as it were, one bound with ropes and tied to a great weight and about to be cast into the sea. In this process of confession and absolution this one is freed from these ropes and assured that his Father embraces him rather than casts him to his death. With beautiful words from which the title of this article is drawn, Calvin said,

> When the whole church stands, as it were, before God's judgment seat, confesses itself guilty, and has its sole refuge in God's mercy, it is no common or light solace to have present there the ambassador of Christ, armed with the mandate of reconciliation, by whom it hears proclaimed its absolution.[74]

A Plea to Return to the Old Paths of Confession and Absolution in Public Corporate Worship

Answering Objections to the Practice of Confession and Absolution

The history of the Reformation and Calvin's teaching and practice notwithstanding, over the years there have been objections to the traditional practice of a separate confession and absolution in the worship service.[75] I attend to two of them here as I advocate for the practice.

The first objection is that the practice smacks of Roman Catholicism.

To my mind, the answer to this is first of all the history compiled in this article. The practice as understood properly has a thoroughly

ment as a benefit of confession and absolution: Kuyper, *Our Worship*, 154.

73 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:639 (3.4.14). The Latin can be found at https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutio1/institutio1/Page_412.html

74 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:638 (3.4.14).

75 See especially the pamphlet written by Gerrit Hoeksema entitled *The New Order and the Next Synod* (Grand Rapids: Meyer Book Company, nd). Hoeksema summarizes his six objections on page 41.

Reformed pedigree. The Reformed fathers themselves knew there was a danger that the people *ascribe to the church* the innate power to forgive sins, as Rome did. Therefore, these fathers were careful to teach God's people so that they understood properly that God alone forgives, but that He declares this to us through the mouthpiece of His church's ministry by the Word. If the Reformers thought it important to keep this practice in Lord's Day worship even as they ministered to folk coming out of the superstition of Rome and even when they let go of so many other practices to avoid feeding this superstition,[76] we ought not easily dismiss the precedent.[77]

Nonetheless, if a time of confession and absolution is finally restored to the liturgical practice of the church,[78] it would be wise to carry it out in such a way that resemblances to Roman Catholic practice be minimized. The absolution does not need to be termed "absolution" if this causes some to stumble. It can be termed "declaration of pardon" or "declaration of forgiveness," which is a very accurate description of what is happening. Scripture passages that promise forgiveness to those with repentance and faith should be read prior to the declaration so that all know it is God in His Word declaring forgiveness through the ministry of the church. And the declaration itself should make clear that God is the One forgiving the sins of His people, not the minister. Everyone must know the minister is proclaiming what the Word says to the people before Him, just as the minister does in the sermon.

A second main objection is that Reformed churches effectively carry out confession and absolution in the reading of the law (conviction of sin), the congregational prayer (confession), and the hearing of the sermon (absolution). Indeed, in Reformed history the practice of confession and absolution became subsumed in these elements. The question is whether it was actually *con*sumed by these elements so that it no longer exists. How many ministers think they

76 For example, they did not want to have funeral sermons to avoid perpetuating Roman Catholic superstitions regarding the power of the church with regard to the dead.

77 Gerrit Hoeksema argues that Calvin and the other reformers were too influenced by Rome, which explains why they had a confession and absolution in worship; Hoeksema, *The New Order,* 7-8.

78 Never hastily, and never if the threat of division was real. And not without facing *all* the objections thoroughly.

are to declare in the course of the sermon that God's people who come with repentance and faith to the Word are loosed from the guilt of their sins? Among those, how many do this regularly? If the law is being used as conviction of sin, the minister ought to and can give voice to confession of sin in the congregational prayer. Yet, do people understand the connection between the reading of the law, the prayer, and the sermon?

The Heidelberg Catechism explains the key of preaching this way:

> When according to the command of Christ it is declared and publicly testified to every believer, that whenever they receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith, all their sins are really forgiven them of God, for the sake of Christ's merits; and on the contrary, when it is declared and testified to all unbelievers, and such as do not sincerely repent, that they stand exposed to the wrath of God and eternal condemnation, so long as they are unconverted; according to which testimony of the gospel God will judge them, both in this life and in the life to come.[79]

Certainly, the preaching of the Word does this, but not often so directly as a confession and absolution would. Since the absolution (declaration of pardon) *is* the preaching of the Word, the church would be taking up the key power of preaching, as the Heidelberg Catechism calls us to do so, in liturgical confession and absolution. If doing so prevents the preaching from regularly using the key this way, then restoring the practice of confession and absolution ought not be considered. Nonetheless, it is more probable that restoring the old practice would remind and encourage the minister boldly to declare the forgiveness of sins in his preaching as well.

Confession and Absolution and the Great Principles of Reformed Worship

The practice of confession and absolution in the worship service is appropriate for Reformed worship. In addition to everything stated thus far, the practice meets the requirements of the three great principles of Reformed worship—that public corporate worship is a covenantal

79 Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 31, in *The Confessions and Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2023), 118.

assembly, that public corporate worship is therefore a holy dialogue between God and His people, and that this covenantal assembly is regulated by God Himself.[80]

Public worship is a *meeting* of the covenant God and His covenant people. God is our Friend-Sovereign, and we are His friend-servants. Corporate worship is a unique time and place in which God's people enter into the heart of the covenant, which is fellowship with their God. There is structure to this relationship, as there is in marriage and in family and in a kingdom. In this covenant we have a God-given role. We come as a bride to the Bridegroom, children to a Father, citizens to a King. We come understanding our own failures in the covenant. The role we are given in the covenant is governed by the commands that the Lord of the covenant gives: "Love Me, and this is how you love Me in the place I give you in My covenant." But we have gone after other lovers, thinking they would be able to satisfy our longings. We have rebelled in our hearts and lives, despising the fact that *His place* in the covenant includes all authority over us. Therefore, as Calvin says, how can we not come confessing? We know His holiness. And we know we are His beloved (He has called us that at the beginning of the service).[81] How can we carry on without confessing our sins and hearing Him say to us explicitly, "I see your sins, everything about them—I see your self-love, I see your desire to dethrone Me as your God. But I also hear you confessing and turning away from them and to Me, and seeing the blood of My Son shed for you. I absolve you of any guilt. Come close to Me now, and let us fellowship with each other. Sing to Me and pray to Me, and I will speak to you in My Word so that you say, 'I *am* my beloved's, and my beloved *is* mine'" (Song of Solomon 6:3).

Is this not what Calvin means when he says that confession and absolution opens the door to prayer, that is, to intimacy, in the worship service? Our spiritual motion in confession and absolution is that of

80 See my articles on these subjects in *Standard Bearer*. The first, "The Covenantal Assembly," appears in *Standard Bearer* (October 1, 2011), 17. Further articles appear in 88:92, 185, 251, 326, and 448. You can find them online by searching at https://sb.rfpa.org/type_articles/o-come-let-us-worship/

81 We are a reconciled people, never thinking we have forfeited our place in His covenant by our sins. Yet, in this relationship that we have offended, we need to come close in the way of confession and pardon.

the Shulamite woman, "I sleep, but my heart waketh: *it is* the voice of my beloved that knocketh [law], *saying*, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled [the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance]: for my head is filled with dew, *and* my locks with the drops of the night [He has been far, but He seeks nearness by His sovereign irresistible grace]" (Song of Solomon 5:2). If in the opening service (call to worship, praise, salutation, votum, benediction) we have come through the door, in the reading of the law, confession, and absolution, we are drawn close to the One whose room we have entered.

Since God's covenant is at its heart communion, *dialogue* is central to it. In dialogue people come close to each other. They share what is inside them with one another. *All* of the worship service should be a dialogue between God and His people. Confession and absolution fit perfectly into this scheme. God speaks to us in His law, we confess our sins in response, and God declares forgiveness to us in the gospel.

God *regulates* this covenantal meeting and holy dialogue according to His Word. Confession and absolution are compatible with the regulative principle. They are aspects of the reading and preaching of the Word and prayer. God's law is the reading of His Word, while the absolution is the preaching of His Word. Our confession is the element of prayer.

Add to this that the confession/absolution aspect of traditionally Reformed worship highlights the threefold division of the Heidelberg Catechism, the schema that was to govern the movement of the original Palatinate liturgy.[82] The first part of the service was to highlight our guilt and lead us to confess our sins; the second part of the service was to highlight the gospel of grace; and the third was to be offerings and praises of gratitude. Restoring a time of confession and an absolution would bring this movement through guilt, grace, and gratitude out of black and white and into color.

Conclusion

The Reformed faith understands the holiness of the God we worship. In a day and age in which sin before a holy God is almost a foreign concept even among people of the church, there is cause to re-engage the tradition with regard to confession and absolution in

82 Dorn, *The Lord's Supper in the Reformed Church in America*, 29-30.

worship. Yet, as in the Heidelberg Catechism, awareness of our sin is a means to a greater end—to genuine understanding of the gospel and fellowship with our Father. In this day when relationships are often destroyed, unformed, or mediated through machines, the power of entering into covenant life with God and each other is not to be underestimated. Confession and absolution are a means to that end.

There is a renewed interest in the historical liturgies of the church today. Any interest ought also to bring us back to this aspect of corporate worship that has been lost in many of our traditions. If we would say with Elijah, "I am not better than my fathers" (1 Kings 19:4), then it would behoove us to continue to think through why Reformed worship included confession and absolution in the sixteenth century, and why exactly it was subsequently lost. If this reflection results merely in a greater consciousness of sin and grace in our existing practices, something has been gained. But I hope for more. May there be a return to the theology and practice of our fathers in confession and absolution in public corporate worship.

Supralapsarianism's Relation of Election and Reprobation[1]

Aaron S. Van Dyke

An article treating lapsarianism may require a word of explanation for its existence. The purpose of this article is not to perpetuate a longstanding, non-essential debate among Reformed brothers. Nor is the purpose of this article to suggest that lapsarianism is or ought to be "the discussion of the day" among Reformed people.

Rather, the purpose of this article is threefold. First, the purpose is to suggest that although lapsarianism is a non-essential issue, it is not an issue devoid of significance. This article will indicate that many who have engaged in the lapsarian discussion did not view their topic as scholastic hair-splitting, but rather as thorough theological inquiry for the sake of a richer understanding of the character and ultimate purposes of God.

Second, the purpose is to remind interested readers that Herman Hoeksema was not a traditional supralapsarian. The lapsarian debate is often framed as a strict dichotomy between infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism. Hoeksema would, no doubt, broadly identify himself with the second camp, but his was a *modified* supralapsarianism. As will be seen, Hoeksema leveled a number of *criticisms* against traditional supralapsarianism.

Third, the purpose is to suggest (indirectly) that a study of Herman Hoeksema's lapsarianism highlights the richness and internal consistency of his theological system. There is warrant to argue that Hoeksema would have viewed his key doctrinal positions—his rejection of the theory of common grace, his doctrine of the covenant, his confession regarding double predestination, and his preferred emphases when treating doctrines such as faith and justification—as parts of an interdependent, seamless whole. Hoeksema's lapsarian convictions are a framework in which these doctrinal positions and emphases find observable unity.

Though the doctrine of predestination is confessionally

1 This article was originally written to fulfill the requirements for a seminary class, and was revised with a view to publication in this *Journal.*

Reformed,[2] it "has not always been presented in exactly the same form. Especially since the days of the Reformation, two different conceptions of it gradually emerged, which were designated during the Arminian controversy as Infra- and Supralapsarianism."[3] Formally, the difference between infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism is their logical ordering of God's eternal decrees. Infralapsarians view God's decrees of election and reprobation as being logically after, or below, God's decree to create the world and permit the fall of mankind. Supralapsarians view God's decrees of election and reprobation as being logically prior to, or above, the decree of creation and the fall.[4] Based on his lapsarian view "a theologian will identify the object of predestination as either *homo creabilis et labilis,* man as creatable and liable to fall [supra], or *homo creatus et lapsus*, man as created and fallen [infra]."[5]

Far from being scholastic, "each side [of the debate between Reformed infras and supras in the seventeenth century] was really trying to solve the intensely difficult problem of reconciling all that Scripture reveals to us concerning God and His nature and the historical facts concerning man's fall into sin. Without trying to be speculative,

2 See the Canons of Dort, 1.6; Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 54; Belgic Confession Article 16; Westminster Confession of Faith, Articles 3 and 7; Westminster Larger Catechism, Questions 11-13; Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 7.

3 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2021), 108.

4 Richard A. Muller, "supra lapsum" in *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms; Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 348-50.

5 John V. Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition: Supra- and Infralapsarianism in Calvin, Dort, and Westminster* (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 2001), xxii. Views about the specific order of the decrees vary among theologians, but Fesko provides a sketch of the general orders that the two lapsarian positions respectively adopt. Supralapsarianism: "1. The decree to save some and condemn others. 2. The decree to create both the elect and the reprobate. 3. The decree to permit the fall of both classes. 4. The decree to provide salvation only for the elect." Infralapsarianism: "1. The decree to create human beings. 2. The decree to permit the fall. 3. The decree to save some and condemn others. 4. The decree to provide salvation only for the elect." Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition*, xxiii-xxiv.

they were seeking to understand how God had intended the fall into sin in His predestination of man."[6] As a question that bears upon how one views the character and intentions of God, the question *is* worth careful consideration.

Over the course of Reformed history, most who have expressed themselves in the lapsarian debate have taken an infralapsarian position. Bavinck relates, "The churches…consistently opposed [the] supralapsarian scenario. As a result there is not a single Reformed confession that contains it."[7] Michael Bell states the case less starkly:

> infralapsarians eventually came to outnumber the supralapsarians… [But] as long as there were strong exponents of the supralapsarian position at the theological schools, and there were so through many of the schools during the seventeenth century, then the debate was kept alive in a manner that was not destructive to either side.[8]

In the course of this longstanding debate, various arguments have been leveled against the supralapsarian position. Some have argued that supralapsarianism is not logically consistent.[9] Others have gone as far as charging supralapsarianism with twisting Scripture.[10] Still others have leveraged the popular acceptance of infralapsarianism against its counterpart.[11]

6 Michael Bell, *Propter Potestatem, Scientiam, ac Beneplacitum Dei: The Doctrine of the Object of Predestination in the Theology of Johannes Maccovius* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 1999), 140.

7 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* vol. 2, *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 366.

8 Bell, *Propter Potestatem*, 140.

9 Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 1:343. Turretin writes: "A non-entity cannot be the object of predestination. Now, man creatable…is simply a nonentity because by creation he was brought from non-being to being."

10 Robert Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 233. "The Supralapsarian, under a pretense of greater symmetry…misrepresents the divine character and the facts of Scripture in a repulsive manner."

11 Over against supralapsarianism, James Thornwell provides an extensive list of the confessions that teach an infralapsarian predestination. James Henley Thornwell, "Outline of the Covenant of Grace and Testimony to

The objection against supralapsarianism that this article takes as its focus is that the theory coordinates—or ascribes equal priority—to election and reprobation. W. E. Best articulates this criticism concisely: "The supralapsarian concept leads to God making eternal punishment and eternal life objects of His will in the same sense."[12] The objection is weighty; as has been said, it bears on the character of God. As will be seen, the objection is also perennial; it has been raised against supralapsarianism throughout church history.

This article will sample statements from supralapsarian theologians and attempt to judge the accuracy of the charge that supralapsarians tend to present election and reprobation as having a coordinate place in the logical order of God's decrees.[13] At question is not whether supralapsarian theologians have taught an *equal ultimacy* of election and reprobation: "the idea that God positively works evil in the hearts of the non-elect in the same way He positively works righteousness in the elect."[14] Rather, the question is whether supralapsarian theologians have presented election and reprobation in a way that makes them parallel, independent means unto God's glory, with neither taking teleological priority.

This article maintains that the charge that supralapsarian theologians have taught salvation and damnation as objects of God's will in the same sense is a misrepresentation of many, but not all, who have expressed traditional supralapsarian views. The article also maintains that the modified supralapsarianism of Herman Hoeksema successfully overcomes the charge in question, clearly presenting

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Sublapsarianism," in *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, vol. 2, *Theological and Ethical*, ed. B. M. Palmer (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), 22-23.

In his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Heinrich Heppe remarks, "Since the sublapsarian conception of the object of predestination became the dominant one in the Reformed Church, the opposite supralapsarianism theory is to be regarded merely as a private theory of individuals." Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson, ed. Ernst Bizer (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021), 162.

12 W. E. Best, *God's Eternal Decree* (Houston: South Belt Assembly of Christ. n.d.), 22.

13 Here, *coordinate* has been defined as *having equal priority*.

14 Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition*, xxvi.

reprobation as serving the purpose of the realization of God's elect church.

To this end, this article first examines specific ways in which the perennial criticism above has been leveled by infralapsarian critics of supralapsarianism. Second, it samples expressions of traditional supralapsarianism and evaluates the extent to which this criticism is valid. Finally, the article treats Herman Hoeksema's development of a *modified* supralapsarianism, especially as it was born out of his condemnation of common grace.

A Perennial Criticism Surveyed

During the period of "High Orthodoxy" in the Reformed churches (c. 1620-1700), few Reformed theologians were as outspoken in their criticism of supralapsarianism as Francis Turretin. Joel Beeke relates, "Turretin rejected Supralapsarianism, Amyraldianism, and Arminianism as being neither biblical, logical, nor edifying."[15] If it is not remarkable enough that Turretin's treatment of aberrant doctrines of God's foreknowledge includes supralapsarianism alongside Amyraldianism and Arminianism, Beeke also relates that in Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, "Supralapsarianism was the *first* option to be rejected by Turretin."[16]

Turretin leveled four main criticisms against supralapsarianism. Among them was supralapsarianism's purported tendency to coordinate election and reprobation. Under the heading "Man creatable was not the object of predestination," Turretin writes: "This opinion [supralapsarianism] is easily misrepresented, as if God reprobated men before they were reprobatable through sin, and destined the innocent to punishment before any criminality was foreseen in them."[17] This far, consistent supralapsarians see no issue with Turretin's criticism, but

15 Joel Beeke, *Debated Issues in Sovereign Predestination; Early Lutheran Predestination, Calvinian Reprobation, and Variations in Genevan Lapsarianism* (Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2017), 203.

16 Beeke, *Debated Issues in Sovereign Predestination*, 203. This is not to suggest that Turretin reacted more strongly against supralapsarianism than he did against Arminianism or Amyraldianism, but does indicate that Turretin's condemnation of supralapsarianism was not an afterthought on his part. Emphasis added.

17 Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:344.

Turretin continues. He argues that if supralapsarians indeed teach the above, "It would mean, not that [God] willed to damn them because they were sinners, but that he permitted them to become sinners in order that they might be punished. And it would imply he determined to create [ultimately] *that* he might destroy them."[18]

Turretin responds strongly against the idea that the damnation of the reprobate is an ultimate end in itself, ungoverned by any higher consideration than the manifestation of God's sovereign prerogative to damn. According to him, supralapsarianism can be too "easily misrepresented" to teach this notion; Turretin found in the doctrine of supralapsarianism the danger of making reprobation an independent end in itself in the mind of God.

John Gill attempted to take a mediating position in the lapsarian disagreement. In his *Body of Divinity*, Gill concludes regarding supra- and infralapsarianism, "for my own part, I think both may be taken in; that in the decree of the end, the ultimate end,…men might be considered in the divine mind as creable, not yet created and fallen; and that in the decree of the means…they might be considered as created, fallen, and sinful."[19] Emphasizing the commonality between the two camps, Gill nevertheless presents the arguments that the two leveled against one another in his day.

Gill summarizes his understanding of the supralapsarian argument: "it is not to be supposed, [say the supralapsarians], that God decreed to create man that he might permit him to fall; nor that he decreed to permit him to fall, that he might redeem, sanctify, and save him; but he decreed all this that he might glorify his grace, mercy and justice."[20] Gill continues,

> And in this way of considering the decrees of God, they think they sufficiently obviate and remove the slanderous calumny cast upon them, with respect to the other branch of predestination [reprobation], which leaves men in the same state when others are chosen, and that for the glory of God. Which calumny is, that according to them, God

18 Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:344. Emphasis added.

19 John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity: or A System of Evangelical Truths, Deduced From the Sacred Scriptures* (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 1995), 185.

20 Gill, *Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 183.

made man to damn him.[21]

Though Gill himself does not lodge the "calumny" above, it is clear that some did. According to Gill, supralapsarians felt the need to clarify that God's glory, not damnation itself, was the ultimate purpose of reprobation.

Note here that just as Turretin took issue with the ease with which supralapsarianism could be *misrepresented*, so too, Gill speaks of a *calumny* brought against the theory. Both men indicate that supralapsarians were *accused* of giving reprobation undue priority in the mind of God, but neither man presents an example of a supralapsarian theologian teaching this.

In the nineteenth century, Robert Dabney wrote regarding the question of the object of predestination, "In my opinion this is a question which never ought to have been raised. Both schemes are illogical and contradictory to the true state of facts."[22] Having stated this, Dabney yet weighs in on the question himself: "the Sublapsarian [infralapsarianism] is far more Scriptural in its tendencies, and its general spirit far more honorable to God."[23]

Dabney presents a number of reasons for his judgment. Drawing upon Turretin, Dabney highlights the charge that within the supralapsarian scheme, "the first act of God's will towards some of His creatures is conceived to be an act of hatred, in so far as He willed to demonstrate His righteousness in their damnation, and indeed before they were considered as in sin."[24] In presenting this objection to supralapsarianism, Dabney indicates that he is unable to find within the supralapsarian scheme a purpose of God in reprobation higher than the bare demonstration of God's righteousness in damnation. It can be inferred then, that in Dabney's mind, the supralapsarian ordering of God's decrees does not subordinate the decree of reprobation to election in any way. According to Dabney, this necessarily means that "God would be said to have created men that He might destroy

21 Gill, *Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 183.

22 Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 233.

23 Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 233.

24 Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 234.

them."[25] This notion, Dabney rejects.

James Henley Thornwell rejected supralapsarianism on similar grounds: "The general impression made by…[supralapsarianism]… is extremely revolting to our moral nature and to our conceptions of the goodness and mercy of God."[26] Thornwell goes on to explain, in some of the most vivid terms that can be found, why he finds supralapsarianism so distasteful:

> supralapsarianism represents the universe as a vast clock of a complicated machinery, wound up and set to going for no other purpose but to strike throughout Eternity the dismal sounds—Damnation and Glory! To these ends the hands point upon the dial-plate of creation and Providence, and for these ends alone God has stepped forth from the depths of His own immensity to create, to order, and to people worlds.[27]

Thornwell is yet another critic of traditional supralapsarianism. He finds within the schema a coordination of election and reprobation such that the two hold twin priority in the logical order of God's decrees and exist as that for which all the mechanisms of creation are geared.

To Thornwell's voice can be added that of Benjamin B. Warfield, who insinuates that supralapsarianism presents a rather arbitrary God who reprobates for the sake of a bare display of His sovereignty: "We find that the [lapsarian] question which is raised amounts to this: whether God discriminates between men in order that he may save some; or whether he saves some in order that he may discriminate between men."[28] Warfield continues, reframing the question yet again in more provoking terms: "Is the proximate motive that moves him an abstract desire for discrimination, a wish that he may have some variety in his dealings with men?"[29]

Warfield's questions reveal that he is troubled by the implications of logically prioritizing election and reprobation before creation and the fall. If election and reprobation are parallel in the logical ordering

25 Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 234.

26 Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, 2:22.

27 Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, 2:22.

28 Benjamin Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 19.

29 Warfield, *Plan of Salvation*, 19.

of God's decrees, and nothing stands above them except the somewhat abstract purpose of "God's glory," then Warfield's questions are worth considering.[30] Is there no higher purpose for God's discrimination than a demonstration of His ability to discriminate?[31]

Like Warfield, Herman Bavinck also saw in supralapsarianism a tendency to give the decrees of reprobation and election equal priority in the mind of God. Bavinck grants, "Supralapsarianism has in its favor that it refrains from all useless attempts at justifying God and simply attributes both election and reprobation to God's sovereign good will and pleasure."[32] Yet, Bavinck writes later that one "problem associated with supralapsarianism is that it makes the eternal punishment of reprobates an object of the divine will in the same manner and in the same sense as the eternal salvation of the elect."[33] To this, Bavinck adds a charge of equal ultimacy: "And further that it makes sin, which leads to eternal punishment, a means in the same manner and in the same sense as redemption in Christ is a means toward eternal salvation.[34]

Bavinck's grasp of the Reformed tradition has been matched by few others; his assertion that traditional supralapsarianism has presented "the eternal punishment of reprobates an object of the divine will in the same manner and in the same sense as the eternal salvation of the elect" ought not quickly be dismissed. Recognizing this, Louis Berkhof echoes Bavinck in his *Systematic Theology*: "It is said," Berkhof writes, "that Supralapsarianism makes the eternal punishment of the reprobate an object of the divine will in the same sense and in the same manner as the eternal salvation of the elect."[35]

A survey of infralapsarians yields a consistent concern among

30 Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema wrote, "The concept *God's glory* is very abstract and has no content for our thinking. This becomes somewhat different when we consider that God is fully blessed as the one who lives his life of love as the triune, covenant God." See Danhof and Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace*, trans. Cornelius Hanko, ed. Herman Hanko (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2003), 167.

31 Here, with Romans 9:20 in mind, we pose the rhetorical question humbly, as those seeking to learn.

32 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:340.

33 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:387.

34 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:387.

35 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 112.

them regarding supralapsarianism: if no decree logically precedes the decrees of election and reprobation, then there is little reason to believe that the decrees do not exist for their own sake (unto God's glory, all grant), and existing for their own sake, exist as coordinate objects of God's will.

Evaluation of Expressions of Traditional Supralapsarianism

In his work *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition: Supra- and Infralapsarianism in Calvin, Dort, and the Westminster*, J. V. Fesko counters the claim of the "school of historiography that argues that the post-Reformation Reformed theologians under the influence of Ramist logic distorted Calvin's doctrine of predestination through an arid blend of scholastic rationalism."[36] In service of his goal, Fesko traces the history of lapsarian theories as they have appeared throughout church history. According to Fesko, Thomas Bradwardine (1290-1349) and Gregory of Rimini (c. 1330-1358) are two of the earliest pre-Reformation theologians whose teachings of predestination approximate what we now know as supralapsarianism.[37] By sampling expressions of supralapsarianism found in these men, it is possible to gauge the likelihood that they would have conceived of election and reprobation as being coordinate in the order of God's decrees.

Bradwardine wrote, "It is by no means clear that if Adam had not sinned no one would have been reprobated.…Therefore, *the sin of Adam is not the primary cause of reprobation*."[38] From comments such as these, Fesko concludes, "Bradwardine's emphasis is that human action has *nothing* to do with election or reprobation. This is *prima facie* evidence that demonstrates that Bradwardine is not an infralapsarian as Augustinians before him, but is instead a supralapsarian; he conceives of election and reprobation apart from the fall."[39]

Having established—on perhaps questionable grounds—

36 Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition*, xiii.

37 Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition*, 40-51.

38 Thomas Bradwardine, "The Cause of God," 160, as quoted in Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition*, 45. The italics are Fesko's.

39 Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition*, 45. The emphasis is Fesko's.

that Bradwardine is a supralapsarian, Fesko continues to quote from Bradwardine's *The Cause of God.* Concerning reprobation Bradwardine contends,

> great profit, both in the present and in the future, accrues to the elect from the reprobate, indeed the whole purpose of being for the reprobate is that they have been created for the sake of the elect. What injustice and cruelty can be charged to God because He chooses to predestine and create one of His creatures for the service of another creature and both of them for His own service, praise, glory, and honor?[40]

From these comments, one may conclude with relative confidence that Bradwardine does not coordinate election and reprobation. Both election and reprobation serve God's "own service, praise, glory, and honor," of course, but Bradwardine goes further than this, indicating that reprobation is subordinated to election in God's counsel.

Fesko's treatment of Gregory of Rimini's predestinarianism leaves one less sure that Gregory did not conceive of election and reprobation as being coordinate in God's counsel. In his *Sentences*, Gregory writes, "From the same lump of clay, which is wholly uniform, the potter selects one part sheerly according to His free will so that it may receive a perfect form sheerly according to His will and dismisses the rest."[41] These sentiments do not necessarily indicate a coordination of election and reprobation, but Fesko uses them to illustrate the "likely" influence of an idea that was gaining traction among theologians in the thirteenth century: the *potentia Dei absoluta,* or the "'absolute power of God' by which He can do anything He desires save a logical contradiction."[42] According to Fesko, to those who held to the concept, "God's freedom to act arbitrarily was of the utmost importance, because He could not be determined by external things."[43] Given this context in which "Gregory's main focus of his supralapsarianism was to exalt the freedom of God over His creation," it is not difficult to

40 Bradwardine, "The Cause of God," 161, as quoted in Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition*, 46.

41 Gregory of Rimini, *Sententia*, as quoted in Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition*, 54.

42 Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition*, 52.

43 Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition*, 52.

see how critics might read in Gregory a coordination of election and reprobation in God's counsel.[44] If the bare sovereignty of God is of highest priority, there seems to be little reason not to coordinate the two.

Supralapsarian statements made by first and second-generation reformers also reflect a great emphasis upon the sovereignty of God in His decrees. Such is this emphasis upon God's sovereignty that little thought seems to have been given to the question of whether the decree of reprobation may be logically subordinate to the decree of election.

Among the Reformation supralapsarians that are treated in this article, Ulrich Zwingli comes the closest to indicating that reprobation may be logically subordinate to election. Heppe uses the following quotation to substantiate his claim that Zwingli was a supralapsarian:

> Since righteousness was to be known by both angels and men and would be obscure and ignoble without the opposite unrighteousness, He prescribed what is right and holy for both.—Both therefore transgress it, because both ought to have known what righteousness and innocence were—God wrought both of these but through an impeller or instrument, in the angel through an ambitious mind, in man through the impeller demon or flesh.[45]

Here, Zwingli's main point is that God is sovereign over, but not culpable in, both the existence and outworking of sin. Notice, however, that in the service of this point, Zwingli identifies God's positive purpose in the unrighteousness "wrought" by Him. According to Zwingli, unrighteousness is the dark backdrop against which righteousness might shine. This does not conclusively prove that Zwingli subordinated reprobation to election, but it does demonstrate that Zwingli was handling the question of the relationship between the two.

On July 29, 1555, Theodore Beza—a supralapsarian—wrote a letter to Calvin referring to a diagram—"tables"—that he, Beza, had drawn up representing his own conception of the logical order of God's decrees.[46] Before its publication, Beza wrote seeking Calvin's mind

44 Fesko, *Diversity Within the Reformed Tradition*, 51.

45 Ulrich Zwingli, *The Providence of God*, 108, quoted in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 161.

46 The diagram, or "*Tabula Praedestinationis*" can be found in Heppe,

on the subject: "But now I come back to the tables. A knotty problem occurs to me—and I ask you to untie it for me. Paul writes that we were 'elect in Christ before the creation of the world' [Eph 1:4]. At this point I ask in the first place how election must be seen."[47] In the course of his inquiry, Beza reveals his own views regarding both the position of election and reprobation in the order of God's decrees and the relation that the two have to each other.

First, Beza questions the idea that *Christ,* in some sense, takes the primary place in the order of God's decrees. He asks, "How can we be called 'elect in Christ'?" and presents two possible answers: "Is it because God had Christ in mind when he destined us or because, once he had decided in himself to save us he later (if we look at the order of causes) subordinated Christ in order to execute his purpose in us through him?"[48]

Having presented the two alternatives, Beza argues that if one adopts the former explanation, he must necessarily adopt an infralapsarian conception of God's decrees: "If we say that [God's decree to elect us] depends upon Christ, we must affirm at the same time, unless I am mistaken, that Christ precedes that purpose in the order of things.…But then…we are compelled to make the foreknowledge of the sickness prior to the knowledge of the remedy."[49] Beza adds, "But also [in the scheme wherein God had Christ in mind when He predestined us], it is necessary that the plan of creation preceded the fall. However, if these

Reformed Dogmatics, 147-148. The decree "to elect in Christ those to be saved" and the decree "to reject those to be damned by their own fault" are parallel and primary in Beza's chart. John Bray says, "The circumstances surrounding the origins of the *Tabula* are exceedingly vague." J. S. Bray, *Theodore Beza's Doctrine of Predestination* (Nieuwkoop, Neth: B. De Graaf, 1975), 70. Joel Beeke is of the opinion that the diagram "was probably written as a polemical tract to counter the arguments of Jerome Bolsec." Beeke, *Debated Issues in Sovereign Predestination*, 178.

47 Theodore Beza, "Beza to Calvin, 29 July, 1555" in Philip C. Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy on Predestination, From 1551 to 1555, The Statements of Jerome Bolsec, and the Responses of John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and Other Reformed Theologians* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 2:735-40.

48 Beza, in Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy*, 2:738.

49 Beza, in Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy*, 2:738.

things are true, it follows from them that…creation, fall, and the old man are proposed in order in God's mind in such a way that election and reprobation are finally subordinated to them."[50] Regardless of whether or not one follows Beza's argument, it is clear that he draws a line from making Christ primary in the order of God's decrees to making election and reprobation secondary to creation and the fall. This, Beza rejects.

Dismissing the idea that *Christ* has a primary place in the order of God's decrees, Beza explains, "On the other hand, I have subordinated all these things in my tables to that first purpose of God both to elect and to reprobate, and I make nothing at all superior to that. I was led to posit this order of causes not only because the end is 'first in intention,' as they say, but also for some other reasons."[51]

In Beza's explanation of his supralapsarian sentiments, he presents election and reprobation as twin means to the glory of God. Commenting on Romans 9:21, he says,

> I think that Paul compares the human race which is not yet created to clay in order to show that God, like some potter—not only before he created the human race, but even before he decided to create it—determined to declare his glory in a double way, and that he later created mankind for this twofold end: to save some of them according to his decree (the reason for which not one can understand) by his mercy through Christ, and to damn others in his just judgment because of their own corruption and its fruits. Thus God's glory could be revealed in either case.[52]

Later in his letter, Beza returns to the two possible explanations of the phrase "elect in Christ," and reiterates the position that he favors.

> God from eternity, when he destined us to salvation, at the same time subordinated Christ to this decree, in whom he might elect us, and might call, justify, and glorify the elect. In the same way, on the other hand, when he destined some to destruction, he at the same time appointed Adam, that those who had been corrupted might be hardened

50 Beza, in Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy*, 2:738.
51 Beza, in Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy*, 2:738.
52 Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy*, 2:739.

> in him, in order that at last he might declare his power in them.[53]

Again, Beza is seen presenting election and reprobation as two parallel tracks, one for whom Christ was appointed and the other for which the sin of Adam was appointed.

Nowhere does Beza's letter give any indication that its author conceives of the negative side of predestination *serving* the positive side of predestination. Beza says,

> So then, if one asks why God decided from eternity to elect some and to reprobate others, and if he asks about the end, I think we must answer: in order that God's infinite power might be made known more fully. But if one asks about the so-called material cause of this eternal decree, I have nothing else to adduce than to the will of God, who has at least the same freedom as the potter.[54]

It ought to be recognized that Beza taught that there were benefits for the elect in the *teaching* of reprobation. Such benefits include instilling "greater fear and awe of God," and stirring the elect to "be more alert to receive the spiritual gift of faith and cause it to increase if he knows that it is not within the power of every man to repent when he will."[55] It is clear that to Beza, the *doctrine* of reprobation serves the elect, but Beza does not indicate whether the *decree* of reprobation as such serves the decree of election.

Before addressing pertinent statements from Calvin, it is necessary to affirm that Calvin did indeed maintain a supralapsarian order of God's decrees. Fesko recognizes that "there have been theologians as early as the seventeenth century, such as Francis Turretin that have argued that Calvin was not a supralapsarian."[56] Nevertheless, Fesko makes a studied, well-argued case that Calvin operated from supralapsarian assumptions. "When one compares the statements of Beza with those of Calvin," says Fesko, "the two theologians appear to be in harmony on supralapsarianism."[57] Likewise, Beeke writes,

53 Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy*, 2:739-40.

54 Holtrop, *The Bolsec Controversy*, 2:739.

55 Bray, *Theodore Beza's Doctrine of Predestination*, 81.

56 Fesko, *Diversity in the Reformed Tradition*, 88.

57 Fesko, *Diversity in the Reformed Tradition*, 143.

"Three major conclusions may be drawn from studying Beza's supralapsarian predestination as presented in his own writings." One of Beeke's conclusions is that "Beza's departure from Calvin can also be easily overestimated. Neither Calvin nor Beza had an inkling of any differences between them."[58]

Likely, claims that Calvin was an infralapsarian can be explained by the following insight from Bray: "Calvin had taught theology primarily by means of biblical exegesis, but Beza felt the need to clarify and to systematize the passages in question."[59] Because what Calvin said about a given topic was often formed in the context of exegeting a specific passage, it is unsurprising that Bavinck finds that "in Calvin's works the supralapsarian approach alternates with the infralapsarian."[60]

Nevertheless, apart from the recognition that Calvin accepted certain supralapsarian presuppositions, it is difficult to explain certain excerpts from his work. In the context of defining predestination, Calvin writes in his *Institutes*, "All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each *has been created for one or for the other of these ends*, we say that he has been predestined to life or to death."[61]

Like Beza, in his discussion of God's decrees, Calvin's interest in maintaining God's *sovereign right* to elect and reprobate overshadows the question of the *purpose* of reprobation in relation to election. In his commentary on Romans 9:11, Calvin writes,

> It is indeed true, that the proximate cause of reprobation is the curse we all inherit from Adam; yet, that we may learn to acquiesce in the bare and simple good pleasure of God, Paul withdraws us from this view, until he has established this doctrine,—That God has a sufficiently just reason for electing and reprobating, in his own will.[62]

58 Beeke, *Debated Issues in Sovereign Predestination*, 192.

59 Bray, *Theodore Beza's Doctrine of Predestination*, 33.

60 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:365.

61 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 2:206 (3.21.5). Emphasis added.

62 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, ed. and trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 350.

It is in light of the truth above that Calvin begins to assert the relationship between the decrees of election and reprobation in his *Eternal Predestination of God*: "When Pighius denies that the election of grace has anything to do with hate of the reprobate, I quite agree that this is true; for to the gratuitous love with which the elect are embraced there corresponds on an equal and common level a just severity towards the reprobate."[63] One could rephrase this sentiment by saying that election and reprobation are two sides of the same coin.

It is not an insignificant point that for Calvin, questioning God's purpose in reprobation, even in relation to election, borders on impertinence. He writes,

> The will of God is the supreme rule of righteousness, so that everything which he wills must be held to be righteous by the mere fact of his willing it. Therefore, when it is asked why the Lord did so, we must answer, Because he pleased. But if you proceed farther to ask why he pleased, you ask for something greater and more sublime than the will of God, and nothing such can be found.[64]

Calvin's reluctance to ask the "why" of reprobation seems to have prevented him from explicitly ascribing to it a relative relationship to election in the order of God's decrees. For this reason it is difficult to clear Calvin from the charge of coordinating election and reprobation in the counsel of God in the statements presented above.

The pattern observed in Calvin and Beza continued after them. In his *Golden Chain,* William Perkins presents a "survey, or table declaring the order of the causes of salvation and damnation according to God's word."[65] Visually, the decrees of election and reprobation are parallel in the table. Perkins' framework presents election and reprobation as the means by which God exalts His justice and mercy.

63 John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: James Clarke, 1961), 89-90.

64 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:227 (3.23.2).

65 William Perkins, "A Golden Chain; or The Description of Theology: Concerning the Order of the Causes of Salvation and Damnation, According to God's Word, A View Whereof is to be Seen in the Table Annexed" in *The Works of William Perkins*, ed. Joel Beeke and Greg Salazar (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 6:9.

A search within *A Golden Chain* and Perkins' *The Manner and Order of Predestination* yields no indication that Perkins conceived of a way in which reprobation might be logically subordinate to election.

So too, Johannes Maccovius, whose unique supralapsarianism was a cause for debate at the Synod of Dordt, maintained, according to Michael Bell, that "God's negative hatred flows merely from his *beneplacitum* [good pleasure] and is the other side of His gracious love for His elect."[66] Bell writes, "Maccovius finds the cause for reprobation within God Himself, i.e., the declaration of the justice and wrath of God."[67] In Maccovius' mind, "When looking at the decree of predestination in respect of intention, what is in view is the ultimate end of God in the manifestation of His mercy and justice and the various possible men that He is able to choose to create."[68] These latter sentiments recall to mind B. B. Warfield's probing question.[69]

The expressions of supralapsarianism that have been sampled in this article have not explicitly taught that God wills election and reprobation in the same sense. However, traditional supralapsarians have so emphasized God's pure sovereignty in double predestination, and this without positing a higher purpose for it other than the double goal of the manifestation of God's mercy and justice, that they have opened themselves up to infralapsarianism's perennial objection against them.

With the infralapsarians, Herman Hoeksema also noted the above as weakness in traditional supralapsarianism. Hoeksema writes,

> Why is there reprobation? It is true that supralapsarians give a partial answer to this question when they assert that God also has willed the ungodly for his own name's sake and for the manifestation of his righteousness, justice, power, and wrath. But this is by no means the final answer that may be given to this question, nor does it satisfy us, because in this way we still cannot escape the impression that there is arbitrariness in God. The reprobate are evidently not necessary to

66 Bell, *Propter Potestatem*, 126.

67 Bell, *Propter Potestatem*, 127.

68 Bell, *Propter Potestatem*, 165.

69 "Is the proximate motive that moves him an abstract desire for discrimination, a wish that he may have some variety in his dealings with men?" Warfield, *Plan of Salvation*, 19.

> reveal God's power, wrath and righteousness, for these virtues certainly never came to a more clearer, more definite revelation than at the cross of Jesus Christ.[70]

As will be seen, this weakness of traditional supralapsarianism will be answered in Hoeksema's modified supralapsarianism.

It has also been demonstrated that as a rule, traditional supralapsarians have prioritized maintaining God's sovereignty in double predestination over treating the question of whether the decree of reprobation might be logically subordinate to the decree of election. It is not unreasonable to infer that traditional supralapsarians have *assumed* that reprobation—as election's counterpart—cannot reasonably be subordinated to it.

Herman Hoeksema's Modified Supralapsarianism

Throughout history, many Reformed theologians have recognized the weaknesses of traditional infra- and supralapsarian theories. In response to these weaknesses, some have constructed alternative lapsarian schemes. Two such theologians are Johannes Coccieus and Peter Van Mastricht. Though the lapsarian theories of these men have their own weaknesses, the rationale behind them is worth considering in connection with the rationale behind Herman Hoeksema's modified supralapsarianism.

Johannes Coccieus—ever conscious of the centrality of God's covenant in Scripture—structured the logical order of God's decrees in accordance with his federal theology.[71] Those familiar with the likely impetus behind Hoeksema's modified supralapsarianism appreciate Coccieus' good impulse here. However, the order that Coccieus developed "seems to be a modification of the infralapsarian view… [and] made more prominent the human element in election."[72] For this reason, among others, Coccieus' schematic never rose to a popularity needed to compete with more traditional infra- and supralapsarian

70 Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), 1:236.

71 Beeke, *Debated Issues in Sovereign Predestination*, 173.

72 James Good, *History of the Reformed Church in Germany* (Reading, PA: Daniel Miller, 1984), 319; quoted in Beeke, *Debated Issues in Sovereign Predestination*, 173.

views.

Peter Van Mastricht's modified lapsarianism is more widely referenced by doctrinal historians. According to Heppe, Van Mastricht "attempts to mediate the opposition between the supra- and infra-lapsarian ways of looking at [the logical order of God's counsel] by distinguishing a fourfold *actus praedestinationis*."[73] The concern of this article is not to parse Van Mastricht's proposed order with its "fourfold *actus*," but rather to observe how Van Mastricht comes by it. Van Mastricht explains:

> From [an enumeration of the properties of predestination] results the most wise order of predestination…which is made plain by the most apt subordination and arrangement of end and means.…The universal directive for this order is in this canon: "Whatever is first in intention is last in execution."[74]

Following this governing principle, Van Mastricht presents a logical order of God's decrees that begins with the decree "to manifest the glory of [God's] grace and justice," and ends with God's "obtain[ing] the glory of avenging justice in the condemnation of the reprobate."[75]

Like Van Mastricht, Hoeksema maintains in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, "We must emphasize not so much what is first or last in the decree of God, but rather place ourselves before the questions: What in those decrees is conceived as purpose and what as means? What is the main object in those decrees, and what is subordinate and subservient to that main object?"[76] Asking these questions, Hoeksema, like Van Mastricht, conceives of an order of decrees in which God's glory is explicitly named and given the primary place.

In his criticism and re-ordering of traditional supralapsarianism, Hoeksema is not alone. Regarding those who have modified the

73 Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 162.

74 Petrus Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology* vol. 3, *The Works of God and the Fall of* Man, trans. Todd M. Rester, ed. Joel Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), 36. "The properties of predestination are: 1. Eternity…2. Independence…3. Immutability…4. Certainty…5. That it is absolute…6. Freedom…7. Wisdom" (34-36).

75 Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 3:37.

76 Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:236.

traditional supralapsarian scheme, Robert Reymond writes: "Other supralapsarians, such as (possibly) Jerome Zanchius, Johannes Piscator, Herman Hoeksema, and Gordon H. Clark, have suggested, with minor variations among them, that the decrees should be arranged in an order that more consistently reflects the rational principle in planning."[77]

Thus arranging his scheme, Hoeksema gives the covenant of grace, with Christ as its Head and Mediator, the primary and controlling place in the order of God's decrees. In his logical order of decrees, Hoeksema begins with God's purpose "to reveal His own eternal glory in the establishment of His covenant."[78] Hoeksema explains his reason for this:

> God conceived and willed all things in his eternal decree for his own name's sake, that is, to the glory of his name and the reflection of his divine, infinite virtues and life. As the highest in God is his own covenant life, he willed to establish and to reveal his covenant in Christ, and all other things in the counsel of God are related to that main purpose of God as means.[79]

God's covenant given the primary and controlling place, Hoeksema's order continues:

> 2. For the realization of this purpose, the Son becomes the Christ, the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature, that in him as the first begotten of the dead all fullness of God might dwell.
> 3. For that Christ and the revelation of all his fulness, the church is decreed, and all the elect. In the decree of God, Christ is not designed for the church, but the church for Christ. The church is his body and

77 Robert Reymond, "A Consistent Supralapsarian Perspective on Election," in *Perspectives on Election; Five Views,* ed. Chad Owen Brand (Nashville: Broadman and Coleman Publishers, 2006), 178. In support of this claim, Reymond refers to Zanchius' *The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination*, Hoeksema's *Reformed Dogmatics,* and an unpublished paper entitled "The Nature of Logical Order" presented by Clark at a meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. Reymond does not provide a reference for Johannes Piscator.

78 Hoeksema*, Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:237.

79 Hoeksema*, Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:236-37.

> serves the purpose of revealing the fullness there is in him.
> 4. For the purpose of realizing this church of Christ and, therefore, the glory of Christ, the reprobate are determined as vessels of wrath. Reprobation serves the purpose of election as the chaff serves the ripening of the wheat…
> 5. Finally, in the counsel of God, all other things in heaven and on earth are designed as means to the realization of both election and reprobation and, therefore, of the glory of Christ and his church.[80]

It appears that the groundwork for Hoeksema's modified supralapsarianism was laid before the formation of the Protestant Reformed Churches. In their seminal book, *Sin and Grace*, one of the principle arguments that Danhof and Hoeksema launch against the theory of common grace is that it presents a "dualism" in the purpose of God: "an individualistic and particularistic doctrine of predestination" on the one hand, "*and* a realization of the original plan of creation through common grace" on the other hand.[81] It was over against the dualism of common grace that Danhof and Hoeksema were prompted to articulate *the organic unity of all things*.

According to Danhof and Hoeksema, the organic unity of all things is *God's purpose in Christ*, the beloved second Person of the intra-Trinitarian fellowship, and the Head and Mediator of the *covenant*.[82] That unity not only encompasses *creation*, but also the *decrees of election and reprobation*.[83] The organic unity of God's will in Christ is Hoeksema's reason for giving God's decree to reveal His own eternal glory in the establishment of His covenant the *primary*, *controlling* place in his order of decrees.[84]

Here we condense Danhof and Hoeksema's argument; the reader is encouraged to read full quotations in the footnotes: 1) God's "glory" may be defined as His essential blessedness within Himself as the Triune God.[85] 2) The greatest (ad extra) manifestation of God's intra-

80 Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:237.

81 Danhof and Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace*, 152-53.

82 Danhof and Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace*, 150-52.

83 Danhof and Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace*, 166-69.

84 Danhof and Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace*, 237.

85 "The Reformed usually designate *God's glory* as the purpose of this will. Formerly we have sought to define this more accurately by speaking of

Trinitarian blessedness (His glory) is the covenant of grace, with Christ as its Head and Mediator.[86] 3) The graciousness of that covenant is most clearly magnified through fall and redemption.[87] 4) The graciousness of *redemption* is most clearly seen in the way of the everlasting antithesis between sin and grace, election and reprobation.[88] *Therefore*, argue

covenant fellowship or friendship. The concept of *God's glory* is very abstract and has no content for our thinking. This becomes somewhat different when we consider that God is the fully Blessed One in Himself. He is fully blessed as one who lives His life of love as the triune, covenant God. God is the God of the covenant." *Sin and Grace*, 166-167.

86 "The love-life of God, welling up from the unsearchable depths of His being…and streaming forth in the many forms of the individual attributes, reveals in a glorious, variegated display the full riches of the eternal friendship of the Trinity.

That divine love-life in God has become, as we see it, the basis for the fellowship and covenant relationship between the Creator and the creature… That covenant idea is willed by God. He seeks a reflection of His life of friendship in the creature…The life and friendship of the Trinity is thus completely enveloped in the glow of love and grace." *Sin and Grace*, 167.

87 "All of this becomes incredibly more amazing and profound when it is related to man's fall into sin and his redemption by and in Christ Jesus. The song of re-creation has far greater depth of tone than the song of creation… Th[e] exalted God lives with the lowly. He stoops down to them with the fullness of His goodness…[and] persists therein even when man, as far as he is concerned, turns this friendship into enmity through sin. Then it becomes fully evident that God is gracious, merciful, patient, and of great compassion. He justifies the ungodly and causes His mercy to extend to the sinner, in Christ, whom He eternally anointed to be the covenant Mediator." *Sin and Grace*, 168.

88 "He has reckoned with sin. Sin serves Him according to the counsel of His will. It is over against sin that grace scintillates in all its glory, according to His good pleasure which He has determined in Himself." *Sin and Grace*, 168.

"If grace were general, there would soon be, even though this was preceded by a period of bitter suffering, a general restoration of all the creatures, and sorrow and crying would flee forever. Purely from the aspect of principle, there would be no real conflict." *Sin and Grace*, 171.

All created things develop in an underlying organic unity in the way of an appalling conflict in order that the covenant of the friendship of our God may be realized through the antithesis of love and wrath." *Sin and Grace*, 152.

Danhof and Hoeksema, a doctrine of common grace should not be introduced to blur the everlasting antithesis between sin and grace. And (directly bearing on our subject) *therefore*, argues Hoeksema by his *ordo decretorum*, the decree of reprobation is subordinate to the decree of election, and both are subordinate to the decree of God to magnify His glorious covenant life. This is the profound and penetrating rationale behind Hoeksema's modified supralapsarianism.

Hoeksema's modified supralapsarianism stood at variance with conventional thought in his day. The last objection to supralapsarianism that Louis Berkhof relates in his *Systematic Theology* is the supposition that "it is not possible to construe a serviceable doctrine of the covenant of grace and of the Mediator on the basis of a Supralapsarian scheme."[89] Berkhof goes on to explain, "[It supposed] that both the covenant and the Mediator of the covenant can only be conceived as infralapsarian. This is frankly admitted by some Supralapsarians."[90] The logical justification for this assertion is that the "Mediator appears in the divine decree only after the entrance of sin; this is the only point of view from which the covenant of grace can be construed."[91] Over against this claim, Hoeksema maintains, "In the decree of God, Christ is not designed for the church, but the church for Christ."[92]

Hoeksema's order of decrees also stands at variance with criticisms that were leveled against him as a preacher in his day. In *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, Hoeksema recounts that early in 1924, the consistory of Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church received a number of protests against his preaching. One of these protests was lodged by Rev. J. K. Van Baalen: "According to the protestant, the two accused ministers co-ordinate election and reprobation."[93] In his 1993 forward to the pamphlet, *The Place of Reprobation in the Preaching of the Gospel,* Herman Hanko relates,

> Repeatedly the charge has been leveled against Rev. Hoeksema that he taught, in his defense of sovereign and double predestination, an

89 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 113.

90 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 113.

91 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 113.

92 Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:237.

93 Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America; Their Origin, Early History, and Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: n.p, 1947), 37.

> "equal ultimacy" of election and reprobation. That is, the charge has been made that both election and reprobation are of equal importance, are carried out by God in identical ways, and exist as eternal decrees without any relationship to each other.[94]

Not only does Hoeksema's order of decrees stand at odds with the validity such criticisms, but in his booklet, *The Place of Reprobation*, Hoeksema explicitly asks and answers,

> What is the relation of election to reprobation? Do these form a dualism? Then there is dualism in God also; then God is a God of the highest love, and at the same time, of the deepest hatred. This is surely impossible. God does not desire the destruction of the reprobate in the same way in which he delights in the salvation and glory of His chosen people. Therefore we maintain that Scripture gives the following in answer to this very important question: Reprobation exists in order that election may be realized; reprobation is necessary to bring the chosen to the glory which God in his infinite love has appointed for them.[95]

Hoeksema preached this.[96] Hoeksema once maintained in a sermon on Romans 9:19-21 that only supralapsarianism does full justice to God's sovereign plan of redemption. The pertinent portions of the transcribed sermon are worth quoting in full. First, Hoeksema dismisses infralapsarianism:

> In as far as we can speak of an order in that eternal counsel…we

94 Herman Hanko, "Foreword" in Herman Hoeksema, *The Place of Reprobation in the Preaching of the Gospel* (Grandville, MI: Southwest Protestant Reformed Church, 1993), ii.

95 Hoeksema, *The Place of Reprobation*, 9.

96 Hoeksema's explicit preaching of supralapsarianism is noteworthy when considered in light of a generalization made by Michael Bell. Bell writes, "The men who held to the supralapsarian viewpoint were mostly teachers and desired to communicate their understanding of a consistent theological system derived from Scripture to the young men under their care. On the other hand, the men who held to the infralapsarian viewpoint were usually pastors, and although they were willing to debate these points with their former teachers and colleagues, they did not believe it necessary or wise to bring such matters into the pulpit." Bell, *Propter Potestatem*, 139.

> shall always have to conceive of such an order in such a way that God remains sovereign. That order may not be conceived as if God first determined to create a human race then decided to permit the entrance of sin, and, finally, purposed to save some out of the whole and fallen race, in order to make them manifestations of His grace, while reprobating others to leave them in their sin and fallen state.[97]

Hoeksema continues, positing his supralapsarian conception of the order of God's decrees:

> On the contrary, it was God's sole and eternal purpose to glorify His name through His Son in our flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ. Unto that end, He chose the vessels unto honor in Christ Jesus, gave them unto Him, a glorious Church, His body, an organic whole, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all, in order that the glory of God and the glorified Christ might be abundantly multiplied through them.[98]

Hoeksema concludes his point by explaining the relationship between reprobation and election: "And He determined to make vessels unto dishonor, not merely to show His righteous indignation, but also that the latter might be subservient to His purpose in the formation of vessels unto honor. This is God's eternal purpose."[99]

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the perennial accusation leveled against traditional supralapsarianism—that it makes eternal punishment and eternal life objects of God's will in the same sense—is not born out by a study of traditional supralapsarian expressions; in the writings that have been examined, this is not explicitly taught. However, it has been observed that by failing to propose a *telos* for election and reprobation other than the double glorification of God's justice and mercy, traditional supralapsarianism opens itself up to the charge that it makes eternal punishment and eternal life objects of God's will in the same sense.

97 Herman Hoeksema, *God's Eternal Good Pleasure* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1979), 64-65.

98 Hoeksema, *God's Eternal Good Pleasure*, 65.

99 Hoeksema, *God's Eternal Good Pleasure*, 65.

This article has also demonstrated that Herman Hoeksema's modified supralapsarianism overcomes infralapsarian's perennial charge. In his organic conception of all things, Hoeksema relates predestination to God's glory in the covenant, and having done this, subordinates reprobation to election in the order of God's decrees.

The importance of the way in which Hoeksema relates election and reprobation in the logical order of God's decrees is at least twofold. First, the relationship between election and reprobation in the order of God's decrees bears upon how one views God. The aversion that infralapsarians historically have had for traditional supralapsarianism may be explained, in part, by the perception of God that traditional supralapsarianism is liable to give: the perception of a God who is equally eager to damn as He is to save; a God who creates some men for the *ultimate* purpose of showing that He can destroy them if He wishes.

By contrast, the portrait of God presented by Hoeksema's modified supralapsarian view is a warm portrait of Jehovah of the holy Trinity: the God whose purposes are all subservient to the manifestation of His glory in the covenant of His Son. To be sure, Jehovah is terrible in His judgments and blazes in dreadful holiness, but His sovereign judgment stands in service of the sovereign redemption of His covenant seed; His reprobating stands in service of His electing.

Secondly, Hoeksema's modified supralapsarianism stands squarely on the grand themes of Scripture. Traditional supralapsarianism opens itself to the danger of being perceived as coordinating the decree of election and reprobation in God's counsel. In doing so, it opens itself up to charges of rationalism and speculation, because scriptural arguments for coordinating the decrees of election and reprobation are scarce.

By contrast, Hoeksema presents a supralapsarianism in which the decree of reprobation stands in the service of the decree of election, and both stand in the service of the decree of Christ as the Head and Mediator of the Covenant. Given the Scriptures' *covenantal*, *Christocentric* nature, Hoeksema's modified supralapsarianism is potentially more tenable for those who wish to model their lapsarian thinking according to a plethora of biblical data and themes.

Having stated the subject's importance, it is also necessary to state that one's lapsarian convictions are non-essential. The *Conclusions*

of Utrecht and Calvin are wise guides when discussing lapsarian theories and the predestination generally. The *Conclusions of Utrecht* say that it is

> not permitted to present the supralapsarian view as *the* doctrine of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, but neither, to molest anyone who personally holds the supralapsarian view, inasmuch as the Synod of Dort has made no pronouncement upon this disputed point.
>
> Furthermore, Synod adds the warning that such profound doctrines, which are far beyond the understanding of the common people, should be discussed as little as possible from the pulpit, and that one should adhere in the preaching of the Word and in catechetical instruction to the presentation offered in our Confessional Standards.[100]

To this we add Calvin's balanced insights. He issued them generally, with the broad doctrine of predestination in view, but it they are also relevant when discussing the narrower topic of lapsarian theories:

> The subject [of predestination] is worthy of study by the sons of God, lest they neglect their heavenly origin and birth. For because the Gospel is called the power of God unto salvation for all who *believe*, some have made this a pretext for obliterating the election of God. But it ought to have occurred to them to ask *whence* faith arises. … Yet knowledge of salvation is not to be demanded by us out of the secret counsel of God. Life is set before us *in Christ*, who not only makes Himself known in the Gospel, but also presents Himself to be enjoyed. Let the eye of faith look fixedly in *this* mirror, and not try to penetrate where access is not open. Since this is the way, let the sons of God walk in *it*, lest, by flying higher than is right, they plunge themselves into a deeper labyrinth than they had wished.[101]

May God grant us to walk in such faith, a faith that has as its object not an abstract schema or inductive argument, but the Person and work of Jesus Christ Himself, clearly revealed in Scripture. Granting

100 Conclusions of Utrecht, 1905 in J. L. Schaver, *The Polity of the Churches*, 6th ed. (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publishing, 1961), 2:34-35.

101 Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 50. Emphasis added.

us such faith, may God also grant humility as we steward the rich doctrinal inheritance we have received and contemplate the deep things of our God.

— — —

"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen."

Romans 11:33-36

History of Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America
4. Fellowship and More

Douglas J. Kuiper

Three previous articles have traced the history of the ecclesiastical body known as Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA).[1] The first, "Eras," was a broad overview of historical developments in Classis West from its inception in September 1939 to the present; anyone interested in the broader history of the PRCA would find it relevant. The second, "Meetings," was a more in-depth look at the work of the Classis over the years. The article records church polity in action. The third, "Issues," introduced the reader to notable decisions of Classis West, some of them precedent setting; the article traces some aspects of the development of thought in the PRCA.

Classis meetings exist so that delegates can carry out work that pertains to the churches in common. However, a meeting of Classis West represents more than merely *work*; it means *fellowship*, both light-hearted and substantive. This final article explores that aspect of life in Classis West.

Of course, that classis meetings are opportunities for fellowship is true of any classis meeting, not only those in Classis West of the PRCA. But the fellowship at a meeting of Classis West has a different character than that of a meeting of any classis comprised of churches in a close geographic region. As I stated in the first article,

> 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. The

1 Douglas J. Kuiper, "History of Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (1) Eras" in *PRTJ* 56, no. 2 (April 2023): 69-102; "(2) Meetings" in *PRTJ* 57, no. 2 (April 2024): 99-138; and "(3) Issues" in *PRTJ* 59, no. 1 (November 2025): 69-99.

> 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.

This article opens by focusing on the main aspect of fellowship—spiritual and professional growth, especially as manifest in the officebearers' conferences that are associated with the meetings of Classis West. It then examines the lighter side of this fellowship and examines what impact weather has had on that fellowship.

Fellowship at Officebearers' Conferences

Classis West has held 118 regularly scheduled meetings from September 1967 to September 2026; at least 65 of these meetings were preceded by an officebearers' conference. A list of the dates and locations of these conferences, as well as their general topic, is found in appendix one.[2]

Development

No record has been found of an officebearers' conference in Classis West before September 1967. This is striking, because the first meeting of Classis West had been held twenty-eight years earlier, in 1939, and because the practice of officebearers' conferences before a classical

2 The appendix lists 65 known officebearers' conferences held between September 1967 and September 2026. Possibly a 66th conference was held on March 2, 1971, but the only evidence of it is a speech found in Jason Kortering's personal files in the PRCA archives. No other announcement for that conference or report of it is available. Anyone who finds further evidence that this conference was held on March 2, 1971, or regarding another conference not included in the list, is asked to supply me with this evidence.

meeting had long standing in Classis East. Because the practice of Classis East provides background to the practice in Classis West, and yet because this article focuses exclusively on Classis West, a brief overview of the practice in Classis East is found in appendix two. It is reasonable to view the practice of Classis East as being the impetus for Classis West to begin holding such conferences.

The first officebearers' conference was held with little fanfare. No published announcement of it exists, although undoubtedly it was announced to the consistories. The report of that classis meeting makes no mention of it.[3] The only public report of the event is this: "Loveland was also the site of an Office Bearer's Conference in which Rev. Woudenberg of Lynden, Wash. addressed the delegates to Classis West on the subject, 'The Local Congregation: Its Mission'. After the address the delegates were invited to discuss the paper."[4] Why was no attention drawn to this conference? Because the record is silent, no definite answer can be given. Possibly it was initiated by one or two men who gave little advance notice.

The second conference was given brief attention in the *Standard Bearer* rubric "News From Our Churches."[5] This time the stated clerk intended to give more comprehensive information:

> Classis met on March 5, but the delegates enjoyed some activities on the day before the convening of Classis. In the afternoon, there was a conference of the ministers and elder delegates of the West, which was attended also by most of the ministers of Classis East, the professors of the Seminary, all of the seminarians and some elders of the East. The men discussed a paper which had been prepared for the conference, and decided to make the conference an annual event. This denominational conference is to be held when Classis West meets in Illinois. The delegates to Classis West will continue to hold such a conference of discussion and fellowship on the day before their other meeting each year, also. The fellowship was continued through

3 David Engelsma, "Report of the Meeting of Classis West," *Standard Bearer* (November 1, 1967), 72.

4 John Faber, "News From Our Churches," *Standard Bearer* (October 15, 1967), 48.

5 John Faber, "News From Our Churches," *Standard Bearer* (April 1, 1969), 312.

> a supper hour, since the women of the South Holland congregation graciously provided a supper for all of us after the conference. In the evening of March 4, Rev. B. Woudenberg spoke to the congregation of South Holland and to the delegates of Classis West on the subject of "Evangelism."[6]

This announcement is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it indicates that the classis had envisioned a conference before each of its two annual meetings. One would be a "denominational" conference, held annually in Illinois, while the other would be only for classical delegates "on the day before their other meeting each year, also." Second, this part of the stated clerk's report was never published in the *Standard Bearer*, perhaps because of space constraints, but also because another short article in the same issue featured the conference.[7]

The conferences continued to be held regularly, but not before every meeting. Classis West holds twenty regular meetings in the course of a decade. But as appendix one indicates, the delegates attended eleven or twelve conferences from 1967-1979; eleven in the 1980s; fourteen in the 1990s; fifteen in the 2000s; and thirteen from 2010 to the present.

In time, the *Standard Bearer*'s publication of the stated clerk's report of a classical meeting regularly included his report of the conference. Sometimes, as was the case with the second conference that classis held, the *Standard Bearer* included an article that gave a more in-depth report, written by a conference attendee.[8] Not infrequently the papers presented at the conference were also published in the *Standard*

6 David Engelsma, "Report of Classis West, held in South Holland, Illinois on March 5, 1969" (Wyoming, MI: Archives of the PRCA): 171:8; digital file pages 101, 104.

7 See the stated clerk's published report in *Standard Bearer* (April 15, 1969), 336. For the editor's report, see Homer C. Hoeksema, "A Worthwhile Conference," *Standard Bearer* (April 15, 1969), 319.

8 See Dale Kuiper, "Officebearers' Conference–Pella," *Standard Bearer* (April 15, 1972), 334; Wayne Bekkering, "Officebearers' Conference," (May 1, 1989), 350; Joel Sugg, "Officebearers' Conference," (April 15, 1991), 320; Ron Koole, "Officebearers' Conference," (April 15, 1992), 319; and Everett Van Voorthuysen, "Report on the Officebearers' Conference," (March 1, 1993), 242.

Bearer or the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*.

The first two conferences consisted of one man presenting a paper in an afternoon or evening session the day prior to the classis meeting. Most conferences prior to 1990 featured two men presenting papers, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon; occasionally a third section was included. In the 1990s a format was introduced that included a keynote speech to begin the conference, then three break-out sessions at which two or three different presentations were given. More recently the trend has been not to have break-out sessions, but to have between two and four presentations; if less than four, the day might conclude with a panel discussion.

Topics and presenters

The various topics covered at these conferences related, broadly or narrowly, to the work of the minister and elders.

The topics were varied. Some were doctrinal; in chronological order, these include Pentecostalism, postmillennialism, theonomy, dispensationalism, predestination, justification, and sanctification. The doctrines of justification and sanctification were the featured topic of conferences both in the early 2000s as well as in the 2020s. Other conference topics regarded documents: the Church Order, the Canons of Dordt, the King James Version, and the Heidelberg Catechism. One focused on a man: Herman Bavinck. Several dealt with the work of the offices and pastoral issues, such as pastoral counseling, the office of mercy, baptism on the mission field, various aspects of preaching, the work of the elder, preaching, and missions and evangelism. Yet others—The New Hermeneutic and Understanding the Old Testament Scriptures—regarded Bible interpretation.

The topics were timely. Doctrinal topics and those dealing with pastoral matters are always timely for officebearers' conferences. Other topics were timely because they addressed issues that the PRCA was facing at the time: Baptism on the Mission Field (1977), Historic Presbyterianism (1986), *The Psalter* (1989), and the proper response to sexual abuse in our churches (2023).

The goal in developing the topics was always for the presenter(s) to make the topic pertinent to PRCA officebearers. How well this is done directly affects the value of the conference, even when the topic

itself is relevant.

Usually, but not invariably, the presenters were ministers in the PRCA, either from Classis West or "imported" for the day from Classis East. When they were not ministers, the presenters were usually past or present elders, and sometimes past or present deacons.[9]

Occasionally members of other denominations participated. Notable in this respect is the meeting of March 1986, at which George Hutton, minister of the Bible Presbyterian Church of Larne, Northern Ireland, spoke on "The History of Scotch-Irish Presbyterianism" and "Presbyterian Principles of Worship." Two more instances of the involvement of those outside the PRCA denomination can be noted. First, Jeff Doll, a pastor in the URCNA and director of the Institute for Reformed Biblical Counseling, gave two of the four presentations at the conference in September 2016. Second, because federal tax law contains some features unique to clergy, and because a well-known financial firm, Clergy Financial Services (the name has now changed) is based in Loveland, CO, the February 2006 conference included a morning presentation by a member of that firm, while the afternoon session featured speeches from two PRCA ministers regarding the minister's use of his money, and the minister's preaching and counseling regarding the use of money.

Committee

Such conferences must be planned, and planning requires a committee. The first mention of a committee specifically mandated to plan conferences was in March 1972: "We look forward to the next meetings being planned by the conference committee, Rev. [R.] Decker and Rev. [D.] Engelsma."[10]

Always the committee consisted of two men. Its membership

9 A nearly exhaustive list of the names of presenters who were not ministers, and their church affiliation, follows in chronological order: Milt Alsum (Loveland, CO); Marion Cimo (Houston, TX); John Kalsbeek, Jr. (Redlands, CA); Marten Straayer (Edmonton, AB); Paul Van Koevering (Holland, MI); Robert Brands (Loveland, CO); Joel Sugg (Houston, TX); Daryl Poortinga (Roselle, IL); Alan Meurer (Roselle, IL); Herman Ophoff (Byron Center, MI); and James Regnerus (Doon, IA).

10 Dale Kuiper, "Officebearers' Conference–Pella," *Standard Bearer* (April 15, 1972), 335.

was informally arranged; it was not an official standing committee of the classis. No record of this committee's membership or work is ever found in the minutes of Classis West, and *Standard Bearer* reports mention the names of the committee members only in the first twenty or so years of its existence; even then, the committee changed membership at times without that change being noted.

The task of the committee was to determine a conference topic, divide the topic into various sub-topics, find speakers for the sub-topics, and inform the churches that the conference would be held. In addition, the committee kept a checkbook that was replenished with an offering taken at the noon meal during the conference; Joel Sugg wrote: "Its limited expenses (including a mid-day meal prepared by the ladies of the host congregation) are defrayed by passing the hat among those present."[11] The committee used its funds to cover travel expenses for speakers who had come solely for the sake of the conference. Classis itself would cover the travel expenses of conference participants who were also classical delegates.

A conference committee still exists, but in the last decade the various consistories that are hosting the meeting of classis have taken the lead in planning the conferences.

Benefits

One benefit of the conferences is that the attendees receive instruction in some aspect of their ecclesiastical work and are encouraged to do that work better and more diligently: "The conference served as a reminder and encouragement, not only to the ministers, but to all who attended, concerning the work of the ministry of the Word."[12]

But, without doubt, another benefit is fellowship. Early on, the stated classical clerk wrote, "The fellowship of the saints was enriching. These conferences are a worthwhile aspect of the life of our churches."[13] The fellowship for which these conferences provide

11 Joel Sugg, "Officebearers' Conference," *Standard Bearer* (April 15, 1991), 320.

12 Daniel Kleyn, "Report of Classis West," *Standard Bearer* (April 15, 2001), 333.

13 David Engelsma, "Report of Classis West," *Standard Bearer* (April 15, 1975), 336.

opportunity is not merely that of being in company with others who have the same occupation or concern, but consists more fundamentally in sharing ideas and sharpening minds. As the stated clerk said elsewhere, "Discussion was lively and profitable. 'Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend' (Prov. 27:17)."[14]

Not only have ministers indicated these benefits;[15] so have elder attendees who wrote reports of individual conferences. Joel Sugg wrote,

> Such conferences have particular value to the elders in attendance, especially to those who come as classical delegates only at extended intervals. Not only is the subject matter pertinent to their calling, but discussion of the subject, both during the conference proper and afterward during individual conversations, gives them additional depth and breadth. Delegates to Classis West have an unusual fellowship because that assembly takes most of them many miles from home and their daily routine. In addition, many of the congregations in the west are geographically isolated in terms of convenient fellowship with other congregations. This brief detachment in time and distance, along with personal contact with others in like situation, provides a fertile soil both for quiet mutual reflection and for animated discussion. The additional opportunity for fellowship which the conference provides is coveted by many elders because they attend classis much less frequently than some others and far less frequently than their pastors. This opportunity not only expands the elders' knowledge of the truth and its application, but also encourages the development of friendships with other elders and the ministers.[16]

And Ron Koole opined, regarding a conference that focused on the Church Order of Dordrecht:

> Attending an officebearers' conference was a first for me. It was an opportunity that proved to be a very valuable experience. Because

14 David Engelsma, "Report of Classis West," *Standard Bearer* (May 1, 1980), 360.

15 Dale Kuiper, "Officebearers' Conference–Pella," *Standard Bearer* (April 15, 1972), 335.

16 Joel Sugg, "Officebearers' Conference," *Standard Bearer* (April 15, 1991), 320.

> the material presented has a direct bearing on the work done by officebearers, such a conference provides opportunity to grow in the office. The lively, hour-long discussions following each presentation cannot be captured in print, but they did serve well to enrich the topics. Also, one cannot help but be struck by the important place that God ("who is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in the churches of the saints" [I Cor. 14:33]) has given to the church order in the Reformed churches. This church order, which has its principle roots in the Reformation, enables the churches to heed the command of Scripture to do all things decently and in order. A conference of this nature serves as a stimulus to officebearers to read and study carefully the articles of the church order.[17]

The Lighter Side of Fellowship

In addition to the fellowship and spiritual growth that delegates enjoy at officebearers' conferences is the fellowship that delegates enjoy with members of host congregations. Some congregations—Lynden and Hope (Redlands), for example[18]—have invited all the delegates to the church building the evening before the classis meeting for a time of fellowship. After one visit to Lynden, "several members of the congregation [said] that the conference and the meeting of classis gave them a real taste of the denomination, something which does not happen very often because of their location in the very northwest corner of the most northwestern state."[19] No doubt the experience was mutual; ministers in other states rarely have reason to get to Lynden to meet the congregation and its members.

When delegates stay in the homes of members of the congregation, friendships are formed. These delegates come from Edmonton and Lacombe, AB; from the suburbs of Chicago and the farms or small towns of northwest Iowa, southwest Minnesota, and Wisconsin; from the shadows of the majestic Colorado Rockies or Mount Baker and the

17 Ron Koole, "Officebearers' Conference," *Standard Bearer* (April 15, 1992), 319.

18 Daniel Kleyn, "Report of Classis West," *Standard Bearer* (April 15, 2003), 334 (Lynden) and (April 1, 2004), 310 (Hope, Redlands). These are not the only two times that the host churches provided for fellowship on a larger scale.

19 Ronald Van Overloop, "Report of Classis West," *Standard Bearer* (October 1, 1993), 21.

ocean breezes of the rainy Pacific Northwest and the dry, dry climate of southern California. By car or airplane (formerly by train) they make a pilgrimage to one destination, there to spend two or more days and nights. The members of the host congregations open their homes, feed the delegates meals at the family table, talk after supper in front of a fire or on the patio, and get to know each other.

Small congregations hosting

Occasionally Classis West accepted the invitation of a very small and remote congregation to host the meeting. The smallness of the host congregations made the fellowship of the delegates even more intimate. Hope (Isabel, SD) hosted Classis three times during the 1970s, when Hope numbered ten families or fewer, and Trinity (Houston, TX) hosted twice (1986, 1998). The first time Classis met in Isabel was in September 1971; on its agenda was the examination of Candidate Rodney Miersma who had accepted the call to Isabel. Having sustained his examination, he was ordained that evening at a worship service attended by all the classical delegates.[20] Rarely is an ordination scheduled to coincide with a classis meeting.

The main point to note, though, is that the fellowship is all the closer when the congregation is so small. The stated clerk reported after another classical meeting in Isabel: "the delegates enjoyed the hospitality and fellowship of the saints in Isabel, as well as good fellowship among themselves."[21] Imagine twenty-four men visiting a congregation that consisted of seven families: The delegates numbered one person less than the number of total members of the congregation! Add to that the likelihood that these men sat outdoors under the open prairie sky well into the evening!

When a small church hosts, it must face logistical concerns: how to house all these men? Stated Clerk David Engelsma reflected on that, when writing about the first time the ten families (forty-seven members) of Trinity PRC in Houston, TX hosted the delegates:

20 David Engelsma, "Report of Classis West," *Standard Bearer* (October 1, 1971), 23-24.

21 David Engelsma, "Report of Classis West," *Standard Bearer* (October 15, 1979), 48.

> The members of the congregation were warm and gracious hosts and hostesses. Because of the small size of the congregation and because the church building lacks the facilities to serve meals at church, the hosting of Classis was demanding for the congregation. Households lodged five or six men; a few women prepared meals for some twenty-five men; the entire Classis had the noon and evening meals in the homes of families of the congregation. Such was the graciousness of the spirit in which all this was done that the delegates were made to feel that they did the congregation a favor in allowing them to serve. The "Texans" spoke of the benefit of Classis meeting there for the congregation; the fellowship with the congregation at the meetings and in their homes was equally beneficial to the delegates from the other churches of the Classis. In many cases separated from each other by great distances and isolated, the churches of the West desire the expression and enjoyment of their unity afforded by the meeting of Classis.[22]

Twelve years later Trinity hosted for the second and last time. The congregation then numbered five families, and its Council had decided to disband. This needed the approval of Classis and required the presence of the synodical deputies from Classis East. But being now five families instead of ten, and hosting twenty-six visiting delegates, the logistics were even greater. The solution was unprecedented: "Because of the small size of the host congregation, Trinity PRC, the delegates stayed at the J-Bar-J Ranch.[23]...With delegates staying in close quarters, with bunk beds and common facilities, they enjoyed a great time of fellowship, and no little humor."[24]

"No little humor": what specifics can be given about that? Following are two vignettes, both regarding the stay at the J-Bar-J Ranch. The first is my memory of another man's story: one of the minister delegates was soundly asleep, but the others in the room were not because the snoring of the slumbering one kept the others awake.

22 David Engelsma, "Report of Classis West," *Standard Bearer* (October 1, 1986), 22-23.

23 The J-Bar-J Ranch was located at 7889 I-10 Frontage Road in Sealy, TX; it was located about 25 miles west of Trinity PRC, 214 Barker-Clodine Road, Houston, TX.

24 Steven Key, "Report of Classis West," *Standard Bearer* (April 1, 1998, 310).

This prompted a minister to crawl under the bunk bed and push up and down on the plywood in an attempt to rouse the snoring, slumbering servant of the churches. Word has it that he snored on.

Another minister admits to having joined a colleague in putting shaving cream on the faces of sleeping men, making the sleeping men rub their face. Awaking, some of them immediately suspected *one* of the minister culprits but not the second. When the recipients of the shaving cream started chasing the suspected culprit, the unsuspected culprit joined the chase as if he had also been the recipient of the shaving cream.

Trinity, Houston, TX was not the only congregation to host a meeting with unusual arrangements due to its small size. When the congregation in Pella, IA hosted in March 1996, the consistory arranged with a nursing home that was located two blocks away to provide meals for the delegates.[25] The delegates did not fellowship with the elderly residents, but were served dinner in a side room.

Other forms of fellowship and fun

Delegates also enjoy fellowship by discussions at coffee breaks and during the lunch hour. The car rides to and from the classis meetings are also a lovely opportunity, and when delegates from various churches are in the same vehicle, the fellowship and banter increase exponentially.

Lunch hour might include a walk with other delegates. In such instances pastors might engage in general "shop" talk, or more specifically discuss some issues that their consistories and congregations are facing.

But rivalling some of the events of the Houston-hosted classis is the memory of the noon-hour go-kart races in South Holland, IL in September 2005. Ministers, of course, live in parsonages; their children need entertainment; and much of the church parking lot can be a playground. Why not get a go-kart for the children to race around in? Why not show it to the classical delegates, then let them join in the fun and have time-trial races? In the end, it appears that the minister's wife had had her own share of practice on the go-kart, because she

25 Allen Brummel, email to DJK, January 23, 2023; Michael De Vries, email to DJK, May 28, 2026.

readily won the time trial races.[26]

Photos courtesy of Eugene Braaksma



Rev. A. Brummel gets Rev. R. Smit ready to go.



Rev. S. Key doing a “wheelie!”

26 Daniel Kleyn, email to DJK, December 28, 2022.



Crysta Brummel takes first!

Extended fellowship

At least once the fellowship of the classical delegates was extended over the weekend. Three times in its history, Classis West convened on a Wednesday and was still meeting the following Saturday. In two of those instances (March 1953 and September 1999) Classis apparently adjourned by noon on Saturday, enabling those within driving distance to return home the same day. But the meeting of September 1983 in Edgerton, MN carried over to Saturday afternoon (by which time three delegates left to return home) and then into Saturday evening. Many delegates, unable to return home in time for Sunday, worshiped in the Edgerton congregation on September 11.[27]

The Weather Report

Warm or Hot

Fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ, and particularly with fellow officebearers, is usually warm. Often the meetings of

27 James Slopsema, email to DJK, December 26, 2022. "There was a classis meeting in Edgerton that did not conclude its business until 8:00 PM Saturday. All the delegates that had driven for a distance or had flown in stayed over Sunday and worshiped with the Edgerton congregation. Edgerton and Hull were vacant at the time. None of the ministers had taken any sermons along. So Marv Kamps from Doon ended up preaching twice for the Edgerton congregation and most of Classis West's delegates. My elder and I drove back to Randolph after the PM service."

Classis West featured a warmth of both fellowship and air temperature. The stated clerk reported after the March 1994 meeting of Classis in Redlands, CA, "Classis West held its regular March session in the warmth of southern California. The warmth was that of the weather, but especially it was that of the fellowship of the saints of the congregation located so far away from any of its sister-congregations."[28]

Early September is still summer, so warm temperatures at the regularly scheduled September meetings are expected. The meeting in September 1983 in Edgerton, MN was notable not only for its length but also for the heat. The church building in Edgerton was, at the time, poorly insulated so that it was hot when the weather was hot and chilly in the winter. The building also lacked air conditioning. Because of the heat, the assembly held its Friday evening session in the Reformed Church of America building across the street, an air-conditioned facility. This prompted Classis to instruct its stated clerk "to write a letter of thanks to the Rev. Gruis of the Reformed Church of Edgerton for allowing Classis to use the church building on Friday evening."[29] In carrying out this mandate, the stated clerk, using a play on words, thanked the pastor for the "warm hospitality in offering to us the use of your commodious and comfortable church auditorium."[30]

Early March is usually too early for spring weather for most of our churches, but in southern California the air is warm, the delegates from colder climes are eager to bask in the sun, and the oranges are ripe on the trees. For these reasons the delegates readily accept invitations to meet in Redlands in the spring. Because the time and place of a classical meeting is always determined at an earlier meeting, the delegates in March 2011 were discussing whether to go to Doon or Redlands in March 2012. Perhaps swayed by the fact that Classis had met previously in Redlands more recently than it had in Doon, a delegate made a motion to hold the March 2012 meeting in Doon. This motion was readily defeated, and Redlands' invitation quickly accepted. But in March 2012, it turns out, the weather in Doon was

28 Ronald Van Overloop, "Report of Classis West," *Standard Bearer* (April 1, 1994), 309.

29 Minutes of Classis West, September 7-10, 1983, Art. 72.

30 "Correspondence of the Stated Clerk for the September 1983 meeting of Classis West," Archives of the PRCA, 177:3; digital file page 357.

warmer than in Redlands.[31]

Cold

While the fellowship and the weather have often been warm, the weather has also been cold. Perhaps at moments, in the heat of a debate, the air in the meeting felt icy too, but this article will not explore that. At least three times Classis has found out that to meet in March in Hull, IA comes with risks and perils.

The first was in March 1965, which met during a "raging blizzard," according to the stated clerk. An extended quote from his report of the meeting is in order.

> The "blizzard of '65" will be another feature of this meeting long remembered. Doubtlessly the delegates went home with many stories of this event. Very few managed to leave the town of Hull that first Wednesday night. The few who tried either turned back–or ended in the ditch. Many delegates had to stay at homes where guests had not been expected. One could tell of the delegates whose bed suddenly collapsed during the night; of California delegates (I should use the singular) who came to Classis on Thursday morning with a large bath towel wrapped around his face and paper sacks serving as boots; of the one-way traffic back home again because of the huge drifts which crossed the roads.[32]

A few words of explanation are in order. Hull is a small community surrounded by rich farmland. The reference to leaving the town of Hull on Wednesday night is not a reference to delegates trying to get home; after all, the meeting lasted three days. Rather, it refers to delegates trying to get to their host families who, probably being farmers, lived some distance outside of Hull's city limits. This explains why people in town had to house delegates when they had not expected to. And,

31 How much warmer, I do not remember exactly. Weather statistics on www.weatheronthisday.com (accessed July 27, 2026) indicate that on March 7, 2012, Doon's high temperature was 69 and Redlands' high was 66. It seems to me that the temperature disparity was larger, however, and at a certain point in the day it may have been closer to ten degrees.

32 Gise Van Baren, "Report of Classis West," *Standard Bearer* (April 15, 1965), 336.

of course, the attire of the California delegate is explained by the fact that winter clothing in California is much lighter than in Iowa!

The second time was in 1977:

> Classis West met in Hull, Iowa on March 2 and 3 in the midst of a snowstorm reminiscent of the famed Hull blizzard of March, 1965. More than a foot of snow fell on Wednesday with the result that the delegates were unable to get to their lodging in the country that evening. Since all travel by car was impossible even within the town of Hull, delegates were transported to homes in town by snowmobiles. It was an amusing sight: delegates perched warily on the back of the suspicious machine, one arm holding the driver for dear life, the other arm grasping a suitcase, and a hat left to fend for itself.[33]

Again, people in the city of Hull had to open up their homes to delegates who had been assigned to out-of-town homes. Even then, said the stated clerk, "the storm served to increase the fellowship of the delegates and the brothers and sisters of northwest Iowa."

The March 2025 meeting, hosted by Calvary, Hull, IA was held under similar circumstances: "God sent snow, ice, and powerful winds upon Northwest Iowa which impacted the travel of many delegates."[34]

Some readers might not realize that the Doon, IA that boasted warmer temperatures than Redlands, CA in 2012 is only ten miles away from the Hull, IA that is noted for its March blizzards. It seems prudent that, in the future, delegates not again accept an invitation from the two churches in Hull to host the March meeting. Redlands is always a good location for the March meeting, but Doon appears to be safe too!

Conclusion

Delegates, and even visitors, to the meetings of Classis West can expect to have fellowship. They might not always witness or participate in humor; and, after all, humor is not necessary to a classis meeting.

33 David Engelsma, "Report of Classis West," *Standard Bearer* (April 1, 1977), 311.

34 Joshua Engelsma, "Report of Classis West," *Standard Bearer* (April 2025), 258.

But there will be fellowship, and it will be enjoyable.

But the meeting is particularly called so that the delegates can do the work of the churches in common by deliberating on the matters that are on the agenda. The fun and humor is a way to relax minds that have been focusing on the work of the day and give a little levity to what could be a stressful meeting of the classis.

With this I conclude the record of the history of Classis West. These four articles were intended to serve several purposes. One is to inform you about the work that happens at a meeting of classis, when your pastor or district elder is away from your congregation for several days.

The second purpose is to help you see that the work of a classis is the work of the churches in common. We can be thankful that we are not members of independent, or only loosely federated, churches who cannot rely on other churches for help and support. Just as in a family, all of the members need each other; and just as in the church of Christ, the various members need and serve each other; so also the classical meetings are an expression of the need of the various congregations for each other, and of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ in His church as instituted in various places but serving the same cause.

The third purpose is to encourage you to pray that God give wisdom to delegates to meetings of classis to do their work. If it is the work of the churches, then when that work is done well and to God's glory, His blessing will rest on the churches.

Appendix One
List of Officebearers Conferences in Classis West, 1939-2025

Date	Location	Topic
1. 1967, Sep. 19	Loveland, CO	The Local Congregation: Its Mission
2. 1969, Mar. 4	South Holland, IL	The Genealogy of Jesus According to the Flesh
(1971, Mar. 2	See note 1)	
3. 1972, Feb. 29	Pella, IA	Pastoral Counseling
4. 1973, Mar. 6	South Holland, IL	Pentecostalism and the Work of the Holy Spirit
5. 1973, Sep. 4	Loveland, CO	Neo-Pentecostalism
		Our Prot. Ref'd Position Regarding the Free Offer
6. 1974, Feb. 5	Doon, IA	The Offerings Taken in Our Worship Service

7. 1975, Mar. 4	South Holland, IL	The Office of Mercy
8. 1976, Mar. 2	Edgerton, MN	Church Extension Work by the Local Congregation
9. 1977, Mar. 1	Hull, IA	Baptism on the Mission Field
10. 1977, Sep. 6	Pella, IA	The New Hermeneutic
11. 1978, Feb. 28	South Holland, IL	Postmillennialism
12. 1980, Sep. 2	Pella, IA	The Law and the Gospel
13. 1981, Mar. 3	Loveland, CO	Preaching the Law and the Gospel
14. 1981, Sep. 1	Hull, IA	The Office and Work of the Ruling Elder
15. 1982, Mar. 2	Randolph, WI	Bible Translations and Textual Evidence
16. 1983, Mar. 1	South Holland, IL	The Work of the Elders with the Alcoholic
17. 1984, Sep. 4	Doon, IA	Church Visitation
18. 1985, Mar. 5	Randolph, WI	Theonomy
19. 1986, Mar. 3-4	South Holland, IL	Historic Presbyterianism
20. 1987, Mar. 3	Hull, IA	Dispensationalism
21. 1988, Mar. 1	Redlands, CA	The Christian's Relation to Civil Government
22. 1989, Feb. 28	South Holland, IL	The *Psalter* and Congregational Prayer
23. 1990, Mar. 6	South Holland, IL	Preaching, Part 1
24. 1991, Mar. 5	Randolph, WI	Preaching, Part 2
25. 1992, Mar. 3	Doon, IA	The Church Order of Dordt
26. 1992, Sep. 2	Loveland, CO	Shepherding God's Flock, Part 1
27. 1993, Mar. 2	South Holland, IL	Shepherding God's Flock, Part 2
28. 1993, Aug. 31	Lynden, WA	Reformed Missions and Evangelism
29. 1994, Mar. 1	Redlands, CA	The Reformed Practice of Catechism Instruction for the Youth
30. 1995, Feb. 28	Loveland, CO	The Truth of God's Gracious Covenant
31. 1996, Mar. 5	Pella, IA	Discerning the Spirits
32. 1997, Mar. 4	Doon, IA	Faithful Preaching versus the Free Offer
33. 1997, Sep. 2	Lansing, IL	Reformed Worship
34. 1998, Mar. 3	Houston, TX	Denominational Unity
35. 1999, Mar. 2	Redlands, CA	The Doctrine of Sovereign Predestination
36. 1999, Aug. 31	South Holland, IL	Fully Equipped for the Work: A Conference for Elders and Deacons
37. 2000, Sep. 5	Randolph, WI	Understanding the Old Testament Scriptures
38. 2001, Mar. 6	Doon, IA	The Minister as the Man of God
39. 2001, Sep. 4	Hull, IA	The Covenant and Missions
(2002, Mar. 6	Loveland, CO	Planned but cancelled)

40. 2002, Sep. 3	Edgerton, MN	Justification by Faith Alone: Was Luther Mistaken? Or Has Protestantism Despised her Birthright?
41. 2003, Mar. 4	Lynden, WA	The Canons of Dordt: Our Reformed Banner
42. 2003, Sep. 2	South Holland, IL	Remembering the Schism of 1953
43. 2004, Mar. 2	Redlands, CA	The Divine Work of Sanctification
44. 2004, Aug. 31	Randolph, WI	Christian Education
45. 2005, Mar. 1	Roselle, IL	Reformed Evangelism
46. 2005, Sep. 6	South Holland, IL	Our Denominational Seminary
47. 2006, Feb. 28	Loveland, CO	The Minister and His Money
48. 2006, Sep. 5	Hull, IA	The Holy Spirit: True and Co-Eternal God
49. 2007, Mar. 6	Doon, IA	Pentecost and Pentecostalism
50. 2008, Mar. 4	Redlands, CA	Promoting Sabbath Keeping in the 21st Century
51. 2009, Mar. 3	Edgerton, MN	Catechizing Our Youth
52. 2010, Aug. 31	Hull, IA	The Divine Act of Creation
53. 2011, Sep. 6	Lansing, IL	Celebrating the 400th Anniversary of the KJV
54. 2012, Mar. 6	Redlands, CA	Herman Bavinck: The Theologian
55. 2013, Mar. 5	Lynden, WA	The Heidelberg Catechism: 1563-2013
56. 2014, Sep. 23	Lansing, IL	Developing One's Preaching After Seminary
57. 2015, Sep. 29	Edgerton, MN	The Local Church and Missions
58. 2016, Sep. 27	Randolph, WI	Biblical Counseling
59. 2017, Sep. 26	Hull, IA	The Five "Solas" and How They Matter for the Ministry
60. 2021, Sep. 28	Crete, IL	The Doctrine of Sanctification: The Blessed Work of Christ's Spirit
61. 2022, Mar. 1	Redlands, CA	The Church of Christ
62. 2023, Sep. 26	Crete, IL	Sexual Abuse in Our Churches and the Proper Response
63. 2024, Sep. 24	Hull, IA	The Conclusion of PRCA Foreign Mission Labors in the Philippines
64. 2025, Sep. 23	Crete, IL	Justification and Forgiveness
65. 2026, Sep. 29	Redlands, CA	Bible Translations: Which Text? Which Version?

Note 1: As indicated in the body of the article, I can find no advertisement for or report of an officebearers' conference held on March 2, 1971 in Doon PRC. However, the archives contains the outline of a speech by Rev. J. Kortering entitled "Scriptural Principles to Guide the Christian in His Social Calling," intended to be given at this conference. So either a conference actually was held that day but no other record of it exists, or the conference was planned but not held.

Appendix Two
Officebearers' Conferences in Classis East

This series of articles focused on Classis West of the PRCA, and this current article included observations regarding officebearers' conferences that delegates attended the day before Classis West met. But, as noted in the body of the article, the idea to hold a conference in conjunction with classis meetings began in the East, not the West. This part of the story must be told to set context for the rise of the practice in the West.

Classis East Ministers' Conferences, 1944-1948

In 1944 Classis East included eight PRCA congregations in West Michigan as well as two in Illinois (Oak Lawn and South Holland) and one in Randolph, WI. By 1948 it had gained one more congregation–Fourth (Southeast). During these years Classis East ordinarily met four times a year–in January, April, July, and October.

Prior to 1944 the ministers held conferences *after* classis concluded its work. Of these conferences no record is immediately available. But on April 11, 1944, the ministers gathered on the day *before* the classis met for the first of a series of day-long conferences. A report of this first conference is found in the *Standard Bearer*:

> On April 11 the ministers of Classis East held the first meeting of their newly organized Ministers Conference.
>
> Taking a lesson from the past the organization has adopted a setup different from the previous conferences which were organized only to pass out of existence after a few meetings. We may remember that the previous meetings were held after a day of busy classical activities, when some of the delegates were eager to spend a few quiet hours

> with relatives and friends, others had to hurry off to their trains. Now, however, we have an all-day meeting the day before Classis, with the ministers of Classis East only. The purpose of limiting the circle thus is not to be exclusive of course but to insure a reasonably solid attendance.[35]

The format for this newly organized ministers' conference included two sessions–morning and afternoon–at which a minister presented a paper on a topic, after which the attendees discussed the topic.

Subsequent known meetings were held on October 3, 1944[36]; April 3, 1945[37]; July 10, 1945[38]; January 8, 1946[39]; January 7, 1947[40]; April 8, 1947[41]; October 16, 1947[42]; April 6, 1948[43]; and October 5, 1948.[44] If others were held, the *Standard Bearer* gives no notice of them.

The topics were varied and meaty. The October 16, 1947 conference was particularly significant. Dr. Klaas Schilder was present at this conference, and many men from Classis West attended. Although we have no single report of it, later articles in the *Standard Bearer* referenced the conference. Not surprisingly, its topic regarded God's covenant and its unconditional character–the very issue in the 1953 controversy in the PRCA.[45]

35 "Report of Ministers' Conference," *Standard Bearer* (September 1, 1944), 483.

36 "Report of Ministers' Conference," *Standard Bearer* (September 1, 1944), 483.

37 "Ministers' Conference," *Standard Bearer* (March 15, 1945), 275.

38 "Official Notice," *Standard Bearer* (June 15, 1945), 428.

39 "Ministers' Conference," *Standard Bearer* (December 15, 1945), 125.

40 "Attention—Ministers of Classis East," *Standard Bearer* (December 15, 1946), 140.

41 "Attention—Ministers of Classis East," *Standard Bearer* (April 1, 1947), 312.

42 "Attention! (Ministers of Classis East)," *Standard Bearer* (October 1, 1947), 3.

43 "Attention: Ministers of Classis East," *Standard Bearer* (March 15, 1948), 267.

44 "Notice," *Standard Bearer* (October 1, 1948), 9.

45 See the following *Standard Bearer* articles for a non-exhaustive list: George M. Ophoff, "Prof. K. Schilder Replies," (August 1, 1950), 473; Herman Hoeksema, "An Open Letter to the Liberated," (January 1, 1950),

No ministers' conference was held after 1948, presumably because the churches were embroiled in this controversy. Herman Hoeksema later reflected on the fact that including only ministers in the conferences may have contributed to the division in the PRCA. Writing about the issues discussed at the Synod of 1951, he reflected that in the PRCA some considered faith as a condition to enter into heaven. He then said,

> I am afraid that there is disagreement on this score among us. We do not understand the all-comprehensive promise of God, as it is taught in our Reformed Confession. I am afraid sometimes that the trouble is that we have been separated too long as churches. How otherwise can you explain the patent fact that at this Synod Classis East and West are divided exactly along this line. We should have had conferences as ministers and elders. And we should still have conferences, preferably with as many of our people present as can attend such conferences.[46]

So Hoeksema indicated two benefits of conferences. The first is that they provide opportunity for frank discussion of issues so that any lack of agreement on the issues may be expressed. That might not seem like a benefit, but to keep silent about one's disagreement certainly does no good. The second benefit is that as many as possible hear the correct biblical and confessional defense of truth and exposing of error.

Classis East Officebearers' Conferences, 1954-1978

Conferences in Classis East resumed soon after the schism. Until 1978, Classis still met quarterly, and the conferences continued to be the day before the classis convened. Three notable differences between the pre-1953 conferences and the post-1953 conferences are apparent. First, the pre-1953 conferences were called "Ministers' Conferences," while those post-1953 were called "Officebearers' Conferences." In light of the previously quoted conviction of Herman Hoeksema that "we should have had conferences as ministers and elders," this change seems intentional.

148; "Nothing Binding?" (November 15, 1950), 76; "The Stocking is Finished," (January 1, 1952), 148.

46 Herman Hoeksema, "The Synod of 1951," *Standard Bearer* (January 15, 1952), 173.

Second, rather than being day-long conferences, they were evening conferences consisting of one session and one speaker. And they were widely advertised; the *Standard Bearer*, for instance, contains many advertisements of them; likely church bulletins did as well. In light of the previously-quoted conviction of Herman Hoeksema that "we should still have conferences, preferably with as many of our people present as can attend such conferences," scheduling them in the evening also seems intentional.

Third, a committee to organize the conferences was formed, kept careful minutes both of its meetings and of the conferences themselves, and left us its record.[47] At least initially, the committee consisted of one delegate from each consistory. Annually the committee elected five functionaries—president, vice-president, secretary, vice-secretary, and treasurer. It met at least once between meetings of classis to plan the next conference. And, according to the minute book, it organized fifty-eight conferences between October 5, 1954 and September 12, 1978—about 2.4 conferences per year, on average.

What did not change is that the topics were still varied and meaty.

But eventually this committee stopped functioning, and conferences stopped being held regularly. The *Standard Bearer* advertised three conferences in the 1980s (May 1982 in Holland; January 1985 in Southeast; and September 1988 in Byron Center) but each appears to have been organized by the host consistory.

The purpose of this appendix, again, is to demonstrate that the idea for officebearers' conferences in Classis West originated, it seems, with the practice in the East. The irony is that, while Classis East held conferences long before Classis West began doing so, Classis East has ceased from holding conferences regularly, while Classis West continues to do so.

47 "Minute Book of the Committee for Officebearers' Conferences," inclusive of meetings from October 1954 to January 1979, Archives of the PRCA, 795:1.

Not for Conjectural "Corrections": A Review of *The Authority of the Septuagint*

Douglas J. Kuiper

The Authority of the Septuagint: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Approaches, ed. Gregory R. Lanier and William A. Ross. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2025. Pages xii+282. $40.99 Softcover. ISBN 9781514009727.

The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures used by many Jews in Jesus' day and by many Christians in the early New Testament church. Gregory Lanier and William Ross, both professors at Reformed Theological Seminary, wrote an earlier volume introducing the Septuagint.[1] In the closing chapter of that volume, they broach the topic of the authority of the Septuagint. The present volume explores that topic in more detail.

The question of the Septuagint's authority is not trivial or irrelevant, even though it appears not to bear directly on the life of most Christians. The Greek Orthodox Church considers the Old Testament Septuagint, not the Old Testament Hebrew, to be the authentic text of the Old Testament. Renewed interest in the Septuagint brings the issue to the fore. Bible translators must face the questions whether and how to use the Septuagint in their translation. And the fact that many New Testament quotations from the Old Testament are from the Septuagint press the matter.

This book investigates what is the Septuagint's authority and suggests some answers. But for several reasons it does not give a definitive answer to the question. First, the book is a multi-authored work, and most authors do not present their own view but present biblical, theological, or historical considerations (see the book's

1 Gregory R. Lanier and William A. Ross, *The Septuagint: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021). This is a helpful introduction to the Septuagint, with the last chapter being the most controversial. Lanier is professor of New Testament at RTS in Orlando, FL, and Ranier is professor of Old Testament at RTS in Charlotte, NC.

subtitle) that might help the reader form his own view. Second, as the editors indicate early on, one must recognize the possibility of "gradations" of authority (38). In fact, at times a writer discusses the concept "authority" in abstraction from the Septuagint (152-55, for example), to lay groundwork for further discussion.

Nevertheless, the editors are confident that the volume "advances the discussion in new ways" (17). The remainder of this review 1) summarizes the book's contents; 2) gleans the apparent answers to the question regarding the Septuagint's authority; 3) points out positive benefits of this book; and 4) responds to a main polemic that the book's editors are making. In the end, the book is recommended as an aid to stimulating thought about the issue, but the reader should consider several caveats to what he reads, not the least of which regards the role of the Septuagint in textual criticism of the Old Testament Hebrew text. Thus the title of this review: "not for conjectural 'corrections.'"

Summary

The book consists of twelve chapters, of which nine are explicitly numbered as chapters, two are labeled "excursus," and one is an afterword. The first chapter introduces the topic of the Septuagint's authority. Because the question bears directly on the matter of New Testament quotations from the Old Testament, the editors present three categories of "test cases" with which authors of later chapters interact, covering instances in which 1) New Testament citations agree with the Septuagint against the Hebrew; 2) New Testament citations agree with the Hebrew against the Septuagint; and 3) multiple New Testament citations of the same Old Testament passage do not match each other (6-17).

Chapters two through four present the "biblical approach" to answering the question. In chapter two Gregory Lanier demonstrates that one cannot conclusively argue that the Septuagint formed an authoritative canon in addition to the Hebrew texts. William Ross, in chapter three, faces the question of what constituted the Old Testament text during the post-exilic (Second Temple) period. He concludes that this text was primarily a "proto-MT" (an early version of what later would be the standard Hebrew text, the Masoretic Text; henceforth, "MT"), but suggests that at times other texts, including the Septuagint,

might provide better evidence to the reading of the Hebrew originals than did this proto-MT. Thomas Keene closes the biblical approach segment by examining "A New Testament Approach," concluding that "New Testament writers simply are not asking the question we have posed, at least not in the terms we have posed it" (66). Implicit evidence allows us to make some general conclusions (see "*1. Derivative Authority*" below), but there is no explicit biblical approach to answering the question.

Chapters five and six and the first excursus supply the "historical approach." Edmon Gallagher examines the early Christian church fathers' view of the Septuagint, observing that some considered the Septuagint itself to be an inspired translation (chapter five). In chapter six Levi Berntson traces two debates through the Reformation and post-Reformation scholastic eras. The first debate regarded what constituted the authentic Hebrew text, and the second regarded the role of the Septuagint and other translations in textual criticism, "correcting" the Hebrew text, if such "correction" was deemed necessary. (I put these words in quotation marks not because I am quoting them from the book but because I am alerting the reader to a problematic answer that some give to the question of the authority and use of the Septuagint). In the first excursus J. V. Fesko examines which Old Testament text the Reformers considered authentic. No reformer agreed with Rome that the Latin Vulgate was authentic. Some considered the MT authentic, but others pushed back, considering the MT to be corrupt and preferring the Septuagint.

Chapter seven is entitled "A Systematic-Theological Approach." Daniel J. Trier and Joshua McQuaid survey Protestant systematic theologies to see how they engage the Septuagint, concluding that some use it to illustrate an interpretation of Scripture, and others to help form doctrinal judgments. Yet, they conclude, systematic theologians have not paid enough attention to the Septuagint.

The second excursus, "The Septuagint and Confessional Bibliology" by Mark Ward, is summarized in the last section of this review. In chapter eight, James Prothro provides "A Roman Catholic Approach" to the question of the Septuagint's authority, and in chapter nine, Myrto Theocharous attempts to tie together what has been said and bring a cohesiveness to the whole. The afterward contains Karen

Jobes' final reflections.

The chapters contain more than this—more will be said below—but enough is said to give the reader a road map through this book.

Enough has also been said to highlight one reason why I was disappointed with the book: it barely gives an answer to the question regarding the authority of the Septuagint. Most of the book presents "approaches." But in the end, one realizes that there is not really a biblical approach to answering this question; as Keene indicated, it was not a question that the inspired biblical writers faced (66). Keene's comments regard the inspired writers of the New Testament, but because the Old Testament was written before its Greek translation was made, the same must be true of the inspired writers of the Old Testament.

One expects a historical survey to present the views of others, so it is understandable that Gallager and Berntson did not provide their own view of the Septuagint's authority. But the reader is warranted to have expected a "theological" approach to be one that supplied doctrinal foundations for a definitive answer to the question, based on the Reformed and Presbyterian creeds. Instead, chapter seven surveyed how systematic theologians have answered the question, if they faced it at all.

Only James Prothro and Myrto Theocharous gave their answers to the question. In other words, the book provides a Roman Catholic approach and the approach of a Septuagint specialist who is an evangelical Christian.[2] But the book does not present a cohesive approach that the authors collectively take.

The main question that the book addresses *barely* gets answered.

To put it differently, the book contains seventeen pages to state the question, about two hundred pages to explain the question and show how some may have answered it (this includes the first parts of chapters eight and nine), and fifteen pages to give the reader a pointed answer to the question (the last parts of chapters eight and nine).

I hoped for more. I ordered this book for review because I am currently writing a series of articles introducing the readership of the *Standard Bearer* to the Septuagint, because I found Lanier and Ross'

2 https://www.grbc.gr/en/faculty-and-staff/myrto-theocharous-en, accessed September 10, 2026.

first book to be helpful, and because I hoped to find this volume as helpful. I was disappointed.

Answers to the question

Like gleaning grain in a harvested field—like hard work to find profit in something that appears to contain little—the reader can piece together how the authors might answer the question. It comes as no surprise that the answer is in harmony with the last chapter of Lanier and Ross' earlier book.

1. Derivative Authority

Many consider the Septuagint to be authoritative because it is a translation of God's inspired Word.

Thomas Keene (chapter 4) observes that this was the view of the inspired writers of the New Testament: "The writers of the New Testament believed that the Hebrew Bible, as written and spoken by Moses and the prophets, was the very Word of God and therefore divinely authoritative.…such authority was *transferred* through translation" (85).

In chapter 5, Edmon Gallagher surveys the church fathers of the ancient era. They were not entirely of one mind; some considered the Septuagint inspired and viewed this as a factor in its authority. Even then, the fact that the Septuagint was a translation *of God's Word* was the real point: "The church fathers in general considered the LXX to be an authoritative, divinely inspired translation of an authoritative, divinely inspired text" (111).

And Levi Berntson, writing on the Reformers' view of the Septuagint (chapter 6) says "the Reformers generally regarded the Hebrew text of the Old Testament as the authoritative text over and above all the 'versions'" (116). Theocharous also posits that the Septuagint holds derivative authority (233); this appears to be what Prothro means by "functional" authority (196-200); and Karen Jobes' reflections (239-240) are also to this point.

That the Septuagint possesses derivative authority is a sound and necessary position. The authority of the Septuagint is that of the Word of God, because the Septuagint is a translation of the inspired Scriptures. To reject its authority in this regard is to reject the authority

of any Bible translation.

2. Interpretive authority

Some consider the authority of the Septuagint also to be that it helps interpret or explain the Hebrew text. James Prothro argues this (200-204): on the one hand, while translators must translate and not exegete, they make judgment calls regarding which word to use and how to convey idioms or figures of speech. These judgment calls involve some degree of interpretation. On the other hand, because the Septuagint's language transitioned from Hebrew expressions to Greek ones that affected the early church and helped form Christian thought, it had interpretive authority in a unique way.

Something about this point must be granted. The Septuagint does indeed give a glimpse as to how its translators understood the Old Testament, and it did influence the thinking of the early Christian church regarding God's revelation in the Old Testament.

But is this really the Septuagint's *authority*, or is this an *effect* of the Septuagint? It appears to be the latter. To say it is the Septuagint's *authority* is to say that the Septuagint is normative in this respect and to suggest that the Septuagint always (at least, usually) did these things for good. That is overstating the matter. At the most, the Septuagint would have this "authority" when it comes to a study of linguistics and translation theory and practice. But we may still question the accuracy of the Septuagint's translation in various points, and therefore the "interpretation" that the translators made. Even today, a translator of a work may be reviewed and critiqued regarding the accuracy of his translation and the interpretations he made.

3. Textual-critical authority

Then, some argue that the Septuagint is authoritative as a witness to the original text. It helps us know how the original text read, and it helps us correct other Hebrew copies (Prothro, 194-196; Theocharous 233-234). At times, the Septuagint has higher authority than the MT because "it represents the Hebrew original more accurately than the MT" (234). And Prothro says, "Naturally, one would always prefer to print a Hebrew text of the Hebrew Bible rather than conjecture a back-translation based on the Greek. But if one is looking for the original

text with the highest authority, there is little virtue in defaulting to Hebrew words if they are the wrong words" (195).

Now we are in the quicksand, and Prothro as much as admits it: "*conjecture* a back-translation based on the Greek." How does one know that the Hebrew words (of the MT) "are the wrong words"? What criteria help one discern that? Then, when one thinks he or she has determined that the words of an established text in the Hebrew language are the wrong words, who is to say that the Greek translation is better than the Hebrew original? Who is to say that someone's *conjecture* is correct, and another's not? This is subjectivism.

I do not dismiss the practice of textual criticism entirely. But properly done, it requires one to recognize that the weightiest evidence for a textual reading is found in the same language in which the text was written. The most a translation can do is witness to the presence or absence of a passage or section of Scripture; it cannot determine which word the original penman used in the original manuscript (see p. 93).

Yet even regarding this witness to the presence or absence of larger sections of Scripture, the Septuagint is problematic. In some books the Septuagint is significantly shorter than the MT, and in other books longer, in part because of the addition of the apocryphal books. One cannot just assume that what is in the Septuagint was in the Hebrew original, and that the Septuagint translators neither added to nor subtracted from what Moses, David, and the other prophets wrote.

As noted above, Levi Berntson reminded us that the Reformers regarded the Hebrew text of the Old Testament as authoritative. They used the Septuagint as an aid in understanding the Hebrew text (118), but they "generally did not correct the Hebrew text with the Septuagint" (119). "Generally": apparently Zwingli and Calvin did at times. Should they have? And did the church sanction their doing so? Berntson then proceeds to demonstrate that the post-Reformation scholastics generally followed in the footsteps of the Reformers who did not use the Septuagint to correct the Hebrew text (126-131). The orthodox Reformed from the 1500s through the 1600s were consistent. Only in the eighteenth century did some begin to suggest that the Septuagint could correct the Hebrew, and yet "this newer view did not become the dominant position of the mid-eighteenth century and was sometimes viewed with suspicion until the next century" (135),

the era of the Enlightenment, German Rationalism, and British Deism.

Let us return to the practice of the orthodox Reformers and post-reformation era orthodox men: a translation cannot correct the wording of the original text!

Appreciable points

Even though much of what the reader finds in the book is not a direct answer to the question that the book raises, the book contains worthwhile content.

Lanier's conclusion that there was no "broadly recognized, coherent, and stable Septuagint/Alexandrian canon" (33) was appreciated, but more worthwhile was his investigation into the criteria that he evaluated to come to this conclusion (20-34). Interesting and informative were the sections regarding which languages the Jews spoke and where (42-49), which texts of Scripture they used (49-63), and again, which sources of the Old Testament Text the New Testament writers used (78-85).

Well-written history is always fascinating, so the historical treatment of a subject of which I knew relatively little was enjoyable reading and a good education (chapters five and six). I understand why the book presented no history of the use of the Septuagint in the western world during the medieval era: in Romish civilization no such history existed because the Vulgate was the standard. But what about the history of the use of the Septuagint in *Greek-speaking* churches during the medieval era? And do John Chrysostom's writings have any merit in this historical survey and the conclusions reached? The reader wants more here.

This section on "appreciable points" is short, but it encompasses forty percent of the book's content. The book has value.

The Polemic Against the Reformation Bible Society

An underlying goal of the book—no doubt a *secondary*, not *primary*, goal—is to discredit the Reformation Bible Society (RBS), or at least the position that the RBS espouses.

To do polemics—to oppose a view with which one does not agree—is reasonable. Stated absolutely, true ideas cannot coexist with false ones. More personally, one who prefers a certain sports team or

car make and model will naturally point out the deficiencies of the alternatives. So that the book expresses its opposition to the position of the RBS is not an inherent fault of the book.

However, it certainly catches the reader by surprise. Why this obvious vendetta? How does this vendetta help answer the question that the book barely answered? What positive thing did it contribute?

These questions come to the fore for several reasons. One is that the book devotes an entire "excursus" to this polemic: Mark Ward's chapter on "The Septuagint and Confessional Bibliology." A second is that the book's authors made some broad, sweeping, unsubstantiated claims as they engaged in this polemic. A third is that, at times, they misrepresented the RBS.

Not the engagement in the polemic, but the form that this engagement takes in this book, I did not expect in a book edited by professors of RTS and published by IVP. We can read books to learn about the errors of others, but when those others are misrepresented, the book does not achieve its purpose.

Did the Septuagint exist in Jesus' day, and did the apostles use it?

The first mis-claim comes in the book's introduction, in which Lanier and Ross present the view of some "that the Septuagint did not exist prior to the first century (but was fabricated later) or was never meaningfully used by the apostles" (2). A footnote then cites two authors, their works, and the publisher of those works, fulfilling the reader's expectation that when we refer to views that we oppose, we demonstrate that others actually held those views. After this proper demonstration, the editors refer to a third group and author that apparently holds the view that they oppose: "and the various publications, keynotes, and blog posts of the Reformation Bible Society (particularly by Jeffrey T. Riddle)" (2, n 5). From the perspective of current academic publishing standards, this statement shouts out: *"When it comes to Jeffrey Riddle, we won't tell you specifically where to find his view. But you'd better take our word for it: he holds an odd view."* A broad brush.

So does Jeffrey Riddle, and does the RBS, deny the existence of the Septuagint before the first century, and that it was meaningfully used by the apostles? No. Lanier and Ross are wrong—and this appears to

be more than an error of misunderstanding; it appears to be an error of poor scholarship and of stating as fact what is not fact by portraying another's view wrongly. Consider the following.

First, at the 2024 (first annual) convention of the RBS, Russell Fuller gave an overview of the Septuagint. In that overview, among other things, Fuller indicated that the Septuagint began in Egypt in the 280-180 BC era; that its purpose was to place the Jewish law into Ptolemy's library and give the Jews in Egypt their own law in the vernacular of that day; and that the Septuagint is important for understanding Koine Greek because of its influence on the Greek language and on the inspired New Testament writers.[3] I originally read Russell Fuller's article at the same time that I read Lanier and Ross' earlier volume, in preparing to write my *Standard Bearer* articles, and concluded that they *agreed* on the early date of the Septuagint's origin (intertestamentary period) and use by the apostles.[4]

Second, what about Jeffrey Riddle? Did he deny the existence of the Septuagint in Jesus' day? In fact, he did *not* deny the existence of a Greek translation of the Old Testament, nor that the New Testament writers used it. In the same *Journal* he concludes that the "New Testament authors … did not use a uniform and standard 'Septuagint' because it did not exist in their day."[5] The question at issue is not whether a Greek translation of the Old Testament existed, nor whether that translation was known as the Septuagint, but what *form* this translation had attained. In speaking this way Riddle appeals to what others have said, including Lanier and Ross, Karen Jobes and Moises Silva, and Edmon Gallagher. Lanier and Ross, for example, open the first chapter of their earlier book by asking "What (If Anything) is the So-Called Septuagint?" and answering with several (helpful) nuances.[6]

In sum, Riddle is not guilty of the charge laid against him. He does not deny the existence of a Greek translation of the Old Testament; does not deny that the New Testament inspired writers *sometimes* used

3 Russell T. Fuller, "The Septuagint: An Overview" in *Reformation Bible Society Journal: The Reformation Text and the Septuagint*, ed. Jeffrey T. Riddle (Charlottesville, VA: Reformation Bible Society, 2025): 4-6, 18.

4 Lanier and Ross, *The Septuagint*, 46-65, 141-146.

5 Jeffrey T. Riddle, "How did the *Earliest* Church Use the Septuagint?" in *Reformation Bible Society Journal*, 53.

6 Lanier and Ross, *The Septuagint*, 25-37.

it; but posits, as do others, that a "uniform and standard" text of it did not exist. Is that inaccurate? Mark Ward does not think so: "Riddle is right to say that 'there was no standard or uniform so-called Septuagint at the time of the apostles'" (173).

The main point of Riddle's chapter is to explain how the New Testament church used the Septuagint, and in that vein to deny that they used it *to correct the Hebrew text*. He writes: "The rejection of the old Protestant approach and the embrace of a new historical-critical approach that suggests using the Septuagint to correct the traditional Hebrew text of the Old Testament is sometimes justified by its advocates with the suggestion that it best reflects an apostolic pattern and practice."[7] This Riddle opposes, and this is his point of difference with Lanier and Ross. They should be honest that this is the point of difference and not paint Riddle with a broad brush as if he denied the existence of a Greek translation from the Old Testament that New Testament writers sometimes used.

I hope that Lanier and Riddle can see their error here. In one sentence they entirely mispresent an entire article of a man whose view they oppose. They do not give scholarly demonstration that in fact this man's view differs from theirs. To use the words of the Heidelberg Catechism Answer 112, they have judged Riddle rashly. This is poor scholarship according to publishing standards and is not brotherly. Nor did it help the reader! The reader would have been helped much more had Lanier and Ross interacted with Riddle's position rather than trying summarily to dismiss it.

Mark Ward's Excursus: Summary and Evaluation

Mark Ward's contribution to this book is not in a numbered chapter but in an "excursus." The book presents his contribution as a side matter. The editors apparently concede that the chapter has negligible value as a positive contribution to the question that the book faces. But they include it because it is relevant to the polemic that the book is making.

Because the Reformation Bible Society and its "Confessional Bibliology" is perhaps not widely known, one can appreciate that Ward introduces it to the reader. Ward is correct that the RBS opposes

7 Riddle, *Journal*, 33.

"evangelical English translations of more recent vintage that use critically reconstructed texts" (169). The reader should understand that a "reconstructed text" is one that textual critics created within the last two hundred years using various sources, criteria, and methods, including conjectural emendation (changes worked back into the original text based on assumptions that today's textual critics make). A reconstructed text is a marked contrast to the MT and the Received Text (the established textual base of the New Testament of Reformation-era Bibles).

Specifically, Ward notes that the first annual conference of the RBS provided reasons why the Septuagint should not be used text-critically "to help fix apparent problems in the MT" (170). Ward summarizes the four main speeches at the RBS conference, given by Russell Fuller, Jeffrey Riddle, David Kranendonk, and Peter Van Kleeck, Jr., but makes clear that Riddle is his primary target. He then presents three fundamental problems with the arguments that these men, represented by Riddle, made. The first problem is "lack of engagement with translators' rationale" (173), that is, that the RBS/Riddle are not responding fairly to why the translators of modern English versions, including the NIV and ESV, used the Septuagint. Second, he faults the RBS/Riddle for not giving specific examples (176)—and then, acknowledging that they did give *some* examples, argues that those examples were not to the point. Third, he charges RBS/Riddle with "lack of reckoning with the Masoretes" (178), by which he means that even the Masoretes themselves engaged in textual criticism.

In response, first, Ward paints with as broad a brush as Lanier and Ross did. I present two instances. For one, Ward calls the confessional bibliologists "fraternal twins" to the KJV-Only movement (169). Reader, remember that fraternal twins, while not identical, are still *twins:* they were born at the same time (within an hour, usually) and to the same parents, and they were raised in the same home and in the same circumstances. To call the RBS and the KJV-Only movement "fraternal twins" is an unwarranted overstatement. Basic to the KJV-Only position is that the KJV is an *inspired translation.* The confessional bibliology position is not that the Masoretic and Received Texts are inspired as a text, but that in them God preserved for the church the word that He had given the apostles and prophets

by inspiration, and that these texts should be used as the basis for new translations.

Ward's second instance of using a broad brush is found in his conclusion, where he reminds us that many have succumbed to the temptation of beatifying "a particular form of the biblical text—usually a translation of it—and to proclaim that this form is forever and always beyond revision" (179). Ward then gives examples of denominations and people that have done so with *translations,* and here I grant his point. But the MT and TR are clearly an exception to Ward's "usually," because they are not *translations* of the biblical text; they are *established texts* themselves. Do scholars today want to create a new textual base of the Old Testament? Let them do it. But if they revise the MT, let them not pretend they still have the MT; let them frankly acknowledge that they have created a different text that is at variance with the MT. Finally on this point, Ward's statement suggests that constant revision of texts is good. But this is *precisely one major problem with today's critical texts*; scholars are continually revising old texts. Will we ever have a textual form that all can agree portrays the Old and New Testament Scriptures as the Holy Spirit inspired them? At one time all agreed that the MT was that, and many today still think it is. To think that the MT is accurate is "beautifying" the MT?

My second response to Ward regards his explanation why English translators appeal to the Septuagint ("notable philological or textual difficulties in the text of the MT," 173) and his suggestion that at times "the MT [is] so difficult here that the LXX (or Peshitta, or Vulgate, etc.) must be brought in to help" (176). This returns us to the foundational point of this review: while translators can consult other translations to see how others interpreted or understood the text, these translations cannot establish which word was used in the original. The use of a certain Dutch or German or English word tells us nothing about which Hebrew or Greek word the Holy Spirit directed Moses or Paul actually to use. The translation can limit the possibilities to a range of words; "red" is never a translation for "grass" or "house" but could be for "red" or "scarlet" or some other range of red. But a translation cannot be definitive as to exactly which word was used.

Third, Ward defends the practice of textual criticism by the fact that the MT itself was the product of textual-critical work. But

doing textual-critical work is not itself the problem, and the RBS/Riddle never asserted that such was a problem. Rather, the problem is the *presuppositions and methods that newer textual critics use*, in distinction from those that older textual critics (Erasmus, Beza, and the like) used.

Questions arise that Ward does not address, and I would have been greatly helped to see the questions addressed. The Septuagint was written in the second and third century before Christ was born. The MT was created and became a fixed text some 700 or more years after the Septuagint. So how, in concrete and practical ways, can the Septuagint that existed prior to the MT help us understand the MT? Did the editors of the MT themselves consult the Septuagint, and if so, how did they use it, and why did they make the judgment calls that they made? Without knowing the answer to these, how can we know that they made the wrong judgment calls? And most basically: what methods did the Masoretes use in constructing their text, and are Old Testament textual critics using the same methods today? Ward faults the confessional bibliologists for not reckoning with the Masoretes, and his statements raise more questions.

This last part of the review, observing and responding to the book's polemic with the RBS, has been expansive. That the book has some value has been established. That the value is limited because the book barely answers the question that it asks has also been established. This value is further limited by the book's misrepresentations, broad brushstrokes, unasked and therefore unanswered questions, and a wrong idea that we can conjecture a different reading of the Hebrew Old Testament and be confident that we are right and the Masoretes were wrong.

Book Reviews

Believe: Why Everyone Should Be Religious, by Ross Douthat. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2025. Pp. xi + 216. Hardcover. $29.99. ISBN 9780310367581. Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.

God/god exists, regardless of who or what he or it may be. There are many evidences of the existence of the creator of the universe, including the marvelous mind of man. It is good for the human to acknowledge this by the adoption of some religion or other. Any religion is better than none at all, and the God/god who, in fact, does exist will, in the end, show Himself/itself acceptive of all worshippers of Someone/something. This is the unbelievable content of *Believe*.

The author, on his part, once a thoroughly secular human, has for a number of purely natural, rational reasons opted for Christianity in the form of Roman Catholicism.

The book is natural theology with a vengeance: a defense, not of Christianity, but of religion in any form, not on the basis of divine revelation in Scripture, but on the basis of perceived evidences in nature. It is reasonable to believe in someone or something higher than man, someone or something "divine." It is also healthy to do so. Atheism is unhealthy.

The implication of this natural theology is, among other things, the lack of all certainty—the lack of certainty in that area where, above all else, certainty is demanded: the knowledge and worship of the one true God, with trust in Him for salvation. The author does not know with any certainty who God/god is, whether the God of the Christian faith, or the god/gods of the heathen religions. With regard to his relation to Jesus, such as it is, the author "make(s) my bet on Jesus" (193).

What the book proves, in spite of itself, is that genuine belief in God, which is not merely desirable for human happiness, but is necessary for the glory of the one true God and for the salvation of sinners, is a reality only by revelation—the gracious act of God of making Himself known with certainty in Jesus the Christ by His Word.

And yet the book is more than the failure of an exceptional effort of natural theology. To one who believes in the one true God by the power of the "holy and divine Word" (Belgic Confession, Art. 2), the

book is a confirming, sometimes stirring, page in the "most elegant book" of nature, leading the reader to "contemplate the invisible things of God" (Belgic Confession, Art. 2). How wonderful are the immensities and intricacies of creation, including the brain of man! How deliberately perverse, therefore, is the denial of the one true God the Creator by unbelieving humans, including the learned scientist. That this astounding world blindly and naturally developed into the marvelous cosmos it now is, including man's brain, carries the conclusive falsity of the theory in itself. Were the theory of atheistic evolution not so grievous an error, it would be ludicrous. The proper response to the foolish theory is the laughter of derision. It is God's response (Psalm 2).

The believer knows God the Creator also by means of the creation itself (Belgic Confession, Art. 2). Advancing and enhancing this knowledge, in spite of itself, the book is profitable.

To the human who lacks faith by the Word, which evidently includes Ross Douthat, the book is sufficient to convince him and to leave him without excuse (Belgic Confession, Art. 2).

It Is Written: A Believer's Guide to the Doctrine of Scripture, ed. John Hooper. Salisbury, England: The Bible League Trust, 2025. Pages xxvi+630. Hardcover. $36. ISBN 9798218790615. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.

The modern low view of Scripture has invaded evangelical Christianity. It teaches that Scripture is both the Word of God and the words of men, especially the latter; and that it is inerrant and authoritative only regarding what it meant to teach, and not the words it used to teach it. Do not view Genesis 1-11 as history; it does not intend to be read as history. One gets the impression that in His Word, God said things to us that even He considered beside the point!

This low view affects evangelical Christianity's view of the *text* of Scripture, both of the Old and New Testaments. Can we really know which words Moses, David, Paul, and others used? Their original writings are long gone; where would we go to find the words that they used? Critical editions of the New Testament text have been developed but are always changing.

This attack on the text partly explains the multitude of English Bible *translations* today: constantly changing texts require new translations to convey the new "findings." Besides, each translator has his preferred translation methodology and interpretation of the Hebrew and Greek. And publishers find publishing Bible translations to be profitable!

The present volume is refreshing because it opposes this modern low view of Scripture. The twenty-one contributors live in the UK or USA; many are connected to the Trinitarian Bible Society; and all give evidence of a high view of Scripture that accords with the Westminster Confession and London Baptist Confession. (The London Baptist Confession is essentially a revision of the Westminster, with changes to the section on baptism; its doctrine of Scripture is identical to the Westminster).

But ultimately, these men use the Bible itself to explain what the Bible is. Some charge "foul: circular reasoning!" (503) but why would we not want to know what God is doing in His Word? If a secular book claims to be history or poetry, do we question that when its content give evidence that its claims are true? Why would it be different with Scripture?

*****

The book's chapters fall into four groups, to accomplish four goals. The first is to teach believers what Scripture is. Chapters 2-4, 6-9, and 21 regard the Bible as revelation, its origin by inspiration and its preservation through the ages, and its attributes (inerrant and infallible, authoritative, sufficient, clear, and unified).

The second is to foster in believers a love for Scripture. Chapters 1, 19, 20, and 23 aim at this, with chapter 22 explaining how that love is to be shown in our interpretation of Scripture.

Third, the book defends the proper text of Scripture against attacks on it today. Chapter 5 treats the "canon" of Scripture (what really belongs in the Bible, and how do we know?); chapters 10 and 11 treat the text of the Old and New Testaments; and chapters 12 and 13 defend the inclusion of Mark 16:9-20 and 1 John 5:7-8, two passages omitted or questioned by modern texts. Appendices 1 and 2 fall into this category too.

Finally, the book addresses Bible translations (chapters 14-18 and

appendix 3). It defends the KJV as the best translation of the Bible in English (read chapters 17 and 18 particularly), but the authors distance themselves from the view that the KJV is itself an inspired translation. Those who think it time to dispose of the KJV should read the comparisons of various modern versions (RSV, NIV, ESV) to the KJV (chapters 15 and 17). The last appendix, regarding the place of gender-neutral language in the Bible, only heightens the concern about a growing number of recent Bible versions, including the 2011 NIV. Had you thought that the KJV's language was common in Elizabethan England? Read page 451 and reconsider. Did you think that the KJV was written with a view to how it would *read*, or be *heard*? Read pages 566-569.

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The book's content is hefty, and so is the book itself, containing over 650 pages. Its heftiness might discourage some from reading it, but ought not. For, first, the book is for believers. Its style is not academic and scholarly but instructive and pastoral.

Second, both the font and the line spacing are sufficiently large. The book has many pages, but neither their layout nor content make them tedious to read.

Third, that each chapter is devoted to a specific topic enables one to read two chapters on a Lord's Day afternoon, and another two chapters a month later, without missing the flow of thought.

Not hefty is the price tag; many smaller books cost more than this. The $35.99 at Amazon is a good value, but the official USA distributor provides a 25% discount; see the QR code at the end of this review, or go to www.textandtranslation.org.

*****

There is little to critique in this book. Occasionally one disagrees with a statement. Did Paul write Hebrews (515-16)? Scripture does not say that he did, and Hebrews 2:3 distinguishes the penman from those who heard the Lord directly, as Paul did. And when we pray to the Father, are we praying to the Triune God or the first person only? Craig Dennison wrote: "Our prayers can and should be Trinitarian in their content, but the recipient of our prayers is the Father" (449). I find it unclear whether Dennison is saying that we pray only to the first person, or to the Triune God as Father. The latter is a soundly Reformed

explanation, in light of the distinction between the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity. But neither of these matters bear directly on the main point of the chapter.

My disagreement with Malcolm Watts is more substantial. He is right to reject Rome's view that the church's authority determines the canon of Scripture. But he misrepresents when he claims that Protestants gave another wrong criterion for determining the canon: "*the witness of the Spirit* determines canonicity" (100). The error of this, he claims, is that of placing "all the emphasis on the spiritual perception of believers." And he asserts that the French Confession (1559) is guilty of this error in saying that "we know these books to be canonical...by the testimony and inward illumination of the Holy Spirit" (100).

Is the Holy Spirit's testimony not a factor in determining canonicity? The Holy Spirit who inspired the writers of Scripture is the only one whose testimony matters! The relevant question is not *whether* the Holy Spirit's witness is essential but *how* He gives that testimony: in the Word itself.

Watts misunderstands the French Confession (1559). Granting that the Confession does not say that the Holy Spirit gives His testimony *through the Word*, it is wrong to conclude that the confession teaches an error. The Confession, after all, is not speaking to *determining* canonicity, which is what Watts is addressing, but to how the believer *recognizes* the books of Scripture to be canonical. Both the objective testimony of Scripture and the inward illumination of the Holy Spirit are necessary to this end. Although omitting the former, the Confession does not deny it. Watts suggests that the French and Belgic Confessions are at odds here, with the French presenting error and the Belgic presenting truth (101). Understanding the authorship of the French Confession (Calvin and other Genevan theologians), the historical context of its writing, and Guido de Bres' heavy reliance on the French when writing the Belgic, make it almost impossible to defend the assertion that the French Confession presents an erroneous view on a topic so weighty as the canonicity of the books of the Bible.

The fruit of the Spirit's witness in the child of God is indeed that the believer perceives what is God's Word. This is sovereign grace applied to the believers' understanding of where to turn for authoritative

guidance in matters of doctrine, worship, and life.

But that is the most I can do in faulting a 650-page book. It is a well-written book that contributes well to a significant subject. Get it for your home and church library! Read it! And keep it! You may well find yourself referring to it again from time to time.



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From Sacred Text to Religious Text: An Intellectual History of the Impact of Erasmian Lower Criticism on Dogma as a Contribution to the English Enlightenment and the Victorian Crisis of Faith, by Theodore Letis. Reedsburg, WI: Kept Pure Press, 2025. 362 pages. Hardcover. $29.99. ISBN 9798218812515. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.

This volume is the published edition of Theodore Letis' (1951-2005) doctoral dissertation, completed in 1995. Letis defended the *textus receptus* of the 1500s as being a faithful New Testament Greek text and pointed out the errors and weaknesses of modern Greek texts. In this he followed in the footsteps of others, including Edward Freer Hills.

The matter is not insignificant: The New Testament translations of the KJV and NKJV are based on the *textus receptus*, while twentieth-century Bible translations use a modern textual base. In addition, Letis' argument is precisely the opposite argument of many today who deride the KJV for its use of an *inferior* text.

Had Letis not died a decade after obtaining his PhD, his dissertation might have appeared earlier in book form. But by publishing the dissertation now, Kept Pure Press, which publishes media that

promotes the same cause that Letis championed, has done a valuable service to the cause of promoting the *textus receptus*.

Letis' contentions

Letis expresses his main contention in the book's title: whereas Christians once understood the Bible to be a sacred text (God's inspired Word to His people), by the 1800s many viewed it as a religious text that speaks of the religious faith of a religious people (Christians) but that is neither inspired nor inerrant. Letis refers to this shift as the "desacralization" of Scripture.

The book's burden is to explain the major steps in this desacralization. Many scholars argue that the eighteenth-century English Deists or nineteenth-century German higher critics began the process. By contrast, Letis finds its origin in the work of Desiderus Erasmus in the 1500s: "It is the thesis of this dissertation that the nineteenth century German...*Quest for the Historical Jesus* actually began with the first halting steps taken by Erasmus toward the Quest for the Historical Text" (28). Not merely Erasmus' work of textual criticism, but his "approach to the textual criticism and interpretation of the Bible *without a deliberate reference to the dogmatic tradition of the Church*" (52, emphasis added), was this starting point.

The first part of the book traces the process of this desacralization. Chapter one is devoted to Erasmus as the fountainhead of desacralization, while chapter two treats the Council of Trent's dogma that the Latin Vulgate was the authentic text. The third chapter surveys the response of Lutheran and Reformed theologians to Rome's dogma: the *apographa* (copies of Scripture that were preserved through the ages and always available to the church, so represented also in the *textus receptus*) were the authentic text. The fourth notes that two groups of men developed the seed that Erasmus planted–those who rejected the Reformed and Presbyterian confessions, and those who rejected the Christian creeds (Unitarians). Here Letis argues a subpoint to which he earlier alerted his reader: "It will be a subtext of this thesis that it has been the marginalized, dissenting and non-conformist traditions since the Reformation that have tended to pioneer in the practice of Biblical criticism" (59-60).

Chapters five through eight (part two) examine the Antitrinitarian

attack on Scripture. Chapter five traces Jean LeClerc's effort to defend Scripture's authority and reliability while dismissing the doctrine of inspiration. The sixth chapter observes Isaac Newton's denial of the Trinity and his attack on two significant New Testament passages: 1 Timothy 3:16 (should it read *God* was manifest in the flesh, or *who* was manifest?) and 1 John 5:7b-8 (the explicit witness to the Trinity that Erasmus first excluded from his Greek text). Newton advanced the idea that the early church *added* the Trinitarian reading in these texts to promote a new doctrine. Chapter seven is a quick tour of thirty other Bible versions and men from the 1500s-1700s that commented on these two passages, either to defend the Holy Spirit's words as orthodox or try to expose them as fraudulent additions. And chapter eight observes Joseph Priestly's contribution to the development of a quest for the historical Jesus.

Letis' book makes a valuable contribution by analyzing the idea of harmless engagement, the conviction that "the textual variants within the Greek NT manuscripts never affect essential dogma within the Christian belief system" (24). Letis argues that the textual variants often *do* involve essential dogmas *and represent an effort to undermine these dogmas*. Do orthodox scholars realize that this is a motive of many who engage in textual criticism?

The book's final chapter observes the historical process by which this idea of "harmless engagement" was "dismantled." Playing a key role was a denial of the inerrancy of Scripture. By rejecting verbal inspiration, one was free to find errors in the text and to correct them as he thought best. If the Bible was written by fallible men, later men (endowed with a superior ability to reason!) were free to find those mistakes and correct them as these later men saw fit. The Bible was no longer a sacred text; it was a religious text and could be adapted to any religious purpose.

Evaluation

Good academic dissertations do not merely *state* a thesis; they *demonstrate* the thesis. Letis' dissertation is good; Letis demonstrated his thesis and demonstrated that he was not alone in observing the points he makes. Letis may have been original in his presentation of the matter and in tying together many strands, but he certainly was

not novel.

This reader was specifically struck by, and convinced by, the connection that Letis demonstrated between a notable mid-seventeenth century Remonstrant (Stephen de Courcelles) and Erasmus (138-142). Making the connection compelling is that both viewed rationalism, the powers and abilities of the human mind, as the ultimate determiner of what is right, whether theologically or textually. I was reminded of my own church history professor's maxim, "Arminianism is incipient modernism."

The book lacks an index. An index would be helpful; the book refers to many scholars and ideas and refers to them repeatedly throughout.

The book is worth reading. It is an academic and scholarly heavyweight that reinforces the foundation of orthodoxy—a high view of Scripture as God's inspired and revealed Word—as well as the response of piety—love for the Scriptures, and utmost care in handling them.

Appendix regarding a textual matter

Ironically, in preparing the book the transcriber and editor had to engage in textual criticism of Letis' manuscript. The "received text" for this volume is the copy of the dissertation found in the Library at Edinburgh University (xix). That copy had two textual issues; one was corrected (263-64), while the other could not be even though another version was consulted (259-260).

The Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary Library bought much of Ted Letis' library[1] and houses many of his personal effects, including a binder that contains early drafts of his dissertation. The unresolved textual issue made me wonder whether an earlier draft would help resolve the matter. It was a shot in the dark: earlier drafts of dissertations can be incomplete, so when doing textual critical work with the text of dissertations, the later the document, the better!

Letis typed out a "preliminary" draft of his chapter on Samuel Davidson on 13 August: "This is not the end of this essay, but this is as far as I can get on this day, 13 August, 4:03 P.M. It will be completed

1 See David Engelsma, "Acquisition of the 'Letis Library'," *PRTJ* 41, no 2 (April 2008): 93-98.

within the next few days, D. V." A year designation is lacking, but it was almost certainly 1994, because Letis finished his dissertation in 1995. In 1994, August 13 was a Saturday; I can appreciate why at 4 PM on a Saturday afternoon he laid aside his work for the week.

On page 13 of this draft (see illustration) appears the section in which the textual issue occurs. The draft's wording of the draft is close, often identical, to that of the final submitted dissertation. But three things are noteworthy. First, the draft lacks the quote from Davidson's daughter (260), and the word "perspective" (261, first word). Second, it includes some words that the final draft did not include: "and that by means of the most popular Biblical introduction in the English Language." Third, it indicates that the words "The publishers let him have his way little suspecting what the results would be" were not part of a quotation, as it appears on page 261 of this volume, but were the concluding sentence to the paragraph that spoke of Davidson revising Horne's work. This third point is the main takeaway of this appendix.

Note that I have avoided making some mistakes that textual critics of the Bible make. I avoided insisting that the earliest available manuscript is the most reliable. I avoided intimating that the quote from Davidson's daughter (259) is not authentic because it was a later insertion, and that it was the publisher's attempt to change the manuscript to fit the publisher's agenda (the antitrinitarians allege that some inserted verses that support the Trinity to promote an agenda). And I supplied no conjectural emendation of the text.

In the end, the deep-dive into the treasure trove of Letis' files produced nothing startling, but it was enjoyable! Perusing old documents often is.

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Early draft of part of chapter 8 of T. Letis' thesis

In 1854, however, when the invitation had been extended to him to produce a revision of Horne's work, there was as yet no public evidence of Davidson's development. To all appearances he was still an advocate of the old orthodoxy. By accepting the task Davidson fully realized that here was an opportunity to showcase his current grasp of contempory German methods. Davidson could only have seen this development as most fortuitous. Here was an occasion to be the channel, *par excellence*, through which the very latest results of German scholarship--the only scholarship Davidson deemed worthy of the name--could pass, and that by means of the most popular Biblical introduction in the English Language.[14] The publishers let him have his way little suspecting what the results would be.

Once the work was completed, it had all the appearances of a treatise produced in the atmosphere of a German university: comprising eleven hundred tightly compacted pages, an addenda, and three indices totally thirty-eight pages. It lacked nothing in comprehensiveness. This was meant to be *the* definitive, nineteenth-century treatment of the Old Testament in English.

Shortly after its arrival, in spite of there being so much content, and much that Tregelles himself would have said, it was just a few pages, 372-376, treating Biblical inspiration, to which Tregelles turned his attention.[15] Tregelles has said in his own words, on many occasions, that Biblical criticism should not be fear but should be seen as God's providential means for purifying the inspired deposit, and here Davidson echoed the same spirit in his preface:

[14] In the words of one of his apologists, Davidson, "considered that the progress made in Biblical Criticism ... or perhaps, to put it more accurately, the increased literary and scholarly intercourse between England and Germany, made it impossible to keep up any longer in this country a little water-tight compartment, as it were, of effete criticism guaranteed against the floods of better-informed opinion that had broken loose elsewhere" (Davidson 1899:36). This evaluation would hold true, in Davidson's opinion, for Tregelles's conservative project as much as for the kind of Biblical criticism practiced within the established church.

[15] This locus on Biblical inspiration could only have been discovered in the course of reading the entire work because Davidson had provided no index listing for "inspiration."

Letters from America: A Dutch Reformed Perspective on the Struggle for Orthodoxy in American Presbyterianism, by Cornelius Van Til, ed. and transl. by Daniel J. Ragusa. Libertyville, IL: Reformed Forum, 2025. 170 pages. Hardcover. $29.99. ISBN 9781959145462. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.

Daniel Ragusa has collected and translated twenty-four letters that Cornelius Van Til wrote between 1935 and 1940 for *De Reformatie*, then edited by Klaas Schilder. The Reformed Church in the Netherlands (GKN) and the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in North America were mutually interested in each other's developments, news, and well-being. The CRC was also observing a developing apostasy in the PCUSA against which some, J. Gresham Machen among them, were standing fast. Much of the introduction (9-36) explains why these letters from the United States were of immense interest to many in the Netherlands.

For the purpose of this review the more relevant question is not why Van Til wrote the letters. It is why they were translated and why one should read this book.

The book's value: narrating apostasy

Van Til had left the CRC to teach at Princeton Theological Seminary, for decades the theological bastion of northern Presbyterianism. But modernism began to make inroads at Princeton and in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUSA), leading to the formation of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia in 1929 and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) in 1936.

The book's primary value is that it narrates a history that explains why today, in mainline Reformed and Presbyterian churches, many prefer outward semblances of peace and unity to deeper discussions of doctrine and rejections of false doctrine. Ragusa writes,

> Moreover, this early twentieth-century struggle shaped the theological and the ecclesiological landscape of our own day. By entering the past through these letters, to the time when the techtonic plates of the church world were shifting, we gain unique insight into the present state of things. We see firsthand the causes that wrought the devastating effects we see around us today (9).

Apostasy had also manifested itself in the GKN, notably in the case of J. Geelkerken, a minister who had been deposed for denying that a literal serpent literally spoke to a historical Eve in a historical Garden of Eden. This apostasy, in turn, was rooted in the efforts of German philosophy and higher criticism to discredit the authenticity and authority of the Bible as God's revelation to us.

Van Til's letters testify that this apostasy which ravaged the PCUSA and Princeton in the 1930s manifested itself in doctrinal matters. Leading ministers denied the need to "believe in the plenary inspiration of Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, His substitutionary atonement, His bodily resurrection from the grave, and His supernatural miracles" (117-118). A leading minister defended the notion that "just like Christ, we too must become divine" (45). Another envisioned the day "when the scientific view of natural selection and the New Testament doctrine of an election by grace may be seen to be both sides of God's activity, and not as horns of an inescapable dilemma" (68).

The letters testify that this apostasy was also evident in the way in which broader assemblies treated cases of men who were faithful to Scripture. The Bible and confessions were not the basis of these judgments, nor was fairness the standard. In both doctrine and methodology, the PCUSA in the 1930s was "beginning to come closer to Rome" (54).

Yet the PCUSA and Princeton both presented themselves as orthodox and relevant. The leaders were enamored with Karl Barth, and both Emil Brunner and Otto Piper were appointed professors at Princeton for a time (chapters 4-6, 17-19). As Van Til noted, however, these men were not orthodox: "Barth, who rejects the Word of God as inerrant, will call men back to faith in Scripture. Barth, who destroys salvation history, will summon the believers of all churches together to the defense of historic Christianity" (121). That Barth "will" do these things, the reader must understand, meant that the PCUSA's modernist leaders envisioned that Barth would help put the modernizing denomination on sure footing. Van Til indicates that, in fact, Barth could not do so: Barth denied the inerrancy of Scripture.

The apostasy was not limited to the northern segment of the PCUSA; Van Til also notes briefly the slide in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (southern Presbyterianism; 117, 138),

the United Presbyterian Church of North America (137), and the (German) Reformed Church in the United States (71). These other three denominations were not at the same stage of apostasy as was the PCUSA, but each had begun the road to "progress."

The book's value: narrating a response to apostasy

Faithful ministers in the PCUSA, though in the minority, opposed this apostasy and paid for it by losing their positions. This led to the formation of the OPC; chapters 3, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, and 22 recount notable moments in the first four years of the OPC's history. These include a lawsuit against the OPC for the use of its first name, the Presbyterian Church of America; an account of the life, influence, and death of J. Gresham Machen; an account of the debate within the new denomination whether chiliasm, or premillennialism, was compatible with the Presbyterian creeds; and the eventual departure of Carl McIntyre and some members to form the Bible Presbyterian Church.

Whereas the PCUSA was influenced by Barth, Brunner, and Piper, the OPC was happy to have the support of the CRCNA (82). Notably, it also intended to carry on the spirit of Abraham Kuyper (115-19, 163-167).

This latter point drew the attention of another Reformed American theologian: Herman Hoeksema. In chapter ten (85-89), Van Til informs his readers of the status of the doctrine of common grace in the United States and Hoeksema's opposition to it. Hoeksema even warned the fledgling OPC, which appreciated the doctrine of common grace, that the doctrine would lead her in the direction of Arminianism and of denying the antithesis. Van Til was convinced that Hoeksema's concern was overstated.

Concluding Analysis

The letters cover a brief five-year span of history that took place ninety years ago. Yet the translator and editor is correct that what happened then has shaped the doctrinal and church landscape of the present. The letters also indicate the methods by which people who think the church should be "progressive" take over and ruin a denomination.

While the subject matter of the book is sad, Van Til's writing

is gripping. He paints a vivid picture; the reader almost thinks he is sitting in the auditorium of the 1935 General Assembly of the PCUSA, watching the proceedings (chapter 2). Van Til's analysis of matters is also compelling and often ironic. He writes regarding the American Association of Theological Schools:

> The Association is, of course, completely neutral. As proof of this, take into account the following facts. In June 1938, the Association decided to work with the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America (modern) and with the Preaching Mission (modern) in order to advance the work of the association. The Association also works together with the International Council of Religious Education (modern) and with the International Missionary Council (modern). The Association is, therefore, thoroughly neutral. (153-154)

The twenty-four letters are short, about five pages each, and can be read independently of the other chapters. This makes the book a good read when one has only twenty minutes available. Thanks to Daniel Ragusa for translating it, and to the Reformed Forum for publishing it. A small suggestion for a future reprint: While the introduction (18, note 29) indicates awareness of Marvin Kamps' book *1834: Hendrik De Cock's Return to the True Church*, perhaps that should be repeated on page 56 (note 7). The book is not only a substantive history of the 1834 Secession (Afscheiding) but its appendix also contains the translation of primary sources relating to the Secession.

To Change All Worlds: Critical Theory from Marx to Marcuse, by Carl R. Trueman. Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024. Pp. 256. Hardcover. $34.99. ISBN: 9781087754390. Reviewed by Marco Barone.

Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology—Implications for the Church and Society, by Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2024. Pp. 528. Hardcover. $34.99. 9780736988704. Reviewed by Marco Barone.

Introduction

Critical theory (CT, from now on) cannot receive a unanimous definition. Rather, CT includes a large number of approaches and ideas

that pertain to political, social, and anthropological issues. However, Shenvi and Sawyer helpfully list the theoretical pillars that unite all CT approaches:

1. The social binary: Society is divided into dominant/privileged/oppressor groups and subordinate/marginalized/oppressed groups along axes of race, class, gender, sexuality, physical ability, immigration status, religion, and so forth. Included in this central idea is the concept of intersectionality.
2. Hegemonic power: Oppression and domination are not limited to cruelty or overt acts of injustice but also include the ways in which dominant social groups impose their values, traditions, norms, and ways of "being" and "doing" on society such that they are accepted as natural, normal, or even God-ordained. Contemporary critical theory emphasizes that this oppression and domination is structural—that is, it is manifested and applied via social institutions and systems.
3. Lived experience: The lived experience of minoritized and oppressed groups rivals and at times is prioritized over objective evidence and reason when it comes to understanding the world. The lived experience and the consequent experiential knowledge of the minoritized and the oppressed yields special knowledge and insight relative to social analysis in general and justice issues in particular.
4. Social justice: Social justice is concerned with the transformation of society via the emancipation and empowerment of marginalized and disenfranchised groups. Social justice requires us to dismantle the systems, structures, and hegemonic norms that create and perpetuate the social binary. (*Critical Dilemma*, 92-93)

***To Change All Worlds: Critical Theory from Marx to Marcuse*, by Carl Trueman**

To Change all World (*TCAW*, from now on) is a relatively brief and accessible book that expounds the historical and intellectual origins of CT up to our day. The book also contains insightful reflections for the Christian on how to look at CT.

In the first chapter, Trueman introduces the reader to the importance of studying CT. Trueman says that CT and Christianity share "a set of serious questions about the human condition that demand serious answers" (3). That is reason enough to consider CT seriously and not dismissively.

Chapter two discusses the two philosophers who (unbeknownst to them) became the founding patriarchs of CT, Georg Hegel (1770-1831) and Karl Marx (1818-1883). This seemingly abstract intellectual history is key to understanding the nature of CT because neither ideas nor thinkers emerge from a vacuum but from a specific and complicated historical and intellectual context (15-16).

Chapter three is about Karl Korsch (1886-1961) and Georg Lukács (1885-1971), who further developed CT and ideas such as reification (treating people like objects and capitals) and alienation. The conclusion of the chapter highlights how these developments end up treating people, or at least a group of people, in the same objectifying and alienating ways that those developments meant to expose.

Chapter four is dedicated to the Frankfurt School, a group of thinkers that finalized the passage from traditional theory to critical theory. Trueman says how these thinkers at the beginning of the twentieth century faced real questions about real problems (for example, they were all Jews who directly or indirectly witnessed discrimination). However, though many of the questions they posited were legitimate ones, Trueman argues that the CT developed by the Frankfurt School cannot be critically adopted by Christians. That is because CT is a method with precise commitments to destabilize and change the very nature of institutions such as the family and, perhaps more importantly, to redefine what it means to be human.

Chapter five discusses the Frankfurt School's criticism of Enlightenment philosophy. Though some of these criticisms are and even should be shared by a Christian worldview (138, 142-143), ultimately the Frankfurt School conducts a reductionist reading of the sources in order to serve its subversive purposes.

Chapter six is dedicated to CT's redefinition (or, better, distortion) of the concepts of sex and gender, especially focusing on philosophers Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957) and Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979). This chapter is not for the faint of heart, though it is insightful in explaining

some of the origins of contemporary degeneracy regarding these issues.

Chapter 7 is about the cultural industry, that is, the industry that, through the media and other means, ends up shaping the mindset and consciousness of people. If there is one thing regarding which the Frankfurt School was largely spot on, it was the power of the media to create "false consciousness." The latter refers to the intellectual and life posture of the age that distracts the audience from the real problem of both individuals and society. This chapter calls for attention.

Chapter 8 is an encouragement to "negate the spirit that negates" (215). Though CT needs serious attention because it shares with Christianity some fundamental concerns (218-221), ultimately CT is a secularization and a distorted copy of Christianity. With its radical and unrealistic redefinitions of humanity's nature and needs, CT ended up creating what it claimed to oppose: a new cast of oppressors and a new group of oppressed, namely, those who oppose CT, political correctness, and related practices.

Positively striking about this book is Trueman's recurring insistence that the church's calling cannot be reduced to simply refuting CT's inconsistencies at an argumentative and intellectual level. Rather, besides witnessing the gospel to the world, the calling of the church towards a world poisoned by CT is to *live* consistently what the church claims to believe. Worship should remind us that all people from all groups are equal before God, because all are created, fallen, and in need of redemption (76-76); Jesus is the fulfilment of the humanity of all who trust in Him, and the ultimate solution of any reification and alienation that any individual or group might have experienced (143-144); in a culture obsessed by sexuality and plagued with pornography and promiscuity, the church is solemnly called to witness with her life and conduct to the sexual purity, loving families, and ordered relationships that by God's grace Christians are called to nourish in their midst; and the church must witness to the world's cacophonic accounts of the real beauty of holiness found in Jesus Christ and in worshipping Him (212-215).

In brief, since all the problems that CT correctly diagnoses are resolved in Christ (225), the church's best answer to CT is a way of life that concretely shows the lasting solutions offered by Christianity. This process also includes honest and excuses-free self-examination

on the church's part for its past and present sins, including the "sex abuse crises that have engulfed not just the Roman Catholic church but Protestant denominations and congregations in recent years" (227). In this way, the church shows that the solution to humanity's problems is not the utopian dream of a humanity as envisioned by CT, but that solution is found in Jesus Christ who, in His mercy and condescension, empowers the church to embody "a little bit of heaven on earth in the church" (227). And it is especially towards this latter end that *Critical Dilemma* helps the church the most.

Critical Dilemma

Critical Dilemma (*CD* from now on) is divided into four sections: an introductory chapter (chapter 1), part one (titled "Understanding"), part 2 ("Critiquing"), and part 3 ("Engaging").

Part one of *CD* is mostly historical, similar to *TCOW*. The difference between *TCOW* and *CD* is that the latter goes into much greater detail in explaining some of the contemporary, loud offspring of critical theory, especially critical race theory and queer theory. Thus, *CD* aptly complements the history of CT so ably presented in *TCOW*.

Most remarkable is the seventh chapter, "Positive Insight." In it, the authors offer the church some key instructions when approaching CT. The authors tell us that "every truth claim must be evaluated on the basis of whether it corresponds to reality and not on the basis of the identity of the person making the claim. Genetic fallacies must be rejected." A claim that CT or any other theory makes "may in fact be true and may be an appropriate corrective to false or insufficient claims held by a particular person, Christian or otherwise." Regrettably, "the backlash against critical race theory and all things stapled to it has become so strong in some Christian circles that people have grown increasingly skittish about any claim that sounds remotely woke, even if the claim in question is true and supported by ample evidence" (206). Instead, Christians should consider the rise of CT as an occasion better to understand humanity and society and to see the helpfulness of analysing the dynamics of power (210). Moreover, the church should honestly face the horrors of history (211), including those approved by Christians (for instance, chattel slavery). Finally, the church is called to acknowledge fully the fact that unjust systems do

exist (238-239) and that the experience of groups and people, though not the standard of truth, is important, especially when such history is marked by oppression and injustice (239-241).

Part two is a devastating critique of the theoretical presuppositions of CT and their applications. Nothing is left untouched: the four pillars of CT highlighted above are refuted, critical race theory is thoroughly critiqued, the incoherence of the idea of collective/ancestral guilt is exposed, and finally the twisted nature and devastating consequences of queer theory are made evident.

Part three starts by listing eight ideas from CT that inevitably bring some degree of damage to society and the church, for instance, full lies such as "whiteness is wickedness" and partial truths such as "the Bible was written from the perspective of the oppressed" (419-424). Part three proceeds by ably explaining the appeal of CT: "the critical tradition exerts a tremendous pull on people who are compassionate and who genuinely want to serve those in need" (441). Therefore, it is key for the church not to be dismissive and ideological in its opposition to CT. Rather, the church has to practice wise listening and understanding (418-419), exercise compassion rooted in truth (444-445), talk (wisely but unashamedly) about race, gender and justice (450-466), and transparently acknowledge the evils of the past, including those approved by the church or sections of the church (466-467). The church should condemn evil wherever it appears (especially in her midst) and should show in repentance and through words *and life* that the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the solution to all the problems that CT claims to resolve. If that does not happen, the church misses an opportunity and offers only a partial witness to a world that is obsessed with CT's ideas and that desperately needs the truth of Christ.

Concluding Remarks

A few decades ago, the previously-mentioned ideas belonged to what at the time was an obscure ideological methodology known only to a limited number of academics. Today, almost everyone in the Western world has at least heard about them, and many think that they have an informed opinion about them. The situation, however, is far from being that simple.

On the one hand, many claim that CT is just a neutral method, a candid tool aimed at identifying problems in society and groups, and not a substantive ideological system. They make this claim in spite of the countless, candid admissions to the contrary made by many proponents of CT. These proponents openly say that their projects are aimed at revolutionizing society, the family, and the individual according to principles antithetical to the Christian faith.

On the other hand, within the church at large is some hysteria about CT that leads many to dismiss and mark as CT and "woke" even legitimate calls to proper reform, justice, and accountability in church or state. In these cases, the ghosts of CT and wokeness become pretexts to avoid painful, demanding, but necessary repentance and reformation.

Moreover, in such a polarized atmosphere, those who claim that CT is just a neutral method tend to condemn those who do not give CT the credibility they think it deserves. Conversely, those who see CT and wokeness even where it does not exist tend to dismiss *a priori* anything that CT tells us, not on its merit, but simply because it is CT, even when CT might be telling us something useful or even true.

The polarized and reactionary society in which we live only makes things worse for many conservatives. When they hear the most egregiously wrong claims made by CT, they are tempted "to forgo nuance and precision in the face of serious error" and "are attempting to perform open-heart surgery with a hand grenade rather than a scalpel" (*CD*, 485; see also *TCAW*, 1). True, some of CT's ideas are so transparently false and absurd that it is easy simply to dismiss them with mockery. Some lightness never hurts, and Trueman himself spices his astute analyses with his typical British wit. But laughter alone generates little or no understanding. Finally, an already bad situation is made worse by both classical and social media, often inhabited by people from all sides whose methodology is usually to shout at each other over any given issue.

Reality is seldom (if ever) properly depicted by the black-and-white approach assumed by contemporary culture warriors. For instance, to understand Christianity, one must have at least a general idea of its origins and history. There is no way around that. Slogans, catchphrases, and shibboleths will not do; only careful study will help understanding. The same is true with many other complicated

realities, including CT.

Thank God, Trueman and Shenvi/Sawyer are among those who bring historical clarity and Scriptural wisdom to the chaos with their respective publications. *TCAW* and *CD* are two wonderfully complementary books that competently tell us what CT *is* and what it is *not*, and how *to approach* and how *not to approach* CT. Considering the times we live in, I believe these are key readings, especially for clergy and lay people who are involved in ministry of any form.

Contributors for this issue:

Marco Barone, member of Southwest Protestant Reformed Church (Wyoming, MI).

David J. Engelsma, professor emeritus of Dogmatics and Old Testament Studies at the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary.

Cory J. Griess, professor of Theology and New Testament Studies at the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary.

Douglas J. Kuiper, professor of Church History and New Testament Studies at the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary.

Aaron Van Dyke, pastor of Cornerstone Protestant Reformed Church (Dyer, IN).

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PRTJ Policies

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Most articles that appear in the *PRTJ* have been previously solicited by the faculty of the PRTS through the editor of the *PRTJ*. The faculty will gladly consider unsolicited articles for publication; the editor, with the faculty, will make the final determination whether to publish.

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