

## Editor's Notes

This issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* contains articles that should be of interest to our readers, whether seminary professors, seminary students, ministers, elders, or lay persons who are readers in and students of the Reformed faith.

The bulk of this issue includes speeches that were given in the summer of 2019 when, for the second summer in a row, a group was sent to Mexico under the supervision of the First Protestant Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan. The article by the Reverend Cory Griess, pastor of the First PRC of Grand Rapids, was a speech that he was asked to give on reformational theology. This is a neo-Calvinistic movement that has made deep inroads into many of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches in Mexico, as it has in churches around the world. Rev. Griess identifies the root of this teaching in the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd, and lays bare its fundamental opposition to the historic Reformed faith as expressed in the creeds. Rev. Griess gave the speech several times and in several different venues, including Mexico City and Chiapas.

In addition, Rev. Rodney Kleyn, pastor of the PRC congregation in Spokane, Washington and I gave speeches at a conference that opened the new school year of the *Universidad Juan Calvino* in Mexico City, whose president is Dr. Misael Custódio. The theme of the conference was Reformed eschatology. Not all the speeches could be included, but we have selected four of them for inclusion in this issue. They were well received by the faculty, students, and visitors to the conference. It is hoped that our readers will also find them profitable.

One of the book reviews, by the way, concerns mission work done in the early to mid-twentieth century in the state of Chiapas in Mexico. The book, *Kemp: The Story of John R. and Mabel Kempers, Founders of the Reformed Church in America Mission in Chiapas, Mexico*, is a fascinating account of the labors of a Reformed missionary in this remote region of Mexico. Anyone interested in Reformed missions in Mexico will want to read this book.

Prof. Douglas Kuiper includes a significant chapter out of his Th.M. thesis, *Recognizing the Legacy of George M. Ophoff*. The

chapter deals with Ophoff's role in the conditional covenant controversy in the PRCA during the 1950s. His role was crucial in exposing the error and in leading the churches to defend the confessional and biblical truth concerning the unconditional covenant of grace.

Emeritus Prof. David Engelsma contributes a significant review article on *The Crux of the Free Offer of the Gospel* by Sam Waldron. Engelsma indicates agreement that the crux of the issue with regard to the theology of the well-meant offer (WMO) of the gospel is indeed the cross of Jesus Christ, as is Waldron's contention. He points out clearly that the well-meant offer is an inexcusable assault by Reformed and Presbyterian theologians who promote the WMO—a gutting of the particularity and efficacy of the cross. There are other issues with the WMO: the denial of the truth of reprobation, an implicit (or not so implicit) endorsement of free will, the nature and authority of preaching, introduction of confusion into the Godhead, and more besides. But the crux of the issue is the cross! The WMO is nothing less than camouflaged Arminianism. It is not only the enemy in the gate; but it is the enemy who has been invited into the camp by a goodly number of Reformed theologians. The WMO simply cannot be squared with the Reformed confessions, either the Three Forms of Unity or the Westminster Standards. I have always wondered what the proponents of the WMO would have to say to God's commission to Isaiah in Isaiah 6:9, 10, "And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; let them see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed." Isaiah would have been incredulous if after such a commission, God had told him to present the gospel as a WMO. The article also addresses the oft-repeated false accusation that because they deny the WMO the PRC are hyper-Calvinists.

And then there are the book reviews—always a delightful section of the journal. But do not only read the reviews; buy the books. That is the point of the reviews. Buy the books and test the reviews over against your own evaluation.

Now read and enjoy.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*

—Ronald L. Cammenga, editor  
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# Ophoff's Role in the Conditional Covenant Controversy

Douglas J. Kuiper

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Theology degree, the undersigned wrote a thesis entitled *Recognizing the Legacy of George M. Ophoff*. This thesis is only a beginning of formal scholarship regarding one of the men whom God used to found the Protestant Reformed Churches in America. More scholarship in this area could profitably be done.

Of the six chapters in the thesis, the first three set the historical stage for a treatment of Rev. Ophoff's legacy, surveying his life before the PRCA, and his pastoral ministry in the PRCA. The sixth chapter concluded the thesis by examining Rev. Ophoff's relationship to Rev. Hoeksema. Two chapters—chapters four and five—are the heart of the thesis, for they investigate two crucial aspects of Ophoff's legacy. Chapter four focused on Ophoff's Old Testament teaching and writing, while chapter five surveyed his role in the conditional covenant controversy that led to the split of the PRCA in 1953.

This fifth chapter is reprinted here. My goal in reprinting this chapter is twofold. First, this reprint gives readers of the PRTJ a taste of what my thesis was about. Second, and more importantly, this reprint highlights a point that others have noted, but not developed at length: Rev. Ophoff's pivotal role in the conditional covenant controversy.

The chapter is reprinted with minor editing. Copies of the thesis are available from the seminary for a nominal charge to cover the cost of printing and binding.

Before closing, I express my thanks to the PRCA for allowing me to focus on the task of earning my ThM degree before taking up my teaching labors. My studies were enjoyable and profitable.

Prof. Douglas Kuiper

### **Ophoff's Legacy: His Role in the Conditional Covenant Controversy**

The disbanding of the Byron Center PRC in 1944 not only marked the end of George Ophoff's pastoral ministry, but also necessitated his finding a new home and church home. Immediately he and his family joined the First PRC of Grand Rapids.<sup>1</sup> Within eighteen months the Ophoffs moved from Byron Center to 343 Eastern Avenue in Grand Rapids, about one mile from First PRC, which was located at the corner of Fuller and Franklin Streets.<sup>2</sup>

Practical considerations probably governed Ophoff's decision to become a member of First PRC. At the time, three other PRCs existed in the greater Grand Rapids area.<sup>3</sup> However, these were much smaller than First PRC, which was a large congregation with just under 2,000 members and only two full-time pastors.<sup>4</sup> To join First would give Ophoff greater opportunity to continue to use his pastoral and teaching skills.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the seminary met in the basement of First PRC. Ophoff's work life would henceforth be intertwined with this congregation.

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1 The minutes of the consistory of First PRC, July 10, 1944, Art. 7, indicate that the membership of the Ophoff family was received.

2 See the "1946 Church Directory of First PRC," page 27.

3 Second PRC was in the Roosevelt Park neighborhood in the southwest area of the city, near Grandville Ave. and Godfrey Ave.; Creston PRC (in number, this was "Third") was in the northeast part of the city, north of Leonard St. and east of Plainfield Ave.; and Fourth PRC had recently formed and was meeting in the southeast area of Grand Rapids, on Kalamazoo Ave. near Burton St.

4 In 1947 First PRC numbered 476 families and 1,964 total members. This was about 40% of the total membership of the denomination, which was about 1,200 families and slightly over 5,000 total members. The denomination by then had 23 congregations. See *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches—1947* (Grand Rapids: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 1947), 110-20. Regarding its pastors, Herman Hoeksema had pastored First PRC since the denomination began. Since 1939, First PRC had two full-time pastors; when Ophoff joined in 1944, the second pastor had just accepted another call and First PRC was in the process of calling Hubert De Wolf to be its second pastor. In 1948, Cornelius Hanko became First's third full-time co-pastor.

5 Church directories of First PRC during the era that Ophoff was a member indicate that he led one or two Bible studies annually.

Soon after receiving Ophoff's membership, the consistory of First PRC informed the congregation that

it has appointed the Rev. G. M. Ophoff as a minister of our congregation with the status of an emeritus minister without salary. The purpose of this appointment is to permit Reverend Ophoff to retain the official status of a minister of the Word while actively engaging in teaching in our seminary. The congregation presents this appointment for the approbation of the congregation and if no objections are brought to the consistory the appointment will stand.<sup>6</sup>

Two points of explanation are in order. First, the Church Order that the Synod of Dordt adopted spoke of four offices in the church, with that of professor of theology being a distinct office.<sup>7</sup> However, the PRC have traditionally insisted that professors be men who have served in the ministry, and viewed the work of a seminary professor as a specialized work of the office of minister.<sup>8</sup> In the PRC, the work of a professor is overseen by the synodically appointed Theological School Committee, but a local consistory must hold a professor's ministerial credentials and be ready to treat any matter of orthodoxy, or any other matter that pertained to his office. By this announcement, First's consistory was indicating that it held Ophoff's credentials. Second, the use of the word "emeritus" is misleading. The consistory

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6 "Bulletin of the First Protestant Reformed Church," January 13, 1946.

7 "There are four kinds of offices: of the ministers of the Word, of Doctors (Professors), elders, and deacons." See Richard R. De Ridder, *Translation of Ecclesiastical Manual including the decisions of the Netherlands Synods and other significant matters relating to the government of the churches*, by P. Biesterveld and Dr. H. H. Kuyper (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1982), 225.

8 In 2000 the PRC Synod revised Article 2 of its Church Order to read, "The offices are of three kinds: of the ministers of the Word, of the elders, and of the deacons." Synod made this change on the basis of three grounds, the first of which indicated that the PRC had already understood the office of professor to be a specialized aspect of the office of minister: "Grounds: a. This revision reflects the exegesis of Ephesians 4:11 commonly held in our churches, viz., that this verse teaches that the office of 'pastor and teacher' is one office." See *Acts of Synod and Yearbook 2000* (Wyoming: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2000), 26.

had not declared Ophoff to be emeritus; unlike an emeritus minister, Ophoff would be actively serving the denomination. However, like an emeritus minister, he would not labor in the pastoral ministry of a particular congregation. First's consistory was informing its congregation of Ophoff's status within its congregation, not of his status within the denomination. Here First's consistory was breaking new ground, at least in the PRC: Ophoff was the first ordained minister in the PRC to hold the office of minister but not to labor either in the pastoral ministry or in missions.

Although Ophoff could not know this at the time, his move to First PRC put him in position to serve the role he played in the conditional covenant controversy in the PRC. For one thing, Rev. Hubert De Wolf, one of First PRC's three pastors, made statements in sermons on the pulpit of First PRC that contributed to the schism of 1953. As a member of First PRC, Ophoff heard those statements and protested them. For another, First PRC not only held Ophoff's ministerial credentials, but also appointed him to serve three terms as ruling elder in the congregation, during the years 1946-1948, 1952-1954, and 1957-1959. The controversy reached its zenith during Ophoff's second term as elder. Not only did he protest statements made by De Wolf, but he was also in a position to adjudicate them. In part, this was the role Ophoff played in the 1953 controversy. But there was more.

This chapter begins by explaining the doctrinal issue at stake and the history of the controversy. It proceeds to examine in greater detail two different roles that Ophoff played in the controversy. Then it contains a section in which Ophoff's role is evaluated.

### **The Conditional Covenant Controversy in the PRC**

The issue in this controversy was whether faith is a condition that humans must fulfill to be in God's covenant and fully enjoy its benefits. More particularly, the issue was whether God promised salvation objectively to every baptized child, but required that child to believe in order to receive the salvation He had promised. In the end, the PRC decisively rejected the idea of conditions in the covenant.

The issue ought not be misconstrued. First, the PRC did not deny the role of faith in salvation. They understood faith to be the means

or instrument by which all the blessings of salvation become ours. They considered faith to be God's gift to His people, and therefore an integral component of salvation itself. They understood faith's activity to be a fruit of God's grace, the inevitable response of God's covenant people to His work of establishing and maintaining His covenant. The PRC did not come to understand these points only as a result of the conditional covenant controversy; rather, they had always understood Scripture and the Reformed confessions to teach this.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the PRC did not dispute that orthodox Reformed theologians in years past had used the word "condition" when referring to faith and obedience.<sup>10</sup> The PRC understood these men not to have taught that God promises to bring humans into the covenant, or to continue covenant fellowship with them, only if humans do something first. Rather, the PRC understood these fathers to have taught that faith is a necessary way by which God's covenant members inevitably experience His covenant blessings.

Such was Ophoff's own assessment. In an article entitled "The Fathers Regarding Conditions," Ophoff responded to the assertion of another that the Reformed fathers spoke of conditions in the covenant. Ophoff said that this assertion "is too sweeping to be true"<sup>11</sup> and pointed out Herman Bavinck's own assessment of this view decades earlier: "In the first period the Reformed freely spoke of conditions in the covenant. But when the nature of the covenant was more deeply thought into and had to be defended against Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Remonstrants, many in their hearts objected to the usage

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9 See the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 7; Belgic Confession, Article 22; and the Canons of Dordt I.5,6; II.7,8;III/IV.14.

10 For instance, Heinrich Bullinger, "The One and Eternal Testament of God," in Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 108-11; Wolfgang Musculus, *Common Places of Christian Religion, Gathered by Wolfgangus Musculus for the use of such as desire the knowledge of Godly Truth*, trans. John Man (London: Henry Bynneman, 1578), 284; and Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1994), 2:184-89.

11 Ophoff, "The Fathers Regarding Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, August 1, 1949, 468.

of that language and avoided it.”<sup>12</sup> Ophoff then stated positively the key to understanding that in the covenant God requires faith and obedience: “The right way of saying this is to state simply that, with God working regeneration, faith, and conversion in His people, there are no conditions in the covenant; and that, this being true, the promises of God are unconditional and unfailing.”<sup>13</sup> And again:

What our study has revealed is that the word *condition* as a sentence element of the statement to the effect that God saves men *on condition* of their faith and repentance is a bad term; but that the doctrine according to which God demands of His people in the covenant that they believe in Him through Christ and keep His covenant is certainly sound doctrine. And these demands are actual.<sup>14</sup>

The controversy as it erupted in the PRC was related to the covenant conception of Dr. Klaas Schilder in the Netherlands, and particularly to Schilder’s application of his covenant conception to baptism. Schilder’s view can be described here only briefly.<sup>15</sup> Although Schilder

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12 Ophoff, “The Fathers Regarding Conditions,” 466. The reference can be found in Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. Three: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 229.

13 Ophoff, “The Fathers Regarding Conditions,” 467.

14 Ophoff, 468.

15 A fuller description of Schilder’s teachings and the role they played in the controversy in the PRC can be found in Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth’s Sake*, 261-76. A book-length biography of Schilder has been written by Rev. Henry Vander Kam, *Schilder: Preserver of the Faith* (New York: Vantage Press, 1996). Also relevant are the chapters by J. Faber, “Klaas Schilder’s Life and Work,” and S. A. Strauss, “Schilder on the Covenant,” in J. Geertsema, ed., *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teachings of Dr. Klaas Schilder* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1995):1-33. Two relevant resources authored by Schilder are *Het Verbond In De Gereformeerde Symbolen: Collegeverslagen Symboliek*, 5d Druk (Kampen: Berg-Broederweg, 1977) and “The Main Points of the Doctrine of the Covenant,” trans. T. Van Laar (Canada, 1992). The latter was a speech that Schilder gave on August 31, 1944, in the Waalsche Kerk in Delft, the Netherlands. Finally, in the early 1950s Schilder wrote a series of articles in *De Reformatie* in which he responded to the provisional adoption of “The Declaration of Principles” by the PRC Synod of 1950. In

had initially emphasized the unilateral character of God's covenant, he later emphasized that both God and mankind were parties in the covenant.<sup>16</sup> Schilder applied this to children in the covenant, and to infant baptism, by saying that God's promise to infants in baptism was not for elect children only, but for every baptized child.<sup>17</sup> Only when the baptized child fulfills God's demand does that child actually receive what God promised: "Promise and demand belong together; the two are one. Therefore God chooses the form of speaking with a condition; not that I earn salvation with my faith. . . . He speaks to me with a living voice about promise and demand: the goods lay in the promise; if you accept the promise then it is for you."<sup>18</sup> Schilder's conception was related to the covenant theology of William Heyns,<sup>19</sup> but differed from that of Herman Hoeksema and much of the PRC, which insisted that the promise of God in baptism is only for *elect* children of believers.<sup>20</sup>

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these, Schilder also elaborated on his view of covenant and conditions; see the book containing Jelle Faber's *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism* and Klaas Schilder's *Extra-Scriptural Binding—A New Danger* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1996), 57-167.

16 Schilder, "The Main Points," 7-10; Strauss, "Schilder on the Covenant," 25-27.

17 Schilder, "The Main Points," 11-13.

18 Schilder, "The Main Points," 13-14; Strauss, "Schilder on the Covenant," 28-29.

19 See Prof. W. Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1926), 133-39; J. Faber, "William Heyns as Covenant Theologian," in *Calvin's Books: Festschrift for Peter De Klerk*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser, Herman J. Selderhuis, and Willem van 't Spijker (Heerenveen, Netherlands: J. J. Groen en Zoon, 1997), 301-14; and David J. Engelsma, *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant: The Declaration of Principles* (Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2013), 50-56. Though Schilder and Heyns had a similar view of the covenant, Heyns taught common grace while Schilder rejected the idea.

20 Already in 1927 Hoeksema had written a series of articles in the *Standard Bearer* entitled "De Geloovingen en Hun Zaad." This is now available as *Believers and Their Seed: Children in the Covenant*, trans. Homer C. Hoeksema, revised edition (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997). In these articles, taking the "Form for Infant Baptism" as his starting point, Hoeksema explored the place of children in the cov-

Despite this significant difference between Hoeksema and Schilder, the two men had remarkable similarities: both opposed the Kuyperean doctrine of common grace;<sup>21</sup> both agreed that the proclamation of the gospel does not indicate a divine love toward everyone who hears;<sup>22</sup> both had been suspended and deposed by broader assemblies rather than by their own consistory; both depositions were the result of a person refusing to sign statements with which he could not agree; and both depositions resulted in the formation of new denominations.<sup>23</sup>

Without entering into the historical background in detail, several historical points are salient.<sup>24</sup> First, when Schilder visited North America in 1939 and again in 1947, Hoeksema desired to meet him, and the PRC opened their doors to him. Second, some PRC ministers began teaching Schilder's view of the covenant, claiming that they were free to do so because the PRC did not have an official position regarding the covenant.

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enant. One of Hoeksema's conclusions was that in God's covenant as it is manifested on earth is a twofold seed—the elect kernel and the reprobate husk and stalk—and that God's promises are only for the elect, in whom also the promises will be unconditionally fulfilled.

21 See Jochem Douma, *Common Grace in Kuyper, Schilder, and Calvin: Exposition, Comparison, and Evaluation*, trans. Albert H. Oosterhoff, ed. William Helder (Hamilton, ON: Lucerna CRTS Publications, 2017), 129-232.

22 See A. C. De Jong, *The Well-Meant Gospel Offer: The Views of H. Hoeksema and K. Schilder* (Franeker, Netherlands: T. Wever, 1954) for a more indepth examination of this issue. De Jong demonstrates that the two theologians both disagreed with the conception of the well-meant offer as an indication of God's love for all who hear the gospel, while at the same time disagreeing with each other about specific aspects of the idea of the term "offer." See pages 70-71 for a brief statement of their similarities and differences.

23 Vander Kam, *Schilder: Preserver of the Faith*, 72-78.

24 This history is explained in more detail in Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake*, 271-315; Herman Hoeksema and Herman Hanko, *Ready To Give An Answer: A Catechism of Reformed Distinctives* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997), 163-69; and Gertrude Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden: A Brief History of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1992), 129-64. Engelsma provides a helpful timeline of the schism in *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant*, 189-95.

Third, in the post-World War II era, many Dutch immigrants from the Liberated churches were coming to America and looking for church homes. Schilder encouraged them to join the PRC. Many did; in fact two PRC churches were established in Ontario, one in Hamilton and the other in Chatham, primarily consisting of such immigrants.

These factors led the Mission Committee of the PRC to request Synod 1950 “to draw up a form that may be used by those families requesting organization into a Prot. Ref. congregation. We believe that this would serve to remove all misunderstanding and aid toward unity.”<sup>25</sup> In response, Synod 1950 drew up a document entitled “A Brief Declaration of Principles of the Protestant Reformed Churches.”<sup>26</sup> This document reiterated the stand of the PRC on the issue of common grace, and set forth the PRC’s rejection of conditions in the covenant on the basis of the Reformed confessions’ teachings regarding the unconditional and unchangeable character of divine election and the efficacy of Christ’s death for the elect only. It also emphasized the PRC position on the autonomy of the local congregation.<sup>27</sup>

Synod 1950 adopted the Declaration of Principles provisionally and sent it to the churches for further reflection. Ophoff explained why Synod adopted it only provisionally, and who proposed such: “Wasn’t it Rev. Hoeksema who proposed on the floor of synod (1950) that to avoid even the semblance of hierarchy synod advise that the churches, before adopting the ‘Declaration’ for approbation, prove and

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25 *Acts of Synod 1950* (Grand Rapids: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 1950), 54.

26 Engelsma’s book *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant* is a history of the development, adoption, and effect of the adoption of the “Declaration.” The book also contains a brief commentary on the “Declaration” on pages 221-67. The “Declaration” can be found in *The Confessions and Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 412-31.

27 Engelsma calls this section an “anomaly” because this point of church polity was not an issue in the PRC at the time. He surmises that this last section was added to show Schilder that he and the PRC had something in common, perhaps motivating him to work through the difference regarding the covenant. See Engelsma, *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant*, 45.

approve it for the greater part of a year?”<sup>28</sup> Synod 1950’s provisional adoption included declaring that the “Declaration” was “a working hypothesis for our mission committee and for our missionaries in the organization of churches.”<sup>29</sup>

Because this final adoption of this document would leave no room for the Liberated view of the covenant in the PRC, the formulation and provisional adoption of the “Declaration of Principles” became a lightning-rod for those in the PRC who desired to allow that covenant view. To the Synod of 1951 came numerous protests against the provisional adoption of the “Declaration” in an attempt to prevent final adoption. The history cannot be recounted in full here.<sup>30</sup> In brief, the arguments against adopting the “Declaration” included the allegations that the “Declaration” was not clear, that its doctrinal content was not correct (by which some manifested their sympathy for the Liberated view of the covenant), that it was being forced hierarchically on the churches, and that it was an extrascriptural document that should not have binding force on the churches. Eventually, the Synod of 1951 adopted the “Declaration.” Paving the way for the split of 1953, some members appealed this matter to the Synod of 1953.<sup>31</sup>

Another significant contribution to the schism, particularly relevant to what follows in this chapter, were two statements in sermons that Rev. Hubert De Wolf preached at First (Grand Rapids) PRC.<sup>32</sup> On April 15, 1951 (after the provisional adoption of the “Declaration” by Synod 1950, but before its final adoption in 1951), De Wolf said in a sermon on Luke 16:19-31 (the parable of the rich man and Lazarus): “God promises every one of you that if you believe, you

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28 Ophoff, “Rev. Petter’s Sixth and Seventh Installments,” *Standard Bearer*, February 15, 1951, 236.

29 *Acts of Synod 1950*, 90.

30 See Engelsma, *Battle for Sovereign Grace*, 57-76, for a fuller account.

31 Ordinarily the appellants would have had to appeal to Synod 1952. They did make known to Synod 1952 their intent to appeal. Synod 1952 permitted the appeals to come to the Synod of 1953 because the *Acts of Synod 1951* were not yet available by February 1952, so that appellants had little time to prepare an appeal that interacted with the decisions of Synod 1951. See *Acts of Synod 1952*, 81-82.

32 Gertrude Hoeksema, *Therefore Have I Spoken*, 322-24; Cornelius Hanko, *Less Than The Least*, 209-13.

will be saved.”<sup>33</sup> On September 14, 1952 (after the final adoption of the “Declaration,” and in the knowledge that the matter was being protested), he said in a sermon on Matthew 18:3: “Our act of conversion is a pre-requisite to enter the kingdom.”<sup>34</sup> Because De Wolf said this in the middle of the controversy regarding the Liberated view of the covenant, many understood De Wolf to be making his position on the issue clear. In the second statement De Wolf was opposing the doctrine embodied in the “Declaration.” In the first statement De Wolf was proposing not only the Liberated view of the covenant (which emphasized the promise of God to every baptized child), but also the idea that God desires the salvation of everyone who hears. This idea was inherent in the doctrine of the well-meant offer, which the PRC had rejected since its inception.<sup>35</sup>

The immediate cause of the schism was First PRC's suspension of De Wolf in June 1953 and deposition of the elders who had supported him.<sup>36</sup> Both De Wolf and his supportive elders, and Herman Hoeksema and Cornelius Hanko and their supportive elders, claimed to be the continuing First PRC. At Classis East<sup>37</sup> in July 1953, both sent delegates. When the classis, after deliberation, seated the delegates who supported Hoeksema, the delegates of three other churches left the meeting.<sup>38</sup> In Classis West, many reacted strongly against the deposition of De Wolf; this set the stage for a division that occurred at the September meeting of Classis West. The outcome of the schism was that the PRC was reduced from 25 congregations and 5,726 members in 1951, to 17 congregations and 2,385 members in 1954.

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33 Gertrude Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden*, 176.

34 G. Hoeksema, 177.

35 Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches*, 320-53.

36 G. Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden*, 193-209.

37 Since 1939, the PRC have been divided into two classes, Classis East and Classis West. The dividing line for the two classes is the Illinois/Indiana state line. The PRC Synod has granted an exception to one church (Peace PRC) that originally was located south of Chicago in Illinois but relocated into northwest Indiana, to remain in Classis West; see *Acts of Synod and Yearbook 2015*, pages 47-48.

38 G. Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden*, 200.

### **Ophoff's Role in the Controversy: *Standard Bearer* Writings**

One aspect of Ophoff's role in this controversy was his *Standard Bearer* writings. Here his contributions were twofold: he wrote articles in the *Standard Bearer* opposing the conditional covenant view,<sup>39</sup> and he wrote an article that served the function of a bombshell.

In many of Ophoff's relevant *Standard Bearer* articles he interacted with Revs. Andrew Petter<sup>40</sup> and Bernard Kok,<sup>41</sup> ministers in the PRC whose sympathies lay with the Liberated. To set the background, it must be noted that in 1944 the ministers of the six PRCs in northwestern Iowa and southwestern Minnesota, as well as De Wolf, at the time pastor of the Manhattan, Montana PRC, began publishing a church periodical entitled *Concordia*.<sup>42</sup> In the first issue, using the analogy of a symphony, Editor Gerrit Vos assured the readers that the *Concordia* would "sing the same melody" as the *Standard Bearer*, but "in a different pitch."<sup>43</sup> It would sing the same melody as the *Standard Bearer* by witnessing to the same gospel.<sup>44</sup> However, whereas the

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39 Douglas J. Kuiper, "George Martin Ophoff: A Bibliography (4) His Doctrinal and Miscellaneous Writings," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 52, no. 2 (April 2019): 69-89.

40 Andrew Petter graduated from the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary in 1935, and eventually served five pastorates in the PRC. He would be an ardent defender of the Liberated view of the covenant. Significantly, in 1951 he accepted a call to the PRC in Chatham, ON, one of the two PRCs at the time made up primarily of Dutch immigrants from the Liberated churches.

41 Bernard Kok graduated from the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary in 1929 as part of the second graduating class. He served three pastorates in the PRC, in addition to holding the distinction of serving as the first PRC missionary for five years. In 1947 he accepted the call to the PRC of Holland, where he was at the time of the 1953 split. From 1953-1960 he was part of the Orthodox Protestant Reformed Church (the De Wolf group), and from 1961-1969 he was a missionary and served a pastorate in the CRC.

42 These six churches were in Doon, Hull, Orange City, Rock Valley, and Sioux Center, IA, and in Edgerton, MN. See Gerrit Vos, "Informative Subscript," *Concordia*, February 21, 1944, for a note about De Wolf being asked, and agreeing, to be on the editorial staff.

43 Gerrit Vos, "Concordia in Euanglio," *Concordia*, February 21, 1944. At the time, Vos was the pastor of the church in Edgerton, MN.

44 This explains the title of the editorial, which means "harmony in the gospel."

*Standard Bearer* was primarily a doctrinal periodical, the *Concordia* would be lighter in content, including church news, a children's page, and a serial story.

No doubt Vos was serious about his statement that the *Concordia* would sing the same melody as the *Standard Bearer*. Vos himself was always known for being firmly committed to the doctrines for which the PRC stood, and he remained with the PRC throughout the entire conditional covenant controversy. However, the same cannot be said for the other six men whose names appeared on the masthead of the first issue of the *Concordia*.

Rev. Andrew Petter's name was not on the masthead of the first issue. His first contribution to the periodical was published in October 5, 1944, and his name first appeared on the masthead of the October 19, 1944, issue. Three years later,<sup>45</sup> Petter began writing an extensive series of articles on the doctrine of the covenant in light of the controversy in the Netherlands,<sup>46</sup> and in 1950 he began a series of articles examining the Declaration of Principles.<sup>47</sup> The latter series he began with "a mixed feeling" because "it immediately will suggest controversy to the readers, and thereby I mean controversy in the bad, unedifying sense." In these articles Petter defended the Liberated view of the covenant, a view that was being opposed in the *Standard Bearer*. The PRC had *Concordia*, but not concord; the two magazines were not singing the same melody.

Many of Ophoff's *Standard Bearer* articles opposing the conditional covenant view were directed explicitly against Petter's *Concordia* articles. Until Petter's twenty-seventh installment, Ophoff watched with interest from the sidelines, as it were. But when Petter wrote, "The Scriptures plainly teach that there are conditions in connection with the covenant,"<sup>48</sup> and referred to various texts, Ophoff openly

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45 Although the original contributors to the *Concordia* were ministers in Iowa and westward, when Petter joined the editorial staff he was the pastor of the PRC in Grand Haven, MI. In 1946 he moved to the PRC in Orange City, IA.

46 Andrew Petter, "The Covenant, I-Introduction," *Concordia*, November 13, 1947.

47 Petter, "Explanation" and "A New Declaration," *Concordia*, October 2, 1950.

48 Petter, "The Covenant, XXVII-Dr. Schilder," *Concordia*, March 31, November 2019

challenged Petter's understanding of these texts, and Petter's conclusion that faith is a condition.<sup>49</sup> Ophoff's two initial articles began a longer exchange with Petter responding to Ophoff in the *Concordia* and Ophoff responding to Petter in the *Standard Bearer*.<sup>50</sup> In addition, Ophoff engaged Petter regarding his comments on the "Declaration of Principles."

In the process of replying to Petter, Ophoff penned three articles that are worthy of note. In them Ophoff did not respond polemically to the comments of another person—something he often *did* do in his articles—but focused on Scripture passages that were often used in defense of conditional covenant theology, showing that the passages could not properly be used in such a defense.

In the first article, Ophoff demonstrated that the Hebrew words "אִם" ("if") and "כִּי" ("when") in Deuteronomy do not indicate that God's covenant people must fulfill conditions in order for God to bless them, but rather that God's covenant people experience God's blessing in the way of obedience; Israel enjoyed blessing *when* she obeyed.<sup>51</sup>

In the second article, Ophoff explained the Word of God in Deuteronomy 31:16, in which God tells Moses that after his death Israel "will forsake me, and break my covenant which I have made with them" (KJV).<sup>52</sup> Ophoff made plain at the outset what this Word of God did *not* mean. It did not mean that the carnal (ungodly, unbelieving) people in Israel were truly in covenant with God; only the elect are in the covenant, in Christ. By this promise God was not teaching that His

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1949.

49 Ophoff, "Open Letter to Rev. Petter," *Standard Bearer*, May 1, 1949 and May 15, 1949.

50 See the following articles, all in the *Standard Bearer*, written by Ophoff (though some were verbatim quotes of part or all of Petter's articles): "Rev. Petter Replies," June 1, 1949; "Reply to Rev. Petter," June 15, 1949 and July 1, 1949; "Rev. Petter Replies," September 1, 1949; and "Comments on Rev. Petter's Articles," October 15, 1949. In his article "The Fathers Regarding Conditions," *Standard Bearer*, August 1, 1949, Ophoff took issue with Petter's sweeping statement that the Reformed fathers taught conditions in the covenant in the sense in which Petter was teaching them.

51 Ophoff, "The 'If' Sentences in Deuteronomy," *Standard Bearer*, June 15, 1949.

52 Ophoff, "On Breaking the Covenant," *Standard Bearer*, May 1, 1950.

promise had come to those who would break His covenant when they were circumcised (or baptized), so that they were once actually saved and later would become no longer saved. The expression does not suggest that the covenant is an agreement between God and humans, in which God promises to save humans on the condition that humans believe. In all these ways Ophoff showed that the passage cannot be used to the advantage of those promoting the idea of a conditional covenant. Very simply, the text means that unbelieving, ungodly Israelites—who at times were the driving force of the nation, if not its majority—despised and trampled on the saving work of the Triune God in Jesus Christ and by His Holy Spirit. This does not destroy God's covenant, for God continues it with the elect remnant. But the unbelievers have shown that it is not for them.

In the third article—really a series of three articles—Ophoff examined the concept of “promise” in the Reformed confessions (Canons II.5, Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 83-84), and Scripture (the covenant promises in Genesis 3:15, as well as those to Noah, Abraham, Jacob, to Israel through Isaiah, and to the church of the New Testament).<sup>53</sup> He noted that the word “if” is not found in these promises, nor was God suggesting that we understand them conditionally. They are divine promises of what God will certainly do to His elect, the true seed of the woman, in whom God works faith. Ophoff then noted that some Scripture passages *do* use the word “if”—Romans 4:24, for example. However, this verse does not constitute a *promise*, nor does every “if” clause set forth a condition. In sum, “the promises of God are ‘if-less’ indeed, and therefore of necessity unconditional. And they come only to the elect, that is, historically the believers.”<sup>54</sup>

Although Ophoff interacted with Petter and Kok in many of his *Standard Bearer* articles, he interacted with others as well. Notably, three articles contained an exchange with Schilder. When Schilder visited the PRC in 1947, ministers and officebearers in the PRC held a conference with him to discuss their theological differences.<sup>55</sup> Af-

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53 Ophoff, “Once More—The Promise,” *Standard Bearer*, May 15, 1951; June 1, 1951; and June 15, 1951.

54 Ophoff, “Once More—The Promise,” *Standard Bearer*, June 15, 1951, 427-28.

55 G. Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden*, 143-45; Gerrit Vos, “The Schilder November 2019

ter the conference Ophoff asked Schilder one more question, which Schilder asked Ophoff to put in writing so that Schilder could answer it in Schilder's magazine, *De Reformatie*.<sup>56</sup> Ophoff apparently did not do so with any speed, and Schilder made a note of Ophoff's omission in the February 2, 1950, issue of *De Reformatie*. Consequently, two-and-a-half years after the conference, Ophoff published his questions in the *Standard Bearer*.

In his first article, after summarizing Schilder's view, Ophoff asked whether he had summarized accurately what Schilder had stated at the conference, and whether Schilder's view was not essentially Heynsian, as Ophoff had concluded that it was. Ophoff then began explaining the error of the Heynsian view of the covenant.<sup>57</sup> In his second article, Ophoff continued to explain this error, and then asked more questions of Schilder. Among other things, he asked regarding the sovereign reason why some baptized children die spiritually: Even though they do despise God's grace as it is proclaimed in the preaching, is not the deepest reason that they were divinely reprobated? How then can God be said to establish His covenant with them, and at baptism say that He washed them in Christ's blood? Did Christ then die for some who are reprobate? Is God's promise then conditioned on human activity? And "Is it right to evade this difficulty by calling it a mystery, or by an appeal to the incomprehensibility of God, or by taking recourse to the reasoning that according to God's logic and in his mind the conflict resolves in a higher unity?"<sup>58</sup>

Ophoff was disappointed by Schilder's response. Essentially, as Ophoff relates it, that response was this: Schilder was too busy writing in his magazine regarding ongoing controversy in the Netherlands; Schilder had previously discussed these matters with Ophoff at the conference; the questions could be discussed at another conference, were a delegation of PR ministers to come to the Netherlands; and Ophoff was asking Schilder to speak officially on behalf of the Lib-

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Conference," *Standard Bearer*, December 1, 1947; Herman Hoeksema, "Our Conference with Dr. Schilder," *Standard Bearer*, December 1, 1947.

56 Ophoff, "Questions for Prof. Dr. Schilder," *Standard Bearer*, April 1, 1950, 302.

57 Ophoff, "Questions for Prof. Dr. Schilder."

58 Ophoff, "More Questions for Prof. Schilder," *Standard Bearer*, April 15, 1950, 329.

erated churches regarding their covenant doctrine, something that Schilder was in no position to do.<sup>59</sup> Ophoff disputed Schilder's answer: he was asking Schilder not regarding the position of his churches, but regarding his own position that he had set forth at the conference two years earlier; and Ophoff had not put these questions to Schilder at that conference.

This concluded the brief exchange between Ophoff and Schilder in the *Standard Bearer*. Even though Schilder had not answered to Ophoff's satisfaction, Ophoff had made his point: the Schilderian view of the covenant was essentially that of Heyns.

In addition to these *Standard Bearer* articles, Ophoff wrote others, one of which stands out as being a bombshell. This article regarded a visit that the PRC ministers John De Jong<sup>60</sup> and Bernard Kok made to the Netherlands, not as official denominational delegates but as tourists.<sup>61</sup> While there, the men had visited the Liberated churches and encouraged the Liberated who were immigrating to America not to think that their different covenant view made it impossible for them to join the PRC. The men reportedly said:

Indeed, we have much to be grateful for to Rev. Hoeksema. But his conception regarding election etc. is not church doctrine. No one is bound by it. Some are emitting a totally different sound. Their [De Jong's and Kok's] opinion was that most (of the Prot. Ref.) do not think as Rev. Hoeksema and Rev. Ophoff. And sympathy for the Liberated was great also in the matter of their doctrine of the covenant.<sup>62</sup>

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59 Ophoff, "Prof. K. Schilder Replies," *Standard Bearer*, August 1, 1950.

60 John De Jong graduated from the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary in 1929 as part of the second graduating class, the same of which Bernard Kok was a member. De Jong served four pastorates in the PRC; in 1949 he was minister of the Creston (Third) PRC of Grand Rapids. From 1953-1961 he served in the Orthodox Protestant Reformed Churches (the De Wolf group), and from 1961-1968 served pastorates in the CRC.

61 For more on these historical points, see Gertrude Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden*, 148-54; for Ophoff's more direct involvement, see Herman Hanko, "George M. Ophoff (26) The Polemicist," *Beacon Lights*, August-September 1978, 15-16.

62 See letter from Prof. Holwerda to an immigrant in Chatham, ON, as published and translated by Ophoff, "Revs. De Jong and Kok in the Netherlands: A Report," *Standard Bearer*, August 1, 1949.

Soon afterward, a Dutch immigrant to the area of Chatham, ON asked Benne Holwerda, professor in the Liberated seminary in Kampen, advice regarding which Reformed church to join in Canada. In response, Holwerda not only encouraged the immigrant to join the PRC, but also referred to his recent visit with De Jong and Kok and to what they had said regarding the PRC's openness to the Liberated. Soon after the immigrant received the letter, he showed it to Ophoff, who was in Chatham to preach that weekend. And Ophoff printed the letter in the *Standard Bearer*, both its Dutch original and an English translation.<sup>63</sup>

Ophoff never quoted the letters or articles of others without also commenting on them, and comment on this one he did. He began by defending his right to publish the letter.<sup>64</sup> He continued by explaining that it was his *duty* to publish the letter, in part, because "our whole movement is at stake, if the statements contained in the letter are true."<sup>65</sup> Ophoff then defended why he published this matter immediately, rather than waiting: De Jong was considering a call to be missionary to the Dutch immigrants in Ontario, many of whom were Liberated. And Ophoff presented his view of the situation: many in the PRC had embraced the covenant view of the Liberated, which view was false doctrine. Even though the Liberated taught election and speak of faith as God's gift, said Ophoff, they did not incorporate these ideas into their covenant theology. On the other hand, Ophoff disputed De Jong's and Kok's assertion that the PRC do not have a covenant theology. It had not been written out, but such a covenant

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63 Ophoff, "Revs. De Jong and Kok in The Netherlands."

64 Whether Ophoff should have published the letter became a matter of debate, because the letter appeared to be a private letter between two individuals other than Ophoff. Holwerda himself objected to the publishing of this letter; Herman Hoeksema's response to Holwerda was that Holwerda had intended the letter not for one recipient only, but for all the Dutch immigrants in the community; that by the time Ophoff saw the letter, other immigrants in the area had also seen it—in other words, this letter was publicly known; and that Revs. De Jong and Kok's comments could be publicized because they had spoken these comments as if they represented the PRC. See Herman Hoeksema, "The Open Letter of Prof. Holwerda," *Standard Bearer*, September 15, 1949.

65 Ophoff, "Revs. De Jong and Kok in the Netherlands," 470.

theology did exist, and was rooted in the stand that the PRC took on common grace. De Jong's and Kok's statements, as reported in Holwerda's letter, forced the issue: it was time for the PRC to spell out its covenant theology officially, to reject the covenant conception of Heyns and the Liberated, and to show the exit door to those who did not agree with the PRC's doctrine of the covenant.

The publishing of this letter was the occasion for turmoil in the PRC.<sup>66</sup> One aspect of that turmoil was that some thought the letter should not have been published, but another aspect was that Ophoff had put the match to the kindling: for some time, some had promoted the idea that Hoeksema's covenant view was not that of the PRC, but De Jong's and Kok's statements were a bold assertion; the matter was now in the open.

### **Ophoff's Role in the Controversy: Protests**

Ophoff's role in the controversy was not only that of putting the match to the kindling, and of defending and promoting the covenant view that the PRC had taught and would continue to teach, but was also, in part, that of helping bring the controversy to an end. The road to the end, though, was neither easy nor quick.

The two statements that De Wolf made in sermons on the pulpit of First PRC, given in the historical context in which they were made, indicated what side De Wolf was on in this controversy: *not* on the side of Hoeksema and Ophoff. The promoters of the conditional covenant idea had advanced their cause in the public preaching in the churches. Those who understood that the PRC rejection of common grace implied a very definite covenant conception, one that excluded any condition that a human had to fulfill, realized that a response was necessary.

De Wolf's first controversial statement was made in a sermon on April 15, 1951. The consistory of First PRC received two protests at its meeting on April 23—one by Dirk Jonker,<sup>67</sup> and one by George

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66 G. Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden*, 152.

67 A protest from Dirk Jonker was as significant as a protest from George Ophoff. Dirk Jonker had been ordained into ministry in the CRC in 1918 and served churches in Sibley, IA and Rusk, MI until 1926, when he was deposed. See [http://www.calvin.edu/cgi-bin/lib/crcmd/search.pl?ID=1078&prev\\_mode=name&termid=1089&act=show\\_details](http://www.calvin.edu/cgi-bin/lib/crcmd/search.pl?ID=1078&prev_mode=name&termid=1089&act=show_details); accessed March 27, 2019. November 2019

Ophoff.<sup>68</sup> The consistory initially informed the men that they had not submitted a copy of their protest to “the party involved” (that is, De Wolf), and therefore would not treat their protests. In this the consistory was not applying the principle of Matthew 18; that passage refers to the manner of treating a private sin, while this was a matter of the public preaching in the churches. Rather, the consistory was applying a decision that the PRC had appended to Article 31 of the Church Order. That article regards the right of appeal. The appended decision requires one who is appealing a matter to give “notification to the secretary of the body by whose decision he is aggrieved,”<sup>69</sup> so that the body whose decision is being appealed can prepare a response. De Wolf, of course, was a person, not an ecclesiastical body; but the principle applied.

At its May 14 meeting, the consistory began treating these protests. De Wolf was presiding at the meeting (First PRC’s three ministers presided by rotation), but relinquished the chair to Hoeksema,<sup>70</sup> who appointed a committee to bring advice regarding the protests. According to C. Hanko, Hoeksema “added that the committee should not be too ready to condemn Rev. De Wolf, because the matter might not be as serious as it appeared to be.”<sup>71</sup> The consistory’s treatment of these

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He joined the PRC in 1926, and asked the combined consistories to declare him eligible for a call in the PRC, which the consistories did; see “Minutes of the Combined Consistory Meeting,” November 3, 1926, Art. 20. At its meeting on June 3, the classis of the PRC went on record as saying that it judged Jonker’s deposition to be unjust, it renewed his eligibility for a call for three more years, and it permitted him to speak a word of edification. However, Jonker never received a call, and never held the office of minister in the PRC. See “Minutes of Classis,” June 2 and 3, 1937, Art. 11. The PRC recognized his gifts in other ways. Broader assemblies often gave him advisory vote, and when doing so referred to him as “Rev.” Jonker. He also served as stated clerk of both Classis East and the PRCA synod. Jonker did not live to see the controversy resolved; he died in February 1953.

68 “Minutes of Consistory of First PRC,” April 23, 1951, Art. 20.

69 *The Confessions and Church Order of the PRC*, 390. This decision had been added in 1934.

70 “Minutes of Consistory of First PRC,” May 14, 1951, Art. 14.

71 C. Hanko, *Less Than The Least*, 210.

protests was prolonged because the consistory was “stale-mated,”<sup>72</sup> and eventually the consistory “decided to drop the entire matter.”<sup>73</sup>

De Wolf's second statement was made on September 14, 1952. This time Hoeksema saw the seriousness of the matter; both he and Ophoff registered a protest with the consistory at its meeting the next evening, September 15.<sup>74</sup> On February 16, 1953, the consistory, after examining De Wolf at length, declared his answer satisfactory, and his doctrine to be scriptural and confessional.<sup>75</sup> Attempting to show that De Wolf's statements were heretical, both Hoeksema and Ophoff asked the consistory to rescind this decision.<sup>76</sup> Ophoff himself used the word “heretical,” and did so because he understood the statements to express a doctrine that was contrary to Scripture and the Reformed confessions. Ophoff, always following a logically consistent train of thought, pointed out to the consistory that if it considered De Wolf's statements to be in harmony with Scripture and the Reformed confessions, then it must declare Ophoff's to be heretical, for both presentations of the matter could not co-exist. In his own words, regarding De Wolf's first statement:

As the consistory well knows, my position is that this statement of Rev. De Wolf is heretical. The consistory is well acquainted with my position and my whole argument as I have over and over stated it upon our meetings. By pronouncing this statement of Rev. De Wolf to be the true doctrine of the Scriptures and the Confession, the consistory must well understand that it has pronounced my doctrinal position heretical. And, therefore, the consistory now finds itself under the moral necessity of taking against me disciplinary action . . . .<sup>77</sup>

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72 G. Hoeksema, *Therefore Have I Spoken*, 322.

73 C. Hanko, *Less Than The Least*, 210. Ophoff gives more firsthand information about why he wrote this protest and why it was dropped in “Another Assault (Conclusion),” *Standard Bearer*, May 1, 1954.

74 “Minutes of the Consistory of First PRC,” September 15, 1952, Art. 7. September 18, Art. 6.

75 “Minutes of the Consistory of First PRC,” February 16, 1953, Arts. 6,7.

76 See Ophoff's letter to his consistory, dated February 23, 1953. In it he often uses the word “heretical” to refer to these statements. The letter is part of Supplement XIV of the meeting of Classis East, April 1953 (Wyoming: PRC Archives), Box 152, Folder 34.

77 Ophoff, “Letter to the Consistory of First PRC,” dated February 23, November 2019

Let it be clear: the consistory had *not* declared Ophoff's position heretical, and had *not* begun any disciplinary action against him. Nor had it done so regarding De Wolf. Ophoff was insisting that the position of either himself or De Wolf was heretical, and the consistory must proceed to discipline either Ophoff or De Wolf.

When the consistory would not uphold Hoeksema and Ophoff, both men appealed the matter to Classis East. In the end, the classis upheld Hoeksema and Ophoff, and declared both statements of De Wolf to be heretical on the basis of Scripture and the Reformed confessions.<sup>78</sup>

As an elder in First PRC in 1952 and 1953, Ophoff played a role in the defense of the protests also: he had a voice in the assembly that deliberated on the protests.<sup>79</sup> His protest to the consistory, quoted on the previous page, reflects this in the words "as I have over and over stated it upon our meetings." That the consistory did not appoint Ophoff to its committee mandated to bring advice in the matter stands to reason, in light of the fact that he brought a protest. Had another than Ophoff protested, and had Ophoff's position on the issue not been evident for years already, he might well have been appointed to such a committee.

### Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated Prof. Herman Hanko's assertion that "Rev. Ophoff played a major role in that controversy."<sup>80</sup> That role had several aspects. First, Ophoff's role was *to notice early* that trouble was coming. Hanko says: "It is not an exaggeration to say that Rev. Ophoff noticed this [indications of trouble in the PRC] before anyone else in the churches."<sup>81</sup> Ophoff had noticed how well many in the

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1953.

78 "Minutes of Classis East," April-May 1953 session, Art. 267b. The decision was made on Thursday, May 28, 1953. "Heretical" was the word classis used.

79 Herman Hanko, "George M. Ophoff (26) The Polemicist," *Beacon Lights*, August-September 1976, 14.

80 H. Hanko, "George M. Ophoff (23) Polemicist," *Beacon Lights*, April 1978, 10.

81 H. Hanko, "George M. Ophoff (24) Polemicist," *Beacon Lights*, May 1978, 3.

PRC, even Hoeksema, received Schilder, and realized that Schilder's covenant view and that of the PRC, which was a development of its stand on common grace, were not compatible.<sup>82</sup>

Second, Ophoff's role was *to sound the alarm early and clearly*. In the fall of 1948 Ophoff protested a decision of his consistory, that of First PRC, regarding where its missionaries were to labor. The substance of that protest is not to the point of this thesis. What is to the point is that in the course of the protest Ophoff noted the errors that he saw in the theology of the Liberated: theirs was a "double-track theology" according to which "the reprobated in the covenant as well as the elect objectively possess Christ" and "the promise of the gospel is always conditional—if you believe you will be saved. This conditional promise comes to all, elect and reprobated."<sup>83</sup> This Ophoff expressed in 1948, a year after the conference with Schilder. That he appealed the matter to Classis East, and later synod, was the means by which these comments became publicly known. Synod judged these comments to be "irrelevant to the case,"<sup>84</sup> that is, not germane to his protest. The point for now is that Ophoff expressed himself early.

Ophoff also sounded the alarm early by responding to Petter in the May 1, 1949, issue of the *Standard Bearer*. That he sounded the alarm *early* does *not* mean he sounded it *first*. In late 1947, Herman Veldman began writing about the doctrine of the covenant in the "Our Doctrine" rubric of the *Standard Bearer*,<sup>85</sup> and a month later Gerrit Vos began sounding the alarm in a series of editorials.<sup>86</sup> Soon after he resumed writing the editorials of the *Standard Bearer* (a stroke had interrupted this work), Herman Hoeksema observed and commented

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82 See also Herman Hanko, "George Martin Ophoff: Humble Servant of the Truth," in *Portraits of Faithful Saints*, 417.

83 Ophoff's protest to his consistory, as found in *Acts of Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grand Rapids: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 1949), 33.

84 *1949 Acts of Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches*, 55.

85 The first in a series of articles was entitled "Our Covenant God," *Standard Bearer*, December 15, 1947. This series appeared in almost every successive issue through October 1, 1948.

86 Gerrit Vos, "The Covenant Controversy," *Standard Bearer*, January 15, 1948; February 1, 1948; February 15, 1948; March 1, 1948; March 15, 1948; April 1, 1948.

on an exchange in a Dutch periodical between the Liberated minister F. L. Bos and the synodical minister E. G. Van Teylingen.<sup>87</sup> In commenting on this exchange, Hoeksema held before the readership of the *Standard Bearer* the PRC position on the covenant, showing that it differed from the Liberated view and that the PRC view was in harmony with the Reformed confessions. But it was Ophoff's publishing of the letter of Prof. Holwerda that constituted his sounding the alarm *clearly*, by demonstrating that the enemy was within the camp.

Third, Ophoff's role was *to keep sounding the alarm*, and to join the front-ranks of the battle. This he did by his *Standard Bearer* writings and by protesting De Wolf's statements. He was not the only one to protest, but even here his role was distinct: he was one of the first two protestants, and the only one to protest *both* statements.

Fourth, Ophoff stayed in the battle until it was finished. This was vintage Ophoff: when he began a matter, he was determined to finish it. None other than Herman Hoeksema once urged Ophoff to drop his protest against De Wolf's first controversial statement,<sup>88</sup> apparently because Hoeksema did not see that the matter was as serious as Ophoff considered it to be. Ophoff did not drop the protest, and would not. The truth as taught in Scripture and the Reformed confessions was what mattered to him. For it, he was tenacious.

Apt are the comments of David Engelsma: "George M. Ophoff, with his colleague in the Protestant Reformed seminary, Herman Hoeksema, was the main proponent and defender of the Declaration and its theology of the covenant. The fiery Ophoff was, if anything, a fiercer foe of the theology of a conditional covenant than was Hoeksema."<sup>89</sup> ●

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87 Herman Hoeksema, "Proposition Concerning the Covenant of Grace," *Standard Bearer*, February 15, 1949; March 1, 1949; March 15, 1949; April 1, 1949.

88 H. Hanko, "George Martin Ophoff: Humble Servant of the Truth," 417; see also the comments above to which footnote 7 is appended.

89 Engelsma, *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant*, 60.

# A Report from the Desert

Cory J. Griess

The article was given as a speech in three places in Mexico at the request of the National Presbyterian Church. This explains the approach to the article, reporting what is happening in the United States. It also explains the heavy reliance on web-based sources in the footnotes.

## Introduction

I intend to give this paper as a news station would report a story. If a building burns down, the reporter first reports the facts of the story—a building burned down on...street. Then the reporter goes on to explain why this has happened. In the first part of the paper, I am simply going to simply report what has happened and is happening in the largest Dutch Reformed denominations influenced by reformational thought<sup>1</sup> in the U.S. These are the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). There are news reports that reporters do not enjoy giving. For me, this is one of them. These denominations were once strong, thoroughly Reformed, and creedal; now it seems the fires of liberalism are overcoming them. In the second part of the speech, I am going to explain why, in my belief, this has happened, at least in part. The explanation is the influence of reformational thought.

## The Present State of the Main Dutch Neo-Calvinist Influenced Denominations

The Reformed Church in America, and the Christian Reformed Church have been home to reformational thought since its inception.

<sup>1</sup> Reformational philosophy is a movement within the stream of Dutch neo-Calvinism to establish a Christian Philosophy. It was pioneered by Herman Dooyeweerd and his brother-in-law, D.H. Vollenhoven, in the 1930's. Dooyeweerd's magnum opus, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, was published in English in the 1950's. His following grew in the United States thereafter, until it became greater there than anywhere else, especially in certain Dutch Reformed circles.

Both denominations are, generally speaking, moving in a theological-ly liberal direction. There are battles in both the RCA and the CRC over the acceptance of homosexuality and homosexual marriage—defended as pleasing to God. Women in church office was accepted long ago in both denominations, contrary to the Word of God. The authority of God’s Word having been set aside, the next step is that the progressives fight for acceptance of homosexuality. Currently in the RCA there are at least three practicing lesbian ministers functioning in good standing in the denomination.<sup>2</sup> In 2005, a letter to the RCA Synod stated: “We believe that the Church of Jesus Christ, full of the Spirit, should bless covenantal same-sex relationships, as it does heterosexual relationships. We believe committed same-sex relationships are not sinful, but rather a blessing from God. We believe that the Reformed Church in America ought to confess its sinfulness in adhering for too long to an oppressive position on homosexuality and ought to seek the forgiveness of its lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgendered brothers and sisters.” It is noted that [t]he letter included more than 150 signatures, including dozens of RCA ministers, scores of elders and deacons, and several professors at RCA institutions.”<sup>3</sup>

In the CRC, a recent survey of the denomination found that 25 percent of its ministers believe that anyone with same—sex attraction should be allowed to live in a same-sex marriage or committed same-sex relationship outside of marriage if their conscience permits them to do so. In the RCA and CRC some ministers are performing gay marriages and, in the RCA, individual congregations are advertising the fact that they will marry gay people. One example is the following: “The consistory of the Greenpoint Reformed Church has voted to encourage committed same-sex couples to prayerfully consider marriage, and pledge our support to couples wishing to get married in our church. If you would like to be married at the Greenpoint Reformed Church or would like one of our ministers to officiate at your wedding, please email us. . . .”<sup>4</sup> Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff, a promi-

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2 Kevin DeYoung, "An Overture Regarding Homosexuality and the RCA." The Gospel Coalition. Last modified March 13, 2012. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/an-overture-regarding-homosexuality-and-the-rca/>.

3 DeYoung, “An Overture.”

4 DeYoung, “An Overture.”

ment reformational philosopher at Calvin University recently gave a public lecture in support of homosexual marriage in church and state, calling this support, support for, “the great good of civil and ecclesial marriage.”<sup>5</sup> His influence has had a large impact on the CRC.

In contradiction to the truth statements of the Word of God, both the RCA and CRC have adopted positions that promote the teaching of theistic evolution in their denominations. The CRC in 2010 did so by removing a previous position that stated that “the clear teaching of Scripture and our confessions on the uniqueness of human beings as image bearers of God rules out the espousal of all theorizing that posits the reality of evolutionary forebears of the human race.”<sup>6</sup> Removing that statement as the position of the denomination, the CRC instead espoused all theorizing that posits the “reality” of evolutionary forebears of the human race. The colleges of the RCA and CRC are committed to a monkeys-to-man evolutionary ancestry of human beings.<sup>7</sup> I give one example from Calvin University, “While being sensitive to the diverse faith backgrounds of our students, we teach biology from an evolutionary paradigm. And we affirm...that life has been on earth for billions of years.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, all life forms have evolved over time. This problem is not only in the biology department. John Schneider, one-time professor of theology at Calvin University and Dan Harlow, until recently professor of religion at Calvin, in 2011 stated publicly that because of their belief in theistic evolution, their teaching is also that Adam and Eve never existed, that there was no paradise where man was sinless, and there was no fall into sin.<sup>9</sup> In

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5 Gayla R. Postma, "Wolterstorff: Biblical Justice and Same-Sex Marriage." *The Banner*. Last modified October 24, 2016. <https://www.thebanner.org/news/2016/10/wolterstorff-biblical-justice-and-same-sex-marriage>.

6 "Creation and Science." The Christian Reformed Church. <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/creation-and-science>.

7 "150th birthday of 'On the Origin of Species' prompts area colleges to assess Darwin's impact." *The Grand Rapids Press*. Last modified September 26, 2009. <https://www.mlive.com/living/grand-rapids/2009/09/mt-preview-6cb3ab31a22e38aa08287743da38bf7edbaad038.html>.

8 "Perspectives on Evolution." Calvin University. Last modified February 4, 2011. <https://calvin.edu/academics/departments-programs/biology/about/mission/evolution-statement.pdf>.

9 Barbara B. Hagerty, "Evangelicals Question The Existence Of Adam" November 2019

2013, CRC theologian Ed Walhout proclaimed that now that the CRC has accepted evolution, the next step is to dismiss Adam and Eve, dismiss the fall of Adam into sin, dismiss the doctrine of original sin, and reimagine Jesus and salvation and the future in light of an evolutionary process.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time and in the same denomination Dr. Wolterstorff is also influencing the CRC with the public teaching that, "...at least in the case of Jews and Muslims, the non-Christian is not worshipping a different god, not worshipping an idol, but merely worshipping differently the same god, the one only God."<sup>11</sup> I could go on, but this gives you a flavor of developments in confessional Reformed churches in the United States. Thankfully, not everyone in these denominations embraces these positions. But this is the trajectory of these denominations.

### **The Explanation of These Developments**

The question is, why has this happened? Why are these denominations being pulled away from the Reformed and biblical faith? There is more than one answer. But I contend that part of the answer is the influence of reformational thought in these denominations. Is there something inherent in reformational thought as it was conceived, whether it is found in the Netherlands, the United States, or anywhere else, that might lead the church in this direction? My answer is that there is.

Reformational philosophers like to trace their roots back to Calvin. There is a connection to Calvin at least in regard to the faith that both teach the sovereignty of God over all aspects of life. However, reformational thought is more than a couple of steps removed from Calvin. First, it comes out of a stream of Calvinism beginning with

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And Eve." National Public Radio. Last modified April 9, 2011. <https://www.npr.org/2011/08/09/138957812/evangelicals-question-the-existence-of-adam-and-eve>.

10 Edwin Walhout, "Tomorrow's Theology." *The Banner*. Last modified May 3, 2013. <https://www.thebanner.org/features/2013/05/tomorrow-s-theology>.

11 William D. Dennison, "Dutch Neo-Calvinism and the Roots of Transformation: An Introductory Essay," *JETS* 42, no. 2 (June 1999): 285, <http://the-highway.com/neo-calvinism.pdf>.

Abraham Kuyper that is known as neo-Calvinism. “Neo” means “new.” It is called neo-Calvinism because it is not entirely the same as the old Calvinism. Peter S. Heslam, a British scholar in his book entitled *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper’s Lectures on Calvinism*, reflecting especially on Kuyper’s cultural pursuits, says, “Kuyper’s Calvinism may justifiably be called ‘neo-Calvinism’ and cannot be taken as an accurate and reliable guide to the theology of John Calvin.”<sup>12</sup> In addition, even in the stream of Dutch neo-Calvinism, Dooyeweerd, the father of reformational thought, took a new turn. This is seen especially in his view of Scripture and his exaltation of philosophy, which will be explained momentarily.

I limit my criticism of Reformational thought to two key points. First, I argue that the reformational tradition has a low view of the authority of Scripture. Second, I argue, that while this tradition has a low view of the authority of Scripture, it has too high of a view of its own importance. This overly inflated view of its own importance has distracted the church where this thought has been accepted, from being what the church is called to be in Scripture.

Before I carry out those criticisms, let me state that I am not in favor of a world-flight, Anabaptist approach to life. As long as God allows in His providence, God’s people must live in all spheres of life governed by Scripture. They must be taught to do so, and how to do so.<sup>13</sup> I also agree with Dooyeweerd and his followers that there is no neutrality. And Christianity may indeed have influence upon culture. In God’s providence, it has, and often does. But this is ultimately up to God, and this influence has always waxed and waned throughout history. Christ is Lord regardless of the effect of Christianity on society. He is not more Lord or less Lord over the world depending on Christianity’s effect. According to His good purpose, with both the waxing and the waning of Christianity’s impact on society, He gathers His church and builds His spiritual kingdom often, historically, even more when Christianity’s influence wanes.

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12 Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper’s Lectures on Calvinism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 260.

13 See the pamphlet by David J. Engelsma *The Reformed Worldview on Behalf of a Godly Culture*. <http://www.prca.org/resources/publications/pamphlets/item/640-the-reformed-worldview-on-behalf-of-a-godly-culture>. November 2019

### **The Reformational Tradition's Low View of the Authority of Scripture**

Dooyeweerd posited the notion that all reality can be analyzed in fifteen distinct modal spheres or aspects, from the “number” of that portion of reality, to its “spatial” aspect, to the “ethics” surrounding it, to its “faith” aspect, and so forth. Cats can be considered from the point of view of their number—how many there are—or how many legs one cat has. They can be considered from the point of view of their shape, the spatial aspect. They can be considered from the point of view of their ability always to land on their feet when dropped, something Dooyeweerd would call the “kinematic” aspect. Cats can also be considered from the point of view that Egyptians worshipped cats—the “faith” aspect. There are fifteen of these aspects by which all reality can be examined.

According to Dooyeweerd, each aspect has its own God-created laws that are connected to it. These laws, or norms, structure the aspects. And when society conforms its understanding of all things to the laws of these aspects, then culture will be transformed under the rule of Christ. Dooyeweerd says that these laws or norms that go along with each aspect are the Word of God. Just as much as Scripture is the Word of God, these created norms that structure the aspects, are the Word of God. In fact, Scripture is only *one part* of the Word of God that structures all of reality. “We must now try to realize the significance of the distinction between the Word of God in its full and actual reality and in its restricted sense as the object of theological thought.”<sup>14</sup> Dooyeweerd taught that sacred Scripture is only the Word of God with authority (as propositional statements of truth) for *one* out of the fifteen aspects, the modal sphere of “faith.” From Scripture we can learn the norms, the laws, for the faith aspect, and, therefore, can call the Egyptian worship of the cat, idolatry. But the Scriptures do not apply as propositional statements of truth outside of the “faith” aspect. They only apply as statements of truth to things like prayer and sacraments,—“faith” things. In the other fourteen aspects, the function of Scripture is only vaguely to “animate us,” but not to give us *statements of truth* that apply to all of reality.<sup>15</sup> John Frame comments,

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14 Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought*, (Nutley, NJ: The Craig Press, 1980), 143.

15 See Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight*, chapters 5, 6, 7, 113-57.

As we read scripture, the power ‘grips’ us, changes our ‘direction’ and thereby affects all areas of life. But as a book with words and sentences, however, the Bible is said to address only the faith aspect of human life.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, Dooyeweerd criticized others (VanTil)<sup>17</sup> for stating that Scripture, as statements of truth properly understood, ought to govern all our thinking in all of life. Dooyeweerd said, as propositional statements, Scripture may only govern our religious thinking.<sup>18</sup> And so with regard to the creation of the world in Genesis 1 and 2, for example, Dooyeweerd said that the six days of creation in Genesis have nothing to do with 24-hour time periods because Scripture’s only concern may be the “faith” aspect. Dooyeweerd called the days of creation “faith-days.”<sup>19</sup> But as far as how long they were, that is not the task of the words of Scripture; that is the task of another sphere and its norms to determine.<sup>20</sup>

Is there not a connection between this view of the Bible and the earlier quotations of men who deny the existence of Adam and Eve and the fall into sin? The latest unbelieving, “scientific”<sup>21</sup> theory is that humans evolved not from two people, but from at least seventy. Even though Scripture denies this, it is accepted by the men quoted

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16 John Frame, "The Amsterdam Philosophy: A Preliminary Critique." Frame-Poythress. Last modified, 2012. <https://frame-poythress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/FrameJohnAmsterdamPhilosophy1972.pdf>, 28.

17 By the 1960’s VanTil was distancing himself from Dooyeweerd and the movement precisely because of Dooyeweerd’s view of the Bible and exaltation of philosophy.

18 John Byl, "Dooyeweerd's Legacy." Bylogos. Last modified September 14, 2010. <http://bylogos.blogspot.com/2010/09/dooyeweerds-legacy.html>.

19 Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight*, 150-1.

20 John Frame, "Dooyeweerd and the Word of God." Frame-Poythress. Last modified June 4, 2012. <https://frame-poythress.org/dooyeweerd-and-the-word-of-god/>, second article, footnote 16. In addition, notice, Roy Clouser, a contemporary reformational theologian, who says applying Scripture as statements of truth to the other aspects is “fundamentalism.” [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1596&context=pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1596&context=pro_rege).

21 Scripture calls this “science falsely so-called” in 1 Timothy 6:20.

above because the Bible as propositional truth may not speak to these matters even if it intends to. It is silenced. Sacred Scripture is told to sit in a corner and only speak when it wants to address the “faith” aspect. As you can see, this thinking can be used to evade what Scripture actually says in many ways and with regard to things to which the Scriptures intend to speak.<sup>22</sup> The Scriptures call God’s people to be Bereans, who “were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” (Acts 17:11) For all the talk from some reformationals of agreement with Calvin who taught that we must put Scripture on as the lens through which we must view everything in life, it must be understood that for a true follower of Dooyeweerd, Scripture is not *propositional truth* when put on as a lens. Rather, Scripture only may be put on as a vague, general, “inspiration” for all of life. In fact, reformational thought ends up calling the church to put *creation* on a lens, (which becomes, then, unbelieving science), and not let Scripture speak. Or if it may speak, only through the lens of the more fundamental word given in creation (unbelieving science).

This has led many reformational philosophers (including Dooyeweerd) to put philosophy above theology and, in fact, to speak critically of systematic theology in the process. In his book *In the Twilight of Western Thought*, Dooyeweerd’s own introduction to his philosophy, Dooyeweerd makes philosophy more fundamental than theology.<sup>23</sup> Really, he questions whether or not we have to know anything of God’s truth propositionally to be a Christian.<sup>24</sup> In fact Dooyeweerd goes on to call dogmatic theology, which sets forth the content of the Scriptures in propositions, “dangerous.”<sup>25</sup> By this criticism of theology, Dooyeweerd is critical of the authority of God’s Word. The Scriptures

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22 Reformationals will immediately call this “fundamentalism.” Genuine fundamentalists do not always interpret and apply Scripture properly, but it is no fundamentalism to let Scripture speak authoritatively to all to which it speaks.

23 If a reader doubts this he must read for himself, Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought*, the three chapters entitled “Philosophy and Theology.” See especially, the second chapter by that name, 132.

24 Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight*, 135.

25 Dooyeweerd, 135.

are certainly not a theology textbook, but there is a system of theology in sacred Scripture. There is in Scripture a rational, coherent, system of thought, the denial of which is a denial of Scripture itself. This is what Jude is talking about in Jude 3 when he says, “it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” The faith once for all times delivered to the saints is a logical system of truth—“the faith” delivered to the church by the Spirit, through the apostles. Jude calls the church to contend for that system. The apostles were, among other things, systematic theologians. The book of Romans is a logical, systematic theology of salvation. The Reformed and Presbyterian creeds claim to be, not infallibly so, but properly so, representatives of that system. And Reformed and Presbyterian people believe that to be true.<sup>26</sup>

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26 May God give the conviction of the Presbyterian J. Gresham Machen: “There are those who think that systematic theology on the basis of the Bible is impossible; there are those who think that the Bible contains a mere record of human seeking after God and that its teachings are a mass of contradiction which can never be resolved. But to the number of those persons we do not belong. We believe for our part that God has spoken to us in his Word, and that he has given us not merely theology, but a system of theology, a great logically consistent body of truth. That system of theology, that body of truth, which we find in the Bible is the Reformed faith, the faith commonly called Calvinistic, which is set forth so gloriously in the Confession and catechisms of the Presbyterian church. It is sometimes referred to as a “man-made creed.” But we do not regard it as such. We regard it, in accordance with our ordination pledge as ministers in the Presbyterian church, as the creed which God has taught us in his Word. If it is contrary to the Bible, it is false. But we hold that it is not contrary to the Bible, but in accordance with the Bible, and true. We rejoice in the approximations to that body of truth which other systems of theology contain; we rejoice in our Christian fellowship with other evangelical churches; we hope that members of other churches, despite our Calvinism, may be willing to enter into Westminster Seminary as students and to listen to what we may have to say. But we cannot consent to impoverish our message by setting forth less than what we find the Scripture to contain; and we believe that we shall best serve our fellow Christians, from whatever church they may come, if we set forth not some vague greatest common measure among various creeds, but that great historic faith that has come through Augustine and Calvin to our own

Operating with a high view of Scripture, Reformed orthodoxy has always confessed dogmatic theology to be the “Queen of Sciences.”<sup>27</sup> The term “university” is the combination of the word diversity and the word unity. A university is a place where all the diverse subjects are studied, but studied together in a unity. At least before Kant, the unity of the diversity was not philosophy, it was theology. The Word of God in its truth claims was seen as the light shed ultimately upon all knowledge, and holding all knowledge together. Reformational thought in its disparagement of theology, and exaltation of philosophy parts ways with the Reformation. But interestingly, it even parts ways with neo-Calvinists like Herman Bavinck. “In the circle of the sciences, theology is entitled to place of honor, not because of the persons who pursue this science, but in virtue of the object it pursues; it is and remains—provided this expression is correctly understood—the queen of the sciences.”<sup>28</sup>

Not only has reformational thought put Scripture as propositional truth into a corner by limiting its authority to the “faith” modal aspect, and by placing philosophy above theology, but now even with respect to the “faith” aspect, reformational thought opened the way for Scripture to be stripped of its authority. The teaching of reformational thought has been that the moral law of God is more fundamentally

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Presbyterian church.” And may God give us the conviction of Presbyterian theologian B.B. Warfield, explaining his own subscription to the Westminster Confession: “I wish to declare that I sign these Standards not as a necessary form which must be submitted to, but gladly and willingly as the expression of a personal and cherished conviction and further that the system taught in these symbols is the system which will be drawn out of the Scriptures in the prosecution of the teaching to which you have called me. Not, indeed, because commencing with that system the Scriptures can be made to teach it, but because commencing with the Scriptures I cannot make them teach anything else.”

27 Science properly defined, of course. Theology is a different kind of science, but it is a science. The term “Queen of Sciences” originated with Aquinas but was carried on by the Reformed. Cf. “Form of the Installation of Professors of Theology” in *The Psalter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, revised 1998), 109 (in the back).

28 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 1: Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 54.

found in creation. The moral law that is most fundamental and enduring is, love God and love your neighbor. This law is discoverable apart from Scripture, but has also been inscripturated. Yet, as any reader of the Bible knows, Scripture also gives us an abundance of material answering the question, “*how* do I love God and the neighbor.” Some reformational philosophers view these commands of Scripture explaining how to love God and the neighbor, as time bound. Not merely in the sense of the changes in the unfolding of redemptive history from Old to New Testament, but bound to a former age that is now irrelevant. Frame comments on the reformational position: “How do we know how to love in our day? The answer is that the particular commands of Scripture, are *illustrations of how* we should do it. But, the church today must do for its age what the apostles did for theirs.”<sup>29</sup> In other words we are to write our own commands for the faith aspect of life, making it up as we go, but follow the general example of how the apostles did so in the New Testament for their age. And we are to do this without taking what they wrote as the actual Word of God for our age. “Schrotenboer for instance discusses some of the problems we face in applying biblical commandments to the modern cultural situation, and comes to the conclusion that even the ten commandments are not normative for us ...No the decalogue is not the absolute changeless law, it is rather an *adaptation* or expression of God’s law [more fundamental law in nature] for a particular time and place.”<sup>30</sup>

The result of all this is obvious. No longer is the church under the authority of the Scriptures instead, she is under the authority of the subjective opinion of men. This has been how many progressives in the RCA and CRC have argued for women in office, for example. The Scripture that does not allow this position is dismissed as not applicable to our day. This has led to increasing acceptance of other liberal doctrines at the expense of the authority of God’s timeless Word. Principles work through.

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29 Frame, *Dooyeweerd and the Word*, <https://frame-poythress.org/dooyeweerd-and-the-word-of-god/>, second article, at footnote 19.

30 Frame, *Dooyeweerd and the Word*.

Next I will quote some of the contemporary reformational theologians in the CRC/RCA as they speak to the issue of homosexuality. As you read them, I ask you to consider whether or not there is anything of the view of the Scriptures in these contemporary quotations, that is in line with the view of the Word of God found in Dooyeweerd and other reformationals as explained above. The first is from Dr. Wolterstorff, who is reported to have said,

Being on the homosexual end of the sexual orientation continuum... doesn't seem [to be]... a mark of the fallenness of creation, but rather a creational variance. "When those with homosexual orientation act on their desires in a loving, committed relationship, [they] are not, as far as I can see, violating the love command," ... "If homosexual orientation is not morally blameable or a disorder, and if members of the church are to accept people as they are, then why is it wrong for people with [homosexual] orientation [to act] on their desires in a loving and covenantal relationship?"<sup>31</sup>

The love command is the only thing that endures, and we have to apply it as we see fit, following the example of how the apostles did it for their day, but not necessarily coming to the same conclusions.

Or, from reformational theologian James Olthuis, whose position is influenced as follows:

Love is the creation norm of human relationships, including marriage. Since a homosexual relationship experiences a love relationship, then a same-sex marriage is permissible and even recommended... A love-filled same-sex commitment is a "sign of God's abundant grace, a token of God's future in a fallen world."<sup>32</sup>

The love command is all that matters, not the Scripture's own authoritative commands for how love is to be expressed.

And finally, the most revealing, from reformational theologian Hendrik Hart:

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31 Postma, *Wolterstorff*, <https://www.thebanner.org/news/2016/10/wolterstorff-biblical-justice-and-same-sex-marriage>.

32 Dennison, *Dutch Neo-Calvinism*, <http://the-highway.com/neo-calvinism.pdf>, 287.

Normally Reformed people would not be tempted to derive their sense of what is ‘natural’ straight from the Bible, [!] nor would they use the Bible to become informed and knowledgeable about homosexuality [!]. Reformed Christians have a long tradition of regarding the Bible as a book of faith [Notice! limited to the “faith” aspect] and not as a text for geology, biology (evolution), hygiene (purity code), economics (jubilee), or whatever else.<sup>33</sup> The Bible gives us our ultimate perspective, our fundamental orientation for our lives, [the “inspiration” and vague ‘direction’ ] but does not provide us with data and concepts we can simply and directly use in our time. Its concrete morality is not and cannot be ours. It is not a moral text. Christian faith is not moralistic.<sup>34</sup>

Scripture only applies as general power and orienting force, but not as actual statements that are authoritatively to lead us. And it only applies in certain areas, even though it may speak to other areas.

With this view of Scripture, especially among the leaders, is it any wonder that what I reported as happening in Dutch Reformed circles in the United States is indeed taking place?

### **Reformational Thought’s High View of Itself**

My second reason for arguing that reformational thought bears responsibility for the liberalism in the denominations where it has been housed, is that reformational thought’s inflated view of its own importance has distracted the church from being the church according to God’s Word. First of all, much reformational thinking—at times explicitly, almost always at least implicitly—leaves the impression that by reformational efforts, we will transform this world into “the millennial kingdom” or even the new heavens and new earth. William Dennison intriguingly points out that as one studies church history, one sees a shift in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. That shift is away from hope in Christ establishing the new heavens and new earth, to a hope that is centered ultimately in this life, and even a hope that we will

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33 Here the fallacy is that since the Bible is not a textbook for geology, economics, etc., it must not be allowed to say *anything* to those matters, even if it does intentionally speak to them (which it does). Then, it may not say anything concerning morality either. It is limited to whatever content one gives to “the faith aspect.”

34 Dennison, *Dutch Neo-Calvinism*, <http://the-highway.com/neo-calvinism.pdf>, 287, footnote 81.

turn this world into the next, by our transformation of culture. “Even Christianity would relinquish her desire for the next world...For many Christians, the new heavens and new earth will take place in this world.” Dennison goes on to lay a large part of the blame for that shift at the feet of Dutch reformational thought.

Suddenly, during the nineteenth century, the Calvinistic view of eschatology emphasized the continuity between the present heaven and earth and the new heaven and earth. In other words, through the social activity of Christians God will bring restoration and redemption to the present creation. Herein, the present creation will be the redeemed new creation without the effects of sin in its creatures as well as in nature.<sup>35</sup>

The church takes the place reserved for Christ.

Along with this has come the notion that God has two purposes in history. One is to save a church in Jesus Christ. The other, is to establish a worldwide God-glorifying culture, established by the union between the church and the world on the basis of a supposed common grace. As soon then as the world is convinced of the modal spheres, and falls in line with their norms, the heavenly city will be complete. For many, this other goal is just as important as the saving of Christ’s church, for many the saving of His church is only a means to this end.<sup>36</sup> Whether or not reformationals state that they are postmillennial, and some do state that, the thinking certainly sets the stage for postmillennialism, naturally leads to it, and is consistent with it.

Second of all, reformational thought’s inflated view of itself is seen in reformationals who will not go as far as stated above. Instead, these emphasize that even if we do not turn this world into the heavenly Jerusalem, we and the world with us, will fill up the new heavens and new earth with “stuff” that we produce, under the influence of the reformational worldview. Misinterpreting Revelation 21:24-26,<sup>37</sup> they argue that “cultural riches,” and “a variety of cultural and social experiments involving the human spirit” will go into the heavenly

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35 Dennison, “Dutch Neo-Calvinism,” <http://the-highway.com/neo-calvinism.pdf>, 277.

36 Saving grace serves a supposed common grace.

37 For what I believe is the correct interpretation, see: <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=114181854562>.

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city.<sup>38</sup> Also entering will be, “The Arc de Triumph, the Mona Lisa, Shakespeare’s sonnets, the ’57 Chevy, the Taj Mahal, Thai food—all the glories of human civilization, only purged of their sinful histories, imperfections, mixed motives, and negative byproducts. The Bible says that all of them will come into God’s eternal city as offerings to the LORD who is the fountain of all goodness, truth and beauty.<sup>39</sup> And the point is, of course, that we the church by the reformational worldview have to join with the world to produce these things so that there is more to go into the new heavens and new earth.<sup>40</sup>

Reformational thought’s inflated view of its own importance is seen, third, in that it has begun to re-shape biblical doctrines into something having to do with cultural transformation. The biblical doctrine of sin is recast in such a way that it is defined as the culture not aligning itself with the norms. Sanctification is recast from progressive obedience to the law of God from the heart, to progressive transformation of culture. Sanctification becomes “an internal revitalization, which comes upon the people of God through the Holy Spirit. Specifically, the people of God are called and led by the Holy Spirit to purify the creation from sin [disobedience to the norms of the aspects more than to the moral law] on the basis of Christ’s atonement and victory.”<sup>41</sup> The biblical doctrine of election is reshaped from the eternal source of the salvation of God’s people to merely God’s choice of which people are going to transform the culture. Speaking of the Reformed doctrine of predestination, one reformational theologian says:

While that idea [the Reformed doctrine of predestination] may be comforting to those who believe they are among the elect, it is not a topic that plays well from the pulpit. It is an arrogant position that may consign good acquaintances to hell while granting heaven to only a select few. It’s time we make a concerted effort to shift the focus of

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38 Richard Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 86.

39 Greg Johnson, "<http://gregscouch.homestead.com/files/monalisa.htm>." Greg's Couch. <http://gregscouch.homestead.com/files/monalisa.htm>.

40 See also Paul Marshal, *Heaven is Not My Home: Learning to Live in God's Creation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 230-4.

41 Dennison, *Dutch Neo-Calvinism*, <http://the-highway.com/neo-calvinism.pdf>, 286, quoting Al Wolters.

election away from eternal bliss to the biblical concept of God calling the elect to be a blessing in the world.”<sup>42</sup>

Evangelism is recast from calling sinners into a right relationship with God in Christ, to redeeming the institutions of the earth. Therefore, “evangelism should not merely be the preaching of the good news to individuals; rather it should include the restructuring of social institutions as well.”<sup>43</sup>

The cumulative effect of all this has been a shifting of the focus of the church away from a scriptural pursuit of what she should be. There has been a shift away from trust in the power of the Scriptures preached, faithfully, logically, authoritatively, confessionally, as God’s will for all things to which they properly speak, and as the power of God to build His kingdom. There is a lack of trust in the truth of 1 Corinthians 1:21-25, “For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

The gravitational pull of the more exciting prospect of transforming this culture into the millennium or the new heavens and new earth has taken the church’s focus away from working to maintain the marks of the true church (explained in Belgic Confession, Articles 28 and 29). In some circles the prevailing thought is that Christians may in large part ignore the church for the more important matters of cultural transformation. It has drawn God’s people away from the high callings given them in Scripture, (e.g. being a wife and mother). It has drawn the church away from putting her energy into reforming the lives of the families within her midst according to the Word of God (which is the foundation of the church and society, and which is a major focus

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42 Alvin Hoksbergen, "The New Calvinism," *The Banner*. Last modified January 18, 2011. <https://www.thebanner.org/features/2011/01/the-new-calvinism>.

43 Frame, *Amsterdam Philosophy*, <https://frame-poythress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/FrameJohnAmsterdamPhilosophy1972.pdf>, 34.

of the Word of God), to allowing the church to mirror the culture in the family's destruction, all the while calling people to transform the culture. Indeed, the traditional Reformed and biblical emphasis on the antithesis has fallen away. The church becomes more and more like the world, transformed by the world, all the while proclaiming that her goal is to influence the world.

The emphasis on thorough catechizing of the youth in the theology of the Reformed and biblical faith has fallen away, only to be replaced by a watered-down, felt-need religion, and emphasis on being in the culture. The effect upon the youth has been devastating.

It has distracted the church from caring about souls and their eternal state, to caring instead about what "impact" is being made on the culture.

All this, though there is no reformational agenda in the entire book of Acts, which is our model for the spread of the gospel. Where are the apostles, having been sent out by the Lord Jesus Christ, pursuing the reformational ideal? It is not there. Certainly, we are called to make disciples in all the world, teaching them to observe all things that Christ commanded. Certainly, disciples must and will express their discipleship in all spheres of life. Certainly, the more faithful disciples God gives in one area the more their influence will be seen on the level of society. But that is far different from the reformational agenda. An agenda, though absent from the book of Acts, that reformationals insist upon must become the church's focus, in reality distracting her from what Christ calls her to be. Whereas the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Reformation of the church was a RE-formation according to the truth statements of the Scriptures, reformational thought, wherever it has taken root (Netherlands, Canada, United States) has contributed to the church's DE-formation, away from being formed by the Scriptures.

### **The Remedy**

The church must be the church according to the Word of God. What is needed is more Calvinism and less neo-Calvinism. Her focus must be on what Scripture places its focus upon. Ironically, she will be no good to anyone, much less the world's culture, if she does not. Let her stand upon the absolute authority of the Word of God, authoritative in its truth statements in regards to everything to which it speaks; a full-bodied conviction of *sola scriptura*, as that of the Reformers and

of the Reformed confessions. Let Christians do their science through the lens of the propositional truth statements of Scripture.<sup>44</sup> Let them do telecommunications through the lens of Scripture's truth statements, live their family life through the lens of Scripture's truth statements, and every other aspect of the Christian life.

Let them establish schools built upon the word-for-word inspiration of Scripture, with its authority proclaimed and applied in every subject.<sup>45</sup> Let Christians take a more sober view of the church's effect in the world. Sometimes God gives more effect in His providence, sometimes less. But let the Christian strive to be a faithful presence in every aspect of life, to the glory of God, in whatever age He gives us in which to live. And let them leave the results of that to Him, being willing to bear reproach and to go outside the camp for His sake. Let them retain the scriptural emphasis on the spiritual antithesis between church and world, as we live in this present Babylon. Let us live more like Daniel, less like Esther. James 4:4, "Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God."<sup>46</sup>

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44 The Bible is not a science textbook of course. But there are times when it intentionally speaks to scientific matters. When it intends to do so, those statements must be held for truth and must become the lense through which we engage in scientific endeavor. That is not fundamentalist; that is Reformed.

45 To give one's children over to unregenerate men for most of the hours of the day, for most of the days of the year, to fill their heads and hearts with the philosophy of men, especially in the day and age in which we live, is not far away from handing them over to the devil himself to teach..

46 Many reformationals will immediately accuse me of being a dualist at this point. No one who believes in the absolute sovereignty of God can be a dualist. Nonetheless, there is in sacred Scripture, clearly, the teaching of what Herman Bavinck called a "relative dualism." Bavinck, whose theology was written to combat dualism, said a relative duality is unavoidable in Scripture. There is after all a real devil, with real power given of God, and a kingdom of this world. He is "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience." (Ephesians 2:2). For Herman Bavinck's notion of "relative dualism" see John Bolt, "Herman Bavinck on Natural Law and Two Kingdoms: Some Further Reflections." *The Bavinck Review* 4 (2013). [https://bavinckinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/TBR4\\_06\\_Bolt.pdf](https://bavinckinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/TBR4_06_Bolt.pdf), 83. Bolt says reformationals are afflicted

Let the church today heed the call of Christ to the church in Sardis, Revelation 3:2, “Be watchful, and *strengthen the things which remain*, that are ready to die.” We are living in a dark age morally and spiritually. The answer of the church in this age must be to strengthen the things that remain in our midst as this culture sinks into the cesspool of moral decay. The world is increasingly bold in its godlessness. Children and youth are being snatched up. The answer is the biblical and Reformed doctrine and life, taught to them thoroughly and without compromise, and exemplified before them in knowledge and piety, whether in church, home, school, and the carrying out of our vocations.

And let Christians never forget, that our hope is ultimately not in this age but in the age to come--an age ushered in by Christ Himself. 2 Peter 3:13 reads, “Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments wisely,

It seems to me that the men who are more responsible than any others for the state of the world, and especially for the state of the church, today, were the so-called preacher-politicians of the last century who displayed such enthusiasm and zeal and energy in trying to reform the world and society, and who gave the impression that education was more important than salvation. They were men who talked about this world and what could be done here and now, and so turned the attention of men and women away from the world that is to come. The tragedy is not so much that they believed in reform, but that they became *over-zealous*, and pinned their faith to reform... The Christian is not only to believe in government, he is to take part in it. But the moment he begins to pin his faith to it and to believe that it can save the world, then he is contradicting the gospel, he is denying the Christian faith. We must not pin our faith to this world, our hope must not be set upon it. The Christian is a man to whom the main thing, and the great thing, is that glory, that world that is to come. ‘Look for!’ ‘We *look for!* a new heavens and a new earth.’<sup>147</sup> ●

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with “dualophobia.”

47 Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Expository Sermons on 2 Peter* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 203.

# The Millennium of Revelation 20

## Rodney Kleyn

The study of eschatology is not an “abstract arm-chair study,” in which we try to figure out and unlock mysteries concerning the future that have nothing to do with us today. Instead, the study of eschatology puts before us the main calling that we have to watch and be ready for the day of the Lord.

In the study of eschatology, there are three main principles or foundational truths that we should keep in mind. First, the Bible teaches that there is only one future coming of Jesus Christ (Rev. 22:12-13). That coming will mark the end of all things as we know them, will bring the final judgment, and will result in the creation of the new heavens and the new earth. Second, there are identifiable signs of the coming of Jesus Christ of which we must be aware as Christians. And, third, the kingdom and rule of Jesus Christ is not future and earthly, but present and spiritual. It is this third principle that we will be considering this evening as we look at the millennium from the very well known passage of Revelation 20:1-6.

In these verses, we have the binding of Satan for a thousand years, (a millennium), and, at the same time, Jesus Christ ruling with His saints. Much of the confusion and erroneous teaching about the end times comes from a misinterpretation of this passage.

### The Millennial Views

There are three basic views of the millennium.

One is the premillennial view, which teaches that the millennium is a future, earthly kingdom and that, prior to this kingdom, (“pre-millennium”), Christ will come two times: first, in a secret rapture in which all true Christians will be taken up into a temporary, seven-year holding pattern in the skies during which time the kingdom of antichrist will rise and the Jews, because of severe persecution, will be converted *en masse*. Then, at the end of that seven years, Jesus will come again with the Christians and establish the thousand-year, earthly kingdom of peace and prosperity. That is premillennialism.

The second view is that of postmillennialism, which also teaches that the thousand-year kingdom of Jesus Christ is mostly future and earthly. This view teaches that in the last one thousand years or so of history here on earth, Christianity will make great strides, the world will become a better place as a result, and there will be a golden-age of the gospel and of earthly peace and prosperity. Not only will the majority be converted, but society will be dominated by Christians, so that world economies and politics are run according to biblical principles. At the end of that period of time, (“post-millennium”), Jesus will come, into a mostly good world, will destroy Satan and the few remnants of sin, and will usher in the new heaven and a new earth. Post-millennialism teaches that the world is gradually becoming a better place and will continue to so improve as history progresses.

Both of those views take the passage in Revelation to refer to an earthly, future kingdom.

The other view, which has been labeled “amillennialism,” is the one that I will be teaching and explaining this evening. This view does not deny that there is a millennium but, rather, teaches that the thousand-year reign of Revelation 20 is already happening now; that the millennium is a present, spiritual reality; that Jesus reigns from heaven throughout the entire New Testament age by His Spirit and His Word, and that it is during this time that Satan is bound for a thousand years.

### **Revelation 20 in Context**

Now, let us look more closely at Revelation 20 and see that this is the proper understanding of the one thousand years.

To begin with, we must note that this is the only mention, in the entire Bible, of the millennium. When you have something like that in Scripture, which seems isolated and unique, then in order to understand it, you have to put it in the context of all the teaching of God’s Word. You must interpret it in its immediate context, and you have to evaluate your interpretation in light of all of Scripture.

First, then, we consider the millennium in its immediate context within the book of Revelation. Notice, first, that this book is written to seven specific churches that were being persecuted and were surrounded by a godless culture. This book is not a speculative book

that only tells about things in the future that have nothing to do with the present, but it is written to encourage the church in the world that is being persecuted. It has a practical purpose.

Second, the book of Revelation is a book of prophecy that tells about “the things that must shortly come to pass” (Revelation 1:1). There are seven main divisions or sections in this book. These are not to be read as chronological, but rather as parallel, each describing the same history of the entire New Testament age from seven different perspectives. And as the book progresses, the focus shifts more and more, in each of these seven sections, to the last days. Revelation 20 falls in the last section, where the focus has shifted from what is happening on earth during the history of the new dispensation to what is happening in the spiritual realm and to Satan, and the focus is on the final destruction of Satan at the end of time.<sup>1</sup>

Third, we must understand that the book of Revelation is almost entirely symbolic. It is made up mostly of visions that cannot be taken literally. You see that with the numbers in the book of Revelation: twenty-four elders represent the Old and New Testament church; the 144,000 represent the whole body of God’s elect gathered in heaven; or, you have the vision of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that cannot be taken literally, but rather represents the Antichrist and his dominion in the earth. So, the book of Revelation is symbolic. And that symbolism is right here in this passage too in the binding of Satan. There is a spirit, the Devil, that is bound with a chain; there is a pit without a bottom. These descriptions obviously cannot be literal; a spirit cannot be bound with a physical chain and a bottomless pit is a literal impossibility.

### **Revelation 20**

Looking more closely at the millennium passage in Revelation 20:1-6, we see a clear division in these verses. The first three verses look at this millennium from the perspective of earth and what happens on earth. The second three verses, (vv. 4-6), look at the millennium

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1 For more on the layout of the book of Revelation and how to understand and read the parallel sections, see William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1961). See chapters 2-4, pp. 22-44.

from the point of view of heaven. Those two perspectives sum up how we should understand the millennium. The millennium refers, on the one hand, to the binding of Satan so that he cannot do something on the earth, and, on the other hand, the millennium is the rule of Christ from heaven with the saints.

In the first three verses, we have the binding of Satan. The first verse describes for us the Devil's jailer, an angel with a key. "And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand." An angel is a heavenly messenger, but this angel is sent, not to *announce* something but to *do* something. So, he has a key and a chain in his hand.

In verses 2 and 3, with that chain, "he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, and cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up." Here Satan is described with four names: the dragon, the old serpent, the Devil, and Satan. These names should not simply impress us with the dreadfulness of Satan, but are given here to demonstrate the absolute power of God over Satan. Satan is merely an angel and a creature with a name. God is absolutely and sovereignly powerful over the devil. Just one of God's angels has the power to lay hold of him and bind him. As Luther wrote: "One little word shall fell him."

Verse 3 describes for us the pit and Satan's binding. He was cast into this pit and shut up and the angel "set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season." We are familiar with the picture of a pit. Paul and Silas were cast into a prison, likely a dungeon, and chained. Jeremiah was cast into a pit. With chains, Peter was bound hand and foot and locked in a prison. The pit is bottomless to symbolize that, for Satan, there is no escape. That is the picture, but what is this pit?

This pit is not hell, which is described a little later in the chapter as the lake of fire which will be Satan's eternal end. Instead, we take this as a figurative description of God's placing a restraint on the power of Satan during the millennium. That helps us to understand the millennium. What is the millennium? It is the period of time during which Satan is said to be bound; it is the 1,000-year period mentioned six times in this passage.

That helps us, too, to see that we should not take the 1,000 years as literal, but symbolic or representative. The passage itself is full of symbolism and almost all the numbers that are used in the book of Revelation are also symbolic. It simply does not fit with the book of Revelation to take this as a literal 1,000 years. It certainly does not fit with the rest of Scripture, based on this one passage, to speak of a lengthy earthly kingdom.

Instead, 1,000 in the Bible represents completeness. You have this, for example, this in Psalm 50:10: “the cattle on a thousand hills are mine.” Do we take that number 1,000 literally, so that the cattle on hill number 1,001 are not God’s? No, 1,000 refers to completeness. It means the cattle on *all* the hills are His. So also here, 1,000 years refers to a complete period of history: ten x ten x ten—ten being the number of completeness in the Bible and a cube pointing to perfection.

So, when is this 1,000 years?

To answer that, we need to answer another question; what does it mean that Satan is bound?

### **The Binding of Satan**

The 1000 years is marked at its beginning by the binding of Satan and at its end by the loosing of Satan. What restraint does God place on Satan during this time? What is different during this thousand years, from before the thousand years and after the thousand years?

In the purpose clause in verse 3, we have the answer. God’s purpose in binding Satan is “that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled.” In contrast to this binding, verses 7-9 describe what happens at the end of the thousand years when Satan is loosed. When the thousand years are expired, “Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, and shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle.... And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city.”

The restraint of Satan during the millennium makes it *impossible* for him to deceive the nations. This restraint is not a complete restraint. Satan still works during this millennium with temptation and persecution and false teachings and in other ways to deceive the

people of God. He goes about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. But there is one thing that he truly wants to do, which is his main desire, which he cannot do—he cannot deceive the nations. That means that he cannot hold the nations under the darkness of unbelief. During the time before this binding, the Old Testament period, all the nations except Israel were, so to speak, under the rule of Satan. He blinded the nations. God’s special and saving revelation came only to Israel. The nations were deceived.

But now, during the binding of Satan, the gospel goes to all these nations. And, during these one thousand years, Satan cannot combine the nations of the earth under one political power that opposes the cause of God in Christ. It is only at the end of the thousand years (v. 8), that he gathers all the nations together. This is the restraint placed on Satan during the thousand years.

So, the question is: when is Satan bound? The answer is: right now, in the present, during the entire New Testament age from the ascension of Christ into heaven until shortly before His return. This is what takes place. Satan is unable to prevail because he cannot combine the nations as a unified force. Instead, as we look at history, there is constant warfare, the nations cannot get along. It is not until the very end that they will come together under the kingdom of anti-christ against the church and the people of God. This is the deceiving of the nations. Satan is bound for the duration of the New Testament age so that the gospel of Jesus Christ can go forth victoriously to all the nations. They are not under the deceit of Satan.

### **Support in the Rest of Scripture**

Let’s now think of a few other passages in the New Testament that help us to understand what happens during this figurative 1000 years.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus says, “I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” In Matthew 28, when He gives the Great Commission, Jesus says, “Go ye into all the world,” and in that connection He speaks of His role: “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.... I am with you always.” During this period, Satan is bound, he cannot prevail, so that the gospel may have free course and so that Satan may not bring the nations together against the cause of Jesus Christ.

We have to look at this not only in the context of Revelation, but more broadly in Scripture. Is there any indication in the rest of Scripture, now specially in the New Testament, about the timing of the binding of Satan? The answer is: Yes, there is. It is connected to the cross of Jesus Christ, His resurrection, His ascension, and the gospel going forth to the Gentiles. Let me point to three other passages in the gospels that show this.

In Matthew 12, Jesus is accused by the Jewish leaders of casting out devils in the name of the devil. Jesus responds in Matthew 12:28, 29 in this way: “If I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you. Or else how can one enter into a strong man’s house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil the house.” The word there used for “binding the strong man,” (and the strong man here is a figure or a symbol of Satan), is the same word that is used in Revelation 20. Jesus is basically saying that the power by which He cast out the devils is not the power of Satan, but a power that is against Satan and that binds Satan. This is what Jesus was doing in His ministry. He came into the world in order to bind Satan. The miraculous casting out of demons was symbolic of the binding of Satan.

Next we, turn to Luke 10. The disciples here are sent out—the seventy—by Jesus. We read in verse 17 that they returned with astonishment and joy: the “seventy returned again with joy, saying, Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name.” Then Jesus answers them in verse 18: “He said unto them, I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven.” That is not to be taken literally, but it is a figure of Satan’s power being dealt a crushing blow and he being cast out from heaven and from his position of power over the nations. That fits with the mission preaching of the apostles. Satan is cast out and the gospel goes out, during the New Testament dispensation, with great power bringing the nations under the spiritual dominion of Jesus Christ.

There is one more passage in the gospels that is also parallel, and which helps us to see this, and that is in John 12. There are some Gentiles, some Greeks, who come to Philip and say, “Sir, we would see Jesus.” Philip communicates this to Jesus, and Jesus answers in verses 31 and 32. In connection with the gospel going to the Gentiles,

he says: “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world [Satan] be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.” What is important here is that in verse 31 Jesus says, “the prince of this world [will] be cast out.” He will be cast out now, as Jesus goes to the cross, is buried, rises from the dead, and ascends into heaven. As He is lifted up on the cross and in His ascension, He will draw all men. People from all the nations of the earth, will be drawn by the gospel to Jesus Christ, and simultaneously Satan will be cast out. This fits, precisely, with what Revelation 20 describes as the binding of Satan.

So, this is the way to understand the binding of Satan in Revelation 20:1-3. From the point of view of earth, Satan’s ability to bring the nations together against Christianity is restricted, and meanwhile the gospel goes forth to gather, victoriously, the elect church of God from all nations of the earth. And then, at the very end, Satan is loosed briefly before Christ’s second coming.

### **The Reign of the Millennium**

Turning back to Revelation 20, we have in verses 4-6 the millennium from the point of view of heaven. What happens in heaven during this thousand years?

Notice verse 4: “And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the Word of God, and which had not worshiped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.”

This fits perfectly with what we have already said. While Satan is unable to deceive the nations, Christ and the saints rule from heaven. Why do I say from heaven? Because there is nothing in the verse here to indicate that this rule is an earthly rule. Instead, these are souls, souls of those who have been beheaded, that is, people who have been killed. These are not headless bodies but these are souls that have been separated from their bodies in death.

What is being described here is the intermediate state of the souls of believers. The soul of the believer at the moment of his death is immediately given life. Verses 5 and 6 speak of this as the first resur-

rection: “Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.”

The first resurrection is a resurrection in the new life that our souls receive at the moment of death. These souls, the souls of those who have died as believers, live and reign in their intermediate state with Christ for a thousand years. They are given life, the life of Jesus Christ in their soul. They are conscious in the presence of Christ, and they reign with Christ. Note: they reign *with Christ*. Christ is reigning in the present, during this thousand years. His kingdom is in the present and believers, in their glorified souls, are given a place of rule with Him.

What happens to the rest? Verse 5 says, “The rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished.” These do not participate in the first resurrection. That is, unbelievers who die in their sin and unbelief are not given this place of glory and this place of rule.

What an encouragement this is to the church here on earth. Here on earth, the church militant is given a glimpse of the church triumphant. While Satan cannot deceive the nations, there are still many things that he can do. One of those things is his persecution and saints are beheaded as a result of that persecution. They die for the cause of Christ. Satan may destroy this body! But here exactly is the encouragement, that when he does that, he only becomes the instrument to bring these saints into a greater glory with Christ. And God’s truth goes on, the gospel goes forth victoriously to the nations. Luther says, “The body they may kill, (but) God’s truth abideth still.”

So we have in the millennium of Revelation 20 the present, spiritual rule of King Jesus from heaven by His Spirit and Word throughout all of the New Testament age and the reigning of His saints with Him in heaven at present.

### **Reasons for the Amillennial Interpretation**

Why must this be our view of the millennium? We ask that question from the point of view of what the rest of the Bible says about eschatology. There are four reasons.

First, this must be our view of the millennium because the kingdom of Christ is spiritual. Jesus did not come to establish a Jewish

kingdom or an earthly rule. When the multitudes and the disciples wanted this, he rebuffed them and withdrew from them (John 6:15, 26). In John 18:36 he told Pilate at his public trial, "My kingdom is not of this world." His kingdom is not earthly and carnal, but heavenly and spiritual. What that means is this, that the rule and authority of His kingdom is the rule, by His Spirit, in the hearts of believers. In Luke 17:20-21, Jesus says that the kingdom comes not by observation, you cannot point to it on earth, "Lo, here," or, "Lo there," but the kingdom is within you. The power of this kingdom, the rule of Jesus Christ, is perceived only by faith in the hearts of the regenerate. Except a man is born again, he cannot see this kingdom (John 3:3). And so, where Christ comes by His Word and Spirit and conquers sin and brings sinners into willing subjection, there Christ is ruling. His rule is spiritual. That is the power and purpose of the gospel.

Second, the millennium must be understood this way because the kingdom of Christ is already victorious, in the present! We do not wait for a future victory and kingdom, but Christ is presently ruling. Most of what I have said to this point about Revelation 20 has been against the premillennial position, but I must say something here about the hopes of postmillennialism. Postmillennials look forward to a great overtaking of the world in a surge of the Christian gospel and Christian principles and mass conversions to Christianity. Typically, their response to amillennialism is that the amillennialists are pessimistic about the future. And, I suppose, from a carnal earthly perspective, it appears that we are. But that is because the victory of Christ and His rule must not be measured in human terms, in terms of numbers or influence. Rather, the success of the gospel is measured by its power and victory in the hearts of the elect. And from that point of view, God is never defeated and the gospel never fails at any point in history. Today, already, Jesus Christ rules and is victorious.

In the third place, we must take this view of the millennium because it harmonizes with the rest of Scripture, it avoids confusion in understanding Scripture, and because, practically, it does not distract the believer and the church from their main calling in the present. Confusion is not good. The Scripture must be understood as teaching a harmonious whole. Truth is not uncertain. And from a practical point of view, that means we should not have a divided purpose in our

lives as Christians. Man's chief end, is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. All future millennialist teaching, both premillennialists and postmillennialists, distract the Christian from this main purpose and from present spiritual calling. It distracts the believer from his present struggle with sin and the enemy, Satan.

Premillennialism, which teaches that there will be a future earthly Jewish kingdom says that Christians have to get ready for the restoration of the Jews. When this is your perspective, then who are your enemies? They are anyone who is opposed to the nation of Israel. And this view of the millennium becomes very political and the Christian loses perspective.

Similarly, postmillennialism shifts the focus from what is spiritual and primary to what is earthly and cultural as it seeks to establish some semblance and dominion of Christianity in a godless culture with the result that the gospel focus of the church is lost.

The amillennial view, however, keeps us focused on and watching for the coming of Jesus Christ, it reminds us that our enemies are spiritual and that we are engaged in a history long personal struggle with sin and Satan, and it teaches us that Christ by the cross already has the victory.

Fourth, and finally, we must have this view of the millennium because this is the view that brings encouragement and comfort to the church here on earth. The book of Revelation, I said, is written to persecuted Christians in the midst of a godless culture. What are you going to tell such people? Are you going to give them something abstract by speaking of some distant event and a future Jewish kingdom? Are you going to tell them that the world is getting better and better? How would this have helped the church of the first century, being persecuted by the Jews and living in a godless culture?

No, this is what you will tell them: Jesus is King; He is building His church; the gates of hell will not prevail against it; the gospel and the truth will stand; the next great event in history is the return of Jesus Christ to conquer and destroy the devil and those who serve him; and He comes again to make all things new.

Then you will also tell the Christians who face death and persecution about the glory of their souls at the moment of death. Not only can Satan not triumph over the gospel and the church, but he cannot

destroy you by killing you. At the moment of death, the souls of believers go to live in glory and are given victorious life with Jesus Christ.

In my temptations and persecutions, and in your temptations and persecutions as Christians, this is what we need to hear. This is the beautiful truth of the millennium and this is Christ's message for the church here on earth. ●

# The Antichrist

Rodney Kleyn

The biblical study of the end times is an exciting endeavor, not only because it deals with the future—and we are all curious about that—but especially because it shows us how and where to see Jesus our Savior in the last days. That is the idea of the “signs.” They call attention to Jesus Christ and His coming. This is especially true of the sign of antichrist. Without Christ, there would be no antichrist and so as we look at antichrist, in contrast we see Christ Himself.

The subject of antichrist is a massive one in Scripture. You will find it in the gospels where Jesus gives instruction on the *abomination of desolation* and the great tribulation. You will find it in the epistles of Paul, especially 2 Thessalonians 2; John also mentions antichrist in his epistles, and there are two entire chapters in the book of Revelation (13 and 17) devoted to this subject. Besides this, there are the prophecies of the Old Testament, especially Daniel, and all the types and shadows of the Old Testament that prefigure antichrist and his kingdom (e.g., Nimrod and Babel, Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon). So, it is a massive biblical subject; and of all the signs of the coming of Christ, this one probably receives the most attention in Scripture.

In my introduction I want to make a few comments on what the Westminster Confession of Faith says about the antichrist. In chapter 25, paragraph 6, we read this,

There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof, but is that antichrist, the man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself, in the church, against Christ and all that is called God.

I read this because I know that you are Presbyterian, so this is your confession, and also because, I am sure that you who live in the midst of a Roman Catholic society recognize that indeed the papacy is antichristian! That is important, and I agree with it, but it is my position that the pope himself is not the personal antichrist, even though it is

highly likely that the pope and Roman Catholicism, which is a universal false religion, will indeed play an important role in the kingdom of antichrist. I also understand, fully, why the Reformers had this view of the papacy. During the time of the Reformation, the papacy had immense political power, and had set itself against the truth and the true people of God.

But, I also want to say this about the Westminster's statement on the antichrist. The point of this article is not so much to identify who the antichrist is, but rather to state that Christ Himself is the Head of the church, and that it is antichristian, that is, it is part of the spirit of antichrist, to set oneself up as head in the church instead of Christ. Three of the passages that I referenced before the speech make this plain. 1 John 4:2-3 speak of the "spirit of antichrist" which is "even now is already in this world." 1 John 2:18 says that "*the antichrist*" will come (that is a specific person as is indicated by the definite article), however, there are already many antichrists, that is, the spirit of antichrist is always present in the world, and there are always people who want to be the antichrist, and people who want to find one who will fill this role. 2 Thessalonians 2:7 speaks of "the mystery of iniquity" which is already working, that is the spirit of the future antichrist is already present in this world. Mankind, the fallen human race, are always working towards raising up the antichrist and his kingdom.

### **Who is the Antichrist?**

Let me begin with a definition.

*The antichrist is a future political and religious leader, who will rule over a world-wide kingdom, who will promise peace and prosperity to all humanity, who will oppose God and Christ, who will set himself up as the head of religion, who will persecute true Christianity, and who will be destroyed by Jesus Christ at his second coming.*

I will now demonstrate the different parts of this definition from Scripture.

The name, "antichrist," is found in 1 John 2:18 and 1 John 4:3. He is also known as "the man of sin," "the son of perdition" and "that wicked one" (2 Thessalonians 2), "the abomination of desolation that stands in the holy place" (Matthew 24), and "the beast with seven heads and ten horns" (Revelation 13). These biblical titles tell us something about him.

“Antichrist” means “against Christ.” “Christ” we know means “anointed”—the Messiah who is sent and qualified by God to be the Savior of the world. That antichrist is against Christ means, first, that he will come as a *false Christ*, claiming to be the anointed, and promising to be the savior of the world. He, of course, is not the only one in history that will do this, (Jesus speaks of many “false christs” in Matthew 24:24), but the antichrist will be the culmination of that antichristian spirit.

Second, that he is against Christ means that he will come *in opposition to Christ*, as an enemy of Christ and the gospel. So, 2 Thessalonians 2:4, “who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God and is worshipped.” This opposition will express itself in his intense persecution of true Christians (Revelation 13:16 connects the great tribulation to the time of antichrist).

Third, that he is against Christ means that he will come as an *imposter*, or substitute for Christ. In 2 Thessalonians 2, he will set himself up as God in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. And you see in that the religious nature of his position. He will not only be opposed to Christ, but will set himself up as an ape, a copycat of Christ, at the head of religion, as the savior of the world and as one who demands worship. And now you see, also, why the Reformers identified the pope as antichrist.

Further, as to the identity of the antichrist, he will be an individual who will live in the final days before the second coming of Christ. These passages identify him as an individual: 2 Thessalonians 2:3 calls him “that man of sin” and “the son of perdition” and in the prophecy of Daniel he is referred to as “the little horn” (Daniel 8:9), “the king of fierce countenance” (Daniel 8:23) and “a vile person” (Daniel 11:21).

The significance of the fact that the antichrist is an individual is twofold.

First, he will be a man. He will not come as an angel, or some other terrific and strange creature, but as a man from among men, just as Jesus was also a true man. Think of how men are always looking for someone, some great political ruler, to be the one who will answer all of our human problems of poverty, unrest, class distinction, education, discrimination, and more. He will be a human, who will have human

experiences, and will propose answers to the problems that humanity faces.

Second, the significance is that the antichrist is not an institution, but an individual. As an individual, he will be primarily a political leader but will, at the same time, also hold massive religious influence.

### **Revelation 13**

Revelation chapter 13 sets forth these two aspects of antichrist, as both a political and religious leader. In this chapter there are two beasts.

The first beast, (in vv. 1-10), arises out of the sea. This is the beast with seven heads and ten horns. I will not explain all the details of this vision, but I want to highlight several things that help us to identify this beast, who is the antichrist.

The first thing we note is that he has a throne and great authority (v. 2) and that he has power over all kindreds, tongues and nations (v. 7). This points to the fact that he is a political ruler whose kingdom encompasses all the earth.

Second, we should see that this beast arises out of the sea, which in the Scripture represents the troubled nations (see Isaiah 57:20 and Revelation 17:15). He arises out of the trouble and war that exists between the nations, with the promise of peace. This is what Revelation 20 is talking about when, in reference to the loosing of Satan at the end of the millennium, we read that he goes out “to deceive the nations ... to gather them together” and they “compassed the camp of the saints” (Revelation 20:8-9).

Third, we note that there is a striking similarity in this first beast of Revelation 13 to the vision of Daniel 7, where there are four beasts, ten horns, and a little horn representing a king “who will speak great words against the most high.” Looking back to Revelation 13:5-6, we see that this first beast is given “a mouth speaking great things, and blasphemies ... against God.”

Notice also, that this first beast in Revelation 13 is not Satan, but that he receives his power from Satan. In verse 4, “the dragon gave power unto the beast.” Toward the end of the New Testament dispensation, after he has been loosed, Satan will, through this beast to

which he gives power, deceive the nations and gather them together against Christ and against Christians.

In the following verses, Revelation 13:11-18, a second beast is described. This beast, in comparison to the fearsome ugliness of the first beast, looks like a lamb. Again, I will not go into all the details here, but point out several things.

First, this second beast serves the first. According to verse 12, “he exercises all the power of the first beast before him, and he causes the earth and them which dwell therein to worship the first beast.”

Second, this beast is not political, but religious in character. That is why he is called a “lamb;” he is an imitator of Christ. The religion that this second beast will promote is the religion of the antichrist himself. He will deceive men; he will demand that all worship the image of the beast; and he will use the “mark of the beast” to distinguish the faithful from the unfaithful. The religion that he promotes is man-centered. “666,” the mark of the beast, is called, in Revelation 13, “the number of a man” (v. 18).

Thirdly, this second beast represents organized religion. And, here, I think, is where the pope, and other religious world leaders, will come together as one to support the kingdom of antichrist. That is Revelation 17, as well, where the whore, representing the false church, rides the beast. This, of course, speaks of an alliance between antichrist and the leadership of false religions, especially false Christianity.

So, who is antichrist, and what should we expect in the future with regard to antichrist? We can expect that, shortly before the return of Jesus, the nations of the earth will come together in some sort of peaceful union and mighty worldwide empire. Certainly we can see signs of that already today in organizations like the European Union or the United Nations. Also, we should expect that there will be an individual, who will rise to the top of this kingdom, with great promises of prosperity and peace, whom all the people of the earth will adore and worship. And we can also anticipate that the religions of the world, including false Christianity, will come together to support this great king and kingdom. Again, we certainly see this on the horizon in the merging of religions, and the shift of Christianity away from the gospel to political and social concerns.

So this is the Bible’s teaching on who the antichrist will be.

*The antichrist is a future political and religious leader, who will rule over a world-wide kingdom, who will promise peace and prosperity to all humanity, who will oppose God and Christ, who will set himself up as the head of religion, who will persecute true Christianity, and who will be destroyed by Jesus Christ at his second coming.*

### **What Antichrist Will Do**

We know that the antichrist will establish a world-wide kingdom and religion. We know that he will give promise of peace and prosperity. And we know that he will propose answers for all the problems that mankind faces, but our interest is especially this: What will he do with regard to the church? What will he do to Christians? And again, the Scripture gives us answers.

First, he will oppose the church. His main opposition is to God and His Christ, but since he is cast out of heaven (Revelation 12) he cannot touch God Himself. And since in the cross he could not gain victory over Christ, what remains for him is to go after the church. The devil knows that to attack the church is to attack Jesus Christ; that to attack the cause of Christ in the gospel, is to inflict damage on Christ Himself. And so, in Revelation 12:17, we are told that the dragon makes war “with the remnant of her seed [that is, the seed of the woman], which keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.” And certainly, we can see this in the developments of our own day as well. Not only is there a massive departure from the Word of God, but the attentions of politicians and societies are more and more directed against the Christian faith, and there is a massive effort today to isolate and to segregate Christians. One example of this is the homosexual movement and the anti-discriminatory laws which are aimed at Bible-believing Christians who are labeled not only as biased, but homophobic. Those Christians who speak or write against homosexuality, calling homosexuals to repentance, are accused of hate speech and a hate crime.

Second, the antichrist will seek to deceive the people of God. He will put pressure on them to believe the lie that he is the Christ. There are several methods that he will employ to accomplish this. His first and most subtle method will be the tool of false teaching. In all the descriptions of antichrist in the Bible, there is much emphasis on

his mouth and words. Not only will his wicked mouth speak great things against God, but he will also speak as a *false prophet*, “with all deceivableness of unrighteousness” (2 Thessalonians 2:10). Jesus adds to this by telling us in Matthew 24:24, that this deceit will be so powerful that, if it were possible, even the very elect would be deceived.

A second method of deceit that the antichrist will use against Christians is the enticement of the benefits and freedoms of his great kingdom. This is the pressure of the “mark of the beast,” that “no man may buy or sell” unless he has the mark of the beast. We don’t know, specifically, what that mark will be, but there is going to be an economic distinction and segregation of true believers, so that they will not be able to participate in the economy and the material prosperity of the kingdom of antichrist. And here, I think of Hebrews 11:37, “they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented.” Jesus says, “Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you . . . Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you” (Matthew 5:11-12).

A third form of deceit that the antichrist will use is miracles. Both Revelation 13, and 2 Thessalonians 2, indicate this. He will give life to the image of the beast, and he will deceive with signs, lying wonders and miracles that he has power to do in the sight of the beast. In other words, Satan will give a supernatural power to the antichrist, and the false religious leaders who support antichrist will use these miraculous powers to deceive people into the worship of antichrist. These will not be fake miracles, or tricks, but amazing deeds that will defy all human explanation. Just as the revelation and coming of Jesus Christ was accompanied by miracles, so the coming of antichrist will be accompanied by signs and miracles.

One more thing that the antichrist will do is persecute the church. The antichrist will be instigator of the “great tribulation,” of which Jesus speaks in Matthew 24. He will work to convince all that true Christians and the truth of the Scriptures are the cause of all the problems that exist in this world. Christian truth and believers will be blamed for all human suffering and will become despised in society. The Bible tells us that the persecution of those days will be so

severe, that it will be unmatched in all of history (Matthew 24:21). The book of Daniel says that he will “wear out the saints” (Daniel 7:25). But we must not be fearful of that day, for here is our comfort, too. The reason and purpose of Christ’s sudden return is that he may put a stop to that persecution. That is the point of Matthew 24:21-22, when Jesus speaks of those days being shortened. In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul teaches that when Christ returns, He will come “in flaming fire taking vengeance on them” who are persecuting the saints.

And that brings us to the final thing that I want to say about anti-christ. It is this: he will die! Because he is a mere man, he will die. In 2 Thessalonians 2:8 Paul says that Christ will destroy him, “with the brightness of his coming.” There will be a personal showdown. While all the wicked world is running to be covered by the rocks and the hills because of the dreadful wrath of the Lamb, our Savior will be confronting and destroying the antichrist himself. And so, you and I do not need to be afraid. The antichrist is merely a man, whereas the true Christ, our Savior, is God who became a man.

### **Our Calling**

In light of all that the Bible has to say about antichrist, what calling do we have today and in the last days?

First, we are called to be alert to the spirit of antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:7; 1 John 2:18, 4:2-4). The spirit of antichrist is a spirit of materialism and humanism. The antichrist is not going to appear, suddenly, from nowhere, but all the attitudes and philosophies of mankind, and all the development of sin throughout history, are working towards his coming. The world, as it cries out for peace, and as it desires economic stability, and as it worships man, is longing for the coming of antichrist. “There are many antichrists” and these all are “the mystery of iniquity” that is already at work. So, we should be alert to the spirit of antichrist. We do that by “seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33-34).

Second, we should oppose the spirit of antichrist. Watching, and being ready, is not a passive observation of political and religious developments, but it is the recognition of the power and the deceit and the appeal of the antichristian kingdom. Do not we long for peace? Do not we strive for success and prosperity? Do not we seek, too

often, a kingdom in which I am the centerpiece? The opposition to the spirit of antichrist begins with being engaged in the battle with sin in my own heart, understanding the urgency of this in my own life, and my recognizing that I am easily deceived and carried along by the spirit of antichrist. And that means, too, that the church has to deal with false teaching and false teachers. It means that we must stand on the truth of God's Word in the last days. It means, that we must be willing to suffer and sacrifice for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Third, our calling is to trust and not be afraid. Of course, from a certain point of view, it is a fearful thing to think of the last days. I remember a group of young mothers at a Bible study I once led on the book of Revelation, asking, "Can we study something else? I don't like to think of my children living in the days of antichrist?" Of course, those will be difficult days. But we must remember that God gives grace when we need it, and He has promised to preserve His elect so that not one of them will perish. Our trust should especially be focused on the victory of Jesus Christ at the cross, where, as He said, "The Prince of this world is cast out." From a certain point of view, we can laugh at Satan and the antichrist. As big and strong as they may think themselves to be, who are they before Jesus Christ? Luther, in his famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress," says of our "Ancient foe," the Devil, "One little word shall fell him." Jesus says, "Fear not, I have overcome the world." In 1 John 4:4 we read, "Greater is the one that is in you than he that is in the world."

Fourth, and finally, our calling is to have a lively expectation for the second coming of Christ, our Savior. Jesus tells us that when all these things begin to come to pass, then we should lift our eyes to heaven, and look for the sign of the Son of Man, on the clouds of glory (Luke 21:28). He tells us that He will come to cut suddenly short the days of antichrist. What a day, glorious day, that day will be! Then we will see our Savior, then we will be delivered from sin and the world, and then we will be transformed into His likeness, to be ever with Him.

And so we say, "Come Lord Jesus, yea, come quickly!" ●

# The Signs of Christ's Return

Ronald L. Cammenga

## Introduction

Jesus Christ is coming again! Certainly coming! Coming quickly!

He can be heard and seen to be coming in the signs of His coming. There are definite signs of Christ's return. They are signs that assure God's people *that* He is coming. They are signs that assure the people of God that He is coming *quickly*. And they are signs that assure God's people that He is coming *in judgment*. They are signs that Christ Himself has given. Sometimes these signs are called "the signs of Christ's second coming." Sometimes they are referred to as the "precursory signs."

Precursory signs are signs that precede an event or precede one's coming. They are signs that indicate their approach. To function as a precursor is to function as a forerunner. The precursory signs function in much the same way in which John the Baptist functioned in relationship to Christ. He was Christ's forerunner—the precursor of Jesus Christ when He came the first time. In much the same way, the signs of Christ's second coming function as forerunners—as so many John the Baptists.

The Scriptures and the Reformed faith distinguish a twofold coming of Christ. There is the *final, personal* coming of Jesus Christ at the end of time. Sometimes we refer to this coming of Christ as the "second" or "final" coming of Christ. In theology, the technical name that we give to the second coming of Christ is "parousia." But there is also the *continual* coming of Jesus Christ throughout history. To be sure, there is a sudden, final, and personal coming of Christ at the end of time. But there is also a continual, ongoing coming of Christ throughout history, which culminates in His final and personal appearance at the end of time.

The signs of Christ's coming serve to confirm both of these comings of Christ. They serve to remind and confirm to the child of God the truth that Jesus *is* coming. Through the signs, it is as though we can hear Christ's voice and see His footsteps. The signs confirm the

faith of the child of God in the truth that the Savior is on His way, that He *is* approaching. And at the same time, the signs confirm the faith of the people of God in the promise that Christ *will* yet come. Over against the scoffers who say, “Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation” (2 Peter 3:4), the believing child of God is able to point to the signs of Christ’s second coming. The signs indicate the falsity of the scoffers. The signs indicate that all things have *not* continued as ever they were since the creation of the world.

### **What Is Meant by the “Signs of the Times”?**

Scripture teaches the truth of the signs of Christ’s second coming. In Matthew 24, with its parallel in Luke 21, Jesus gives the most detailed instruction in the signs of His second coming found in Scripture. That is fitting since they are signs of *His* coming. At the end of Matthew 23 and the beginning of Mathew 24, Jesus had foretold the destruction of the temple—Herod’s temple. “Your house,” said Jesus, “will be left unto you desolate” (Matt. 23:38). “There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down” (Matt. 24:2).

It was this instruction of Jesus that provoked the question of Jesus’ disciples in Matthew 24:3, “Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the end of the world?” Notice that the disciples ask for “the” sign of Christ’s coming and of the end of the world. Notice also that in His answer, Jesus blends the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world. He could do that because the one was a sign of the other. The destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple was a sign of the end of the world. Throughout Matthew 24, therefore, Jesus sets forth the signs of His coming *and* of the end of the world.

Besides Matthew 24, there are other passages of Scripture that refer to specific signs of Christ’s second coming. There is the mention of various signs throughout the book of Revelation. In the book of Revelation, the signs are connected to the opening of the seven seals, the blowing of the seven trumpets, and the pouring out of the seven viols or bowls. The apostle John also speaks of one of the outstanding signs of Christ’s second coming, the rise to power of antichrist, in his

epistles, as well as in the book of Revelation. In addition, there are also striking Old Testament prophecies of antichrist, like Ezekiel 28 and Isaiah 14, as well as several passages in the prophecy of Daniel. There are those passages of Scripture that compare the days of Noah—the days shortly before the flood—with the days prior to the second coming of Christ. Jesus does this in Matthew 24 and the apostle Peter does this in 2 Peter 4. The apostle Paul refers to the second coming of Christ in connection with the final, bodily resurrection of believers in 1 Corinthians 15. In this passage, Paul speaks of the sounding of the last trumpet, which announces the second coming of Christ. And he speaks of the resurrection of the dead, which takes place in the twinkling of an eye, immediately after the sounding of the last trumpet. Paul also refers in a number of places to the sign of apostasy, the “great” apostasy, or falling away. And elsewhere, Scripture refers to the sign of persecution, the “great” tribulation. That will be a persecution altogether unprecedented in the history of the world. It will be more intense and more widespread than any other persecution of the church. Jesus says concerning this persecution that “except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect’s sake, those days shall be shortened” (Matt. 24:22).

The precursory signs, therefore, are all those occurrences in the creation, or nature, all the events in the history of the world and among the nations, and everything that takes places in the visible church, which indicate that Christ is coming. The signs underscore the truth *that* Christ is coming. They underscore the truth that He is coming *quickly*. And the signs underscore the truth that Christ is coming *for judgment*.

### **Precursory Signs Connected to Reformed Amillennialism**

The teaching of the precursory signs is a distinguishing feature of Reformed amillennialism. In its teaching of the precursory signs, Reformed amillennialism distinguishes itself from the unbiblical millennial views: postmillennialism, premillennialism, and dispensationalism. Each of these views, in their own way, denies the biblical truth concerning the signs of Christ’s second coming.

Premillennialism and dispensationalism deny the reality of the precursory signs. It is the teaching of premillennialism and dispensa-

tionalism that there are no signs of Christ's coming. Christ could come at any moment. He comes without warning. He comes suddenly and unexpectedly, even as far as the righteous and godly are concerned. There are no signs of Christ's return.

Postmillennialism also denies the reality of the precursory signs. There are no present or future signs that indicate that Jesus is coming again. All the signs that are mentioned in Matthew 24 have already been fulfilled. Their fulfillment is in the past, prior to 70 A.D. and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem at that time by the Romans. The signs are past, not present or future. They have already taken place and are not to be anticipated in the future.

The more extreme postmillennialists call themselves "preterists" and their view "preterism." "Preterism" means "past." In grammar, a preterist verb is a past tense verb.

"Preterists" believe that all—a majority, at least—of the events foretold by Jesus in Matthew 24, have taken place in the past. From our present standpoint, they are finished. From our perspective, there is nothing that remains to be finished in the future. For the postmillennialist, the fall of Jerusalem was not prophetic of the end of the world and the second coming of Christ. It was the *only* end that Jesus had in mind in Matthew 24. Most, if not all, of what He foretold came to pass when the Romans overran Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 70 A.D. Contrary to the understanding of Jesus' disciples, what He was about to teach them concerned only the signs of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and were not at all signs "of the end of the world" (Matt. 24:3).

We reject the premillennial, the dispensational, and the postmillennial viewpoints. Contrary to all of these false teachings, there is a solid, biblical basis for the teaching of the precursory signs. There are many passages in which Scripture teaches the truth of the signs of Christ's second coming "and the end of the world." Matthew 24, with its parallel in Luke 21, is certainly the outstanding passage. But it is by no means the only passage. The prophecy of Daniel and the book of Revelation also have a great deal to teach about the signs of Christ's second coming. And there are many other passages of Scripture that speak of the signs of the end of all things.

In addition, there are those passages of Scripture that teach clearly that Christ's second coming is not immanent, that is, just around the

corner or about to happen. That is Paul's teaching in 2 Thessalonians 2. The church must not suppose that the "day of Christ" is at hand, (v. 2). To teach that the day of the Lord is "at hand" is to teach deception and untruth. This is Jesus' teaching in the parables that follow His instruction concerning the signs of the times, the parables that are found in Matthew 25. According to Matthew 25:5, the parables picture the Lord "tarrying." He does not come as soon as men suppose that He ought to come. The Lord tarries, not in reality, nor from the point of view of God's counsel, but from our human perspective. Even though, from our human perspective, Jesus tarries, He gives us signs of His coming. The signs reassure Christians that He is coming. The signs also confront unbelievers with the truth that Christ is coming again. They deny that Christ is coming again. They live as though He is not coming again. But even they cannot escape the truth that Christ is returning. They, too, see and hear the signs of His coming. They must beware!

### **Classification of the Signs**

The precursory signs have been classified in various ways by different Reformed and Presbyterian theologians. There is, for example, the classification of the signs that was proposed by Dr. Anthony Hoekema in his book, *The Bible and the Future*. This same sort of classification has been followed by Dr. Cornelis Venema in his book, *The Promise of the Future*. They make a threefold classification: 1) Signs that evidence the grace of God; 2) signs that evidence opposition to God; and 3) signs that evidence divine judgment.

Under each of these categories, they list the main signs of Christ's second coming. Under "Signs evidencing the grace of God," they classify such things as the proclamation of the gospel to all nations and the salvation of the fullness of Israel. Under "Signs indicating opposition to God," they classify especially tribulation, apostasy, and antichrist. And under "Signs indicating divine judgment," they classify wars, earthquakes, pestilence, and famines.

A second way of classifying the signs of Christ's second coming is to do so chronologically, according to the order and time at which they appear. This is a very workable way of classifying the signs. Then, first, there are those signs that are always present throughout

the history of the world. They have been present since the beginning of the New Dispensation, in fact, many of them were present already in the Old Dispensation. These signs manifest themselves throughout history. They include such things as wars, pestilences, earthquakes, and famines. Secondly, there are those signs that occur shortly before the return of Christ and signal that the end is at hand and very near. These signs include the great apostasy, the great tribulation, the rise of antichrist, and the establishment of the antichristian world-power. And, third, there are those signs that occur immediately before the return of Christ. Included among these signs is the ingathering and conversion of the Jews, referred to in Romans 11:26 as the salvation of “all Israel.” Included among these signs are also the signs in the heavens, like the darkening of the sun, the falling of the stars, and the moon turning into blood. And included with these signs is the sign of the Son of Man in the heavens, referred to by Jesus in Matthew 24:30.

The Protestant Reformed theologian Herman Hoeksema offered a third way of classifying the precursory signs. His classification can be found in his *Reformed Dogmatics*.<sup>1</sup> Hoeksema classifies the precursory signs according to the nature of the signs, that is, the sphere or realm in which the signs become manifest. The three main spheres in which the signs manifest themselves include creation or the realm of the physical universe, the realms of the nations or society, and the realm of the church, that is, the visible church.

Although most of the signs, according to Hoeksema, occur simultaneously throughout the New Testament age, they may be distinguished by their sphere of influence. First, there are those signs that take place in the physical or brute creation, such as, famine, pestilence, disease, and earthquakes. Second, there are those signs that take place in society and among the nations, including wars and rumors of wars, political, social, and racial conflict, violence and revolution, the

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1 Confer chapter 42 of volume 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics* entitled, “The Precursory Signs,” pages 487-532. The interested reader may also consult Hoeksema’s commentary on the book of Revelation, *Behold! He Cometh*. It is puzzling that although it was one of the first commentaries to be published in the English language on the book of Revelation, more recently published commentaries and systematic treatments of Reformed eschatology make no reference to Hoeksema’s groundbreaking work. Puzzling indeed!

increasing divide between the rich and the poor. And, thirdly, there are those signs that concern the church, namely, the preaching of the gospel to the ends of the earth, the ingathering of the fullness of the Jews, apostasy from the faith, the rise of antichrist and his kingdom, and the great tribulation of the church.

As far as classification of the precursory signs is concerned, there is no right or wrong way to classify the precursory signs. Neither Scripture nor the Reformed creeds identify one classification as correct and the others as erroneous. Each of the three has something to commend itself. For practical reasons only, I will follow the classification proposed by Hoeksema. In my judgment, it is the easiest way to organize the various signs. But I emphasize that this is purely for practical reasons, not for any principle reason.

Even then, there is overlap of the signs. Take, for example, the sign of antichrist. It makes good sense to treat antichrist in connection with those signs that occur in the church. Antichrist arises out of the church, that is, the nominal church. He will be the head of the false and apostate church. But, at the same time, this is a sign that clearly overlaps the church and things ecclesiastical and spills over into things social and political. Antichrist will also be a great political leader, as were all the historical types of antichrist, beginning with Nimrod. He will rule over the whole world and will control buying and selling.

### **The Purpose of the Precursory Signs**

But what purpose do the signs serve? Why does God give the church signs of Christ's second coming? What does He intend to accomplish with the signs?

We ought to begin with the negative. What are not the purposes behind the precursory signs? It is a mistake to suppose that the signs have been given to enable us to fix the date of Christ's return. The signs have not been given so that we may confidently predict the exact time of the second coming of Christ. Fools—for that is what they are—fools have attempted to do this very thing since the beginning of the New Testament era. William Miller concluded that Christ was returning to earth sometime between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. Harold Camping predicted that Christ would return in September of 1994, and later revised his calculations and fixed the date as May

of 2011. Inevitably these men justify their calculations by explaining that in reality their predicted date fixed some important event that took place in heaven. And, who can question that? With that, they suppose that they are able to justify their attempts to fix the date of Christ's return. Harold Camping further justified his sinful predictions on the basis of the fact that Jesus in Matthew 24:36 said that the day and the hour no man knoweth, but that we can determine the month and the year. That is one of the grandest examples of "eisegesis" in all the storied history of interpreting Scripture arbitrarily so as to suit one's own fancy.

They are mistaken who suppose that date fixing is the purpose of the signs. The Scriptures expressly condemn even the attempt to do so. No man knows the day or the hour, and that means, of course, that no man knows the time, the precise time of Jesus' return. The attempt to do so is both foolish and sinful. Jesus comes, the apostle teaches in 1 Thessalonians 5:2, as a thief in the night. Like the thief, Jesus comes when men least expect His coming.

Second, another mistaken view of the precursory signs is that they refer exclusively to events that occur immediately prior to Christ's second coming. Although there are certain events that are one-time events, which occur at or near the return of Christ, many of the signs are not limited to the end times. Many of the signs occur throughout the history of the New Testament era. This is the correct understanding of a number of the signs: wars, famines, and earthquakes, to identify only a few.

And, thirdly, it is also a mistake to suppose that the precursory signs are always abnormal, catastrophic, spectacular, and miraculous events. There are, of course, such signs of Christ's coming, such as the sign of the Son of Man in the heavens, Matthew 24:30. But this is not true of all the signs of Christ's coming. Many of the signs are the regularly occurring events that take place on an everyday basis, such as natural disasters, war, famine, and pestilence.

Positively, the purpose of the precursory signs is, first of all, that they might serve as constant reminders of the fact that Jesus is coming. God knows that we need such reminders. So often we become absorbed in our earthly life—our work, our family, our education, our career. And the result is that we forget about the truth that Jesus is coming

again. God also knows how weak our faith is and He knows the constant jeer of the scoffers: "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation" (2 Peter 3:4). On account of the weakness of our faith, Christ causes the precursory signs to take place. Through them He constantly reminds us that He is coming again. As the signs of the Lord's Supper are given in remembrance of Christ, in a similar way, the signs of Christ's coming are given to us so that we may be put in remembrance of Christ's promise that He is coming again.

That must be our response to the signs as they occur. We ought to see and hear in the signs the promise of Christ that He is coming again. They serve as Christ's reminders to His people that He *is* coming and that He *will* come. Blessed purpose of the signs!

Secondly, and closely connected to the first purpose of the signs, is the purpose that the signs serve as reminders, not only of the *fact* of Jesus' coming, but also of the *nature* of His coming. The signs also serve that important purpose. There is something very striking about the vast majority of the precursory signs. The signs not only tell us *that* Jesus is coming, but *why* He is coming. That purpose is judgment, and that purpose is underscored by the signs of His coming. More about that shortly, but already at this point, in treating the reason for the signs, it is important to note that the signs serve to remind us of this purpose of Christ's coming.

Thirdly, the precursory signs also serve to confirm the believer's *hope* of Jesus' coming. The precursory signs not only confirm the fact that Jesus is coming. But they reassure the believer of his hope in Christ's coming. The believer's life in the world is filled with sorrow, disappointment, persecution, and death. The signs serve to remind him that there comes a better day, a day when that which is crooked shall be made straight, when every tear shall be wiped from our eyes, when all Christ's and our enemies shall be vanquished, and when we will share in the glory of our Head, Jesus Christ. All that will happen in the day of Christ's second coming. That is our hope! Out of that hope we are able to persevere!

Fourth, the signs also serve to indicate to believers *when* Christ will come again. That does not contradict what was said earlier, that on the basis of the signs we cannot calculate the exact time of Christ's return.

Not at all. For in a general sort of way, the signs do serve to indicate the progress in the unfolding of God's purpose in history. When we see the signs taking place, we can know that Christ is coming and when He is coming. On the basis of the signs we can say, for example, that Christ is not coming this month or this year. Certain signs must take place. Antichrist must come to power. There must be the development of the one-world government. And there must be the establishment of the union of all the churches and religious organizations under one ecclesiastical umbrella. Because these signs need yet to be fulfilled, believers can know that Christ's return is not imminent. On the other hand, when these things do happen, believers can know that Christ's return is very near.

And finally, the precursory signs serve as divine warnings to the wicked. It is especially with regard to the wicked that Luke speaks of the precursory signs as "fearful sights and great signs" (Luke 21:11). They, too, see and hear the signs of Christ's second coming. In the signs, they are warned of the coming of the Judge of all the earth and of the day of reckoning. Just as the wicked in the days of Noah, who heard his preaching and the call to repentance, they harden their hearts and go on in their sins, all unheeding the warning of the signs of Christ's return. And in doing so, their judgment will be made all the greater.

### **The Actual Signs**

But, what are the signs specifically? And what is the nature of the signs?

The signs, as we indicated, can be divided into three main categories: signs that take place in the physical creation; signs that take place in society and among the nations; and signs that occur in the church, the nominal church.

Included in the signs that take place in the creation are pestilences, mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 24:7 and in the book of Revelation, as pictured by the pale horse of Revelation 6. "Pestilence" refers to the devastation wrought by pests, or insects. Such pests carry disease and destroy crops and livestock. Included are the tiny pests, the microorganisms that cannot be seen with the human eye, the bacteria and viruses that cause sickness, suffering, and death. Science boasts

that it has succeeded in curing a certain disease, but as soon as one disease has been conquered, two others that are more devastating take its place. In a previous generation it was polio and tuberculosis. Then it was cancer. And today it is AIDS and ebola. With the modern means of transportation and the shrinking of the world, various health organizations warn of the increasing danger of a pandemic that could have disastrous effects on the world's population.

The signs that take place in creation include earthquakes, according to Matthew 24:7. Luke speaks of "great" earthquakes (Luke 21:11). Earthquakes occur weekly and they happen in every part of the world. Jesus is not only referring to earthquakes, but to all the destructive forces that are unleashed in the creation: floods, tornados, hurricanes, tsunamis, fires, and the other catastrophes and natural disasters that destroy homes, ruin cities, and kill thousands of people annually.

Included in the signs that take place in the creation is also the shaking of the powers of the heavens. Jesus refers to this sign in Matthew 24:29, "and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken." The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews says in Hebrews 12:26-27: "Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain."

Then there are the signs that take place in the realm of society and among the nations.

Among these signs are the sign of wars and rumors of wars, according to Matthew 24:6-7a: "And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom." In the book of Revelation, these signs are pictured by the red horse. Red is the color of blood and of warfare. The nations of this world are constantly at war with each other. In many countries there are civil wars and violence perpetrated between warring factions. There are more wars and threats of warfare in the world today than ever before.

Then there are the bombings, the shootings, the knifings, and the kidnappings that are daily occurrences in every major city in the world.

There is racial hatred and ethnic cleansings. There are the street fights and the gang violence. The lust for power brings one group at odds with a rival group. In spite of man's strenuous efforts to establish a world-wide and lasting peace, in spite of the efforts of the United Nations and the pressures of the international community, there are and there will always be wars and rumors of war.

Jesus also speaks of famine: "and there shall be famines" (Matt. 24:7). Included in famine are all the consequences that accompany famine and are the aftermath of famine, including the inevitable poverty. In the book of Revelation, this is depicted by the black horse. About the effects of the running of the black horse, we read in Revelation 6:5-6, "And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine." Often this sign is related to war. The outstanding result of war in war-torn countries is the starvation and famine, as well as the diseases, which follow on the heels of war. Or, famine may be due to natural disasters, like floods and fires. Or, it may be the result of the devastation of disease. In spite of the world's ability to produce food, an abundance of food, enough food to feed the entire population of the world, there is widespread famine. Often the contributing factors are the inability to transport food to those who are in the greatest need. Many times a factor is government corruption, or civil war that prohibits the distribution of food in a nation. Whatever the aggravating factors, millions throughout the world starve to death every year. And this says nothing yet of the hordes who suffer under-nourishment and malnourishment.

And finally, there are the signs that take place in the church. These are the signs connected to the running of the white horse in Revelation 6. Included with this sign is the falling away of many, the love of many for the truth of God's Word waxing cold. Included is the great apostasy, referred to in several places in Paul's writings, as in both his first and second epistles to Timothy. Included is the establishment of one great, world-wide religion, which is the goal of the modern ecumenical movement. Included are the false Christs and

the false prophets, of which Jesus speaks in Matthew 24:4-5, 11, and 23-24. Included is the rise to power of the antichrist, the Man of Sin, the Son of Perdition, referred to by Jesus in Matthew 24:15, by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 1 and 2, and by the apostle John in 1 John 2 and 4, as well as in the book of Revelation.

Connected to the rise to power of the antichrist is also the great persecution of the church, to which Jesus refers in Matthew 24:9-10 and 20-22, and to which the apostle John refers in Revelation 13:7-8. Daniel refers to the great persecution of the church in those passages in which he prophesies the coming antichrist, as in Daniel 7:25, where the one who "shall speak great words against the most High" is also said to "wear out the saints of the most High."

Included in the signs that take place in the church is also the sign of the preaching of the gospel to the ends of the earth. From a certain point of view, this is *the* sign of Christ's second coming. This is what Jesus says in Matthew 24:14: "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; *and then* shall the end come." In a very direct way, Jesus connects His second coming to the preaching of the gospel to the nations: "and then shall the end come." As no other sign, this sign indicates the imminent return of the Lord Jesus. That only stands to reason. When the gospel has been preached unto all nations, and by the preaching of the gospel the last elect child of God has been brought to salvation, there is no longer any purpose for history to continue. At that point, the Lord will come again in judgment.

One very important feature of the signs of Christ's second coming is worth pointing out. Consider the signs, for a moment. What are they? War, pestilence, disease, famine, starvation, persecution, bloodshed, and death. The signs, for the most part, are negative in nature. They are not happy events, but events that bring suffering and sorrow. They are dreadful, even horrific events. They are events, that from a human point of view, are altogether undesirable. But that is in perfect keeping with the fact that they are signs of Christ's second coming. For, why is He coming? What is the purpose of His coming? And what will He do when He comes? He comes in order to judge. That is the great purpose for His second coming. That is the one great reason on account of which He comes. Very strikingly, this is the one, great

event that the Apostles' Creed connects to Christ's second coming: "Who shall come again to judge the living and the dead."

To be sure, He comes for salvation. Christ comes for the salvation, deliverance, and glorification of His elect. That is the reason on account of which the Heidelberg Catechism asks in Q.A. 52, "What comfort is it to thee that 'Christ shall come again to judge the quick and the dead'?" The promise of Christ's second coming is a source of comfort for Christians. His coming will mean their salvation, and the creation of the new heavens and new earth in which righteousness will dwell.

But that does not take away from the fact that Christ's second coming has as its main purpose judgment. He comes in order to judge all men. Then the ungodly and unbelieving world, which denied Him, blasphemed His name, profaned His law, and persecuted His people will stand before Him in judgment. Then they will be judged with everlasting judgment, with a judgment that will know no end. Of that coming in judgment, the signs of Christ's second coming are prophetic.

### **The Outstanding Feature of the Signs**

In Matthew 24, Jesus not only teaches what the signs of His second coming are. But He also teaches one of the most outstanding features of the precursory signs. He does that by means of a figure. That figure is found in Matthew 24:8, where Jesus says, "All these are the beginning of sorrows." The real significance of these events is that they are the beginning of "sorrows." The word that is translated "sorrows" in the KJV is not a word that refers to sorrows or pain generally; rather, it is a word that refers to a certain kind of sorrow or pain. It is the sorrow or pain of a woman who is in labor and is in the process of delivering a baby.

The signs of Christ's second coming are "birth pangs," that is, the pain of a woman who is in travail. That is a striking description of the signs of Christ's second coming, a description that points to the real significance of all the signs of Christ's second coming that are mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 24. That is how we ought to think of these events. Every time there is another earthquake, tornado, famine, war, departure from right doctrine, instance of persecution, there is another contraction, another birth pang.

The pain of childbirth is a unique kind of pain. That is true for several reasons. First of all, although it is extremely intense pain, excruciating pain, in distinction from all other kinds of pain, it is wholesome pain. For one thing, it is expected pain. A pregnant woman anticipates that she is going to have to endure this pain. There is no other way, if her child is going to be born. It is also unique pain because it is pain that indicates that all is well. Usually pain signals that something is wrong with the body. There is some injury or affliction that needs attention. But birth pangs are an indication that all is well with a woman's body and with the baby inside the mother's womb. And just as birth pangs are the indication that all is progressing as it should, so do the signs of Christ's second coming indicate that all is progressing exactly as it should according to the counsel of God.

Secondly, birth pangs are necessary pain. A woman must go through the pain of labor and delivery, if she is going to have her baby. If she is going to hold her baby in her arms, feed that baby, and care for that baby, she must endure the pangs of birth. There simply is no other way. So it is with the signs of Christ's second coming. For this reason, Jesus says in Matthew 24:6 that "all these things must come to pass." Just as the labor pains must be endured or the child cannot be born, so also must the signs of Christ's second coming take place or Christ cannot come again.

In the third place, it is also true of birth pangs that they increase in intensity and in frequency the closer to the time of birth. The pains come closer and closer together, and are more and more frequent the nearer the baby's birth. In addition, they increase in intensity, becoming more and more painful as the time of the baby's birth approaches. The signs of Christ's second coming are like that. That is especially how the signs serve as signs of Christ's second coming. From a certain point of view, the signs have always been present in the world. There have always been wars and rumors of wars. There have always been famines, pestilences, and earthquakes. How, then, can these events serve as signs of Christ's second coming? The answer is that they serve as signs of Christ's second coming because the nearer the end, the worse these signs become. As they increase in frequency and in intensity, the people of God are reminded that the end is approaching ever nearer.

Very strikingly, this is a verifiable fact with all the events that constitute the signs of Christ's second coming. This is true of wars and rumors of wars. This is true of pestilence and famine. This is true of earthquakes. Some years ago, I did a study of earthquakes in order to verify this fact. It is simply a documented fact that the number of earthquakes is steadily on the rise, as well as the devastation caused by earthquakes in the form of loss of life and property damage. In part, the explanation is that the earth's population is steadily rising. Still, the fact is that the number and intensity of earthquakes is becoming greater and greater, year after year. This should not surprise us. This is exactly what our Lord foretold would happen as the end becomes nearer and nearer.

This fact clearly contradicts the teaching of postmillennialism. The teaching of postmillennialism is that everything is improving, becoming better and better, until at last Christ returns to a renewed and welcoming earth. That the signs of His return are birth pangs, exposes as a lie a fundamental tenet of postmillennialism.

Other texts of Scripture teach the same thing as Matthew 24. That belongs to Scripture's comparison of the end times to the days before the flood. In the days preceding the flood, the world was not increasing in godliness, but was becoming increasingly wicked and violent. This is also in keeping with Paul's warning to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:13 that "evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived." And this is in part also the teaching of the book of Revelation and belong to the very scheme of the book. Beginning at Revelation 6:8, the seals are opened. Their devastation affects one-fourth of the earth's population. Beginning at Revelation 8:7 and 8, the seals give way to the blowing of the trumpets. Their devastation affects one-half of the earth's population. And beginning at Revelation 16:2-4, the trumpets give way to the pouring out of the viols. Their devastation is total.

But, in the fourth place, all these things are the beginning of birth pangs because what is unique about the pain of childbirth is that it has a hopeful and blessed outcome. That outcome is the birth of a child. In the church, the blessed outcome is the birth of a covenant child—a new life in the fellowship of believers. That is the hopeful outcome of the signs of the times. The sorrow that they bring is, for the church and for believers, a hopeful sorrow. It is sorrow that will

give way to rejoicing and celebration. The outcome is the blessedness of new life—the life of the new heavens and new earth. Think of the joy of parents and grandparents, who hold in their arms the blessed gift from God of a new baby. By comparison, the joy of believers who participate in the renewal of all things is greater still!

### **The Church's Comfort**

And right there is the church's comfort.

We need that comfort. We need that comfort because we are not untouched by the calamities of these events. The people of God experience the storms and the floods, the forest fires and the drought. The people of God experience the fierce opposition of the antichrist, his refusal to allow us to buy or to sell unless we acknowledge him, worship him, and receive his mark in our foreheads. The people of God experience the destruction and death of war. The people of God experience economic distress, are looked down upon, and despised in the world. The people of God experience the persecution and will experience the greatest persecution that has ever been brought against the church in history.

And what will our children and grandchildren experience? What will be their lot as the end approaches ever nearer? How easily we become afraid for them? What temptations will confront them? What suffering will they face? What sacrifices will they be forced to make? What persecution will they be called upon to endure?

Then our comfort must be the comfort expressed in the 52<sup>nd</sup> Q&A of the Heidelberg Catechism:

What comfort is it to thee that 'Christ shall come again to judge the quick and the dead'? That in all my sorrows and persecutions, with uplifted head, I look for the very same person, who before offered himself for my sake, to the tribunal of God, and has removed all curse from me, to come as judge from heaven: who shall cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but shall translate me with all his chosen ones to himself into heavenly joys and glory.

The signs cause us to lift up our heads, for the day of our redemption, our complete redemption, draws nigh. The one I look for is the very same person who died for me. That is significant. That is the reason

on account of which the child of God does not have to fear the end. The one who is coming, whose coming the signs point to, is our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the very same person who suffered and died on Calvary's cross for our sins. How could we possibly be afraid of Him!

He will appear with us before the tribunal of God. He will translate me *and all His chosen ones* to Himself, into heavenly joys and glory. Election, sovereign, gracious election is the root of it all! Why do we not have to fear God the judge in the day of Christ's second coming? Because He chose us, set His love upon us, and decreed that we would be His people now and forever more. We have nothing to fear because the one before whom we will stand when Christ comes again is our Heavenly Father, the one who loved us in eternity past and gave us to His Son. He is the one who loves us in the present, and as our gracious heavenly Father loves us and causes all things to work together for our good.

Thus, the effect of the truth concerning the signs of Christ's second coming is that we are reminded and confirmed in our hope. Christ is coming! Christ is coming for His church! Christ is coming for me, in order to translate me, to take me into the new heavens and the new earth in which only righteousness will dwell.

Come, Lord Jesus, yea, come quickly! ●

# The Final Judgment

Ronald L. Cammenga

## Introduction

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 33: “Of the Last Judgement.”

1. God hath appointed a day wherein he will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ, to whom all power and judgment is given of the Father. In which day, not only the apostate angels shall be judged, but likewise all persons that have lived upon earth shall appear before the tribunal of Christ, to give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds, and to receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil. 2. The end of God’s appointing this day is for the manifestation of the glory of his mercy in the eternal salvation of the elect, and of his justice in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient. For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fullness of joy and refreshing which shall come from the presence of the Lord: but the wicked, who know not God, and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power. 3. As Christ would have us to be certainly persuaded that there shall be a day of judgment, both to deter all men from sin, and for the greater consolation of the godly in their adversity; so will he have that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come; and may be ever prepared to say, Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly. Amen.

Jesus Christ is coming again! He is coming as the Judge! One purpose of His coming, in fact, the one main purpose of His coming is judgment. As the Westminster Confession of Faith says, “God hath appointed a day wherein he will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ.” That the final judgment is the main purpose of Christ’s second coming is clearly the teaching of the Apostles’ Creed, the most ancient confession of the Christian church. In the Apostles’ Creed, the church confesses to believe in Jesus Christ, “who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate;

was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead, He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father, Almighty; *from thence, He shall come again to judge the living and the dead.*” The one event that the Apostles’ Creed connects to Christ’s second coming is the judgment: “He shall come again to judge the living and the dead.”

There are a number of purposes that are accomplished by Christ at His second coming. When He comes again: He will raise the dead. In the words of John 5:25, “the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live.” He will destroy antichrist and antichrist’s kingdom: “And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming” (2 Thess. 2:8). He will come to bring an end to the persecution of His church and deliver her: “He that leadeth into captivity shall go into captivity: he that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and faith of the saints” (Rev. 13:10). He will cause the present creation to be burned with fire and will make all things new: “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea” (Rev. 21:1). But the *main* purpose of Christ’s second coming is to conduct the final judgment. He comes again in order to judge.

What is your attitude toward the final judgment? Do you put out of your mind any thought of the final judgment? Do you salve your conscience with the foolish thought that, after all, you are not such a bad person, and that you do try to live a good life. You endeavor to treat your fellow man as you would be treated. You are good to your wife and your children. Because you live a basically good life, you have nothing to fear in the final judgment. Or, do you, perhaps, blot out all thought of a coming judgment day by throwing yourself into your career, your business, your education, or your pursuit of riches and honor among men? Do you attempt to silence the voice of your conscience concerning the judgment of God by numbing your sensitivity by alcohol or drugs, by fornication or pleasure?

Or, do you instead live in such a way that you long for the judgment day? In the midst of all your troubles and sorrows, do you look forward to the day when you will stand before Christ the judge? As

much as you long for the resurrection of the body, for the joy and glory of heaven, do you long for the judgment day? As you experience the hatred and persecution of the world, do you eagerly anticipate the day when the Lord will right every wrong, make that which is crooked straight, judge all His and our enemies, and cast them down to destruction? As much as you long to be with Jesus, to stand in His presence, and to enjoy His fellowship eternally, do you long for the judgment day that will result in all these other glorious rewards? Is your attitude towards the judgment that which is expressed by the Heidelberg Catechism in Q&A 52:

That in all my sorrows and persecutions, with uplifted head I look for the very same person who before offered Himself for my sake before the tribunal of God, and has removed all curse from me, to come as judge from heaven; who shall cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but shall translate me with all His chosen ones to Himself, into heavenly joys and glory.

The believing child of God ought to long for the Judgment Day. If everything is as it should be in his life, he will. He will because he has nothing to fear in the judgment, absolutely nothing. For the One before whom we will stand in order to be judged is our Lord Jesus Christ. The One before whom we will stand to be judged is “the very same person who before offered Himself for my sake to the tribunal of God.” That gives the child of God comfort and confidence as he awaits the judgment day.

### **Who Will Be Judged?**

Who will stand in the final judgment? The final judgment will be a general or universal judgment. All rational, moral creatures will stand before God to be judged. Included in the final judgment are the angels. In 1 Corinthians 6:3, the apostle writes, “Know ye not that we shall judge angels?” In 2 Peter 2:4, we read: “For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment.” And in Jude 6 we read that “the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.” Although all rational, moral

creatures will stand in the final judgment, the emphasis in Scripture when it speaks of the final judgement is that it will be the judgment of men, that is, of human beings. “For *we [we, human beings] must all* appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:10).

Included in the final judgment will be both the wicked and the people of God. Certainly, the ungodly and unbelieving will stand before God and before Christ in the judgment. If all men are to be judged, the people of God are included. In Revelation 20:12, John sees “the dead, small and great, stand before God” for judgment. In verse 13, John says that “the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell [that is, the grave] delivered up the dead which were in them.” Whether one died and was buried at sea, or died and was buried in a grave in the ground, no matter, all are raised up in order that all may appear in the judgment. Daniel 12:2, “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

Also the righteous shall stand in the final judgment. This is sometimes denied. Some years ago, the famous Reformed Bible teacher, Harold Camping, denied that the righteous will stand in the judgment. He defended the position that only the wicked will be judged, in spite of the teaching of Scripture and the historic Reformed confessions. This is an error, a very serious error. All men, including the godly, will be judged in the final judgment. A bit later, I will explain the reason on account of which the godly must appear in the judgment, but for now, I want to show that this is the clear teaching of Holy Scripture and the Reformed Confessions. The WCF, in chapter 33, paragraph 1 says: “In which day, not only the apostate angels shall be judged, but likewise *all persons* [emphasis added] that have lived upon earth shall appear before the tribunal of Christ.” The Belgic Confession of Faith, in article 37 says that in the judgment day, “*all men* [emphasis added] will personally appear before this great Judge, both men and women and children, that have been from the beginning of the world to the end thereof.”

Scripture explicitly includes the righteous, no less than the ungodly, in the final judgment. In 2 Corinthians 5:10 we read: “For *we must all* appear before the judgment seat of Christ.” And in Romans 14:10, the apostle admonishes the saints, “But why dost thou judge

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thy brother? Or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? For *we shall all* stand before the judgment seat of Christ.”

Clearly, all men will stand in the final judgment. All men will stand in the *final* judgment. There is a coming, future (from our perspective), final judgment. Scripture and our Reformed confessions teach one, single, final judgment. They speak of a final judgment, in the singular, not multiple future judgments, in the plural. This is the false teaching of the premillennialists and dispensationalists. They teach that there will be several future judgments, in the plural. They often speak of three judgments—multiple future judgments. Among these several, future judgments is the judgment of believers only, at the time of the rapture. Among them is also the judgment of the nations, seven years after the rapture and after the great tribulation, which began at the time of the rapture and before the inauguration of the millennium, the one thousand year earthly reign of Christ. And, finally, among these future judgments is the judgment of the wicked at the end of the millennium, what they refer to often as the “Great White Throne Judgment,” after what we read in Revelation 20:11, “And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away.”

But contrary to the teaching of premillennialism and dispensationalism, the Bible speaks clearly of only one future public judgment, *the* Judgment Day. This is implied in Revelation 20, where we are taught that “the dead,” that is, *all* the dead, shall stand in the judgment. The apostle adds, “both small and great.” That again indicates that *all men* shall stand in the one judgment, whether they are small or whether they are great. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says that “we must all appear before *the* judgment seat of Christ,” and again, the implication is that there is one final judgment. This is also the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 25. “All nations” are gathered before Christ at one time for judgment; if all the nations are gathered for judgment, no one is excluded from the judgment. “The King” conducts a single judgment, the result of which is the eternal separation of the sheep and the goats. Here, “sheep and goats” stand for all men. In Romans 2:16, the apostle speaks of “THE day [that is, the one day] when God shall judge the secrets of men.”

Although this is the *final* judgment, it is not the *only* judgment of God. It is the *final* and *public* judgment; but there are other judgments

of God throughout history, though not as the premillennialists and dispensationalists teach. There is God's judgment in the conscience of every man continually testifying to him, so that every man knows his standing before God, whether he is approved by God or the object of God's judgment and wrath: "Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shown it unto them" (Rom. 1:19). There are the judgments that God visits upon men *in this life*, whether in wrath or in chastisement. Solomon says in Proverbs that the curse of the Lord is in the house of the wicked. Not the love of God, not a common grace favor of God, but the curse of God is in the house of the wicked. Romans 1:18 teaches that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodly men, who suppress the knowledge of God. Included in this judgment of God are the consequences of sin that God visits upon the ungodly and even upon His people when they walk in sin. Think of David and God's judgment upon him for his murder and adultery: his young son died, one took his wives as he had taken his neighbor's wife, and the sword never departed from his family. Already in this life, the righteous experience the blessing of God and enjoy the rewards of obedience to His commandments. Solomon says in Proverbs 11:18, "The wicked worketh a deceitful work: but to him that soweth righteousness shall be a sure reward."

Besides the judgments of God on men in time and history, there is also the judgment of God at the cross. On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus said, "Now is the judgment of this world; now is the prince of this world cast out" (John 12:31). In the cross, the judgment that we deserve was borne by our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why we do not need to fear the coming day of judgment. Our Head bore in our place the judgment of God that our sins deserved.

There is also the judgment of all men at the moment of death. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews writes in Hebrews 9:27, "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." At the moment in which they die, all men are judged, and according to that judgment they go in their souls either to hell or to heaven.

But there is also a final, public judgment. This is the judgment that Scripture emphasizes. It is not the *only* judgment. But it is the *final* judgment. And it is also a public judgment. After this judgment, there is no other judgment. There is only the outcome of the judgment. There is only eternity—heaven or hell.

### **Who Will Be the Judge?**

All men will be judged, but who will judge? Who will conduct the final judgment? Before whom will all men appear in order to be judged?

In the final judgment, God will be the Judge. This is clearly the teaching of Scripture. In Romans 2:16 we read of “the day when God shall judge the secrets of men.” In Daniel 7:9, “the Ancient of days, whose garment was as white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool” sits upon the throne in order to judge. The Ancient of days is the Lord God. And in Revelation 20, the one who sits upon the great white throne is the one “from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away.” There can be no question that the earth and heaven flee from the face of God.

Only God can and only God deserves to conduct the final judgment. Only God possesses the infinite wisdom necessary for the judgment. Only God is able to know and judge the secrets of the heart and the thoughts of the mind. Only God is able to judge righteously. He is the only judge who cannot be bribed, coerced, or manipulated. He does not show favoritism or partiality. He weighs perfectly all the evidence. With complete accuracy, He makes His judgment. And His judgment is right and final. There is no appeal of His judgment to a higher court; and there is no need of appeal. Only God has the power—almighty power—to execute the judgment that He issues. Whereas an earthly judge may render a righteous verdict, he is completely powerless to implement the judgment that he has rendered. And only God can show the mercy that will be shown to the people of God in the Judgment Day—amazing mercy.

Although God conducts the final judgment, He judges all men *by Jesus Christ*. Because He is God, the Son of God who is one with God the Father, He alone is qualified to be Judge. As God, He is Himself above judgment. As the Son of God, He is able to render righteous judgment. But the one who judges us is, at the same time, the man, Christ Jesus. The one who was conceived in the womb and born of the virgin Mary. The one who lived a perfect life, who suffered and died under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, and descended into hell. The one who arose from the dead victoriously, who is now ascended into heaven, and seated at the right hand of God the Father

Almighty—He is the one who will judge us. The One who is the Lord of lords and the King of kings, who possesses all power and glory on earth and in heaven. He is the Judge.

That is the Christian's comfort as he faces the prospect of the coming Judgment Day! That is why the thought of the judgment must not terrify the people of God. The one who is going to judge us is the same one who suffered and died for us! What have we to fear? Nothing, absolutely nothing! This is our assurance as we face the coming judgment. If I may put it that way, the first thing you will notice about this Judge, clothed in majesty and glory, is that He has holes in His hands and in His feet.

That it is our Lord Jesus Christ who will conduct the judgment, is the clear teaching of Scripture. The apostle teaches this in Romans 2:16, "In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel." And in Romans 14:12 he rebukes those to whom he writes: "But why dost thou judge thy brother? Or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ." The judgment seat before which we shall all stand is the judgment seat of the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostle teaches in 2 Corinthians 5:10 that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ." In Matthew 25:31 and 32, it is the Son of Man, the one who comes in His glory, who sits upon the throne of His glory and judges all men, separating the sheep from the goats. In Revelation 22:1 and 3, the judgment throne is referred to by the apostle John as "the throne of God and of the Lamb." The Lamb is the Lord Jesus Christ. "Lamb" is the favorite description of Christ in the book of Revelation. The judgment throne is the Lamb's, that is, Christ's judgment throne.

### **What Will Be the Character of the Final Judgment?**

We have answered the question, "Who will be judged?" and the question, "Who will be the judge?" The next question that we face is the question, "What will be the character of the judgment?" What are the outstanding things about the judgment, to which Scripture calls our attention?

First, Scripture teaches that the final judgment will be a *public* judgment. This is what distinguishes the final judgment from all the

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other judgments of God; this judgment is the only *public* judgment. The final judgment is not the only judgment of God in time and in history. But it is the only *public* judgment.

This explains the necessity of the judgment and especially the reason on account of which the people of God must stand in the judgment. For more than six thousand years, the world has despised and persecuted the people of God. They have been mocked and ridiculed. They have experienced rejection and oppression. All the while, the ungodly world has denied and blasphemed the name of God whom the saints confess, whose Word they honor, whose commandments they obey. As was the experience of Noah for the one hundred and twenty years during which he was building the ark, so also will it be in the days prior to the second coming of Christ. But, in the final, *public* judgment, it will be made known that their cause was the cause of the Son of God. The wicked will see and know. They will see and know that God is God, that He is our God and that we are His people. In the language of article 37 of the Belgic Confession, “their innocence shall be known to all.” God’s people will have their day in court. And God and God’s cause will be vindicated before the whole world of men, angels, and demons in the final judgment.

The final judgment will not convince the people of God of who they are and what their standing is before God, as though they were uncertain of this prior to the final judgment. No, not at all! They knew what their standing was. They knew by faith in Jesus Christ that they stood before God as those who were justified. They knew that they had a perfect and everlasting righteousness that would stand before God in the judgment day. They knew what their standing before God was altogether apart from the final judgment. That is not the reason for the final judgment. Just as the one who is on trial knows his own guilt or innocence long before the judge announces his verdict, even before the trial begins, so do believers know, altogether apart from the final judgment, their standing before God. That is not the reason, in whole or in part, for the final judgment. But in the final judgment, inasmuch as the final judgment is a public judgment, the world will see and the whole world will know. Publicly the elect people of God will be justified. And publicly, the ungodly and unbelieving will be exposed and condemned.

That the final judgment will be a public judgment is the teaching of the Bible. In 1 Corinthians 4:5, the apostle says that in the final judgment, the Lord “will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts.” In Matthew 25:32, Jesus teaches that in the final judgment all nations will be gathered together before Him. If all the nations are gathered before Christ in the judgment, the judgment must be a public judgment. In Revelation 20, both the dead and those still living, both the small and the great stand before God as the books are opened. This also implies that the final judgment will be a public judgment.

At the same time, the public judgment will also be a *personal* judgment. Each one of us will have our day in court. Every man, small and great alike, will stand before Christ the Judge. One by one, we will all be judged. Every man will have his day in God’s courtroom. This belongs to the miracle that the final judgment will be. There are many miracles connected to the final judgment. The resurrection of all the dead immediately prior to the judgment is a miracle. The fact that in a moment of time we will all be judged is another miraculous occurrence. That in that single moment of time, not only men, but also the angels will be judged is a miracle beyond our comprehension. But also this fact, that the judgment will be public, that everyone will hear and everyone will know the judgment of God over everyone else who stands in the judgment—this too is miraculous.

### **Judgment According to Works**

One important aspect of the final judgment is that we will be judged “according to our works.” This is the clear teaching of Scripture. This is 2 Corinthians 5:10, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that everyone may receive the things done in the body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.” This is also the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 25. In the separation of the sheep and the goats, Jesus makes plain that the sheep and goats are judged according to their works.

Revelation 20:12 and 13 also speaks of this: “And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, *according*

*to their works.* And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell [the grave, that is] delivered up the dead which were in them; and they were judged every man *according to their works.*” In this passage there is a distinction made between “the books” and “another book.” Without going into detail, “the books” are the records of the thoughts and deeds of every human being as they are known by God. “The books” are distinct from the “other book,” which is the Book of Life, the book in which the names of the elect are written. This teaches us that the final judgment is not based upon our will and works. Rather, our judgment is based upon the eternal will and work of God in election.

Nevertheless, this does not take away from the fact that we are judged *according to our works.* Jesus teaches this when He says in Matthew 12:36 “that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.” And He adds, “For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.” In Romans 2:5, the apostle Paul speaks of “the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,” adding in verse 6 that in that day He “will render to every man according to his deeds.” And the same apostle teaches in 2 Corinthians 5:10 that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.”

But immediately the question arises, “Does this not conflict with the gospel of grace? Are we not saved by grace, apart from our own works? How can it be that we are judged according to our works?” Often this truth that we are judged “according to our works” troubles and confuses the people of God. At the very least, they do not know how to reconcile judgment according to works with the free grace of God proclaimed in the gospel.

What is crucial for all to understand is that judgment “according to our works” is not the same as judgment “on the basis of our works.” Our works are never the basis for our standing with God, not now and not in the final judgment. That would make the final judgment terrifying, indeed. But we are not vindicated in the judgment *because* of our works. All our vindication is because of the merit, the work, and the perfect obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of His

cross work, His doing and dying, God acquits us and declares us to be righteous. But, rather, we are judged *according to* our works. That is different, very different. And that is the clear teaching of Scripture.

What does it mean that we will be judged “according to our works?” First of all, that God’s judgment of us is according to our works means that His judgment of us is *in harmony with* our works. God does not judge one whose works are contrary to His law, the works of impenitent disobedience, rebellion, immorality, and violence to be righteous. Neither does God judge one whose works are righteous, holy, and good—one who strives to keep God’s commandments and to do what pleases Him—to be worthy of condemnation and wrath. His judgment of us is in harmony with our works, in accord with our works.

Secondly, that God’s judgment of us is according to our works also means that the degree of God’s reward of us will be according to our works. Not all will receive the same reward; there will be degrees of reward in heaven. All the saints will be glorified; but there will be those who have greater glory, according to their works during their lifetime, according to their position in God’s church, and according to the severity of the persecution they endured. The martyrs, those who have died for their faith and made the ultimate sacrifice, will have a special place in glory, as the book of Revelation makes plain. The apostle Paul, Martin Luther, and John Calvin are going to receive greater glory in heaven than Ronald Cammenga. The degree of glory will be according to our works.

And thirdly, in connection with judgment according to our works, let us never forget two things. First of all, our works are God’s work in us. When He rewards us, God crowns His own works. That, in the first place, we must never forget. And secondly, let it never be forgotten that the sinful aspect of our works is covered in the blood of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, we have nothing in which to boast. Absolutely nothing! What we are and what we have, we are and we have by grace.

One thing more about the works according to which we are judged, in keeping with Jesus’ instruction in Matthew 25. What are the works that receive the greatest reward? What works does Jesus call attention to in Matthew 25? Are they the spectacular works that men see and

gain the praise of men? Is it the work of giving several million dollars to build a new hospital in Jerusalem—a hospital that bears the name of the wealthy philanthropist. Or, is it the donation of millions of dollars to some educational institution, like Nazareth Community College or Galilee State University, which provide scholarships for students who otherwise might not be able to afford an education? There is nothing wrong, of course, with either of these things in themselves.

But these are not the kinds of works to which Jesus calls attention in Matthew 25. It is the good work of giving a cup of cold water to one who is thirsty, feeding someone who is hungry, or visiting someone who is in prison, suffering for their faith. It is not the spectacular works that get the attention of men and make for headlines in the newspapers—they still exist, don't they? But it is the unnoticed and unheralded works that Christ rewards in the final judgment. He rewards the mother who denied herself and the possibility of a lucrative career for the sake of the care and nurture of her children. He rewards a father who worked long hours, for low pay, at a job that he probably did not much enjoy, for the sake of the support of his family and of the church. He rewards the good works that often go unnoticed among men, like visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction, to which James refers in James 1:27. Not the works that garner the praise of men are the works that God notices and rewards in the judgment.

One thing more about the final judgment. We have already said that God's reward of us according to our works means, in part, that there will be degrees of reward in the final judgment. But that is not only true of the people of God. That is also true of the ungodly and unbelieving. The Scriptures teach clearly that the very worst judgment of God is reserved for those who knew the gospel, but rejected it in hatred and unbelief. Those who were born and raised in the church, who were baptized and probably made confession of their faith and partook of the Lord's Supper, but in the end rejected Jesus Christ, turned their back on the church, and gave themselves over to the world—they will be beaten with double stripes. Their judgment and condemnation will be the worst. That is in keeping with Jesus' rebuke of the cities of Galilee in which He had done most of His mighty works and in which He had personally preached the gospel, but had nonetheless rejected him. "Woe unto thee, Chorazin! Woe unto

thee, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee” (Matt. 11:21-24). That is a warning to every professing Christian. And that is a warning to children and young people who have been born to believing parents, raised in a covenant home, attended Christian schools, and probably made profession of faith in the church, but turn their back on God, His church and covenant. Their guilt is the greater! Their judgment is aggravated! They will be beaten with double stripes!

### **What Will Be the Outcome of the Final Judgment?**

This could be a whole speech by itself on heaven and hell—two speeches, in fact. That is the twofold outcome of the final judgment: heaven and hell. For elect believers, righteous with the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, who were indwelt by the Spirit and lived out of the principle of the new life, the outcome will be everlasting life and glory. The outcome for them will be life and glory with God, with Jesus Christ, and with all the saints who have gone before. Heaven—that is the glorious outcome! The perfection of God’s everlasting covenant of grace. Revelation 21:1-7 describes this glorious outcome. It will be life in the new heavens and new earth. It will be life lived with God, who will wipe away all tears, who will eradicate all death, sorrow, and crying. It will be a life according to which God will be believers’ God, and they His sons and daughters. Glorious day—what a day that will be!

For the ungodly and unbelieving, the outcome of the final judgment will be very different. For those who rejected Jesus Christ and persecuted His church and people, the outcome will be judgment and condemnation. The outcome will be hell and the everlasting suffering of the damned in hell. The outcome will be outer darkness, in separation from God and from the Lord Jesus Christ. There the only

sounds that will be heard will be the sounds of weeping, wailing, and gnashing of the teeth of the damned. Terrible judgment and indescribable suffering! But judgment and suffering deserved by those who despised God's holiness, trampled upon His law, and persecuted His beloved church.

There is no more fitting way in which to conclude a consideration of the final judgment, than to quote the last part of Belgic Confession, Article 37, entitled "The Last Judgment." It is a soul-stirring article that sets before Reformed believers the hope that is theirs in Jesus Christ.

And therefore the consideration of this judgment, is justly terrible and dreadful to the wicked and ungodly, but most desirable and comfortable to the righteous and elect: because then their full deliverance shall be perfected, and there they shall receive the fruits of their labor and trouble which they have borne. Their innocence shall be known to all, and they shall see the terrible vengeance which God will execute on the wicked, who most cruelly persecuted, oppressed and tormented them in this world; and who shall be convicted by the testimony of their own consciences, and be immortal, shall be tormented in that everlasting fire, which is prepared for the devil and his angels. But on the contrary, the faithful and elect shall be crowned with glory and honor; and the Son of God will confess their names before God his Father, and his elect angels; all tears shall be wiped from their eyes; and their cause which is now condemned by many judges and magistrates, as heretical and impious, will then be known to be the cause of the Son of God. And for a gracious reward, the Lord will cause them to possess such a glory, as never entered into the heart of man to conceive. Therefore we expect that great day with a most ardent desire to the end that we may fully enjoy the promises of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." ●

## Review Article: *The Crux of the “Free Offer” Is the Cross*

David J. Engelsma

*The Crux of the Free Offer of the Gospel*, by Sam Waldron. Greenbrier, AR: Free Grace Press, 2019. Pp. 143. \$18.00 (softcover). [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

### Introduction

With the enthusiastic recommendation of such Reformed theologians as Joel Beeke and Richard D. Phillips, Baptist theologian Sam Waldron launches a vehement attack on the Reformed confession of salvation by particular grace and a vigorous defense of the theology of universal, ineffectual (saving) grace as this heresy is inherent in the doctrine of the “well-meant offer” of the gospel.

To his credit, Waldron is candid in his attack and defense, as other defenders of the popular doctrine are not. By the “free offer,” he means a divine invitation to salvation that expresses a saving love of God for all to whom the ineffectual invitation comes, with the sincere, gracious purpose and desire of God that everyone who hears the invitation be saved. In the “free offer,” God extends His saving grace in Jesus Christ to all to whom the offer comes—extends it with the desire of love that the sinner be saved by the offer, that is, by the offering God.

It is both the conviction and assumption of this book that the crux of the doctrine of the Free Offer of the gospel is God’s indiscriminate desire for the salvation of sinners. To put this in other words, at the core of the Free Offer of the gospel is what is called the ‘Well-Meant’ Offer of the gospel...This conviction (that the Well-Meant Offer and God’s indiscriminate desire for the salvation of sinners is the crux of the Free Offer) is also the conviction of its most vocal enemies (9, 10).

Whereupon Waldron adduces this reviewer’s book, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel*, as expressing the rejection of the well-meant offer to which he and his theological allies are opposed.

Honestly, Waldron acknowledges that it is this that the avowed foes of the so-called “free offer” find objectionable—foes particularly in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC).

This is strikingly candid on Waldron’s part because many advocates of the well-meant offer like to disguise the heresy, which they hold, as much as possible by carefully referring to it only as the “free offer.” Thus, they hide behind the use of the phrase in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF, 7.3) and leave the impression that they are only confessing the indiscriminate preaching of the gospel to all and sundry; the serious call to all hearers to repent and believe; and the generally announced particular promise that everyone who believes will surely be saved. This meaning of the “offer,” of course, is orthodox, and heartily subscribed to by the PRC.

### **What Is Meant by the “Free Offer”**

In fact, this is not what such theologians mean by the “free offer.” What they mean is what Waldron rightly and candidly calls the “well-meant offer.” What Waldron means, and what such defenders of the “free offer of the gospel” as Beeke, Phillips, R. Scott Clark, and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (all of whom are adduced by Waldron as defenders of the well-meant offer) mean, by the “free offer” is that “God wills for them [all who hear the gospel—DJE] to be saved (22) and that God has a “desire and intention for the salvation of men who were finally lost” (24), so that the “free offer” preacher assures everyone in his audience that “God wants him to be saved” (33).

The doctrine of the “free offer” for which Waldron contends, as do also most contemporary advocates of the “free offer,” is “that he [God] would have all come to Christ” (130). “God earnestly desires the salvation of every man who hears the gospel. He sends them the gospel—with the desire, intention, and will—that they might be saved by it” (100).

As this universal will of salvation itself implies, Waldron candidly declares that his and the others’ “free offer” proceeds from a saving love for all who hear the gospel and proceeds to them all as the (would be) saving grace of God.

Waldron struggles, as well he might, with the implication of his well-meant offer, namely, that there are two, contradictory wills in God.

With the will of election (which Waldron confesses), God desires and intends the salvation of some only who hear the gospel, Jacob, not Esau. With the will of the well-meant offer, God desires the salvation of all, Esau, as well as Jacob. Thus, the God of the well-meant offer is in conflict with Himself, which is intolerable for a Calvinistic, indeed Christian, theologian.

Waldron makes an effort to alleviate his grave problem of contradiction in God, and that in the important matter of salvation, by recourse to a deep and murky discussion of the nature of the being of God (which discussion does nothing at all to solve Waldron's problem of a conflicted god—a god whom I would advise to make up his mind: does he purpose to save all, or some only?; does he want us to preach his will of election or his will of the well-meant offer?) The familiar appeal in defense of this contradiction in two wills of God to the oneness and threeness of God's being, as though the oneness and threeness of the being of God are also contradiction is a complete failure. For God is not one and three in the same respects. He is one in *being*, and three in *persons*. The Trinity of God is not a glaring contradiction. The doctrine of the Trinity reveals God as incomprehensible. It does not reveal Him as nonsense.

### **“Will of Precept/Will of Decree”**

Beyond all doubt, Waldron's main defense against the charge that his theology of the well-meant offer posits two contradictory wills in God is his appeal to the Reformed distinction between the preceptive will and the decretive will of God. Again and again, Waldron falls back on this distinction in the will of God. He expresses the importance of the distinction for his doctrine of the offer early in his treatment of his subject: “First, the backdrop of this discussion is the preceptive will of God for all men” (25). He returns to the distinction at the very end of the book, where he adds to his confusion by introducing the distinction between the secret and the revealed will of God.

This means that the supposed objection to the Free Offer from particular redemption is not different in its fundamental nature from the problem relating to the tension between God's decretive (or secret) and preceptive (or revealed) will...The particular redemption of only some of those to whom the gospel is preached is not an objection. The

revealed or preceptive will of God in the gospel is that he would have all come to Christ. The revealed will of God is that in Christ, on the basis of his precious blood, there is a sufficient Savior for them (130).

Waldron misunderstands and misrepresents the distinction, “preceptive will/will of decree.” The distinction is not between a desire to save some (election) and a desire to save all (the well-meant offer). But, as the wording of the distinction itself makes plain, the distinction is between a desire, or intention, or purpose, to save only the elect (the will of decree) and the command, or precept, to all who hear the gospel, that they repent and believe (the will of precept). The preceptive will of God is His command, not the expression of His purpose, or intention. A precept is a command. It is not a wish. It is exactly the idea of the distinction in Reformed theology that the Bible often teaches that God commands (preceptive will) what He does not purpose according to His decree (will of decree). Similarly, He forbids (precept) what He has decreed (decree).

Here may be difficulty for the human comprehension. But there is no contradiction. God forbade Adam to eat the fruit (precept), whereas He had decreed that Adam would eat, in order that He might carry out His purpose of salvation in Jesus Christ (decree). God forbade Joseph’s brothers to sell him into Egypt, whereas He had decreed that they would sell him, so that Joseph might keep the family of Jacob alive. God forbade all the agents of the wickedness of bringing Jesus to the cross to perform their evil deeds, whereas He ordained that they would perform them in order to accomplish the salvation of many by the redemption of the cross. God commands all who hear the gospel to believe (precept), whereas by the very preaching of the gospel He hardens the hearts of some that they not believe, according to His decretal will of reprobation (decree). What God commands is one thing (will of precept). What He decrees is another thing (will of decree). Precept and decree involve no contradiction.

When Waldron inexcusably describes the preceptive will of God as God’s *gracious intention, or purpose* to save those whom He has not elected, he completely misunderstands the preceptive will of God, and brings God into conflict with Himself. “The revealed or preceptive will of God in the gospel is that he would have all come to Christ” (130). Now God has two contrary wills: a will desiring the salvation

of all and a will desiring the salvation of some only. He is a God at cross purposes with Himself. And one of these wills—the one which Waldron and his free-offer colleagues emphasize—is a failure. All who hear the gospel do not come to Christ.

Likewise, Waldron's appeal to a distinction between the "secret" and "revealed" will of God rests on a misunderstanding of the distinction. For Waldron, God's revealed will is His purpose that all be saved by the gospel, inasmuch as God loves them all alike. God's secret will, in contrast, is His election of some only. This is sheer contradiction in God with regard to the salvation of humans who hear the gospel. But this is inexcusable ignorance on Waldron's part, ignorance that those who so heartily recommend the book ought in kindness, to say nothing of theological astuteness, to have called to Waldron's attention. The secret will of God is what God has ordained in His eternal counsel, for example, that God would harden Pharaoh's heart so that he would refuse to let God's people go, in order that God might be glorified in Pharaoh's disobedience. Pharaoh did not know this will, nor did he need to know it. Pharaoh knew, and only needed to know, God's revealed will, which was the command of God to him by Moses, "Let my people go." The precept did not contradict the decree. In fact, the precept served the decree. By disobeying the precept Pharaoh hardened himself so as to make himself ready for his decreed destruction.

Waldron makes the revealed will of God a purpose of God to save all who hear the gospel, in contradiction of the secret will of God's predestination that only some be saved. Not only does this understanding of the distinction cause God to be at loggerheads with Himself and bring the gospel into utter confusion (does the God of the gospel will to save some, or all?), but it also is falsity on its very face. If the revealed will of God is taken to refer to God's revelation in Scripture as to whether He purposes the salvation of all who hear the gospel, or of some only, the revealed will—the *revealed* will—of God plainly teaches that He wills to save some only, not all. Jesus told His enemies to their faces in John 10 that they were not of His sheep, to whom alone He willed (intended, purposed, desired) to give eternal life. It is the revealed will of God that God has no desire for the salvation of all who hear the gospel, indeed, of all to whom Jesus Himself preaches the gospel. In Romans 9, the Holy Ghost teaches

that the purpose of God with some who hear the gospel is that their hearts be hardened so that they perish everlastingly. This is not the "secret" will of God, but the "revealed" will. God has made known that He does not will, or purpose, or intend, the salvation of all who hear the gospel. His revealed will clearly makes known His decree of predestination, that He purposes and intends the salvation of some only, in distinction from others for whom He purposes damnation. The revealed will makes known also that God designs and uses the preaching of the gospel as means of grace for the salvation of the elect only.

Waldron and his free-offer allies are inexcusable in their opposition to this revealed will of God. "Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth" (Romans 9:18). The text explains God's will in the matter of the salvation of sinners. The text teaches that this will concerning salvation is particular, not universal. The text teaches that the will for the salvation of some only includes, as an essential aspect of this will, the will for the hardening and damnation of others. And this two-fold will of God regarding salvation is part of biblical revelation. It is the *revealed* will of God. Whether they receive it by bowing to the revelation, this will of God is made known to Sam Waldron and his free-offer allies, as well as to the PRC, unless they do not have John 10 and Romans 8 and 9, and many similar passages, in their Bibles.

To Waldron and his theological allies, who forever oppose and argue against this revealed will of God, that He is merciful in the gospel to whom He wills to be merciful, withholding His mercy from others, as though this truth would render God somehow unfair, if not hard-hearted, making Him the original "hyper-Calvinist," comes the apostolic warning, "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay," etc. (Romans 9:20)

Let Waldron and his allies consider, whether their theology of the offer would occasion such an objection and necessitate such a warning. Who would object to the teaching that God loves all with a saving love and comes to all alike with the message, "I love you all alike, that is, with a saving love, and sincerely desire to save you all;

now I offer all of you alike Christ and salvation; and (as this message implies) it is now up to you”? It is inconceivable that anyone would object, “Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will” (Romans 9:19, 20)

So important for Waldron’s defense of his theology of the well-mean offer is his mistaken understanding of the preceptive will of God that, with the exposure of this inexcusable error, his well-meant offer collapses.

### “Argument” of Slander

Nevertheless, other aspects of his defense and promotion of the theory of the well-meant offer are noteworthy, if for no other reason than that they are part and parcel of the defense of the offer by many others. First, there is his repeated use of the tactic of slander to defend the free offer against the objection by the PRC. The slander is that the PRC are “hyper-Calvinists.” What makes the PRC hyper-Calvinists, according to Waldron, is their denial of “God’s indiscriminate desire for the salvation of sinners,” which desire “is the crux of the Free Offer” (9, 10). Waldron references this denial, which supposedly constitutes hyper-Calvinism, to a Protestant Reformed book. Hyper-Calvinism, of which false doctrine the PRC are the outstanding proponents in our day, is the denial “that God desires the salvation of all who hear the gospel” (33). Not only is the charge false, indeed slanderous, but it too, like the author’s explanation of the preceptive will of God, betrays ignorance, or malice, by its misunderstanding, and misrepresentation, of the error of hyper-Calvinism. Hyper-Calvinism is not the doctrine that God loves only some humans (with His saving love in Christ crucified) and in this love, and grace, wills to save some only in the preaching of the gospel. This doctrine is *Calvinism*, as a school-boy catechized in a Reformed church knows by heart and as even the world of ungodly intellectual scholarship knows, to say nothing of Calvinism’s religious foes. Hyper-Calvinism, which thinks to advance beyond this Calvinism (“*hyper*”!!!), denies that the church may seriously call (exhort, command) anyone to repent and believe who does not show himself as regenerated and already saved. The church may issue the gospel-call only to those who show themselves saved and therefore elect, adding the promise that one who believes shall be saved only to the ears of such a (supposedly) saved person.

Hyper-Calvinism is not the doctrine that God is gracious in the preaching only to the elect. This doctrine is Calvinism—pure, sound, orthodox, historic, creedal, biblical Calvinism. But hyper-Calvinism is the denial of the promiscuous call of the gospel on the (mistaken) ground of election. If Waldron refuses to accept the description of hyper-Calvinism by this reviewer, to whose book on hyper-Calvinism Waldron refers repeatedly, let him hear such an authority as Herman Bavinck. Undoubtedly referring to hyper-Calvinism, Bavinck describes those in the “camp of the Reformed” who “got to the point where they only preached the law to the unconverted and offered the gospel only to those who had already learned to know themselves as sinners and felt the need for redemption” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, tr. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt, vol. 4, 35).

It serves the purpose of the advocates of the well-meant offer to label those who deny the well-meant offer as hyper-Calvinists. But the charge is neither right, nor brotherly. It is theological slander. And it ought to cease, in the interests of theological accuracy, if for no other reason.

To put the best construction on it (I respond to slander with a judgment of charity), the charge that the PRC and others who deny the well-meant offer are hyper-Calvinists arises out of the conviction that the well-meant offer is necessary for the promiscuous preaching of the gospel, including the indiscriminate call of the gospel to all who hear, “Repent, and believe.” The thinking of Waldron and his allies is that without a theology of a (saving) love of God for all and a sincere desire of God for the salvation of all, a church cannot preach the gospel to all. This was exactly the charge of the Arminians against sound Reformed theology at the Synod of Dordt. Particular grace makes promiscuous preaching impossible. Dordt responded to this charge, or fear, as the case may be, in Canons, 2.5:

Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel.

This article of the Canons does not respond to the Arminians' charge by compromising Dordt's confession of particular grace. It does not respond by affirming universal grace in the preaching in contradiction of particular grace in the decree. But the article demonstrates that Dordt's confession of particular grace is, in fact, no hindrance to promiscuous preaching. Such preaching does not contradict the truth of particular grace, but is in perfect harmony with the truth of particular grace.

The preaching of the gracious promise is general, or "promiscuous." The gracious promise itself, originating in God's gracious will to save, is particular: "whosoever believeth in Christ crucified." But the particularity of grace in no wise hampers or restricts the preaching of this particular grace, including the serious exhortation to all hearers to believe and the declaration to all that everyone who does believe shall be saved. Pure, sound Calvinism is not hyper-Calvinism. To charge it with hyper-Calvinism is slander. By this time in the Reformed community, to continue to make the charge is *deliberate* slander, or inexcusable ignorance.

### **Where Has Reprobation Gone?**

Another feature of Waldron's book that cries for notice is its failure to interact with the creedal, Reformed doctrine of reprobation. If Waldron even mentions reprobation, except to defend Iain Murray's unconscionable elision of Arthur Pink's treatment of reprobation from his—Murray's—reprint of Pink's *Sovereignty of God*, I missed it. Silence on reprobation in a book advocating universal grace in the preaching of the gospel is understandable. It is impossible to harmonize a saving love of God for all humans with Dordt's and Westminster's creedal doctrine of reprobation.

And then Waldron's defense of Murray's omission of Pink's doctrine of reprobation from the reprint by the Banner of Truth is as significant as was Murray's omission itself. Whether Pink changed his mind about the doctrine as he aged is not the important thing. What is significant is that ardent advocates of the well-meant offer are quite willing, if not eager, to banish the doctrine of reprobation to oblivion, and to defend those who do so. The reason is obvious and conclusive in the controversy over the well-meant offer: the doctrine

of reprobation condemns the theory of the well-meant offer as heresy. It is impossible to reconcile the offer with reprobation. Since reprobation is an essential element of predestination, inability to reconcile with reprobation is inability to reconcile with predestination. Since predestination is the source and foundation of all salvation, inability to reconcile the offer with reprobation is, by virtue of this fact, to damn the offer as heresy.

If Pink did in weakness change his mind about reprobation (something that a reader of Pink finds difficult to accept), a lover of the gospel of sovereign grace would have included the chapter on reprobation in the reprint of Pink’s book, regardless of the change of mind of the author, unless the author strictly forbade doing so, which no one alleges. And if a lover of sovereign grace were reflecting on Murray’s omission of the chapter on reprobation, he would not defend the omission, but criticize it as fatal weakening of the gospel of salvation by grace alone. Murray did not do the one; Waldron did not do the other. Both declined on behalf of the well-meant offer.

### **Well-Meant Offer Versus Limited Atonement**

Noteworthy also is Waldron’s laborious effort to ward off the charge that the well-meant offer necessarily implies, and leads to, universal atonement. To this issue, he devotes an entire chapter. The Baptist theologian wants to maintain limited atonement. But his valorous efforts on behalf of a limited atonement, despite his confession of universal grace in the preaching, are futile. First, he has the weight of history against him. Again and again, theologians and churches have developed the theology of the offer into the doctrine of universal atonement, as Waldron himself acknowledges. Two well-known, fairly recent instances are the Christian Reformed Church, at the prompting of its theologian, Harold Dekker, and “Reformed Baptist” theologian, David Allen—Waldron’s colleague—in his recent book, *The Extent of the Atonement*. Both of these dramatic instances of the development of the well-meant offer into the doctrine of universal atonement are known to Waldron.

Second, the doctrine of the offer carries the seed of universal atonement in itself. If God loves all with a saving love and sincerely desires the salvation of all, He must have given Christ to die for all.

For apart from the cross, there is no saving grace and can be no sincere offer of salvation, that is, an offer that extends to the hearer the grace of salvation in the desire of God for the salvation of that hearer. Without a cross for all, there can be no sincere desire of God for the salvation of all, nor a sincere offer to all. Here, Waldron is hoist with his own petard. His argument is that there can be no serious call, or command, or (rightly understood) offer, without a gracious, saving purpose of God in the command. But likewise, on Waldron's reasoning, there can be no gracious, well-meant offer without a basis in universal atonement. A love that desires salvation without hypocrisy, as surely the love of God must be, must provide for this salvation in the only source and fountain, namely, the cross. Can an offer be sincere if there is no salvation provided for and available to the one to whom God makes the offer? If God says to a reprobate, "I love you with a saving love in Jesus Christ and ardently desire your salvation," as is the theology of Sam Waldron, Joel Beeke, Richard Phillips, R. Scott Clark and a host of other theologians of the well-meant offer, does not the reprobate perceive God to be saying, "I gave Jesus Christ, whom I am now offering to you sincerely, to the death of the cross for you?" And is this not in fact what the preacher of the well-meant offer is actually saying? Offering salvation, he is well-meaningly offering Christ Jesus, and well-meaningly offering Christ Jesus he is offering Christ Jesus crucified and risen. There is no other salvation than that of the cross. There is no other Christ Jesus to offer than Christ Jesus crucified.

The Jesus Christ of the well-meant offer of Sam Waldron is both a deceiver and a failure. He is a deceiver in that there is, in fact, no salvation in His cross for many to whom He well-meaningly offers salvation. It is with Him as it would be with me, were I lovingly to offer a million dollars to a wretch on Skid Row, when in fact my bank account was empty. The Jesus Christ of the free offer is a failure inasmuch as many whom He lovingly, sincerely desires to save perish nonetheless.

Why are so many enamored of this "Jesus"? this Arminian and Pelagian "Jesus"? this impotent, beggarly "Jesus"?

The crux of the free offer is the cross of Jesus Christ. Is it for all indiscriminately, or for some only? Is it the source of the saving grace

of God for all without exception, or the source of grace for the elect, and the elect only? And is it availing, not only in its accomplishment of redemption when Jesus died, but also today when it is preached. Or, is it inefficacious when it is preached, failing to save multitudes to whom it comes in the saving grace of God towards them? Genuine Calvinism confesses that the purpose of God with the preaching of the cross is the salvation of the elect, and the elect only, and that it is the will of God, the *only* will of God, "by the blood of the cross" "effectually [to] redeem...all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to Him by the Father" (Canons of Dort, 2.8).

Waldron and his universal grace allies would respond that Christ did indeed die, two thousand years ago, for the elect, but that He ought to be preached today as crucified for all who hear the gospel. If God is proclaimed as loving all with a saving love for all, the cross must be preached as a cross for all, because God's saving love is realized and revealed in the cross of Christ. In Waldron's theology, however confused, the former truth is the decretal view of the cross, whereas the latter is the divine will of command. But the apostle proclaimed the cross to the saints at Ephesus and to the church down the ages as a cross for the elect church and for the elect church alone: "Christ loved the *church*, and gave himself for *it* [the elect church]" (Ephesians 5:6). In the language of Waldron's confused theology, Ephesians 5 teaches that the love of Christ and the cross are particular, not as the message of the will of the decree and of the secret will of God, but as the message of the will of precept and of the revealed will of God.

After Waldron has done his very best to reconcile his "Free Offer" with limited, or particular, atonement (something impossible to be done, as Waldron himself is forced to acknowledge), he throws up his hands in despair at accomplishing this impossibility. He does this by the hoary, familiar tactic of the advocates of the well-meant offer: he appeals to "mystery." "[I] want to admit that there are mysteries involved in the relation of the free offer and particular redemption I do not fully understand" (129). What Waldron means by "mystery" is sheer contradiction that mocks both the believing mind and the harmonious revelation of the gospel in Scripture. What Scripture and the historic Reformed faith mean by "mystery" is essentially different:

a truth that is unknown and unknowable to the natural mind of man, but that God has revealed by His Word and Spirit to His church. This revelation is not contradictory, and therefore unknowable, nonsense, as is Waldron's theology of limited atonement (the gracious will of God for the salvation of some only) and of the well-meant offer (the gracious will of God for the salvation of all humans without exception). Appeal to "mystery" by the advocates of the well-meant offer at the point of the failure of the attempt to harmonize the offer with the particularism of the biblical gospel is both the admission of the defeat of the effort to harmonize and the warning that the free offer is the enemy of particular, sovereign grace in the body of Reformed theology, that is, in the confession of the gospel by the advocates of the free offer.

In short, the Bible does not proclaim a revealed message of salvation—a saving grace of God for everyone—that contradicts the eternal decree of election.

As for the text which Waldron makes the foundation of his defense of the well-meant offer, and with which he begins his book, John 5:34, it proves far too much, if it be explained as the expression of the well-meant offer. The text has Jesus saying to His Jewish enemies, "But I receive not testimony from man: but these things I say, that ye might be saved." The explanation of Waldron is that Jesus purposed, intended, desired, came into the world to achieve, and worked at the salvation of every one of the Jews to whom He spoke, indeed of every Jew of the Jewish nation at that time, if not of all time. Because Jesus came to do the will of the Father who sent him (v. 30), if it is the will of Jesus to save all the Jews, head for head, this is also the will of the Father, that is, the will of election. And, if Sam Waldron's explanation of John 5:34 is right, this was the will of the Father in sending Jesus into the world in the incarnation, as well as the will of the Father in all the ministry of Jesus, including His redemptive death, that is, universal atonement.

But, according to Waldron, the will of Jesus and the will of the Father in sending Jesus failed, an astounding admission and a blasphemous assertion. Jesus did not accomplish the salvation of many of the Jews. The reason was that the wicked will of many of the Jews frustrated the saving will of Jesus and of God His Father. Necessari-

ly, then, the reason for the salvation of those Jews who believed was their own will, by which they distinguished themselves from their unwilling compatriots. This blatant heresy, Waldron gladly embraces, promulgates, and defends. Denial of this teaching of Sam Waldron brands one as a hyper-Calvinist!

No doctrinal error is too much in nominally Calvinistic circles today if only it serves to defend and advance the precious teaching of the well-meant offer! To this impotent offer (which saves not one human more than God has elected), the entirety of the gospel of sovereign, particular grace and of the Canons of Dordt is gladly sacrificed.

The contrary testimony of the rest of John's gospel is not allowed to shed light on the passage in John 5. In John 10, Jesus states that He did not come to save all the Jews. He came to save those Jews who are His sheep, in that His Father gave them to Him. There were Jews who were not His sheep. Them, He did not come to save (vv. 1-30). In John 6:38, 39, Jesus teaches that He came down from heaven to do the Father's will and that the will of His Father was that He save and lose nothing of all which the Father has given Him. In verse 44, He adds that the coming to Him which is salvation is not a matter of sinners accepting Waldron's free offer, but the Father's efficacious drawing sinners to Jesus. All of this, it should be noted, belongs to the *revealed* will of God.

When Jesus declares that all His ministry has as its purpose that "ye" might be saved, His reference is to the Jewish people who are God's Israel, not every Jew who stood in His presence that day, or every Jew who was alive at that time, or every Jew who ever lived or would live. As Paul would explain in Romans 9, they are not all Israel, who are of Israel (v. 6). According to Romans 2:28, 29, "he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly. But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly..." As the same apostle will clarify in Galatians 3:29, even among the physical descendants of Abraham, the Jews, it is only "if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

In John 5:34, those whom Jesus willed to save, in accordance with the Father's will of election, were the genuine Jews, all those, and those only, who were the true Israel of God, according to election.

And every one whom Jesus willed to save would be saved. In them, Israel would be saved, not by their own willing, but by the will of God in Jesus Christ.

Do Sam Waldron and his free offer allies really want a gospel of a failed Jesus and of self-saving Jews? A gospel of “so that ye might be saved,” but of many, if not a majority, of these “ye” who are lost nevertheless? Is this really to be the message now of the faith of the Canons of Dort and of the Westminster Standards? And can it really be the case that vast numbers of confessing Calvinists will allow themselves to be frightened by the bogeyman of hyper-Calvinism into embracing this heretical doctrine?

### **Compromise of the Gospel of Grace**

The well-meant offer of the gospel fatally compromises the gospel of salvation by grace. This is the fundamental objection of the Protestant Reformed Churches to the well-meant offer. Our objection is not fundamentally that the well-meant offer, in the context of the doctrines of limited atonement and of predestination, is logically incoherent, although this is an objection, because the truth of Holy Scripture is not an unknowable mass of contradictory confusion. But the well-meant offer compromises the gospel of salvation by the grace of God. It is—essentially, inherently, obviously, and incurably *is*—the denial of salvation by the grace of God. It is the affirmation of salvation by the will of the sinner. If God loves all alike with His saving love (and the well-meant offer expresses saving love) and if in the gospel He comes to all alike with the same saving intention (and the well-meant offer has God coming to all who hear the gospel with a saving intention, even desire), the salvation of some, in distinction from others, is not the work of the grace of God (*for He is gracious to all alike, with the grace of salvation* [!]). The only explanation, then, of the salvation of some, in distinction from others, is that they themselves distinguish themselves by accepting the offer. Salvation is no longer the work of the grace of God. It is the work of the will of the sinner.

If the Reformed church world agrees that denial of the well-meant offer is hyper-Calvinism, it may slander me as a hyper-Calvinist to its heart's content.

To be sure, the theology of the well-meant offer avoids the hyper-Calvinism that it presents as the main threat to Calvinism in our

day. But the reason is that it is not *Calvinism*, the Calvinism of the Canons of Dordt and of the Westminster Standards, *at all*, whether hyper-, moderate, low, or hypo-or any other modifier. It is the heresy of Arminianism, cleverly disguised as the antidote to a hyper-Calvinism, which error becomes the bogeyman that is to scare Calvinists into the opposite error of universal, ineffectual grace—the well-meant offer of the gospel.

The theology of the well-meant offer—an ineffectual grace of God for all, implying that salvation depends upon the will of the sinner—may be approved by prominent theologians and even by a majority of Reformed churches, but it is disapproved by Holy Scripture: “[Salvation] is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy...Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth” (Romans 9:16, 18). ●

## Book Reviews

*The Preacher's Catechism*, by Lewis Allen. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018. Pp. 216. \$22.99 (hardcover). ISBN-13: 978-1433559358. [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

*The Preacher's Catechism* is written by a preacher for preachers. It is a gem! An absolute delight to read! This reviewer enjoyed and profited from every chapter. There was always food for thought. The author brought forth things old and things new in refreshing ways. And he was continually calling his readers—preachers, presumably—to self-examination.

The book's structure is unique. It is written as a catechism. It takes the form of questions and answers, which is what a catechism is. The book is divided into four parts and into forty-three chapters. Each chapter has a title. But beneath the chapter title, there is always a question and an answer. The content of each chapter centers around the question and answer that stand at the head of each chapter.

*The Preacher's Catechism* is modeled after the Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC). Not only does the book's author, Lewis Allen, sprinkle references to the WSC liberally throughout the

book—a very worthwhile feature of the book—but the question and answer at the beginning of every chapter also mirrors the sort of questions and answers found in the WSC. Although Allen frequently quotes Calvin, and other notable Presbyterian and Puritan divines, his favorite resource is the WSC. While lauding the age-old use of catechisms for instruction in the Christian faith, he has highest praise for the usefulness of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Already in the book's introduction, Allen notes—in bold and in italics—that “[t]he Westminster Shorter Catechism is an outstanding resource for the heart needs of every preacher” (21). Published in 1647, “[t]he Westminster Shorter Catechism was written to meet the needs of the whole church. For centuries it has been used to train children and adults in their gospel faith. How about us preachers? We have much to learn from the catechism, both as disciples and as disciples with a particular calling to preach the Word of God” (22). Allen

goes on to inform his readers that “[t]he Preacher’s Catechism is indebted to the Westminster Shorter Catechism for its question-and-answer format and its overall structure. But it’s also significantly different. The 107 Westminster questions become 43. Every one of our questions and answers is reworded, in order to explore the priority of preaching and of the preacher’s own needs. What we have is an entirely new catechism, though one much indebted to its noble ancestor” (22). What we have is a preacher’s catechism.

Preachers will experience a warm and friendly reception in the very first chapter of *The Preacher’s Catechism*. It is soon apparent that Allen knows from personal experience the trials, discouragements, temptations, snares, difficulties, challenges, and besetting sins of ministers—occupational hazards, if you will. He knows the struggles that ministers experience particularly with their main calling: preaching.

To his credit, Allen clearly identifies the minister’s main, really one-and-only calling to be preaching. He hammers on this throughout the book. He comes back to it again and again. The calling of the minister of the gos-

pel is to preach—with a capital “P”. The title of his book, after all, is *The Preacher’s Catechism*. He is insistent that we preachers need to be convinced that this is the great and glorious task to which God in Christ has called us. Whatever other legitimate activities in which the preacher/pastor might be engaged, he must never forget that his primary calling is to preach. When the preacher himself is tempted to doubt the power of preaching, he must remind himself that the weakness and foolishness of preaching is the power of God unto salvation. When the preacher himself despairs of the fruitfulness of his preaching, when it seems that his preaching is having negative results—a less than warm and joyful reception—he must remind himself that God has ordained the preaching as the chief means of grace and salvation.

Allen’s estimation of preaching is altogether praiseworthy. The very first chapter of his *Catechism* is entitled “Preaching, above All” (27). This is the highest of all earthly callings, the calling to preach the gospel of grace. Allen quotes favorably the well-known statement of Phillips Brooks: “If any man be called to preach, don’t stoop to be a king.”

Says Allen of these words, “I love these words, because I know how they affirm the preacher’s task. I passionately believe that preaching is the highest and best calling this side of glory” (76).

As the preacher must never doubt the importance and usefulness of his calling, neither must the church. The book is a stirring call to the members of the church to have the right view of preaching—to elevate and exalt in the preaching in their own congregation. And the book is a call to preachers to instruct the members of their congregations in the vital importance and necessary place that God has given to the preaching of the gospel. All who neglect and despise preaching do so to the peril of their own souls. Allen underscores the significance of God’s Word spoken directly from heaven at the time of Jesus’ transfiguration, shortly before He left them in His ascension: “This is my beloved Son, *hear ye him*” (Matthew 17:5). “Hear ye him!” The faithful disciples of Christ, then and now, must hear the voice of Christ. And that voice is *heard* through the preaching of the gospel.

We preachers are to be preachers of *the truth*. Our preaching is to be biblical and expository. We

are to open, explain, and apply the Word of God. That will result in our preaching the truth. Allen places the highest priority on the truth. The truth is the truth of Scripture, what which God reveals to be the truth. “In a world where we are used to being disappointed and lied to, [God] is the source of all satisfaction and truth. We preachers are to be proclaimers of the truth that is found in God” (36).

The truth centers in Jesus Christ, who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). We preachers must not proclaim ourselves, making the preaching of the gospel a display of our public speaking abilities. Our sermons must not be cold, dry lectures on dogma. Neither must they be purely emotional appeals that aim to arouse the listeners to an emotional frenzy. But we must preach Christ and Him crucified. “Why is the Bible such a thrilling and powerful book?” Allen asks. And his answer is: “Simply because it is all about Jesus Christ.... This book is his book. Genesis to Revelation are sixty-six mirrors, held up by the Spirit of God so that you and I might see Jesus in his excellence” (40).

Because this is the high calling of the preacher, every preach-

er must take stock of himself and his preaching. “How am I preaching? Why am I preaching? And have I degraded the holy ministry of preaching by turning it into an unholy self-service project?” (73). Closely related to these very basic questions, is another soul-searching question that every preacher must put to himself often: “Am I growing as a preacher? Am I developing and striving to develop in the most important aspect of my calling, the calling to preach?”

Every preacher needs to improve in his preaching. We should work at our exegesis of the text of Scripture and aim to teach practically and helpfully. We must learn to present Christ in all of the Scriptures in ways that encourage faith and joy in hm. We need to work hard with our choice of words and illustrations in order to serve the message we are bringing people. Preachers who don’t commit to keeping on learning will end up saying the same things in the same ways. Predictable sermons bless few, if any. (17)

“Predictable sermons bless few.” Indeed! “Have I become a predictable preacher?” is a question that every committed servant of

Christ ought to ask himself with some regularity. Every preacher ought to aim at freshness, at sermons that live.

Crucial to the minister’s work as a preacher is his prayer life. Every good book on preaching stresses the critical importance of the preacher’s personal life of prayer. This is the example of the Prince of Preachers—not Spurgeon, but Christ. Frequently the gospel accounts inform us that Jesus was off by Himself in prayer. The preacher must pray for himself, confessing his sins as a preacher and beseeching the grace of God to do the work that no man has the ability or strength to do in himself.

The preacher must pray over the Word of God, the particular Word of God with which he is working and which he intends to bring to God’s people on the coming Lord’s Day. He must pray that he will be given eyes to see and ears to hear so that, after having seen and heard himself, he may proclaim the Word of God to His people. And he must pray for his people, the members of his own congregation especially. He must pray the Word of God into his own soul and into the souls of his people. He must implore God on behalf of his congregation, that

the preaching of the Word will be a blessing to the members and bear positive fruit in their lives. The call to prayer can be found throughout the book, but the entire last section of the book is devoted to prayer. Allen follows the framework of the Lord's Prayer and applies the petitions of the Lord's Prayer to the prayers that we preachers ought to be praying.

Among preachers it seems entirely acceptable to feel guilty about our personal praying. If we were actually honest with each other, it would probably be acceptable to confess that our prayers are rushed, shallow, or even nonexistent. We have been swallowed up by the activism of our age. To pray seems weak, a cowardly retreat from the world and the work. The Spirit teaches us that prayer *is* the work. Slowly we learn. And we quickly discover that time and energy given to prayer can never be replaced by more prep or more preaching. (194)

*The Preacher's Catechism* is full of quotable quotes. Here is a sampling.

God loves a cheerful preacher. Our ever-blessed, ever-joyful God wants to be

proclaimed by those who are brimful of the joy his grace in Christ brings. (31)

We should never be so foolish as to wonder whether we should preach the gospel or instead teach the Trinity. The God of the gospel is the Trinity. The gospel message is a call to know God in his triune love, both now by faith and one day in eternity with sight and unbreakable joy. (37)

The preacher breaks the bread in such a way that the church feeds on Christ from every Scripture. That is what we are doing in our preaching. Preaching knows no greater goal, and allows no lesser one. (46)

Preaching is the most thrilling, glorious, and wonderful calling, and also the most daunting and, at times, terrifying. (57)

Preachers of Jesus must be like Jesus. No one will listen to a man to learn Christ if they cannot look at him and see Christ. (109)

The sins we feel safest about usually turn out to be the ones that have us by the throat. Ask yourself, how do you spot a

thief? To recognize a thief, you have to know what theft is. (150)

Believe your own sermons. In fact, if you don't, you'll soon be in a world of trouble. (167)

Grace is not a safety net, needed only when our tightrope walk amid sin goes wrong. Grace does not make God a last resort when we've grown tired of sin. Grace is not something we preach to others but pass over ourselves. Grace is not for new Christians only. Leaving those of us experienced in the faith to rely on effort. Grace is for preachers. Grace is for everyday living and ministering. (169)

Preaching is a strange, mysterious Holy Spirit business. The message is his, the purposes are his, and the outcomes of our preaching rest with his wisdom and power. If he exalts us as we preach, or if he sovereignly allows our lives to entail ministry struggle, it is well with him. And so it must be with us. (176)

The sheep belong to the Good Shepherd, not to us. We have not bought them with our blood. And yet, we are called to serve them in love. Every

preacher is a servant of the flock (pastors, of course, being undershepherds). We must go home thinking about the sheep and feeling for them. Our hearts must long that they hide the Word they've received in their hearts. (202)

But our worst sin is that we've not proclaimed God as he is. That is the sin which burns behind all the others on our list. God has not been our first and our best thought and ambition as we've handled his Word. We've chased other goals, often not being aware of it. When God is absent, no amount of effort will make us declare his truth in Christ as we're called to. (206)

The forty-three chapters of *The Preacher's Catechism* are divided into four parts: "Part 1: The Glory of God and the Greatness of Preaching;" "Part 2: Jesus for Preachers;" "Part 3: Loving the Word;" and "Part 4: Preaching with Conviction." Every chapter begins with a chapter title, followed by a question and answer. An appropriate Scripture text follows every question and answer.

Here is a sampling of the questions and answers found at the beginning of the chapters in *The Preacher's Catechism*.

Q. What is God's chief end in preaching?

A. God's chief end in preaching is to glorify his name.

Q. Who is God?

A. God is the one who perfectly lives, rules, loves, and speaks, all to his own glory.

Q. What do the Scriptures primarily teach?

A. The Scriptures are all about Jesus, the one to be proclaimed, trusted, and praised.

Q. What is preaching?

A. Preaching is declaring God's truth in Jesus, to the praise of his name.

Q. What is the preacher's chief end?

A. The chief end of the preacher is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

Q. What does God call us to preach?

A. God calls us to serve all of our hearers with his gospel.

Q. Where does our [the preacher's] reward come from?

A. Our reward comes from the exalted Christ, and is Christ.

Q. Must we preachers obey the law, too?

A. The law is the guide to our holiness, and an unholy preacher is a fraud.

Q. What ten things must every preacher know and do?

A. We must know God's law and know why we both preach it and seek to obey it.

Q. What does the second commandment teach us?

A. You shall not make a preaching idol of your image or of anyone else's.

Q. What does the third commandment teach us?

A. You shall honor the name of God as you preach.

Q. What does the fifth commandment teach us?

A. You shall honor those who preached the Word of God to you, and obey what they taught you.

Q. What does the ninth commandment teach us?

A. You shall not say anything untrue in your ministry.

Q. What does the tenth commandment teach us?

A. You shall not set your heart on another's ministry and gifts.

Q. What is the summary of the Ten Commandments for preachers?

A. Loving the Lord your God and your neighbor, not your preaching, is the goal of the law.

Q. Do you want God and his kingdom above all else when Sunday comes?

A. God's glory and his kingdom focus our prayers and our preaching.

Q. What is the worst sin we might commit in a sermon?

A. We preachers can be the greatest sinners by failing to proclaim God for who he is.

At the end of the day, preaching is a weak and foolish means. God always uses such means in order that the glory may be His. To every preacher it ought to be clear that the salvation of even one sinner under his preaching is a marvel—the work of God alone. “We preachers have all had good reason to be sorry for how we've preached. Yes, our lack of skill and gifting haunts us and has led to many a restless Sunday night, as we've been unable to shake

off the memory of the day's failures” (205). Every preacher has experienced such feelings. Add to that the discouragement that often results from seeing negative fruits to our preaching. In such times, we need to remind ourselves of the will of God to use us, with all our weaknesses and shortcomings, for the salvation of some and the hardening of others. This ought also to be a reason for humility on the part of every preacher. I am reminded of a quote from John Calvin that I have passed along to my students over the years.

But whatever may be the result [of our preaching], still God assures us that our ministrations are acceptable to him, because we obey his command; and although our labour appear to be fruitless, and men rush forward to their destruction, and become more rebellious, we must go forward; for we do nothing at our own suggestion, and ought to be satisfied with having the approbation of God. We ought, indeed, to be deeply grieved when success does not attend our exertions; and we ought to pray to God to give efficacy to his word. A part of the blame we ought even to lay on ourselves, when the

fruits are so scanty; and yet we must not abandon our office, or throw away our weapons. The truth must always be heard from our lips, even though there be no ears to receive it, and though the world have neither sight nor feeling; for it is enough for us that we labour faithfully for the glory of God, and that our services are acceptable to him; and the sound of our voice is not ineffectual, when it renders the world without excuse. (*Commentary on Isaiah*. Comments on Isaiah 6:10.)

I recommend this book to all who hold the office of preacher of the gospel. The book is designed in such a way that it can easily serve as a minister's devotional. I have no doubt that reading and musing over a chapter a day, I would suggest at the beginning of

each day, would be exceedingly profitable. The book could also easily lend itself to a discussion period at a ministers' retreat. Seminary students can profitably read *The Preacher's Catechism* as preparation for the gospel ministry. It would make a great book to read on the internship. The book reckons with the reality that we preachers are mere men, and sinners besides. The preacher is a sinner called by God to preach to other sinners and to himself. And to himself! That the preacher must never forget.

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*Christian Worldview*, by Herman Bavinck. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2019. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, James Eglinton, and Cory C. Brock, translators and editors. Pp. 160. \$24.99 (hardcover). ISBN-13: 978-1433563195. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

This little book is heavy.

It is short: only 140 pages. Its height and width are also small.

The content, however, is heavy, sometimes crushingly so, even for one trained in theology

and with some knowledge of philosophy and science. Bavinck was a profound thinker. As the title indicates, in this little work Herman Bavinck contends for the worldview of Christianity, taking

on (and devastating) the various worldviews that leave out, and deny, God—the true God of the Christian religion.

The topic itself of the book is heavy: worldview. Strangely, in a book on the subject, Bavinck does not offer a definition of worldview. He has the reader himself arrive at an understanding of worldview from Bavinck's description of the contending worldviews and their natures. In light of Bavinck's descriptions, the editors provide a working definition: "It is an attempt to unify the self, the head and heart, on the ground of a primary agreement between religion, science, and philosophy. A world-and-life view means, in brief, faith seeking understanding" (11).

The learned, and extraordinarily well read, Dutch theologian exposes the popular worldviews of "mechanistic monism and historical materialism" (116). These are related worldviews, related especially by denying God the creator of the universe, including humanity, and by denying Jesus Christ the redeemer of (elect) humanity and of the cosmos (the creation; see Romans 8). The former views the world, including humanity, as a giant machine, forever mindlessly, aimlessly, and fruitlessly grinding on. The latter

views the world as developing without purpose along the lines of evolutionary theory. Both are atheistic.

In the end, there are two, and only two, worldviews: theistic and atheistic (73).

Bavinck demonstrates that every form of atheistic worldview fails *as a worldview*. Only the theistic worldview succeeds *as a worldview*. The view of all that is in light of the one God of Christianity, revealed in the one Lord and Savior of the creation, including the elect race of humanity, having as His goal the new world with its redeemed and renewed believers, constitutes, not only the Christian worldview, but also the only possible, genuine worldview. The atheistic worldviews, in both their leading forms, sacrifice "truth, goodness, and beauty," which, in fact, lay claim to humans (95). Bavinck argues, not only that atheism is committed to a false worldview, but also that it does not have, and cannot have, a worldview at all.

In contrast, "viewed from the highest standpoint" [that of Christianity],

The whole world is an organic unity, upheld by one thought, led by one will, directed to one goal...a *building* that *grows*

and a *body* that is *built*. It is a work of art from the Supreme Artist and from the Master Builder of the universe (92).

In the preceding quotation, one should notice that “building” and “body” are singular. World-view concerns a creation and its history that are one. The world and its history are unified. Important also is that the building “grows” and that the body “is built.” The whole world is “an organic unity.” There is development, development towards a goal, namely, the redeemed human race and the renewed creation of the day of Jesus Christ. It is a fundamental, and fatal, weakness of the atheistic worldviews that their world, or, on their view, collection of disparate parts, is not going anywhere. They have no purpose, no goal.

Bavinck makes exalted, legitimate claims on behalf of Christianity with regard to fundamental aspects of the creation, its history, and the view of them by humans:

Christianity is not hostile to “history”..., but it is the animating idea, the leading thought, the all-pervasive leaven, in it. [Christianity] gives it content and form, meaning and a goal. It makes

history what it is and must be. Science can stand only if the theistic worldview, which lies at the foundations of Christianity, is correct. Nature comes into its own and receives its proper place only if it is just as the Scriptures make it known to us. And history is true history only if revelation not only illumines it but has itself also entered into it historically and as such lifted it up to the heights of its particular idea, to a work of God, to the genesis of the kingdom of heaven (121).

This is the book especially for sound, if profound, Christian education. Teachers in the Christian schools might profitably read it and then discuss it at one or more of their periodic conventions or other gatherings. The preacher could read it with benefit, to be reminded that God is the God of creation and history. Jesus Christ is the Savior and Lord not only of the church, but also, as Colossians 1 reveals, the one purpose of God with creation and history and, therefore, the center of the comprehensive view of the Christian of all that is and becomes, including the life and place of the Christian.

And on the vast front of worldview, a war is raging. ●

*Reformed Ethics, Volume 1: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, by Herman Bavinck. John Bolt, ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019. Pp. xlii + 564. \$59.99 (hardcover). ISBN-13: 978-0801098024. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

By the time one has worked in theology for more than fifty years, few books arouse excitement. Strong interest, yes. Delight, often. But excitement, only rarely. This first volume of Bavinck's projected three-volume set on Reformed ethics is the rarity. The subject is exciting: Reformed *ethics*. The author is the Reformed theological giant, Herman Bavinck. And the content is both obviously important—*ethics!*—and rare, at least in the English language: *Reformed ethics*.

Even the history of the discovery of the work is unusual, even stirring. Bavinck, of course, has been dead for about a century. One would have thought that everything of importance that the towering Dutch Reformed theologian had written would by this time at least have been known, if not published. But recently (in 2008) a young seminarian stumbled upon the 1,100 dusty, crumbling pages of this work on Reformed ethics in the library of the Free University in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Evidently, Bavinck wrote the work in preparation for his classes, first

in Kampen and then at the Free. Adding to the intrigue, Bavinck had indicated that he did not want the work to be published. It is mainly editor John Bolt who must answer for it that Bavinck's wishes are disregarded. At the ceremony celebrating the publication of the book, Bolt showed no penitence. Nor should he.

Bavinck himself described "ethics." It is "most closely bound with practical theology" (21).

Ethics describes...how, from beginning to end, on the foundation of and by means of God's acts for us and in us, the regenerated community comes into being. Ethics is the truth about our internal and external sanctification... In ethics, we are interested in the question of what it is that God now expects of us when he does his work in us...Here we are active, precisely because of and on the grounds of God's deeds in us; we sing psalms in thanks and praise to God. In dogmatics, God descends to us; in ethics, we ascend to God...In dogmatics, God

loves us; in ethics, therefore, we love him (22).

As a Reformed theologian, Bavinck immediately guards against the misunderstanding that, whereas in dogmatics God does His part, in ethics we do our part: “Not at all! We establish our calling precisely because God works all in all. This is a mystery: just because God is everything, we can be great” (22, 23). Reformed ethics is distinctive: “Our ethics proceeds from God, is through God, and is for God” (26).

In simplest terms, ethics is the entirety of the Christian life, including experience and behavior, as the holiness that is worked by the Spirit of Jesus Christ (sanctification) and as the spiritual, thankful life of the graciously redeemed, elected child of God.

The large manuscript on ethics will be published in three volumes. This first volume treats of “Humanity before Conversion” and of “Converted Humanity.” The second volume will consist of Bavinck’s explanation of “Humanity after Conversion.” Volume three will be Bavinck’s discussion of the manifestation of the Christian life in various spheres of life. Unfortunately, this last section of Bavinck’s treatment of Reformed ethics is

incomplete. This mixes sorrow with the joy of the finding of the work. “The only extant chapter [of the last section of the manuscript—DJE]...is devoted to the family” (xxxiv). Happily, this surviving treatment of the family is thorough with regard to marriage: “the obligation to marry, impediments to marriage, degrees of consanguinity, engagement, the celebration of marriage, the nature of marriage, divorce, and the relationship between husband and wife” (xxxiv).

Volume 1, therefore, consists of the ethics of humanity before conversion and of converted humanity. The first part has a detailed account of sin, including sin in eating, sin in drinking (alcoholic beverages), and the sin of “inertia,” this last seldom coming to mind in reflection on sin. Bavinck warns, especially ministers, against remaining general in condemning sin. He admonishes them to be specific, and then becomes specific himself: women taking pleasure in their physical beauty; all words that do not serve the truth; art for art’s sake, that is, all art that does not “express the truth”; living “in order to eat”; *dishonesty in not returning borrowed books; and plagiarism* (emphasis added).

With some reliance on Abraham Kuyper, which Bavinck acknowledges (not being a plagiarist himself), Bavinck diagnoses especially three ethical sicknesses (“pathologies”). In this section, there is a penetrating exposure of “temptations.”

In this discussion of the ethical condition of humanity before conversion, Bavinck proposes a theory of common grace, which theory, however, is strictly limited, and determined to preserve the truth of total depravity. Bavinck recognizes the “virtues of pagans,” for example, “Camillus, Scipio, Cato, Seneca, Plato, and Socrates.” Bavinck is quick to qualify these virtues as “praiseworthy [only] as external deeds.” He concludes that “these virtues of pagans were not true virtues.” They merely “resemble[d] the true, spiritual virtues, in the same way that counterfeit pearls resemble genuine ones, or fake gold resembles real gold. They cannot pass the test when assayed by the only true standard.” All the seemingly good works of the pagans lack the fundamental requirement of a truly good work: they are not done to the glory of God. “By contrast, Christian ethics is not utilitarian, but directs everything to glorify God. It sees glorifying

God as the goal of our lives.” Bavinck quotes Augustine with approval (without here crediting Augustine): “the best virtues [of the ungodly] are splendid vices” (158-161). “A natural person can do no good that pleases God” (160).

It is unjust that Reformed churches and theologians today roundly condemn a denial of a common grace that delivers the unbeliever from his total depravity and enables him to perform good works as a departure from the Reformed tradition, at any rate, the tradition of the estimable Herman Bavinck.

Throughout the work, Bavinck seizes every opportunity to condemn mysticism, and to distance the Reformed faith from this religion of feeling, of supposed visions of God, and of miraculous signs from heaven, including opening the Bible at random to read a special message of God to oneself. Against all such mysticism, Bavinck asserts that “there is no vision of God on earth except through faith” (484). Bavinck distinguishes mysticism from the healthy mystical of salvation.

Related to mysticism is “Pietism,” which is found “in the Reformed churches.” This move-

ment “seeks to complete the unfinished Reformation of the sixteenth century (which was limited only to doctrine,)” according to the Pietists.

Pietists want to express the divine in their lives always and everywhere; pietism sinks away into the self and does not rest in God, but pays attention to the subject [that is, the believer—DJE], who has to appropriate the divine and has to display this in his daily walk. It often tries, therefore, to obtain and retain the divine by way of homemade, subjective self-torment...Pietists lose God in themselves, always consider themselves... Pietists...created a dividing line *within* the church between the converted and the unconverted. The covenant idea was not decisive; people had to have had certain experiences...[Pietists like] conversion stories (289-291).

There are long, insightful treatments of the conscience, of assurance, and of Christ as the model of the Christian life. With appeal to the Heidelberg Catechism and to Calvin, Bavinck contends that faith *is* assurance. Therefore, “there is no moral conjecture that needs to be deduced

from works” (369). It was, and is, the fatal error of the Dutch “Further Reformation” that it ignored, and still ignores, that faith *is* assurance, teaching instead that faith must *seek* assurance (374ff.). A perverse development of this “gospel” of doubt was that doubters were praised as the best Christians (377).

His reputation to the contrary notwithstanding, Bavinck was a polemical theologian. His polemics was directed not only against foes outside the Reformed camp, for example, Rome, Socinianism, Arminianism, and Anabaptism, but also against foes within the camp.

Sprinkled throughout the book are practical applications of the Reformed faith to a Reformed, Christian life, as Bavinck conceives it. He disapproves the posture in prayer of remaining seated. Because of the covenant, the children of believers ought to be taught to pray and ought to pray from their youngest years. He recommends fasting, with appeal to both the Second Helvetic and the Gallican confessions. It is contrary to the Reformed faith, the gospel, and the will of God for His people that “many pious people die fearfully and hopeless, without joy.”

References to Scripture, often with brief exposition, are abundant. Bavinck lived in the Bible. His quotations of authorities, both secular and religious, are multitudinous. The man was an astounding scholar. For example, illustrating the sin of inertia, which implies boredom with life, Bavinck instances the English poet, Lord Byron (123). In his treatment of assurance, the theologian takes on the philosopher, Descartes, who famously, and foolishly, thought to overcome his doubt of his own existence by the argument, “I think, therefore, I am” (Latin: “*cogito, ergo sum*”). Bavinck responds that the truth is

just the other way round, “I am, therefore I think.” One does not, and cannot, argue his way into assurance, for “doubt is a psychological or soul sickness” (379, 380). One gains an education from Bavinck’s footnotes alone.

One finishes the volume with thanks to God for the grand and glorious Reformed, Christian faith, with its tradition, and that he is privileged to know the faith and be included in the tradition.

Helpful to the understanding of the content is the summary at the head of each chapter by the editor.

Come, volumes two and three! ●

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*Kemp: The Story of John R. and Mabel Kempers, Founders of the Reformed Church in America Mission in Chiapas, Mexico*, by Pablo A. Deiros. The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, No. 86. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans. Pp. xxxvi + 522. \$38.00 (paperback). ISBN-13: 978-0802873545. [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

Of the many worthwhile books that have been published in The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, this book, which is number 86 in the series, is a very worthwhile addition. If I am not mistaken, it is the largest book in the series to date—over 500 pages. It is worthwhile for a number of reasons. One of the main reasons

is that it is a fascinating account of the more than forty years of service that John R, and Mabel Kempers gave as missionaries of the Reformed Church in America in Chiapas, Mexico. Chiapas is the southeastern most state of Mexico, sharing its far border with Guatemala. The book is written in the first person, based on the detailed journals, diaries,

and archival material that the Kempers have left behind. The author, Pablo A. Deiros, who is vice president of the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Buenos Aires and teaches in the School of Intercultural Studies of Fuller Theological Seminary at Pasadena, California, does a remarkable job of writing as if in the person of John R. Kemper.

*Kemp* is an enduring monument to the love and devotion of a husband and wife to the cause of the gospel. They were a couple who were devoted to each other and to their children, whose marriage and family life were a powerful positive example on the mission field. But more than that, the book exudes their love for and devotion to the cause of missions in Chiapas, Mexico. Together they labored, sacrificed, endured, and triumphed in the spread of the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, in a very remote part of Mexico. Chiapas is not at all like Mexico City, swollen with its mass of millions. It is a very remote region, mountainous, and in places jungle-like in topography, with small villages scattered throughout its peaks and valleys. Mission work in the first quarter of the twentieth century was challenging. It involved

transportation by horse or mule, with very few cars or vehicles that could handle the high mountain passes and deep valleys, the rushing rivers and rickety bridges. Living conditions were very primitive and many of the people were subsistence farmers.

John R. Kempers was born in Sioux Center, Iowa in 1900. He was the son of a northwest Iowa farmer, John Kempers and his wife Annie, whose maiden name was Rozeboom. Mabel Kempers was born Mabel Van Dyke in Holland, Michigan in 1902. John R. Kempers graduated from Northwestern Academy in Orange City, Iowa. Northwestern Academy would eventually become Northwestern College, an institution of the Reformed Church in America. After graduation, he attended Hope College in Holland, Michigan. There he met Mabel, whom he later married and who became his lifelong companion. After college, Kempers attended Princeton Theological Seminary. Already while in college, Kempers became convinced not only of the call to the ministry, but of the call to missions. He resolved that if the Lord opened up the way, he would devote his life to proclaiming the gospel in a foreign land. Little did he know

at the time that the foreign land would be Mexico.

A noteworthy feature of the book is that it tells the story of the mission work of the Kempers against the background of the historical and political developments that took place in Mexico during their lengthy tenure as missionaries in Chiapas. The book actually retells the history of Mexico long before the arrival of John R. and Mabel Kempers. This reviewer learned a great deal about the history of Mexico, history that played a critical role in the development of missions in America's nearest neighbor to the south. There were revolutions and civil wars that impacted the lives of Christians in Mexico. There were foreign influences that breed contempt for all foreigners, including—sometimes especially—Americans. Mexico's history included extended periods of open hostility towards Christianity of any sort, much of which was precipitated by the gross abuses of the Roman Catholic Church over many years in Mexico. For quite some time, the Mexican government was as atheistic and antichristian as any Communist regime. Throughout the Kempers' years of missionary service, the government's attitude

ranged from toleration to strong-arm attempts to rid Mexico of any religious influences whatsoever. Reformed Christians in Mexico have had a very difficult life for several generations.

But *Kemp* is not only of value because of the history that it relates or because of its biography of the lives of a husband and wife who devoted themselves to the cause of Reformed missions. It is especially of value because of the sound principles of Reformed missions that it sets forth. In fact, this is the enduring value of the book and the reason on account of which the book should be required reading in seminary courses on the principles of Reformed (biblical) missions.

The book makes plain that it was Rev. Kempers' conviction that the work of missions must be the work of preaching the gospel. Kempers receives high marks for underscoring the fundamental principle of Reformed missions that is widely lost in what passes for Reformed missions in the twenty-first century.

Many college students in those years [who came to assist the missionaries in various ways] evidently did not understand the meaning of the word

“evangelization,” confusing it with the emotional type of preaching of some so-called evangelists. Evangelistic preaching means preaching the evangel or the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, as Christ has commanded us to do. There can be no more glorious work. One college student with sophomore smartness said preaching was the “rah-rah” of Christianity! In other words, it was only the ballyhoo of press-agent stuff. This poor soul did not know that you cannot educate people into the Kingdom of God, nor surgically operate them in. The only way to bring people into the Kingdom is to evangelize them. (324)

In contrast to the liberal theology that had made deep inroads into many other mission works in Mexico, Kempers was committed to preaching and teaching the Word of God. “[T]he old Book quietly ignores them [the liberals] and goes right on accomplishing that to which God has destined it” (353). Toward the end of the book, reflecting on his years of service in missions in Mexico, he says that “[f]irst, I was convinced of the most foundational principle of classical Reformed missiology, that the biblically based goal of

missions was the conversion of people to faith in Jesus Christ, the planting of churches, and the glory of God. (417) To his everlasting credit, John R. Kempers was committed to the preaching of the gospel on the mission field as the foolishness of God that is wiser than men, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

Besides his commitment to the foundational principle of all missions, *Kemp* makes plain that this humble servant of the Lord was committed to all the other sound principles of Reformed missions. Not only was he committed to them, but in wise and careful though firm ways, he sought to implement them. As in the Christian life so also on the mission field, it is one thing to be committed to sound principles, but another thing to strive to implement them practically. John R. Kempers was a man who put his principles into practice.

What were some of these other Reformed principles of missions that Rev. Kempers sought to bring to bear on his work in Chiapas? I will identify ten of these principles to which Kempers was unapologetically committed.

First, it was Kempers conviction that the future of the church in Chiapas depended on the training

of native pastors. This was something that he aimed at throughout his more than forty years of service on the mission field. Within a year of his arrival in Mexico, Kemper began to train men for the ministry. (65) Throughout his many years of service, Kempers was always working to prepare young men for ministry in the churches of Chiapas. He testified that through the many trials that threatened this work, it was his constant prayer that God would raise up native pastors. Those prayers “were answered, and we [were] proved to be right in expecting a considerable number of Mexican pastors to be raised up throughout the years” (421). As pioneer missionaries in Chiapas, the Kempers were instrumental in instructing young indigenous servants of the Lord in Mexico and placing them among the Ch’ol and Tzeltel natives (421ff.). “Mabel and I were convinced that the training of a national ministry was indispensable for the survival and growth of any missionary work. On this particular point, we were in full agreement with the vision of the Presbyterian missionary pioneers that had planted this church in Mexico” (467-8).

Second, from the outset the Kempers were committed to long-

term service in Mexico. They envisioned devoting their lives to the mission work in Chiapas, and that is exactly what they did. They began the work in their twenties and left Mexico nearly fifty years later, several years beyond the time at which many ministers of the gospel ordinarily retire from active service.

Third, closely connected with a lifetime of service on the mission field in Chiapas, the Kempers were determined to learn the language of the people. Before they took up their active labors, they studied Spanish. And in addition to Spanish, they acquired the ability to understand and speak some of the languages of the original indigenous Indian tribes. At the time that they arrived in Chiapas, the government had adopted restrictive measures prohibiting foreign missionaries to administer the sacraments or perform official functions like officiating at weddings. In the early years of their service, they were forced to keep a low profile and to work in close conjunction with local leaders. But it was during this early phase of the work that they had opportunity to devote themselves to language studies. It was their conviction that they “desperately needed to learn Spanish to be

able to carry out our commission” (168). Time and again throughout the book, Kempers underscores the critical importance of learning and speaking the language for the long-range effectiveness of any mission.

Fourth, the Kempers were committed to Christian education. They faced many difficulties along the way, but were convinced that development of the younger generation must begin in the Christian day-school. Throughout Chiapas most villages either had no school or a school that was in serious neglect. At the beginning of their tenure, the Mexican government was also coming to the realization that they needed to support educational reform. This provided a great opportunity for the Kempers to promote education in Chiapas. They promoted and assisted in establishing a number of Reformed Christian schools.

Fifth, Rev. Kempers aimed at establishing self-governing and self-supporting indigenous churches. He saw firsthand the damaging results of the influence of foreign capital on the mission field. Kempers never provided funds for construction of church buildings, which were then handed over to the locals. At most he

arranged for limited assistance in building churches, but insisted that the locals ought to build their own church buildings at their own expense and sacrifice (325). He insisted on it that the local congregations should support their own pastors (419). In this connection, Kempers promoted in his preaching and teaching the responsibility of the people to give sacrificially for the support of the church. This was a theme of his instruction that was oft repeated and that took a very long time to instill in the people, the vast majority of whom had difficulty in supporting themselves. Nevertheless, in time the benefits of putting the cause of the kingdom first bore fruit in the life of the church.

Sixth, the Kempers showed great frugality on the mission field. They were determined to live at the level of the people to whom they ministered. In countries where a large percentage of the population is poor, as was the case in Chiapas, it would have been folly—Kempers’ own word—for the missionaries to live above the people. “If a missionary builds himself a too-large house ... he erects a barrier between himself and the people with whom he wishes to identify” (325). Living at the level of the

people, living in the same sort of home as that in which they lived, eating the same food as they ate, and dressing as they dressed went a long way to gaining credibility with the people. It also underscored that they were not interested in improving the living conditions and social status of the people, but were concerned to bring them the good news of the gospel.

Seventh, missionary Kempers worked to identify locals who had leadership qualities and who could be prepared to assume leadership roles. True, there were times when those concerning whom he had high aspirations fell away or disappointed. And that, no doubt, is the experience of every foreign missionary. But he still strove to identify those who had the gifts for leadership and teaching. In close connection with this, Kempers warns against too quickly promoting men to leadership positions. He stresses the importance of proving these men. Too often the work experienced setbacks because novices were appointed to leadership positions (24).

Eighth, Kempers filled the important role of the foreign missionary in resolving conflicts between leaders and between

members on the mission field. Such conflict is inevitable. Too often there are those who view the missions setting as an opportunity for promotion of themselves or their own personal agenda. And all too often there are conflicts that develop between strong personalities on the mission field. The missionary is forced into the position of peacemaker and arbitrator between those who are at odds, whose strife threatens the continued progress and, in some instances, the very existence of the mission. Time and again, missionary Kempers was called upon to be peacemaker. Kempers himself came into conflict with one of the main indigenous leaders, who was an especially strong-willed and difficult person. The way in which he dealt with their controversy is an example of standing for the truth, but being willing to endure personal injury. Often this will be required of the Reformed missionary.

Ninth, another very important principle for which Kempers saw a great need was the implementation of church discipline. This was a persistent need, not only because of those who fell away from the gospel and lived impenitently in sin, but because of the weaknesses and sins of the

members of the newly established churches. There were struggles with the sins of drunkenness, fornication outside of marriage, and unfaithfulness of those who were married, abuse of wives and children, and a host of other sins not at all unique to the church in Mexico. The necessary deterrent was the faithful exercise of Christian discipline. What was a necessity with regard to the church members, was an even greater necessity with regard to the officebearers. One of the persistent threats was that officebearers took advantage of their position to accumulate power and influence for themselves. (65)

And tenth, the mission work of the Kempers demonstrates that faithful missionaries of the gospel will experience opposition and persecution. There was hostility from the Mexican government, very open hostility at times that nearly led to the Kempers being sent out of Mexico. There was opposition from the Roman Catholic Church, whose members and clergy did all that they could to oppose the work of missionary Kempers. Malicious reports were deliberately spread among the people by local Roman Catholic Church leaders. And there was opposition on the part of those

who fell away from the church after their hypocrisy was exposed. Besides all the overt persecution, there were the many sacrifices and sufferings that the Kempers endured throughout their years of service in Chiapas. But by the grace of God they persevered and the church was gathered in this remote part of Mexico.

The Kempers were the first Reformed Church in America missionaries in Mexico. The work that they did in Chiapas is a monument to biblical, Reformed mission work. At the time of their retirement from the work in Chiapas, missionary Kempers reflected:

We were honored with many privileges, and we feel deeply grateful for the task commended to us. We participated in the development of the church in Chiapas from small beginnings to three hundred congregations, with a membership of thirty thousand by the time of our retirement. We were involved in the preparation of workers in Bible schools. We published a good amount of literature. We preached the Word of God Sunday after Sunday in all parts of the state of Chiapas. We took the initiative in developing children's, young people's, and

women's ministries and the Constitution of the presbytery and its various organizations. All the accumulated experiences of those forty years of service in Chiapas could then be shared at a national level in the training of ministers for the evangelical churches in Mexico. (469)

Still today there are enduring monuments in Chiapas to the missionary work of John R. and Mabel Kempers. That is the testimony of representatives of the Protestant Reformed Churches who for the last two summers have made visits to Mexico and who last summer visited Chiapas. There are many needs of the churches in Chiapas. And much of the work in Chiapas following

the retirement of the Kempers did not continue to adhere to sound Reformed principles of missions. But without doubt there remains a faithful church in Chiapas that owes much to the sacrificial work of the Kempers.

If you are a student of Reformed missions, its principles and history, or simply someone who enjoys reading in the fascinating area of Reformed foreign missions, you can do little better than to read *Kemp: The Story of John R. and Mable Kempers, Founders of the Reformed Church in America Mission in Chiapas, Mexico*. Highly recommended! A five hundred-page book that for most readers will end far too quickly. ●

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*The Belgic Confession: A Commentary, Volume 1*, by David J. Engelsma. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2018. Pp. xviii + 348. \$31.95 (hardcover). ISBN-13: 978-1944555-33-7. [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

*The Belgic Confession: A Commentary, Volume 2*, by David J. Engelsma. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2019. Pp. xvi + 382. \$34.95 (hardcover). ISBN-13: 978-1944555-35-1. [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

This two-volume commentary on the Belgic or Netherlands Confession of Faith is a welcome addition to the expositions of Reformed confessional literature

published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association. Although the Belgic Confession is the earliest of the confessions that make up the Three Forms of Unity,

having been published in 1561, the commentary on this remarkable confession is the last to be published by the RFPA. Many years ago, the RFPA published the three-volume exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism, authored by Herman Hoeksema, entitled *The Triple Knowledge*. Subsequently, the RFPA published Homer C. Hoeksema's in-depth commentary on the Canons of Dordt, entitled *The Voice of our Fathers*. Both of these commentaries have been republished. At long last, the RFPA has published an exposition of the Belgic Confession. With the publication of this two-volume commentary, Protestant Reformed theologians have now written extensive commentaries on each of the confessions that form the creedal foundation of the Protestant Reformed Churches, as well as many other Reformed churches around the globe.

The commentary has been written by David J. Engelsma, who is no stranger to the readers of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*. His articles and book reviews have been published in this journal from the time of its humble beginnings. Engelsma is emeritus professor of Reformed Dogmatics and Old Testament studies in the Protestant Reformed

Theological Seminary. When he was a pastor, he often taught the Belgic Confession to older catechumens. During his years of teaching at the seminary, he made frequent reference to the Belgic Confession in his dogmatics lectures to seminarians. For many years he has also taught an adult doctrine class, in which he gave instruction in the articles of the Belgic Confession. He has, therefore, a thorough acquaintance with the Belgic Confession of Faith and is eminently qualified to write a commentary on this creed, which is one of the three sparkling gems in the golden crown, which has adorned the head of Reformed churches for several hundred years. The problem in many Reformed churches—and it is symptomatic of deeper, spiritual problems—is that the crown has become tarnished. It is regarded as a useless and neglected symbol that is of little value to the church living in the twenty-first century. In his commentary, Engelsma takes us back to our roots. He makes his readers see how up-to-date and vitally important are the doctrines confessed and defended in the Belgic Confession of Faith. The struggles of the early Reformed churches in the sixteenth century are the church's struggles

still today.

Not only is the Belgic Confession the oldest of the Reformed standards, whose teaching authoritatively binds members and officebearers in the Protestant Reformed Churches and other Reformed communions of churches. But it is also the confession that covers the broadest range of topics. All the main doctrines of the Reformed faith are systematically treated by Guido de Bres in its thirty-seven articles. De Bres, whom Engelsma identifies as “a genuine, outstanding hero of the Reformation” (1:1), intended the Belgic Confession not only to be his own personal confession of faith, but the confession of the oppressed Reformed churches of the Lowlands, suffering under the terror of the bloody sword of Rome’s inquisition.

The Belgic Confession begins with the most complete development of the doctrine of Holy Scripture, its infallible inspiration and full authority, that can be found in the Three Forms of Unity. The first seven articles of the confession are devoted to the source of the believer’s knowledge, which is God’s revelation in sacred Scripture. Concerning these Scriptures, the Confession says in Article 5 that “[w]e receive

all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith.” The same article goes on to express the conviction of God’s people that what is contained in the books of the Bible is the very Word of God, “not so much because the church receives and approves them ... but more especially because the Holy Ghost witnesseth in our hearts that they are from God, whereof they carry the evidence in themselves.”

From the doctrine of Holy Scripture, the confession proceeds to the truth of the Trinity, the deity and manhood of Jesus Christ, the truth concerning the Holy Spirit, creation, providence, the fall, and its consequence in original sin. Having set forth the need for salvation, the Belgic Confession proceeds to the truth concerning the redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. It develops the truth concerning His incarnation, suffering, death, and satisfaction of the justice of God. Having covered Christology, the confession proceeds to the doctrine of salvation: faith, justification, sanctification, the binding authority of the moral law and abolishing of the Old Testament ceremonial laws, followed by Christ’s exaltation and intercession at God’s right hand.

Following the truth concerning the redeemer and salvation, the Belgic Confession develops the truth concerning the church, the duty of membership in the instituted church, “out of [which] there is no salvation” and from which “no person, of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw himself to live in a separate state from it” (article 28). That naturally leads to a discussion of the marks or notes of the true church, the government and offices of the church, her order and discipline, and the sacraments. Like other of the Reformed creeds, the articles on the sacraments are lengthy. That is explained by the controversy over the sacraments at the time of the Reformation, as well as Reformed conviction concerning the importance of the sacraments in the life of the church. De Bres sets forth the distinctively Reformed view of the sacraments as means of grace, rejecting both the Anabaptist and Zwinglian view of the sacraments as bare signs, and the Roman Catholic error that rejects the sacraments as *means* of grace and teaches that the sacraments are grace to all who partake. Well-known is de Bres’ statement in article 35 in regard to the Lord’s Supper: “In the mean-

time we err not when we say that what is eaten and drunk by us is the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ. But the manner of our partaking of the same is not by the mouth, but by the spirit through faith.” The Belgic Confession closes with an article on the duty of the civil magistrate and the second coming of Jesus Christ and the last judgment.

Engelsma’s exposition of the successive articles of this treasured confession is clear, well-organized, and thorough. He explains carefully the language of the individual articles, most of which are treated in separate chapters in his commentary. He is at pains to explain the doctrine that is developed in each of the separate articles. He shows time and again the importance of doctrine and the importance of believers being doctrinally literate and articulate. The death of Reformed believers, Reformed churches, and Reformed church federations today lies in their doctrinal ignorance and indifference. A generation has arisen that does not know what it believes, cannot defend its “faith,” and is tossed to and fro by the winds of false doctrine that are blowing at gale force. At best our age is doctrinally indifferent;

at worst, it is positively hostile to sound doctrine. And the result is that many in Reformed churches (and the greater pity is that their children) are prey to every error and to the spirit of the age. Engelsma calls us to remember the rock from whence we are hewn. He challenges us to know what it is to be Reformed, not merely in name, but in actual fact.

Not only is the commentary positive, but it is polemical. Engelsma engages in thoughtful polemics against the same errors and errorists against whom the Belgic Confession engages in polemics. Besides the ancient trinitarian and Christological heresies combatted by the early church, de Bres wages war in the Belgic Confession against the heretics that threatened the churches of the Reformation. On the one hand, there were all the errors embraced and promoted by the Roman Catholic Church: denial of the sufficiency of Scripture, the Apocrypha, invocation of the saints, her false doctrines concerning the virgin Mary, purgatory, denial of original sin, errors concerning the sacraments, denial of the full satisfaction of the cross of Christ, faith alone, grace alone, the heresy of salvation by faith and works, the denial of the truth concerning

the church, her essence, marks, and calling, the hierarchical view of church government, and many more.

On the other hand, de Bres was especially at pains to distinguish the Reformed from the radical Anabaptists—not to be confused with every stripe of Baptist today. By many, including the civil authorities in the Lowlands, the Reformed and the Anabaptists were identified. The radical Anabaptists denied the legitimacy of the civil magistrate, taught community of goods, confused the domain of the church and state, corrupted the truth of the miraculous conception of the Lord Jesus Christ from His virgin mother, were not content with God's objective revelation in Holy Scripture, embraced free will, denied infant baptism, and repudiated baptism by sprinkling, demanding that all who were sprinkled should be re-baptized, and maintained a pure church ideal.

Not to be overlooked is the Belgic Confession's polemic against the Turks, that is, against the Mohammedans—the adherents of Islam. Many Christian churches and church leaders have only good things to say about Islam and the Quran. They have

made their peace with this anti-christian religion, contending that Christians and Muslims worship the God of Abraham. But that is deliberate distortion of the truth. The God of Christianity and the god of Islam are not the same God, the triune God who is the Father of Jesus Christ. There is no possibility of salvation for those who embrace Islam. Islam is a false religion. This is the position of the Belgic Confession, as is plain from the mention of the Mohammedans in Article 9 of the confession.

To his credit, Engelsma is not content with carrying on the Belgic Confession's polemic against the Roman Catholic Church and the radical Anabaptists, although he indicates especially in the case of Rome that nothing has changed since the days of de Bres. However, he broadens the polemic of the Belgic Confession to include the errors of the new day, the errors that the faithful Reformed church is called upon to combat in the present. These errors include the heresies of the charismatics, the false teachings of premillennial-dispensationalism, the denials of biblical truth by those who embrace evolution, the sexual impurity of those who endorse and live in unbiblical divorce and

remarriage, the heresy of Federal Vision, the conditional covenant error at the root of the Federal Vision, the teaching of free will, the twin errors of common grace and the well-meant gospel offer. He calls attention to creationist Henry Morris' denial of the real incarnation of Christ, sharing in the Anabaptist error that holds that Christ has a specially created human nature, not a human nature derived from His mother Mary (1:307). And he points out Prof. C. J. den Heyer's bold and blatant denial of penal, substitutionary atonement (1:333-4), the result of denying the inspiration of Holy Scripture.

What must never be forgotten—and I always emphasized this to my older catechism students with whom I often studied the Belgic Confession—is that Guido de Bres died for what he confessed in the Belgic Confession of Faith. Would we? The confession was first published in 1561. At the time, de Bres was an itinerant Reformed minister, serving the churches in the Lowlands who were being mercilessly persecuted by the Spanish rulers of the Lowlands and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Only a few years later, he was captured, imprisoned, and tor-

tured, though he never renounced his faith. On May 30, 1567, de Bres was hanged, his body burned, and his ashes scattered. It was the Roman Catholic Church that took de Bres' life, leaving his wife a widow and several small children fatherless. Let no one take the words of this confession on their lips thoughtlessly. De Bres died a martyr's death for the sake of the faith that he confessed in the Belgic Confession.

That adds weight to the language with which nearly every article begins: "We all believe," "We confess," and "We believe and confess." The contents of the confession express the conviction of the heart. What we believe and confess in the Belgic Confession, we believe and confess even if, like de Bres, we must suffer imprisonment and death for what we believe and confess. Are we prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of the truth as de Bres did? We ought to examine ourselves.

A couple of mild criticisms, directed more at the publisher, the RFPA, than the author. The first is that for my part I would prefer one chapter devoted to each article of the Belgic Confession of Faith. Most of the articles are treated in individual

chapters. But in some instances, this is not the case. The result is that when articles are combined in chapters, the chapters often become disproportionately long. Chapter 2 includes Articles 2-4, and is a chapter that goes on for over thirty pages, whereas many of the chapters are in the area of ten or so pages—a much better length for the average reader, in my judgment. Chapter 6 covers Articles 8 and 9, and is nearly twenty-five pages in length. The same is true of chapter 12, which includes Articles 16 and 17, and is nearly thirty pages in length. For my part, I would much prefer to see shorter chapters—one article of the Belgic Confession covered in one chapter of the commentary.

A second criticism is that once again the RFPA has published a set of books that are full of instruction without a final subject index for future reference. That is a mistake in books that are as substantive as these two volumes are and covering as they do so many topics. The life and usefulness of this set of books would be greatly enhanced, if the RFPA had taken the extra time and effort to include a subject (topical) index in the concluding volume, if not after each volume.

These are minor criticisms of a wonderful set of books. All who love our Reformed confessional heritage, and treasure our Belgic Confession in particular, will greatly enjoy and profit from this new two-volume commentary on the Belgic Confession of Faith. Ministers who teach the Belgic Confession in pre- or post-confession classes will now have a new source for their preparation for teaching the confession. Bible classes that work through this beautiful confession will have a reliable and thorough reference tool and resource. And the Reformed Christian who desires to study the Belgic Confession can profit greatly from this newly

published exposition of the creed. All who cherish the Reformed faith are encouraged to invest time in reading and studying these two volumes. The investment will be rewarded by a rich return.

Heartily recommended! And don't forget, Christmas is just around the corner. What better gift than a good book or set of books, which keep on giving. If you are Protestant Reformed but not an RFPA book club member, check with the RFPA contact person in your Protestant Reformed congregation. Or, go to the Reformed Free Publishing Association's website and place your order. The books are also available at Amazon.com. ●

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*Recognizing the Legacy of George M. Ophoff*, by Douglas J. Kuiper. ThM thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary, 2019. Pp. v + 135. \$20.00 (hardcover). [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

Synod 2017 of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America appointed the Reverend Douglas J. Kuiper, then minister of the First Protestant Reformed Church of Edgerton, Minnesota, to the chair of Church History and New Testament Studies. After accepting the appointment, Prof. Kuiper immediately set himself to the task of securing his advanced degree, the master

of theology degree. After completing his course work, Prof. Kuiper wrote his thesis, which he entitled "Recognizing the Legacy George M. Ophoff." The thesis was approved and Prof. Kuiper was awarded the ThM degree by Calvin Theological Seminary. His thesis is now available to the general public.

As the title indicates, the thesis treats the life and contribu-

tions of the Reverend George M. Ophoff. Ophoff's contributions were especially the contributions that he made to the Protestant Reformed Churches, primarily in his capacity as one of the founding fathers of the Protestant Reformed Churches, as well as his decades of service as professor of Old Testament and Church History in the denominational seminary. But his legacy is a legacy left to all those churches that are committed to the Reformed faith and confessions. His legacy is a theological legacy, which served and is still serving the enrichment of the Reformed faith worldwide. Ophoff's insights, as well as the tenacity with which he stood for his convictions, are of value to all who are committed to Reformed truth. He is an inspiration to all who treasure the faith of our fathers today, as this thesis makes plain.

*Recognizing the Legacy of George M. Ophoff* is divided into six worthwhile chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction, which explains the warrant for a full-length thesis devoted to the life and work of George M. Ophoff. Chapter 2 concerns Ophoff's years in the Christian Reformed Church, the church in which he was born and raised. It was from

this denomination's seminary that he graduated and in this denomination that he served his first years as an ordained minister of the gospel. Chapter 3 covers Ophoff's pastorates in the PRC, from the time of the formation of the PRC unofficially in 1924 onward. Ophoff was the first of the three original ministers in the PRC to be deposed from office by classes of the CRC. From that time onward, Ophoff served with unflagging devotion to the denomination of churches he helped to birth.

Chapter 4 begins Kuiper's focus on George Ophoff's legacy and is entitled "Ophoff's Legacy: His Old Testament Seminary Teaching and Writing." In this chapter, Kuiper concentrates on the unique contribution that Ophoff made through his teaching and writing on the Old Testament Scriptures, particularly Old Testament history and prophecy. Coupled to his classroom instruction in the Protestant Reformed Seminary was his writing in the unofficial voice of the PRC, the *Standard Bearer*. Ophoff wrote in every issue of the *Standard Bearer* from its inception, and usually more than one article, until his active service came to an end. He wrote hundreds of articles,

many of which were devoted to Old Testament history—redemptive history—and Old Testament prophecy. Ophoff's principles for interpreting Old Testament prophecy are still taught to students in the Protestant Reformed Seminary. The undersigned calls attention to them in the course that he has taught the past fifteen years in exegesis of Old Testament prophecy. They are an enduring monument to Ophoff's ground-breaking work as an interpreter of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Besides his legacy as a biblical exegete, Ophoff's legacy to the PRC concerns his unique role in the conditional covenant controversy that rocked the PRC in the 1950s. Ophoff is to be credited with the earliest detection of the erroneous theology of Hubert De Wolf, at that time one of the three pastors of the First Protestant Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Along with Herman Hoeksema, Ophoff opposed the conditional covenant view of Dr. Klaas Schilder of the Netherlands, as well as those within the PRC who were promoting the same erroneous conception of the covenant. He wrote extensively against these errors in the *Standard Bearer*,

both in an effort to educate and to warn the people. De Wolf was among those who sympathized with Schilder and took the lead in promoting his errors among the members of the PRC. He did that in two sermons that he preached from the pulpit of First PRC. To statements made in these sermons, Ophoff protested—officially lodged objections—to the consistory of First PRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In the end, his protests were upheld and the conditional covenant controversy was brought to a head. Ophoff insisted and was able to demonstrate that the doctrine of a conditional covenant was only a return to the teaching of common grace, which the PRC had rejected at the time of its formation. The teaching of a conditional covenant, like the teaching of common grace, was the teaching of a love of God that was broader than for the elect alone. It was the teaching of a love of God and a desire of God for the salvation of all who are born within the sphere of the covenant—all the natural children of believers. To his credit, Ophoff saw the error of this teaching, as well as its relation to the teaching of common grace and the well-meant gospel offer. The rejection of the latter, Ophoff insisted,

demanding rejection also of the former.

Chapter 6 is entitled “Ophoff’s Relationship to Hoeksema.” In this chapter, Kuiper discusses the unique character that each of these theological Titans possessed. They were different—very different—men. From the standpoint of their personalities, Herman Hoeksema and George M. Ophoff were polar opposites. But at the same time, they meshed perfectly. Not only did they mesh perfectly, but they were loyal to each other throughout their distinguished careers. Their loyalty was primarily to God, to God’s Word, and to God’s truth. But inasmuch as they were both steadfast in their loyalty to God, they remained loyal to each other. It is hard to imagine that working together as closely as they did and for as many years as they did in the seminary, as editors of the *Standard Bearer*, and as officebearers whose credentials were held in the same congregation, they did not have their disagreements. They did; they had to have had their differences. But to their everlasting credit, and enduring example to officebearers in Christ’s church, they were able to set aside personal and personality differences for the sake of the truth. To each of them, the

truth, the cause of Christ, and the welfare of the churches was of far greater importance than either one of them. Through thick and thin, they regarded each other as co-laborers in the gospel of Christ. They would not let anything stand between them. Officebearers in God’s church today need to learn from these two selfless brothers in Christ, both of whom were leaders in the churches.

The thesis concludes with several worthwhile appendices, including the now infamous *Grand Rapids Press* article quoting the young pastor Ophoff who said that he would choose death rather than sign the infamous Three Points of Common Grace, as Classis Grand Rapids West of the CRC had demanded of Ophoff. Among the appendices is also Ophoff’s “Canons of Interpretation of Prophecy.” These are his eight principles for interpreting Old Testament prophecy.

Prof. Kuiper’s thesis is well-written. The style is easy to follow and interesting to read. The thesis is a reminder to all who are Protestant Reformed of the heritage that is ours. It is also the inspiring story of one of the PRC’s founding fathers. It is the story of a willingness to sacrifice all for the sake of the truth. It is

a tale of one who was raised up by God at just the right moment in the history of His church. It is the story of one who in many respects was in the shadow of the towering figure of his fellow, but who was used by God in His own way, with the special gifts that God had given to him. It is the story of one who stood fearlessly against error and the errorists, but who stood with those whom he knew to be one with him in the faith. In doing so, he distinguished himself from the Reverend Henry Danhof, the other of the founding fathers of the PRC. Danhof would not work with others, but insisted on his own way. He went his own way, a way of independentism and self-assertion, rather than the way of unity in the truth. And his legacy is gone. Not so with George M. Ophoff. His legacy is an enduring legacy. Ophoff's story is worth telling and re-telling, reading and rereading by succeeding generations.

We heartily encourage every PRC congregation to purchase

this thesis for their library and promote the reading of it among their members. We encourage every PRC officebearer to buy or borrow a copy of the thesis for their reminder and grounding in the truth. We encourage our Christian schools, especially our high schools, to purchase a copy of the thesis in order to add to their library's collection and make available especially to their church history students. We encourage all of our members and friends to buy or borrow the thesis for their reading pleasure and profit. Lest we forget!

Copies of the thesis can be obtained by placing an order with the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary. The cost is \$20.00. We are willing to absorb the cost of mailing or delivery by some other means. Or, copies of the thesis can be purchased from the seminary's bookstore. Stop by the seminary, Monday through Friday, from 7:00 AM to 5:00 PM. The thesis can also be borrowed from the seminary library. ●

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*Heretics and Believers: A History of the English Reformation*, by Peter Marshall. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017. Pp xix + 652. \$25.00 (softcover). ISBN-13: 978-0300234589. [Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.]

This book is a well written history of the Reformation in

England. Born in Scotland, Peter Marshall is professor of history

at the University of Warwick in England. The book under review won the Wolfson History Prize in 2018. While not familiar with that particular prize, this reviewer can appreciate that the book won a prize. To read the book was a itself a prize.

### Overview

The book treats the history of the reformation in England in the 1500's. This covers the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Jane Grey and Bloody Mary, and Elizabeth. One familiar with this history realizes that it is not enough to say that the English Reformation took place during the reigns of these monarchs. The fact is that the monarchs themselves directed, in part effected, sometimes opposed, and significantly affected the course of the reformation in England.

Henry VIII (chapters 5-9) initiated the political aspect of the reformation by insisting that he, not the pope, was the head of the English church. Church reformation was not his motive; accomplishing his "Great Matter" (the annulment of marriage to Catherine in order to marry Anne Boleyn) was his motive. Yet, Henry came to envision an English church that was unified

with him as its head—somewhat resembling Rome in doctrine, rather like Rome in its hierarchy, but omitting a number of Romish practices and permitting worship and Bible reading in the common language. Henry also promoted scholarship, which would in turn serve the cause of Protestantism.

Under Henry's son Edward (chapters 10-11) the Reformation made more progress. Reformers from Switzerland and Geneva came to England; some doctrinal advance was made, especially in the teaching that Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper was spiritual not but physical; and both Catholicism and Anabaptism were opposed. Edward's six year reign was a bright spot, but it was short: Edward ascended the throne when he was nine and died at age fifteen.

Then came his half-sister Mary—*bloody* Mary—who undid all that her brother and father had done (chapters 12-13). Her claim to be the head of the church in England represented the only way in which Roman Catholicism did not fully return during her tenure. She restored the popish mass and killed many Protestants. But she also reigned for a short time—only five years.

During Elizabeth's thirty-five year reign (chapters 14-17) the

pendulum swung again in the direction of Protestantism, but it stopped its swing in the middle. That is, the country did not become as distinctly Protestant as did Geneva, and later the Netherlands. The foundation for the English church to be Anglican—not Romish, but still hierarchical—was cemented during her reign. Elizabeth did not tolerate Catholicism, but also had no sympathy for the Puritans. When the Puritans asked her to make further reforms in church government and worship, she refused. They then made clear that they would submit to her as their Queen, but not as their spiritual authority.

In addition to chronicling the influence of these monarchs, the book does justice to two other significant factors in the English reformation. One is the spread of Protestant doctrines to England from the European continent. If these monarchs did not desire a doctrinal reformation (all but Edward did not), many of their subjects did, and any attempt of the monarchs to quench this desire only gave it more oxygen. Throughout the book Marshall weaves this point, showing that the political climate allowed for the doctrines of the Reformation to take root in England. The first

four chapters pave the way for making this point by explaining the state of Catholicism in England prior to 1525, when Henry began wondering how to set his first wife aside.

The other significant factor in the English reformation, Marshall argues, was the role of the people and the effect it had on the people of the nation. About which, stay tuned.

### **Unique Arguments**

Good historians do not merely recount dates and facts; they use historical data to teach lessons from history or to support their interpretations of history. For this reason, every new history book, though it might contain the same dates and facts as an old book does, contains new insights, or develops some point farther than other books had.

This book underscores the role of the English people in bringing about the English reformation, and the effect of the reformation on the people. One must not overstate this role: not every individual Englishman desired and worked for reformation. However, influential clerics, politicians, and lay-people did. The point is that neither the monarchs nor the church as an institution

alone directed the course of the Reformation. On the basis of this starting point, Marshall argues that “‘religion’ itself began . . . to change” (xii; that is, the English reformation resulted in a completely new idea of what religion was and what it entailed). The fact that the English people were *educated* facilitated this change; they could understand the issues of the day and form their own opinions. Especially this explains the fact that some ministers refused to sign and abide by the Acts of Uniformity, which demanded that all subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles and worship according to the commands of the monarch. Thus originated non-conformism, more commonly known as Puritanism.

Another theme that Marshall explores is the price that the English people had to pay for the privilege of living in a country in which the church was being reformed. Part of this cost was that many people—both Catholics and Protestants, and both loyalists to the crown and Puritans—died for their convictions. Rarely do nations kill their own to gain independence from another, but some of the English monarchs did kill Englishmen, and permit the killing of other Englishmen, whose

religious views differed from that of the monarchs. Another aspect of the cost is the weakening of the English monarchy: the Reformation came “at the cost of eroding the government’s power to command, and of empowering ordinary English people to think and reflect—and sometimes to refuse and resist” (xii).

### Positive Evaluations

Marshall’s knowledge of and attention to detail is noteworthy. He does not merely survey the reformation in England; he refers to many persons, many events, and many conversations. For this reason, even a person with a fair knowledge of the English reformation will find this volume worthwhile. Also for this reason, the book has many endnotes. I could wish for even more: some of the details that Marshall relates were unknown to me, and I would have liked to follow them up in another source. This is not to fault Marshall, however; the endnotes he does provide demonstrate that he has fully researched his subject, while to add more would have made the book cumbersome.

Marshall is to be commended for putting the history of the English reformation into the context

of the continental reform movements. Here he finds both similarities and dissimilarities. Every scholar of the European Protestant Reformation understands that the English reformation was unique; Marshall helps explain why certain reform movements, if not the Reformation itself, did not fare as well in England as other countries.

Because the book is limited to the reformation in England in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Marshall does not say much about the Puritan movement in England. He touches only on its bare beginnings, which came during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The Reformation of which he writes is that which produced Anglicanism.

### **An Unanswered Question**

Unanswered is the question what Marshall himself thinks of the history of the Reformation. Rarely does he *explicitly* give his personal assessment of that history. In historical scholarship today this is considered a good thing: it leaves the impression that Marshall is objective. However, the historian must evaluate history. It teaches us lessons: what are those lessons? Is the reader left only with historical data, or with conclusions regarding it? The

reader of this book is left with much data and few, if any, explicit conclusions.

Even the title of the book, *Heretics and Believers*, is ambiguous. This was intentional on Marshall's part, and it does serve the purpose of underscoring that whether one viewed another as a heretic or a believer depended on one's own view of Catholicism. Rome viewed the Reformers as heretics; they considered themselves true believers. The Reformers took the opposite view: *they* were the believers, while *Roman Catholics* were the heretics. The two starkly different viewpoints that Englishmen took on this question indicates that the nation was divided into two camps.

But was one side *right*, and the other *wrong*, in its claim? Marshall does not try to answer the question. Yet the question itself will not go away. I give two representative points in the book at which it comes up, and is not answered. It comes up first when Marshall is explaining the term "Reformation": "The Reformation,' indeed, is itself an abstraction—a later attempt to make sense out of a pattern of events whose unfolding mostly seemed fitful and strange to the people living through them" (5).

Was “the Reformation” *nothing more* than a later attempt of people to explain what happened? Or is church reformation the work of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ, exposing the errors of a corrupt church to the understanding of His people, and re-forming the church to become more faithful?

Then, what of the Lollards? In his treatment of them (104-119), I sensed Marshall had a prejudice against them. Admittedly, this is my read; I could be misreading Marshall. But that Marshall is slow to add any evaluative comments throughout the book I have already noted—yet his evaluation of the Lollards seemed negative: they loved to be critical, and one Lollard’s pointed response (a response I consider to the point) to the Romish view of the sacraments had, in Marshall’s evaluation, an “unattractively negative and destructive cast” (110).

What is Marshall’s view of the Reformation? That is the unanswered question. It will not receive an answer, apparently.

However, every reader of the book must have an answer: this book does not merely chronicle historical events, persons, conversations, happenings, but chronicles the work of God in Christ reforming His church. For that, let us praise God!

### Conclusion

This new history and assessment of the English Reformation is a good value. The price is a good value economically: \$25.00 for a book containing over 670 pages. Even more, the book’s content makes it a good value: the book contains a riveting narrative of the Reformation in England, provides an interesting assessment of that reformation, and is packed full of detailed information. Marshall’s research was extensive, and his factual knowledge of the matter exhaustive.

The book certainly is not a quick read; it will entertain one for many winter nights. One who intends to read it carefully should budget at least 40 hours. ●

*Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law*, by David VanDrunen. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2014. Pp. xii + 582. \$45.00 (softcover). ISBN-13: 978-0802870940. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

Natural law!

A controversial subject, seldom treated at any length, or with much enthusiasm, by Reformed theologians.

This is the subject of the large book intriguingly but significantly titled *Divine Covenants*, by United Reformed scholar, David VanDrunen.

By natural law, VanDrunen understands “the obligations and consequences incumbent upon and known by human beings as image-bearers of God and participants in the protological moral order” (15). One could describe natural law as a certain knowledge that all the ungodly have from nature, or the creation, of certain laws of God that are binding upon them. An outstanding instance would be the prohibition of murder. Apart from the knowledge of God’s commandment in the biblical law of Exodus 20:13, the heathen know that killing another human is forbidden and punishable. They show this knowledge in various ways. Most cultures have a law forbidding murder and prescribing severe penalties

for the deed. Even the heathen in western civilization who murder unborn and partially born babies show knowledge of the law forbidding their murders. They feel compelled, against all incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, to deny that the babies they murder are humans. Why this recourse to idiocy? Because natural law, embedded in their very nature, forcefully forbids murder. They feel compelled, therefore, to deny that their murder is murder. Thus, the heathen of modernity as of antiquity “show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another” (Romans 2:15).

Since there is no knowledge of law without knowledge of the divine law-giver, the issue with regard to natural law is the question, whether the ungodly have a certain knowledge of God Himself. This question is the explanation of the controversy over natural law.

Arguing mainly, as is right, from Romans 1 and 2, Van-

Drunen proves that natural law is reality. Although they are not in the church, have never heard the gospel of the sovereign God, and know nothing of the ten commandments, all humans know God, His eternal power and Godhead, and that He must be glorified by being served. They know Him and important aspects of His law for human life from nature, including themselves as humans originally made in God's image. "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made..." (Romans 1:20).

VanDrunen locates his Reformed theology of natural law within the broadest sphere of Christian theory on the subject. The book fairly bristles with footnotes, many of them lengthy. One of the benefits of the book is the education in natural law thinking that the reader gets in the footnotes alone.

The opening up of the subject and the voluminous research are all to the good.

But the treatment of the subject goes seriously astray from the very outset, and with regard to the fundamental biblical undergirding and understanding of natural law. According to this disciple of the

Abraham Kuyper of common grace and son of the Christian Reformed Church of 1924, natural law is the product of God's common grace. No proof of this assertion is provided. And the act of God that realized natural law in the human race was the covenant with Noah. VanDrunen views this covenant as essentially different from all the other administrations of the covenant. Hence, to a large extent the plural of covenant in the title of the book. The covenant with Noah was a covenant of common grace in distinction from the various administrations of the covenant of saving grace. "the Noahic covenant with all creation after the flood was a covenant of *common* grace—common in the sense that God bestows this grace indiscriminately among the godly and the ungodly" (98).

This view of natural law goes a long way toward explaining why some Reformed theologians are adamant foes of the concept, throwing the baby out with the bathwater. If natural law is the product of the grace of God, be it common, the merely outward adherence of unregenerated heathens to the law of God made known in nature is ethically good. "they [unregenerated humans] are able to achieve much that is

genuinely, though penultimately, good” (98). Grace works goodness. Thus is denied total depravity, and thus the way is opened to the overthrow of the antithesis; to the well-meaning offer of salvation to all who hear; and even, as Christian Reformed theologian Harry Boer proved, to the salvation of unbelieving pagans.

Now, VanDrunen has a fallen humanity that retains the image of God and that is the recipient of a grace of God performing some real, though not ultimate, good. Where this leaves the Reformed doctrine of total depravity, and how this opens the way to a universal saving grace of God, is plain to all.

In addition, the antithesis—the spiritual separation and warfare between the sanctified believer and the unholy unbeliever—has gone by the board. They are brought together by the (common) grace of God that they share and by the common (penultimate) good that they perform. The practical implications and effects of VanDrunen’s common grace covenant with Noah are disastrous for the Reformed, Christian life. VanDrunen himself indicates the practical implications of his theology of natural law. Idolatry

becomes a God-given “common blessing” to all humans (509). Having mentioned such “sexual ethics” as marital faithfulness and homosexuality, VanDrunen relegates the truth of them to debatable controversy between “conservatives” and “liberals,” and to the relatively minor sphere of “protological” teaching, that is, to natural law. Rather than confess the truth concerning these and similar ethical realities of the covenant of grace, VanDrunen allows the common grace covenant with Noah—still in effect—to determine that he will not judge them in light of the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ: “outside the scope of the present book” (478). The covenant of common grace overrides the covenant of grace. And contemporary Reformed scholars are off the hook with regard to the permanency of marriage and the wickedness of sodomy!

In reality, the covenant with Noah was not a covenant of common grace—a common grace covenant supposedly extending to the end of time. It was an administration of the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ. The Noahic covenant revealed that the covenant of God in Jesus Christ extends to all nations and finally to the cre-

ation itself. The New Testament passage that corresponds to and explains the covenant with Noah is Romans 8:19-22. This passage is embedded deeply in the gospel of the covenant of grace with the elect in Jesus Christ, as this gospel of grace is proclaimed in the book of Romans.

Two considerations in the very passages to which VanDrunen himself appeals and which are fundamental to the right understanding of natural law ought to have warned VanDrunen off from his grounding of natural law in a common grace of God. First, Genesis 8:20-22 bases the covenant with Noah on the sacrifice that Noah offered, which was a “sweet savor” unto God. The sacrifice was a type of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The covenant that was based on the sacrifice was an administration of the covenant of (special), saving grace. If God made it with all humans without exception, either all humans are saved by the covenant, or that covenant and its salvation depend upon the will of the sinner. In this case, the covenant with Noah was the first administration of a covenant of Arminianism.

The second consideration that should have given Van-

Drunen pause is the very passage that he (rightly) acknowledges as fundamental to a Reformed doctrine of natural law, Romans 1:18-32. God does not reveal His eternal power and Godhead to the heathen (whether in North America or in the depths of African jungles) with the purpose that they create civilizations that are pleasing to Him (although they do create civilizations, civilizations of common idolatry), or that they perform works that are good and acceptable to Him. But He makes Himself and something of His will for their lives known to them, in order to leave them without excuse (a statement of purpose). The only result of natural law, grounded in knowledge of God from nature (or creation), is that the unbeliever deliberately refuses to glorify God, and turns to idolatry: “changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things” (v. 23). These heathen with their natural knowledge of God “did not like to retain God in their knowledge” (v. 28).

It is difficult to find a natural law theology of common grace in Romans 1 and 2. VanDrunen fails to do so. He does not even

try. He appeals to the passage on behalf of natural law, but he never even attempts to show that natural law in the passage is the product of common grace. Apart now from the implicit surrender of the theory of natural law that is supposed to be founded on common grace in the passage—the fundamental passage on natural law—failing to try to find common grace in Romans 1 and 2, VanDrunen is wise. There is no common grace in Romans 1 and 2. The most heroic exegetical efforts can neither uncover common grace in the passage, nor impose common grace upon the passage. Apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ, which the rest of the

book of Romans will proclaim, there is only common wrath and curse. Such is the import of the opening two chapters of Romans. Establishing this is the *purpose* of Romans 1 and 2.

David VanDrunen opens up an important, controversial, fascinating doctrinal subject. He sheds scholarly light on the subject. But the Reformed work on natural law has yet to be written. This work will allow itself to be informed by Romans 1 and 2. It will view the covenant with Noah in light of Romans 8. It will not dance to the siren song of common grace. It will not break down the antithesis. Prospects for the writing of this book are not bright. ●

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*Theoretical – Practical Theology, Volume 1: Prolegomena*, by Petrus Van Mastricht. Tr. Todd M. Rester. Ed. Joel R. Beeke. Grand Rapids: Dutch Reformed Translation Society and Reformation Heritage Books, 2018. Pp. xci + 238. \$50.00 (hardcover). ISBN-13: 978-1601785596. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

*Theoretical – Practical Theology* is the first volume of the dogmatics of a highly regarded theologian in the Dutch Reformed churches. Van Mastricht lived from 1630-1706. He studied under Gisbertus Voetius, a notable delegate at the Synod of Dordt. This introductory volume of

the Reformed theology of Van Mastricht is to be followed by six volumes of theology proper. This is the first appearance of Van Mastricht's dogmatics in English translation, a significant undertaking.

As the term "prolegomena" expresses, this first volume of the

set introduces Reformed theology as Van Mastricht conceives it and the Dutch theologian's method of treating it. It concerns itself with the nature of theology; the method of teaching theology; and, most importantly, the doctrine of Scripture, which is the source and authority of all theology. The book devotes nearly 90 pages to a thorough exposition of the doctrine of Scripture. Unusual for a prolegomena to dogmatics is Van Mastricht's opening up his subject with a lengthy section on "the best method of preaching." The method is detailed. The detail is wearisome.

Van Mastricht's theology comes highly and unqualifiedly recommended by leading Reformed scholars.

I have some doubts.

Van Mastricht belonged to the tradition of the *nadere Reformatie*, the hijacking of sound Reformed theology by Puritan experientialism. He was highly esteemed by the Marrow Men, particularly regarding his doctrine of the covenant. These doubts are intensified by Van Mastricht's definition of theology: "Christian theology is best defined as the doctrine of living for God through Christ" (66)—*defined* as the doctrine of living for God. It is one

thing to stress that Christian doctrine ends in living to God, that is, that doctrine has as one of its main purposes living to God. This was the conviction of William Ames: "a doctrine sufficient for living well" (xlix). It is another thing to find the essence of theology in "living to God." Theology is sound doctrine. One would define it as sound doctrine concerning God in Christ according to Holy Scripture, or the sound doctrine of the gospel of grace. If one were to describe theology in terms of its purpose, the Reformed believer would refer to the glorifying of God by a good confession, which then is confirmed by a godly walk. Van Mastricht's definition has the practical end of theology swallowing up the doctrinal nature of the Word and knowledge of God. This is a serious weakness in a dogmatics.

Although this weakness might be attributed to the nature of prolegomena, so that better things can be expected from Van Mastricht's treatment of the Reformed doctrines themselves, this volume is the epitome of scholasticism. Every subject is immediately sub-divided into any number of sub-topics, as reason determines them. In the treatment of the topics, the logic of reason dominates, with a string of bibli-

cal texts appended. Everything is schematized.

An example, haphazardly fixed upon, is Van Mastricht's treatment of the "elenctic part" of theology (104-107). The subject is sub-divided into an introduction; "1. Is theology wisdom or prudence?"; "2. What is its object?"; and "3. Is it a theoretical or a practical habit?" In his treatment of these topics, in the short space of four pages, Van Mastricht introduces the thinking of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Scotus (the man was a prodigy of learning). He raises such topics as employing in theology the intellectual habits of Aristotle; viewing theology as all of the habits of Aristotle; distinguishing between theology's primary object and its adequate object; distinguishing in theology the practical from the productive; preferring that theology be merely practical (which

Van Mastricht accepts); that there are things in theology that cannot be produced; apparently in contradiction of book's very title, his own denial that "theology is theoretical-practical"; and more of the same.

Although texts of Scripture are listed in abundance, Scripture does not determine the issues and questions in theology. Rather, "there are *those who say* that theology is neither speculative nor practical," etc. (106; emphasis added). Nor are the solution of the issues and the answering of the questions given in biblical language drawn from Scripture itself.

Granted that the book is prolegomena, it is dry as dust. The theologian will find it hard going. There is not a layman in the world who will read it in its entirety, or, if one does, who will read it with pleasure. ●

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*Chosen in Christ: Revisiting the Contours of Predestination*, by Cornelis Venema. Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2019. Pp. 403. \$19.99 (softcover). ISBN-13: 978-1527102354. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

United Reformed Churches/  
Christian Reformed Church theologian, Cornelis Venema, president of Mid-America Seminary, has written an explanation and de-

fense of the Reformed doctrine of election that is learned, thorough, and, for the most part, sound.

There is a careful interpretation of the outstanding passages

in Scripture on election, including chapters on the Old Testament, the New Testament, and, deservedly, the Pauline epistles as source of the doctrine in their own right. The exegesis is sound and compelling. The doctrine of election does not have its source in John Calvin, but in Holy Writ.

Church historically, the doctrine was clarified and emphasized by Augustine against the early heretic, Pelagius. To Augustine's teaching of election, Venema devotes an entire instructive chapter. The deep, spiritual concern of Augustine was expressed by the biblical question, "What do you have that you have not received?" Venema makes this the sub-title of the chapter heading of the treatment of Augustine. Venema plainly shares this concern. Surprisingly in a defender of the well-meant offer, as Venema is, Venema frankly acknowledges that Augustine rejected the theology of a well-meant offer of the gospel: "Augustine does not affirm that the call of the gospel is a 'sincere' or 'well-meant' offer, which expresses God's good-will toward those whom He has not chosen" (149).

In the chapter on the doctrine of election in Reformation theology, Venema not only does justice

to election in Calvin, as one would expect, but he also examines the doctrine of Luther—the Luther of *Bondage of the Will*. Briefly, he considers the theology of Bullinger, Zwingli, and Vermigli, as well as the Reformed creeds. In his study of election in the Reformation, Venema notes that Lutheranism, following Melancthon rather than Luther, declined to confess the doctrine of reprobation lest this jeopardize its doctrine of "universal grace...in the gospel" (186).

The book explores the striking truth of Ephesians 1:4, that our election was "in Christ," a truth little regarded even by Reformed theologians.

The treatment of the Arminian controversy is solid and insightful. This chapter will be of help to those churches and Christians today who are confronted by and struggling with various forms of the Arminian heresy. Arminius and his defenders at the Synod of Dordt taught salvation conditioned by a positive response to a universal, gracious offer of salvation (220, 221). Theirs was "a doctrine of 'conditional' predestination" (221).

According to Arminian theology, "God's gracious will, which is general and common toward all

whom He graciously summons to faith, can be rendered ineffectual by any of its recipients” (225). This theology “makes evangelical faith a kind of *work* that some sinners, who belong to the class represented by Jacob, perform in order to be saved according to God’s purpose of election” (233, 234).

Venema refutes Arminian theology from Romans 9 (231ff.). He criticizes Arminianism for teaching a will of God for the salvation of all (236). He charges, rightly, that Arminian theology teaches a (saving) grace of God that is “profoundly ineffectual” (236). Against Arminius, Venema affirms “God’s purpose of election to show him [Jacob] mercy was *unconditional* in the strictest sense of the term” (233).

Of great benefit and interest to many Reformed pastors will be the closing chapters on contemporary deviations from and assaults on the creedal Reformed doctrine of election. The controversy over gracious election did not end in 1618/1619. One chapter is a careful, learned exposure of the doctrine of election of the influential Karl Barth. The minister who has neither the time nor the inclination to plunge into the heavy volumes of Barth’s dogmatics,

but recognizes the need to learn something of the German/Swiss theologian’s unique argument for universal election, does well to read Venema.

Venema can be faulted for taking too seriously Barth’s drawing back from acknowledging openly his universalism, when he was called to account by his critics. Barth taught the final salvation of all humans without exception. So much is this the case that he argued at length that Judas Iscariot, the ultimate reprobate in Scripture, was, in fact, elect and saved.

And then there is the development of the universalistic theology of traditional Arminianism in “open theism.” Venema exposes this contemporary heresy of a love of God for all mankind with its necessary denial of God’s omniscience and sovereignty—an Arminianism with candor.

The Reformed reader’s joyful reception of Venema’s solid’s defense of the sovereign, gracious decree of election (a defense by one who cannot cavalierly be dismissed as a “hyper-Calvinist”), with repeated affirmation of an accompanying sovereign, just decree of reprobation, is dampened by Venema’s defense at the very end of the book of the “well-

meant offer of the gospel” (350-354). Venema is candid. By the well-meant offer he means, and everyone who promotes it means, “God’s love toward all fallen sinners” (351). It is a (would be) saving love. It “desires for all to be saved” (350). According to the well-meant offer, God “*genuinely wills* that all fallen sinners...be saved” (350, 351; the emphasis is Venema’s).

Venema’s defense of the well-meant offer, against the objection to it by those who confess the doctrine of predestination, is the same in every respect as that offered by the Christian Reformed Church since its adoption of the doctrine of the well-meant offer in 1924. Venema appeals to a “revealed” will of God that contradicts the “hidden” will of God of predestination. Similarly, he appeals to a “preceptive” will of God that contradicts His “decretal” will. Thus, he misrepresents the preceptive will of God in Reformed theology. God’s preceptive will is not a loving purpose that all humans be saved, but the *command* of God—a *precept*—to all who hear the gospel that they repent and believe. Likewise, the revealed will of God is not the desire of God that all be saved. Rather, it is the command to Pharaoh that

he let the people go, whereas God had decreed that the king would not let the people go, so that God might make His power known in the disobedience of Pharaoh. Between the two aspects of the will of God, there is no contradiction.

To attempt to defend the well-meant offer by appeal to the “serious” call of the gospel as confessed by the Canons of Dort is disingenuous, if not deception (351). God can be, and is, serious when He calls the reprobate to repent and believe, without desiring their salvation. Repentance and faith are their solemn duty. An advocate of the well-meant offer does well, in defense of his theory, not so much as to *mention* the Canons of Dort. *Dordt*—in defense of the doctrine that God loves all human without exception with a love that desires their salvation? *Dordt*—in defense of the doctrine that God desires to save all humans? *Dordt*—in defense of the doctrine that God is gracious in the preaching of the gospel to all who hear? *Dordt*—in defense of the doctrine that God’s grace in the gospel is ineffectual, and ineffectual because some to whom God is gracious fail to accept the offer? *Dordt*—in defense of the doctrine that is the necessary implication of a well-meant offer to

all in the gospel, namely, that the reason why some are saved by the gospel is that they accepted the offer whereas the others rejected it?

And then there is the argument against the well-meant offer that Venema does not take up. Controversy over the well-meant offer in the Reformed community in AD 2019, especially controversy in the sphere of the Christian Reformed, United Reformed, and Protestant Reformed Churches, may not ignore the public development of the doctrine of the well-meant offer in the doctrine of universal atonement of Prof. Harold Dekker and in the doctrine of the denial of predestination of Dr. Harry Boer. Both were Christian Reformed theologians, and both pleaded for their heresies on the basis of the well-meant offer. Venema is thoroughly conversant with these developments.

Despite himself, Venema is compelled to admit that his defense of the well-meant offer is a failure. Again and again, in the short space of four pages, he attempts to defend his obviously inadequate and unsatisfactory defense by appeal to mystery and incomprehensibility. “While it may be difficult, even impossible, for us to comprehend [the

harmony of predestination and the well-meant offer—DJE],” etc. (350). “Despite the difficulty of explaining how these two distinct aspects of God’s will [election and the well-meant offer—DJE] are compatible,” etc. (351). “Admittedly, it is difficult to comprehend the consistency or coherence of these distinct aspects of God’s will” (352). “It is not possible to comprehend fully the harmony within God’s will in this respect” (352). Delivering Venema from the duty of showing that the well-meant offer, not only is in harmony with, but also does not flatly contradict, predestination is the convenient fact that the relation of the well-meant offer and predestination is a “mystery” that lies “beyond our grasp” (352). The “Reformed theology” of Cornelis Venema, like that of the Christian Reformed Church, “recognizes the difficulty of harmonizing the scriptural teachings of a sovereign decree of election and a well-meant offer” (354).

One other feature of Venema’s treatment of the well-meant offer cries out for notice. There is no mention of Herman Hoeksema and of his opposition to the doctrine of a well-meant offer. How a Reformed theologian in the sphere of the creedal Reformed

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churches in North America can discuss and defend the well-meant offer, while condemning the rejection of the theory, without so much as a mention of Hoeksema is, on the one hand, surprising. On the other hand, it is to be expected. Ignoring Hoeksema in public has been the tactic of the Christian Reformed Church with regard to its “un-favorite” son since 1924. As an old Christian Reformed minister, who became one of the founding fathers of the United Reformed Churches, told me, in the presence of several of

his colleagues, “Our tactic with regard to Hoeksema has always been to ignore him in public. But we are not together privately for fifteen minutes before his name comes up among us, and we are discussing him and his theological stand.”

The movement that resulted in the United Reformed Churches took Dr. Cornelis Venema out of the Christian Reformed Church. It did not take the Christian Reformed Church out of Dr. Venema. ●

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