



REFORMED

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*For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion:
in the secret of his tabernacle shall he hide me;
he shall set me up upon a rock.
—Psalm 27:5*

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Three times thou shalt keep a feast unto me in the year. Thou shalt keep the feast of unleavened bread: (thou shalt eat unleavened bread seven days, as I commanded thee, in the time appointed of the month Abib; for in it thou camest out from Egypt: and none shall appear before me empty:) and the feast of harvest, the firstfruits of thy labours, which thou hast sown in the field: and the feast of ingathering, which is in the end of the year, when thou hast gathered in thy labours out of the field. Three times in the year all thy males shall appear before the Lord GOD. Thou shalt not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leavened bread; neither shall the fat of my sacrifice remain until the morning. The first of the firstfruits of thy land thou shalt bring into the house of the LORD thy God.

—Exodus 23:14–19

Feasting Forever with God

God required Israel to appear before him in Jerusalem three times each year to keep the feasts. God had given Israel seven appointed feasts, grouping them in such a way that all seven could be kept in three annual trips to the temple. In March/April the people observed the Feasts of the Passover, Unleavened Bread, and Firstfruits. In May/June the people observed the Feast of Harvest/Weeks/Pentecost. In September/October the people observed the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Ingathering/Booths/Tabernacles.

God required the entire nation of Israel to appear before him in Jerusalem to keep the feasts. In the Old Testament age of symbols and shadows, the nation was represented by its males. Not merely some but “all thy males” must attend the feasts, indicating that the entire nation appeared before him. Women and children often accompanied the men to the feasts, for not only Joseph but also Jesus and Mary “went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast” (Luke 2:42).

The feasts were characterized by abundance, gladness, and celebration. None appeared before God empty, but all overflowed with God’s ample provision. The people came to Jerusalem laden with the harvest of that “which thou hast sown

in the field” and with the crops, when “thou hast gathered in thy labours out of the field.” “The first of the firstfruits of thy land”—barley and wheat and grapes and olives—“thou shalt bring into the house of the LORD thy God.” As the people made their way along the roads to Jerusalem, the hills and valleys rang with their songs of ascent. “I joyed when to the house of God, Go up, they said to me. Jerusalem, within thy gates our feet shall standing be” (Ps. 122:1–2, Scottish Metrical Version). Arriving in Jerusalem, the people did what one does at a feast: they feasted. In the convivial company of their brethren and their God, they were filled, refreshed, and made glad.

How lovely were the feasts! And how much lovelier is their meaning! For the gospel of Israel’s feasts is that God’s people feast forever with God, feeding on his abundance in Jesus Christ, refreshed by his mercy in Jesus Christ, and made glad by his covenant fellowship in Jesus Christ. God brought his Old Testament people before him throughout the entire year to testify to us that we are never apart from him. God brought all his Old Testament people before him to testify to us that he graciously receives all his chosen people and leaves no one out. And God filled his Old Testament people with

abundance and joy to testify to us that in Jesus Christ is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.

How gracious is our covenant God, who brings us to feast before him forever through Jesus Christ our Lord.

—AL

CONTRIBUTION

Repent to Be Forgiven?

That we repent and in the way of repentance experience the mercy of God is the teaching of Scripture and the confessions.¹

Repentance precedes the reception of God's merciful pardon in Christ by faith.²

The PRC teach that repentance is the (God-given and God-worked) means unto the remission of sins. As means, repentance precedes remission of sins; as end, remission of sins follows repentance.³

Be assured that there is forgiveness with God...when we confess our sins and turn from those sins.⁴

God in Christ does not pronounce forgiveness through his church except on the sufficient evidence of repentance.⁵

Consider the following [false] theological claims:

- That God's forgiveness of sins is eternally applied to the elect, apart from repentance...
- That repentance is not the necessary way of receiving forgiveness, but merely a recognition of what was always true.⁶

So, if I want to be forgiven or at least experience being forgiven, I need to repent first. Is that the idea? That certainly seems to be the latest theological rage to come along in some churches that call themselves Reformed. But how and why did this question come to be asked in the first place? There is a history reflected here, and it is not a good one.

To repent is a good thing. To make repentance a condition unto salvation is not. That is not Reformed. The whole point of the Reformed doctrine of salvation is that salvation is by grace alone, without any works or conditions whatsoever. This ought to be simple. But it has been made to be very confusing. If one recognizes that repentance is a good work and is, therefore, a separate entity apart from faith, then the doctrine is simple. Repentance cannot be a condition to anything then, especially to forgiveness. That would not be Reformed. Repentance can only come about as fruit and as thanks after the assurance of forgiveness is given.

But some teachers, in the interest of such statements as those quoted above, define faith to include repentance. That is a problem. If repentance is included inside of faith as part of faith, then repentance can no longer be a good work that is separate from faith; and if it is not a

¹ *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* 2020, 82.

² *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* 2021, 122.

³ David J. Engelsma, "'Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc?' Non!, or, 'Don't Kill the Rooster!'" September 8, 2021, <https://rfpa.org/blogs/news/post-hoc-ergo-propter-hoc-non-or-don-t-kill-the-rooster>.

⁴ Consistory of Second Reformed Protestant Church, letter to Brandon and Alana Oostra dated September 24, 2024.

⁵ Consistory of Second Reformed Protestant Church, letter to Matthew and Christina Overway dated April 9, 2025.

⁶ Josiah Tan, "Pastoral Voice," *Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church [Singapore] bulletin*, May 25, 2025, 3.

good work by definition, then what is it? I don't know that that question has been answered by those who teach that faith itself includes repentance. Repentance necessarily has to be something other than a good work, in that case, unless one wants to include all good works in faith as well—which is another problem but which idea also has become popular. To know exactly how to put faith and works together into one is hard to definitively set forth because there are various ways to do it, and none of them are orthodox. But however it is done, the definition of faith is being messed with; and when faith is redefined, we have a diabolical attack on justification by faith alone on our hands. If good works of any kind can somehow be inserted into faith or parasitically attached to faith, then when one says, “I believe in justification by faith alone,” that person can actually mean, “I believe in justification by faith and works.” Confessing faith alone will mean nothing, but the one confessing those words will still sound Reformed. That happens, and that fools a lot of people.

I maintain that repentance is a good work, a good work that is *apart* from faith by faith's own definition, and also that repentance is the first good work that faith will produce. Repentance, as a good work by definition, does not exist inside of faith as part of faith. Repentance does not come before salvation, salvation that is the forgiveness of sins, which is justification. No good work comes before salvation or forgiveness or justification. Any good work, including repentance, only comes after, as a fruit of faith—faith that is our bond to Jesus Christ, a bond that only he can create by his Holy Spirit. Fruit grows on a branch only after that branch has been grafted into the trunk of a living tree. That union has to be there in order for any fruit to grow on that branch. Faith is that union. Faith has to be there. Only God makes faith. And after God makes that living bond of faith, repentance will sprout and grow. That growth, in fact, is not merely inevitable; it is impossible to stop.⁷

⁷ Heidelberg Catechism, L.D. 24, Q&A 64.

⁸ Canons 3–4.5–6.

⁹ For one example, read the whole chapter of Ezekiel 16.

This is the way it works in our conscious experience as well, contrary to what many people suppose they observe in life. We might wonder, if it appears that repentance is required for human relationships to be restored, doesn't God operate in the same way? The book of Judges seems to illustrate that, for example. The cycle happens over and over. When the people of Israel repented and turned from their wicked idolatry, God delivered them from their enemies. Many texts can be found to verify that order of repentance and forgiveness, on the surface of the matter. That repentance always does and always must come before forgiveness of sins, for all intents and purposes, seems to indeed be true. It is not true, however. It is not true at all, any more than John 3:16 teaches a universal love of God for all men. The principle *scripture interprets scripture* does not allow for such a shallow interpretation.

Those texts that speak of repentance first and forgiveness second are indeed there. “John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Mark 1:4). Many more texts could be quoted. But note this: that order does not define the gospel. “Do this, and then that will happen” is no gospel and never was. It is the law, and the law never saved anybody.⁸ “Repent—and be forgiven!” Really? Did anyone ever repent well enough to be forgiven? Before God's holy majesty, that one should have been immediately consumed without mercy. We all should be. No, no one ever repented “well enough” and never will. God knew that. Yet there *was* mercy. In the midst of some of the most hopeless-sounding passages in scripture, there is always that small glimmer of light.⁹ Always. The darkest, longest tunnel has an opening, be it ever so tiny and far in the distance. A remnant will be saved, a small scrap of humanity. Why? Because there would still be a few men on the earth found to be good enough after all? Hardly. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. That includes

the chosen remnant, whoever they may be. No, mercy is the only explanation. Sheer, undeserved mercy and grace. That is the gospel that we find in the prophets and the apostles. God saves a remnant because that was his promise, and God keeps his promises. There is no other explanation than that in his mercy it was God's pleasure to save his people, even people that were the most stiff-necked, stubborn, unrepentant-prone people of all the nations of the earth. Israel had nothing whereof to boast; nor do we.

Repentance obtained nothing, even for the remnant. God brought a handful of people back to Jerusalem out of the captivity in Babylon. Was that because they would then prove to be such an upstanding, spotless generation? The history of some of their efforts at living godly lives, if such can be called effort, is painful to read. No; first, their repentance would never have been good enough to be a means to the forgiveness of sins, much less to merit forgiveness. Second, God doesn't bargain with men. It simply doesn't work that way with God, ever. If anyone perhaps could have bargained with God, would not Job have been able to do so? He was the godliest man on the earth at the time he lived. God said so. That was a fact. And how did all of that end for Job? Very well—by God's grace alone. God made that abundantly clear—and that is an understatement—when God finally answered Job directly at the end of the book. "Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding" (Job 38:3–4). God went on and on—and on—with such questions. Job's godliness had nothing to do with his end; God's grace alone did. Job was still a man, a pile of dust—and a sinful man too, as we all are. Repent to be forgiven? No one makes such bargains with God. No one.

What about the gospel call to repent and believe? You do have to repent and believe in order to be saved, right? Taking those words alone in the most literal sense of the word, no. Anyone

who is an elect child of God is saved and *will* in time also consciously repent and believe if they survive beyond infancy. There is no "in order to." Grace allows for no "in order to." In the end we are all as helpless little infants, who can do nothing to save ourselves or help ourselves, including the slightest little logical-sounding "in order to." The sacrament of baptism, when administered to infants, shouts this truth with the roar and splash of a mighty flood. No one can or will ever repent and believe of his own accord, much less obtain anything by it. No one.

"Repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" is no condition, nor is obedience to any command a means to salvation. Both repenting and believing are themselves gifts of salvation. God gives us to repent and to believe! That is the promise of the gospel. God will surely grant the fruit of repentance to each of his own—even if one dies in infancy, before any repentance can become a conscious experience in him or her. The seed of it all, who is Christ, is already there. That is the only way to salvation and to forgiveness of sins—Christ. And the bond to Christ is faith; thus faith is the means. Repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ *because he saved you*. Both your activity of repenting and your faith, which results in the activity of believing, are gifts to you because he saved you. Your repenting and your believing do not come first, and *then* you are saved. Your repenting and your believing can buy you nothing. Jesus bought your repenting and believing for you. That is all the buying there is.

Why, then, does the gospel promise also sound like a command? As a command, it would seem that this means that something we do must come first, as either a condition or a means. Canons 2.5 even identifies those words ("repent and believe") as a command. But the same Reformation principle *scripture interprets scripture* will also disabuse us of any notion that this implies that anything we do must come first. Consider the woman caught in adultery. Jesus forgave her without one indication of repentance on her part. Then he said to her, "Go, and sin no

more” (John 8:11). We can assume she did just that. Her life of repentance came after she was forgiven. That is how it works in real life. “Repent and believe” was her thanks and was a gift given to her.

Nor may one explain repentance to be a means or condition unto forgiveness by insisting that God works that condition or means in you entirely by his grace. That doesn’t help. You still have to do something in that case, whether that is by yourself or with God’s help or completely by his grace. In any of those scenarios, God isn’t just plain doing it alone, without you. He is, at the least, using you. That means you get some credit, no matter how little that credit may be. And any credit you have is credit that God does not have. If repentance comes before forgiveness in any way, shape, or form, God is no longer God. It is that serious.

That God uses means is not the problem. He does use means. That is confessional.¹⁰ But when it comes to the means that God uses, a pattern is there. God uses the creation of oxygen to keep one alive as long as he so wills. God provides food to sustain one’s earthly life as long as he has decreed that life to last. But the point of those means is not one’s activity of breathing or eating. If there is not oxygen in a room, all the breathing one tries to do will not help. If real food is not available, eating other substances will not provide nourishment. So it is with faith, which is the means unto salvation. It is what God gives that is the point. When God gives faith, which is to be united with Jesus Christ, that gift is not an option. It is a gift in the absolute sense of the word. If it can be refused, it is not a real gift anymore. But God’s means are not choices. God’s means are gifts to us. The air we breathe and the food we eat are gifts. Faith is a genuine gift.¹¹

But we are not yet finished with addressing all of the ways that are used to undermine faith. What about the objection that faith is never alone? That is a good question because it is true

that faith is never alone—because faith, indeed, always produces good works. Always. Faith will always produce repentance. Always. But here is the difference: faith is not married to good works. They are not one. They are very much two different entities that may not be confused or mixed up with each other or melded together in any way. Faith always has its children. Good works and repentance are the sure children of faith. But faith and good works are not one, are not married, and are not to be identified with each other any more than a parent may be married to his or her own child. Such a theological union of faith and works would be as perverse as the marital union of a parent with his child. Combine faith with good works in a cauldron, stir and blend them so that one ingredient may no longer be distinguished from the other, and you have concocted a spiritual poison, a recipe for a devilish witch’s brew. That’s what it is when faith is combined with and identified with works. Justification by faith alone means nothing if faith and works are one.

Rather, faith always produces good works. Once more, that is what is meant by saying that faith is never alone. And it is exactly that truth that is denied when men are afraid of the gospel, meaning that they are afraid that faith alone, all by itself, won’t be enough to produce good works. Their concern, in that case, is that they think that in order to see good works produced, they need to add the threat of the condemnation of the law to the comfort of the gospel that faith embraces. Understand, that is where the false charge of antinomianism comes from. The charge is oddly and diabolically ironic. The truth is that only faith—faith alone, without works—will ever produce any genuine good work in the child of God. And faith alone necessarily means grace alone. But this is the charge: “You teach too much grace. Grace, grace, grace. No, you need to have some fear of the law with that, some ‘do this or else’ to motivate people to do good works.” That is a lie. God is not pleased

¹⁰ Canons 3–4.17.

¹¹ Canons 3–4.14.

with good works motivated by terror of punishment. That is self-love and is, in fact, no good work at all. Belgic Confession 24 is explicit on that point.¹² Anything done purely out of faith, on the other hand, is not only a genuine good work, but it is also thanks. Faith, which is a matter of pure grace in that it is the union that joins us to Jesus Christ, always comes first. Always. Only then, when that union has been made, will any genuine repentance and turning from sin even be attempted. And why will it be attempted at that point? Out of thanks. That will be the only reason left. If it is not thanks, it is not good. It is that simple.

These are not just abstract theological ideas to be tossed around. This is a matter of how we live every day in our deepest consciousness of life. Do we live out of the fear of punishment because we might not be good enough? Or do we live out of the comfort of knowing that we have been forgiven of all our sins by the grace and work of Jesus Christ alone, with no work of ours—not even our repentance—ever entering into that? Can you see the difference? My repentance *cannot* be first. It cannot. If my repentance comes first, why have I repented? What was the motive? So that God will justify me and save me after all? Isn't that merely another form of self-love? It is. True repentance is sorrow that I have sinned against the loving, gracious God who saved me and forgives me of all of my sins in Jesus Christ. The salvation comes first. The forgiveness comes first. That gives me the only reason there is to repent: in love for God and in thanks for all that he has given me in Jesus Christ. To repent in order to gain something, even if that is forgiveness, does not meet the definition of what genuine repentance is.

What about in the realm of men's interacting with men, though? Some might say that in that case, repentance must still come first. That seems logical. Once more, do not broken human relationships require repentance to be restored? It would certainly seem so. But grace isn't logical

even in earthly realms. Grace goes against human logic every time. This world operates under cause and effect, in doing this to get that. Grace doesn't follow that line of reasoning. Grace has its own divine logic. Grace means that you were given something for no price or payback expected from you whatsoever. It was completely free, in the absolute sense of the word. Our minds have a hard time comprehending that kind of interaction. But now let's apply that to human relationships. Here is the question: How do we begin to forgive someone who has sinned against us? Don't they have to apologize and repent before we can even think about doing that? That is a big question. Let's take that question apart and see where the pieces lead us.

First of all, forgiveness with men is not the same as forgiveness with God. Only God can, in the deepest sense, forgive the sinner. Only God can wipe a sin away from off the end of the galaxy as far as east is from west. In the end he is the only Judge. Jesus Christ has been given all authority and power in heaven and on earth. In that capacity God is the only one who forgives sins, and he does so in Jesus Christ. Besides that, he alone has the prerogative and right to forgive sins because all sin at bottom is sin against God first of all.

Our forgiveness of the neighbor is different. The most we can do as human creatures is not to hold an offense against another person, to refrain from seeking revenge, and to seek one's good instead. When Jesus told us to love our enemies, that is what that forgiveness looks like. It looks like loving our enemies while they are yet enemies, before there has been any evidence of repentance on an enemy's part. One is no longer an enemy if he has shown repentance for his sin against us, but Jesus calls him an enemy. Therefore, this love comes before repentance, before it is deserved.

We must be clear on exactly what this not-seeking-revenge-before-an-enemy-is-repentant looks like, however. Such admonition does not

¹² "It is so far from being true that this justifying faith makes men remiss in a pious and holy life, that on the contrary, without it they would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation."

mean that one must be left open to repeated injury or destruction. David ran away from Saul and his men, hiding in caves and living like an outlaw in order to escape his father-in-law's deadly spear. But David never sought revenge against Saul. He only ever wished him well, undeserving as Saul was. David only sought Saul's good, even to the day Saul died. That is an example of love for an enemy, a poignant example. David did not hold the sins of Saul against Saul, but neither did David trust Saul with his safety. To trust Saul and move back into the palace at Jerusalem would have been foolish, if not suicidal. To forgive within human relationships does not automatically mean to also trust. We may not equate the two. In Saul's case the fruit of genuine repentance was not evident. Such repentance would have been necessary to begin building trust back into that broken relationship. Such lack did not negate the mercy that David showed to Saul, but that lack did keep David living a safe distance away from Saul.

Perhaps the parable of the prodigal son will also help. The wayward, foolish son came back home to his father, and his father simply received him with open arms. That was pure forgiveness and mercy on the father's part, and it was beautiful. All of us are that prodigal son. We come to our heavenly Father with nothing, not even repentance good enough to make any amends; and yet he forgives us because he has already forgiven us in Jesus Christ. Who, in fact, impenitently sinned in that parable without ever being forgiven? The jealous brother, who saw all of his own good works, good works that surely included some shining examples of supposed repentance. In his case he not only refused to forgive his brother, but he also put a very high value on his own good work of repentance. That ought to be the means or merit to something, right? Maybe a fatted calf? But it wasn't. And that made him very angry.

On the other hand, what about one who deserves some sort of consequences for his offenses? What if church discipline is necessary? How are the elders—and, indeed, all of the members—of a church to deal with someone

who has publicly and grossly sinned? Scripture makes clear that in that case admonishment is in order, but how exactly must that be done? Do the elders bring the law with its threats of hell and damnation to persuade that kind of sinner to repent? Consequences of sin can be very real and unavoidable. Hell is also real. It sounds completely reasonable to our earthly flesh to bring the condemnation of the law of God to the sinner. Doesn't the sinner have that coming to him if he doesn't repent? Besides, if I can whack someone with the law of God, that tends to put me above him in stature of holiness, at least in my own mind. My flesh kind-of likes that. If I can accuse someone else of gross sin, that means I must not be guilty of gross sin, right? Isn't it logical to bring the law of God to one caught in a sin? The Pharisees who brought the adulterous woman before Jesus certainly thought so. They were gleefully ready to start flinging all of the stones that the law called for.

The law is indeed useful for instruction. The law shows us what to do and what not to do in love and thanks to God. It shows us what pleases God, and that is exactly what we want to know in order to know how to show our love and thanks to God. The law of God is good. We love it as such! That is our confession, especially in Psalm 119. But the law's condemnation is no longer a weapon that God uses against us, nor may we use it as such against one another.

Rather, it is our calling to bring the gospel to the erring brother, just like God brings the gospel to us. After all, what makes us truly repent in love for God and not in terror of God? The gospel, not the law. Why would we think this would be any different for anyone else? God has saved you and forgiven you of all your sins. Now repent out of love for God and thanks to God for that forgiveness. That kind of admonition is true for all of us. To bring the condemnation of the law gives a reason to improve one's behavior in hopes of avoiding the consequences of sin, but that is all. To bring the gospel gives the only reason there is to truly repent and mean it out of love for God alone.

Note that we are assuming we are dealing with an elect child of God here. The gospel will do nothing for a hardened, reprobate sinner except harden him further. Such impenitence in the church institute must be judged under proper church discipline and condemned. Nevertheless, we are not called to judge who is elect and who is reprobate in this life. Even the judgment of sin on the part of the church institute in its discipline does not mean we are also judging whether a person is elect or reprobate. God may still give repentance to an excommunicated individual and also readmittance into the fellowship of the church. No, only God knows who are his own. We *may not* make those judgments concerning eternity, except for what has been called the judgment of charity with those who confess Jesus Christ by their life and walk, though imperfectly. God will deal righteously with all men, whether they be elect or reprobate. That is all we need to know. The parable of the wheat and the tares is applicable here. For the sake of all the precious wheat in the wheat field, we deal with all the growing plants in the household of faith as if each one could be a stalk of wheat. A premature judgment of damnation and condemnation could uproot and damage some of God's precious elect. Wheat and tares look exactly alike sometimes; so do elect and reprobate. There will be differences, but being a sinner isn't one of them. Elect people of God are capable of any heinous crime just as much as any reprobate. We bring the gospel to all who have sinned. That is where the only power lies to extract them from their error. The commands of God tell us what to do, which is good and helpful; but the commands can't make us do any of it. Only the gospel can *make* us do it.

In Lord's Day 1 we are told that God "makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him." How does God do that? With the law or with the gospel? Or maybe with both? Well, as a whole, what is Lord's Day 1 about? What is the main message there? It is comfort, and comfort is the gospel. There is, in fact, no comfort at all in the commandments by themselves. No one except Jesus Christ obeyed

a crumb of them perfectly. As far as our obedience to God's commands goes, the commands represent everything opposite of peace and comfort. We only deserve condemnation under the law. Yet God has been pleased to comfort us in Jesus Christ. Christ obeyed all of the law of God perfectly, and his obedience is counted as ours. Only in that truth is there comfort, and only in that truth is there power to save.

Let us take a moment to be clear on what that gospel is, then. The gospel is the good news of salvation to us, in light of the bad news of our sin against God's law and what we deserve. It is the news that we are righteous in Jesus Christ because we belong to him and thus are no longer held under the condemnation of God's law. The law is not to be confused with the gospel. Such a mixture would be another witch's brew. The law kills, and the gospel makes alive. Both of those entities are forces, and those two forces cannot be combined without contradiction. Their functions are entirely separate and move in opposite directions. Salvation, assurance, fellowship with God—if any of that is said to come to us by the law, meaning from our obedience to the law, in whatever measure that may be, there curdles a spiritually lethal synthesis all over again. The law of God is good, and the gospel of God is good, but in terms of their unique purposes and functions, they are completely opposed to one another and must be treated as such.

When David repented of his gross sins of adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, what brought him to repentance? Did Nathan the prophet come to the erring king of Israel with the fire and brimstone of hell? Was it the law of God that finally convicted him? No. Not at all. David knew the law of God. He knew he was guilty. That was the problem. He knew he was guilty, but he wouldn't admit his fault for a significant amount of time. We know he greatly suffered from that guilt because he describes it in Psalms 32 and 51 to be like having broken bones. That was the law of God crushing him. That was all the law of God could do for him. The law of God could not deliver him. What did

finally deliver him? The gospel. “Thou art the man.” Thou art the man whom God loves, even though you have grievously sinned against him who so greatly loves you. The story of the slaughter of the little, beloved pet lamb gripped him. When he understood that he was, in fact, the one who had committed the murder of that precious lamb, he finally understood how much he had offended the holy God who so loved him. The pet lamb was a picture of what was reality. There was a real Lamb who was *perfectly* innocent, whom we *all* would slaughter. David saw the essence of that crime against such absolute innocence. That was what broke him. That is exactly how the gospel breaks us. The law has no such capability. The law can strike the fear of punishment in one, but only the gospel can impart a godly fear for God in one. That is love for God—and that is true repentance.

So we bring the gospel of grace alone in Jesus Christ alone to the sinner, of which sinners I am chief. Each of us is chief in counting sins. When God gives us a glimpse of all those sins—and it will be a mere glimpse, lest we be overcome with despair and sorrow—would it be any comfort to

know that only if I repent first, then I might be forgiven? At the point that one begins to see his or her sins in all their darkness and abysmal depth, it will also be clear that repentance will change nothing. The evil is already done. What can a mere act of man do to take that away? The only deliverance is Jesus Christ. He is our justification, our sanctification, our salvation. He is also our repentance, which repentance is our thanksgiving for that salvation. He is our all and everything. Jesus is the only way of forgiveness. Our own activity of repentance may not be added to that Way.

Repent to be forgiven? No. A thousand times no. God forgives us in Jesus Christ alone. Our repentance is thanks for that forgiveness and nothing but thanks—or it is not even real repentance. It would be nothing but attempted manipulation of God to try to get him to forgive us if we think our repentance must come first.

All praise to God, whose mercy reaches above the heavens before one sigh of repentance ever escapes our hearts or our lips. Then, and only then, is all glory given to God for all of salvation, including our repentance.

—Connie L. Meyer

THE SCRIVENER

The Sovereign God of Salvation: Question & Answer Session

This is an edited transcript of the question and answer session following the speech “The Sovereign God of Salvation,” which was printed in last week’s *Reformed Pavilion*.¹

Can you elaborate a bit more on the matter of free will in relation to man’s choice to be saved?

The language of *man’s choice to be saved* is, I think, the common, popular presentation of how salvation works. God lays before man a choice, so the idea goes, and the choice is for man to be

saved or not to be saved; the choice is for man to accept salvation or not to accept salvation. Those who describe salvation as man’s choice would appeal to passages such as Joshua’s saying, “Choose you this day whom ye will serve... as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Josh. 24:15). There is a certain language of *choice*, and men assume that the language of *choice* implies that man has a free will to choose salvation or not. The idea is that God leaves it up to man to choose or not to choose, and man is

¹ Andrew Lanning, “The Sovereign God of Salvation,” speech given on June 7, 2025, in Singapore. The speech can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcktdJuPCLQ>. See also *Reformed Pavilion* 3, no. 10 (June 14, 2025): 4–12.

perfectly free to choose or not to choose. The doctrine of free will teaches that when mankind fell into sin, man's will was untouched by that fall; or at least man's will remained strong enough after the fall that that will can still operate independently of any influence of God, so that when the choice is laid before man—believe in Jesus Christ or don't believe in Jesus Christ; accept salvation or don't accept salvation—man by the operation of that will can himself decide what he will do. The way we could summarize that doctrine of free will is this: man is sovereign in the matter of his choice. Man is sovereign to choose; man is sovereign not to choose. God does not come in and touch man's will or influence man's will in that choice. Man chooses by his own free will. Man is sovereign in salvation.

My critique of that doctrine of free will as it relates to the choice of salvation is that that doctrine makes man to be God. It makes man sovereign in his salvation. And whoever is sovereign in salvation is God. It takes away, then, from the sovereignty of God; and it leaves salvation up to man. You can see how that would work: God came to this man, who had free will, and this man, who had free will; and he gave both of them the equal choice: "Be saved or don't be saved." Well, this man exercised his free will to accept God's offer, and this man exercised his free will to reject God's offer. What is the difference between these two men? It is not God. It is not God's will, not God's determination. As far as God is concerned, so this teaching goes, God had the same will toward both of them. He wanted both of them to be saved. The difference between these two men is that one man was better than the other. And, therefore, that man has reason to boast. And when the man is asked, "Who saved you?" the answer is, "God saved me, and I saved me." This doctrine makes man God.

The truth of the matter is this: God sovereignly saves by his gracious power. When God comes with what we call the call of the gospel—when he comes and says to man, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house," like Paul and Silas said to the Philippian jailor in Acts 16:31—that is not God's laying

a choice, "Do it or don't do it," before man; that is God's saying to man, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. There is only salvation in him. You cannot save yourself." Remember what condition the Philippian jailor was in: he was a dead man. There was no saving him. There was no deliverance from what had just happened. Why not? There had been an earthquake, and he assumed all the prisoners had escaped. The penalty for the jailor would be death. And when Paul came before him and said to him, "Do thyself no harm: for we are all here," then the jailor fell down before Paul and Silas and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:28–30). Whatever was behind that question, "What must I do to be saved?" their answer meant this: There is nothing you can do to be saved. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus Christ is there salvation—not in you, not in anything you can do. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

What is involved here, then, is the nature of faith. What is faith? Faith is not a choice, like I choose what sandwich I'll have for lunch or whatever it may be. Faith is not a choice, where I could do this or I could do that, and either one of them are open to me. But faith is a gift of God, whereby we see things we couldn't see, whereby we understand the wonder of the mystery of God's love to sinners and salvation through Jesus Christ alone. That is faith. And that is the meaning of the call of the gospel too: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." That call of the gospel, then, is not a choice. I know that is the popular language. It is not a choice; it is not a matter of free will; but it is God's sovereign summons, and by that sovereign summons he causes his elect people to know Christ, to know their salvation in him. And in that, God remains God. God is the one who saves. Even in that call of the gospel, even in that believing, God is the one who saves. God saves sinners, and God alone is God.

How do you balance God's sovereignty and human responsibility?

You don't! There is no balance. There is no such thing as balance between God's sovereignty and

man's responsibility. If you want to talk about balance, then it's this: it is all God! He is the only one. Nothing but God from beginning to end. He is the one who saves sinners. There is no balance between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.

That question often refers to the fact that we are rational, moral creatures. We have minds and wills. We know things. God doesn't save us like pieces on a chessboard, where he moves us around, and we don't know what is happening. That is where that question often comes from. God is sovereign in salvation, but man has to be responsible in salvation.

The key to understanding God's work upon rational, moral man is to see that God deals with man according to the nature that God gave him. God made man a rational, moral creature; God operates upon man as a rational, moral creature. That doesn't mean, then, that God does *his* side of it, and then man also does *his* side of it; and in the interaction between God's side and man's side is salvation. No! It is all God's side. It is all God's work. But he works upon man as a rational, moral creature.

To try to illustrate that, let's imagine that against this wall is a block of wood. Next to it is a marionette puppet, with all the strings attached, and the puppeteer can make the arms and the legs move. And then next to that puppet is a human being. All of those are going to be moved to the other side of the room. God is going to move them all over there. How is God going to move that block of wood? He picks it up, carries it across, and sets it down. The block of wood has no idea what is happening. There is nothing in the block of wood that is moving. There are no limbs that are moving. It is just carried over. God dealt with it according to its nature as a block of wood. What about the puppet? God might manipulate the strings on that puppet, so that the legs of the puppet move, and the arms of the puppet move, and the head moves; and the puppet goes to the other side of the room. But nothing happened inside the puppet. There was no inner man in that puppet. God dealt with

it according to its nature as a puppet. And now the human. How is God going to move the human to the other side of the room? God will deal with that human the way he dealt with the puppet and the block: he dealt with each of them according to its nature. That is how he deals with man too. Man has a mind and a will; so God is the one who works on that mind and will, so that the man consciously and willingly says, "I'll stand up, I'll walk across the room, and I'll sit down over there." But at the end of it you say, "How did all three of them get to the other side of the room? God did it." For every single one of them, God did it. And the fact that God operated on each according to the nature of each doesn't mean that one of them cooperated. Nobody would say about the block of wood, "That co-operated with God." No, it didn't. Or the puppet, because it moved its arms and legs, "That co-operated with God." No, it didn't. Or the human, because there was not only outer motion but also inner motion, the human cooperated with God. No, he didn't. God did it. God moved them all.

Hopefully that helps illustrate that there is one side of this: it is God who does it. And now, when we talk about salvation, how is it that somebody like me, who is dead and filthy in sin, can be a child of God, can live with him? What am I going to contribute to that? How am I going to cooperate with that? God has to come to me, who am utterly helpless, blind, dead, poor, naked, deaf, and dumb; and he has to rescue me sovereignly by his power. Now I live. Now I'm saved. Now I have heaven. Now I'm his child forever and ever. That is the marvel of God's sovereignty in salvation.

So this idea of balancing God's sovereignty and human responsibility—wrongly understood, that makes man contribute to his salvation and, therefore, man to be God with God. That is wrong.

The language of Isaiah 44 is very clear on the sovereignty of God. "Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any" (Isa. 44:8). "Fear not, O Jacob, my servant; and thou, Jesurun, whom I have chosen. For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground" (vv. 2–3).

If God alone saves, what is the duty of man with regard to the salvation of our unsaved loved ones?

God alone saves, and he uses the means of his word to do so. Our calling toward our unsaved loved ones, then, is to bring them the word. This does not imply that we are cooperating with God in their salvation. Rather, it simply recognizes that God uses the means of his word to save his elect people.

That is also a comfort to us with regard to our unsaved loved ones. None of us are able to persuade our loved ones to believe. There is no eloquence or passionate speech or sound logic strong enough to turn hardened hearts. But God's word does what we cannot do. God's word goes where we cannot go—into the heart. And God's Spirit bloweth where he listeth, making that word effectual in the hearts of his people. We bring the word to our loved ones, trusting that God will do his good pleasure and that he will use the word to save whomsoever he will.

Churches are using the terms active obedience and passive obedience. What do those terms mean?

Those terms are often used to distinguish between two aspects of Jesus' work of saving his people. The term *passive obedience* is meant to refer to all of Jesus' suffering. You can see that in the word *passive*. We think of the word *passive* as meaning *not doing anything*, but the word *passive* here means *passion* like Passion Week, Jesus' week of suffering, his week before the cross. He was suffering all the agony of hell even before he was crucified. So *passive obedience* is meant to describe Jesus' suffering. His *active obedience* refers to all of his obedience to God's law. The law says many things. Do this. Don't do this. Be perfect. Jesus obeyed every single requirement of the law for his people.

The key to the truth of Jesus' active and passive obedience is that Jesus obeyed every aspect of the law as our substitute. Jesus stood under the law's condemnation as our substitute. And Jesus obeyed the law's requirements as our substitute. Jesus' perfect righteousness before the law is counted as mine.

The terms *active obedience* and *passive obedience* are often misunderstood, so that perhaps better terms would be Jesus' *substitutionary atonement*—he stood in our place and suffered for our sins—and Jesus' *substitutionary obedience*, so that he stood in our place and obeyed God's law. Now the whole law of God is obeyed. It is all finished. There is nothing of the law of God that I have to do in order to be saved. It is all finished by Jesus' work. And now all of the good works and obedience and love that God gives me to do are simply gratitude. Jesus has finished them all in his substitutionary atonement and substitutionary obedience, or his passive obedience and his active obedience.

There are those who say that good works are part of our salvation or aspects of our salvation. How would we evaluate that statement?

Our good works are *not* a part of our salvation. It is possible that someone is speaking loosely, and he means that good works are fruits of salvation. But the language that good works are a *part* of our salvation or an aspect of our salvation has been used in the past to bring in the idea that we *contribute something* to our salvation. And that statement has been used in the past to teach that our experience of fellowship with God is not ours until we have done our good works. First obey. First do good works. Then you may have peace. Then you may have assurance. Then you may have fellowship with God. That is dead wrong. That hides all of salvation behind what man does. That is not how salvation ever works. It is all given freely. God gives me my salvation before I ever do a good work, before I *can* do a good work! He gives me peace, gives me comfort, gives me all these things by his sovereign grace first. The Belgic Confession, one of the Reformed confessions, has a beautiful line in article 24: "it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, *even before we do good works.*" We are free of our sin before we ever do a good work. That is my comfort. That is my hope.

Where do works come in? What is their place? They are not part of our salvation in the sense that they obtain anything from God. Rather, our

good works are the fruits of our salvation. Just like a tree growing out of a root bears fruit, so the child of God in Jesus Christ—who is his root—bears fruit. And the fruit that God gives him—the fruit of love for God and the fruit of love for the neighbor, for example—is all the product of salvation; all the result of salvation; all the fruit of salvation; not part of salvation, to use that language.

Is there such a thing as sanctification by works, or can we say that sanctification is by faith alone?

Lovely question. Is sanctification by works, or is sanctification by faith alone? By faith alone. All of salvation is by faith alone, not just justification. Yes, justification is by faith alone, but so is sanctification. So is covenant fellowship. So is peace with God. That is what the Bible teaches about these things. For example, at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, Peter said about the Gentiles that God had purified their hearts by faith. That is sanctification by faith, and it is always by faith alone. Our peace with God is by faith. “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). The whole of the salvation of the child of God is received by faith alone, not by works. Those works always come as the fruit of that salvation. And in that truth God is God. God saves sinners. In that gospel alone is comfort.

Why do some people, when do they listen to sermons or to God’s word, feel they are being whipped, and others do not?

When there is preaching in a church that puts you under the law, you are going to feel whipped—or you are going to feel proud. One of those two. What does it mean that preaching might put you under the law? It is possible to use all the right words in a sermon—to say *God, saves, sinners, Jesus, grace, election, Reformed faith*—and yet to so preach that the people are left with the impression or with the teaching that they have to do something to *get* the goodness and the sweetness and the richness of that salvation, so that they leave church thinking, “I have to do something, or I’m not going to have

salvation or joy. I have to be busy with something. I have to do better.” If you leave church with your comfort hidden behind your works, then you have been put under the law. The true gospel of salvation doesn’t just use the right words; it also frees you, liberates you. And it frees you and liberates you with this message: Jesus did it. He did it all! There is nothing left for me to do in order to be saved. That is gospel preaching. Martin Luther sometimes defined the gospel in terms of its effect. He said that the gospel can be known by what it does to a man, setting him free from his sin and making him happy.

Let’s try to make that as sharp and as clear as possible. This is the gospel: for your justification, for you to be right before God, it does not matter whether you obey or do not obey. For your being right with God, it does not matter whether you love God or do not love God. For your being right with God, it does not matter whether you love the neighbor or do not love the neighbor. For your being right with God, it matters whether Jesus obeyed or did not obey. And Jesus obeyed. That is freedom! That is such freedom. For my standing with God, all that matters is what Jesus did? I’m free! I’m at liberty.

And what am I going to do with that? Does that mean I’m going to run out of here and say, “Now I can live how I please! I can be devilish and wicked and do anything I want because for my justification it doesn’t matter whether I obeyed but whether Jesus obeyed”? No, that is not how that gospel works. What does the gospel do? When I hear that Jesus, in his obedience, makes me right with God, the fruit of that gospel is gratitude. I am thankful to him. What do I want to do now? I want to obey him; I want to serve him. So the gospel is not dangerous. That is often why people are put under the law: the fear is “If we give them the gospel, they are going to be sinners. We have to make sure they know they’d better toe the line. They’d better obey. If we don’t teach that way, they are going to be wicked.” No. The gospel doesn’t work that way. It frees me! It frees me to obey, liberates me.

Is God evil for decreeing that the reprobate would not be saved?

No, God is not evil in that. God is always perfectly good. Part of the answer to that is that God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts and his ways higher than our ways, so that it is very hard for us to understand the goodness of God and at the same time his perfect righteousness in decreeing that the reprobate not be saved. God is God. We are not God.

The apostle Paul faces this question in Romans 9, when he teaches the gospel of election and reprobation. In Romans 9 he refers to the example of Jacob and Esau. God said about Jacob and Esau, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated" (Rom. 9:13). How could God say that? They were twins. There was nothing different between the two. He said that before they were born. How was it possible that God could say, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated"? Election and reprobation! God had chosen Jacob. And Jacob was the less lovable of the two. Esau was a far more likable person. But God didn't choose the likable person. He chose Jacob. Jacob was conniving; Jacob lied; Jacob was probably not a very nice person to be around. But God chose Jacob and did not choose Esau. He reprobated Esau.

Paul anticipates an objection to God's election and reprobation, and he puts in the mouths of the opponents this accusation: "Thou wilt then say unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?" (Rom. 9:19). The objections means, "How can God judge me, send me to hell as a reprobate, when he is the one who reprobated me? That is not fair. That is not just." Paul's answer is "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?" (v. 20). There is the first thing that we looked at in answering this question: God's ways are higher than ours. Do you know who we are dealing with? We are dealing with the holy, righteous, just God. What are we? We are dust, a little bit of clay here on the earth. Who are we to say to this august judge, "What are you doing? Why have you decided so?" Nay, O man, who art thou, as this clay, that repliest against God?

But then Paul gives the reason. "What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known"—his justice and his power to do what he wants, to decree what he wants, to decide what he wants—"endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction?" (Rom. 9:22). In other words, out of the lump of clay that is humanity, God took some of that lump and made out of it vessels like waste bins, or vessels that are to dishonor. And he did that to show what he may do. He has the right to do so. He raised up Pharaoh, after all, and the whole ancient kingdom of Egypt, for this one purpose: to show he has the right to condemn Pharaoh. And Pharaoh and Egypt and the whole world that still studies Egyptian culture mayn't say, "God was certainly unfair in that." No. God is the potter. He has the power over that lump to make vessels fitted to dishonor. And God has power of that same lump to make vessels that are beautiful vases, fitted to honor and glory—not because we are different. We are clay. We are nothing. God takes his elect people and makes of us vessels fit to put in his house. So we can see there something of the purpose of God. He teaches us by election and reprobation just how sovereign he is. He has the right, the power, the authority, to do as he pleases.

So the answer to the question, is God not good, or is God unrighteous to reprobate? is no. He is good. He is righteous. Always he is. He is God. And that he does these things is his glory.

Maybe one more illustration can help with that. Even among earthly compositions, if an artist is going to make the light section of a painting stand out with brightness and clarity and glory, he might paint the background dark, very black, so that the light portions of that composition stand out and are extra glorious. That is an analogy for election and reprobation. None of us deserve to be saved. We all deserve to be condemned. But God, against the dark background of reprobation, has chosen some of us. He has chosen his people. We didn't deserve that. Who could imagine that? Reprobation makes the grace of God in election stand out brightly.

I believe Jesus Christ died on the cross for my sin. I believe he did everything. Complete salvation of God. But why does God still need me to repent? If not, will I not get my forgiveness of sin?

God's call to repent is not a call that puts forgiveness of sins behind repenting, so that repenting is a wall, a condition, a work that I have to do in order to get the forgiveness of sins. Repenting, rather, is a fruit of what God gives us in salvation. The word *repentance* has been so controversial lately that we lose sight of what repentance actually is. What is repentance, when you boil it right down to its essence? Repentance is just love for God—love for God that at the very same time hates sin. You can think of it this way: when God unites me to Jesus Christ by faith, thus rescuing me from all of my sin and guilt, the first blossom of fruit out of that faith is love for God. When I see God by faith and love him, I also instantaneously see myself, my flesh, and my corruption; and by faith I hate my sin and am sorry for it, miserable over it. So repentance is that first fruit of faith that sees God and loves him and sees my flesh and hates it. But it is all the fruit of faith. It is that blossom that comes out of faith—that first fruit, that first good work of faith.

That is why the call of the gospel often includes *repent* and *believe* together. “This promise [of the gospel], together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations” (Canons 2.5). But the call of the gospel doesn't mean that repentance is faith or that repentance comes *before* faith. The fact of the matter is that the salvation that God sovereignly works is going to inevitably, spontaneously bear the fruit of love for God and hatred of my own flesh.

How is it, then, that I get the forgiveness of my sins and the assurance of it? Is it that I repent? Then I am never going to be assured because I have never yet in my life repented well enough. I have never loved God well enough. I have never hated my sin well enough. And I never will in this life. I hate my sin; I love

God; those are his gifts to me; but I have never repented well enough. I have corrupted it when I have done it. How am I going to get any assurance that I am actually forgiven of my sins? It is by faith in the gospel alone—only by faith in the gospel, which is the polar opposite of working. It is not working, simply resting in Jesus Christ. How do I get forgiveness? Not by any repenting or working or any such thing. Only by the gospel, only by the Spirit, only by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, to the glory of God alone, by grace alone, with repentance as its fruit.

Is there such a thing as “you haven't repented enough”?

I am not exactly sure what this question is aiming at. If the question means this: do I ever in my life repent sufficiently? then there is such a thing as not repenting enough. I have never repented sufficiently. I never have, and I never will. Why? What is repentance? The love for God that hates sin. I don't hate my sin enough. I don't even *understand* my sin enough, let alone hate it enough. So no, I will never, never repent perfectly.

But perhaps the question is addressing this mentality: you have committed a sin, but you haven't repented enough yet to be forgiven of your sin. If that is the mentality that the question is addressing, then that mentality is wrong. That is not what repentance is for: to get saved or to get something from God. Repentance is the fruit of what God has already given me. I go back to article 24 of the Belgic Confession, one of the Reformed confessions that summarizes the Bible: “it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, *even before we do good works*.” We are going to do good works! God gives them to us. We have a small beginning of the new obedience. But we pollute everything we do, so the good works that God gives us we spoil. He gives us good works, including repentance, so that we hate our sin. But that is never *unto* forgiveness. I have that already. I have it by faith. I have it through Christ.

So I guess it depends on which direction that question is going as to how I would answer that. But as far as “Have I ever repented fully

enough?” no, I never have. But God has forgiven me, saved me, the sinner, through Jesus Christ alone.

—AL

HERMAN HOEKSEMA'S *BANNER* ARTICLES

The Banner

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(pp. 245–46)

Our Doctrine by Rev. H. Hoeksema

Article CXV: Dr. Janssen's Notes (continued)

We still were to call the attention of our readers to the standpoint Dr. Janssen assumes in his scientific method. He announces this standpoint in his Introduction to Old Testament Isagogics (p. 2). In full it reads as follows:

“Another element of science is that it should be **in accordance with method**. Method—inductive, deductive, empirical, etc., or a combination—some method must be used if it is to be a science.

“In the sciences that we are working with, a very important element is the empirical side. The empirical element cannot be wanting in any branch of theological science. No branch has any business here unless it is empirical.

“Another condition: The search or investigation **must be critical**. That seems objectionable at first flush. By the critical element I mean that an act of judgment must be used in the study of the data. An act of ‘krinein’ (judgment—Ed.) must take place in every branch of science.

“By the element of judgment is not meant that it must be negative or destructive.

“In every science we have to take a position. When data are presented, we must make a separation between what seems to us to be false and what seems to be true.

“Expressed positively, that act of ‘krinein’ (judgment—Ed.) is to be ‘kat’aleetheian’—in

accordance with truth. **Our judgment brought to bear upon the data should be unprejudiced. We may have prepossessions and no man can rid himself of these. Each individual has a certain type of religion, for religion is an essential characteristic of the human being. Nevertheless this should not influence him to such an extent that it will determine the conclusion so that the conclusion is a foregone one. No science can permit that.** That principle is distinctly recognized by our type of theology as well as by types different from ours. Reformed theologians recognize that necessary element in science. (In this paragraph we underscored.)

“Kuyper, Encyclopaedia, Vol. III, pp. 114, 115: ‘De Schrift staat boven de dogmatiek en de laatste mag niet de eerste beheerschen.’”¹

Now, what is the empirical method which the professor here recommends? It is briefly this, that in the investigation of any object of science we start out with nothing except with the power of our own mind to perceive and to judge. There are certain data. Over against these data which I perceive I assume an absolutely neutral attitude. I bring nothing with me when I pass judgment upon these data. I am unprejudiced with regard to them. And now I pass judgment upon them and thus come to a conclusion. “Terwijl het rationalisme de objectieve wereld zich geheel of ten deele richten laat naar den

¹ English translation: “Scripture stands above dogmatics, and the latter must not dominate the former.”

menschelijken geest onderwerpt het empirisme het bewustzijn geheel en al aan de wereld buiten ons. De mensch brengt bij het streven naar kennis niets mede dan alleen het vermogen van waarnemen; daaruit neemt alle intellectueele werkzaamheid haar aanvang en oorsprong. Aangeboren begrippen zijn er dus neit; alle vooropgevatte meeningen moet de wetenschappelijke onderzoeker ter zijde stellen. Uit den tempel der waarheid, dien hij in zijn bewustzijn opbouwen wil moet hij alle idola verwijderen; geen *anticipatio mentis* (mental anticipations) maar *interpretatio naturae*, *mera experientia* (interpretation of nature, mere experience) moet hem leiden (Bacon). De menselijke geest moet zijn een *tabula rasa*, in qua *nihil scriptum est* (a complete blank) volkomen *voraussetzungslos* (unprejudiced).² This is Dr. Bavinck's description of the empirical method. And then he goes on to condemn it. (Dogmatiek I, pp. 219ff.)

This standpoint, however, so strongly condemned by Bavinck and also by Kuyper and all Reformed, in fact, by all orthodox theologians, is the standpoint Dr. Janssen recommends to his students, and which he himself assumes in his *Isagogics*. He does not leave us in doubt at all as to the extent he wishes this method applied. We must be unprejudiced. We all have a certain type of religion. Every human being has this. But even this poor bit of religion which every individual has may not influence him to such an extent that the conclusion is a foregone one. True, as so frequently, the professor attempts to justify this standpoint by a quotation from Dr. Kuyper. Dogmatics may not dominate exegesis. But as so often, so here the professor fails to see Dr. Kuyper's point. The standpoint which the professor assumes is not that dogmatics may not dominate in exegesis, with which we all

agree. But Prof. Janssen's standpoint is that a foregone conclusion as to the character of the Holy Scriptures may not dominate over *Isagogics*. We may not assume the standpoint of faith. We must be neutral. We may have no prepossessions. Science is to determine what the Word of God really is. Our human judgment above the Word of God, that is the standpoint of Prof. Janssen. Actually, when we read how the professor attempts to cover some of these things by quotations from the Netherland theologians, we are willing to grant that he does so in all sincerity, but we obtain the impression that he does not know what Reformed theology really stands for!

Just let us investigate what this standpoint leads to. The professor wants to assume this neutral attitude in the science of *Isagogics*. He himself defines *Isagogics* as "the science that treats of the origin and history of the writings which the Christian Church inherited from the church of the old dispensation and with it, on the strength of the testimony of Jesus and the apostles, accepted as Holy Scriptures." Even this definition is as neutral as possible. There are certain writings. These writings the Christian Church inherited from the church of the old dispensation. These writings the church accepted on the testimony of Jesus and the apostles as Holy Scriptures. That they are actually Holy Scriptures the definition does not say. That it belongs to Old Testament Introduction to point out their canonical significance is ignored. That they are actually part of a canon is not expressed. They are writings. And these writings the church accepts as Holy Scriptures. And now Prof. Janssen, the man of science, places himself without any prepossessions over against these writings. He does not presuppose that they are of divine origin. It is, for him, not an established fact that they constitute the Word of God. That the conclusion to which

² English translation: "Whereas in rationalism the objective world lets itself be directed in whole or in part in accordance with the human mind, empiricism totally subjects the human consciousness to the world outside of us. In the pursuit of knowledge, human beings bring with them nothing but the faculty of perception. All intellectual activity has its beginning and source in this faculty. Innate ideas, therefore, do not exist; the scientific investigator must set aside all preconceived opinions. From the temple of truth, which he aspires to construct in his mind, he must remove all idols. No anticipation of the mind but the interpretation of nature—just experience—must lead him ([Francis] Bacon). The human mind, therefore, is and must be a *tabula rasa* [blank slate] on which nothing has as yet been written, an entity completely devoid of presupposition." (Translation taken from Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003], 219.)

the modern critics come is wrong with regard to these writings cannot be postulated beforehand. No, without any prepossessions the professor comes to these writings. And in that attitude he will, according to the empirical method, investigate these writings as to their origin and history. All the data he collects. He studies the phenomena of these writings, but also data from without. If they conflict, he judges without prejudice or prepossessions which data are to be trusted. If Scripture says repeatedly that the Lord spake to Moses, and if Jesus corroborates this testimony of Scripture, and if the professor finds data that in his judgment point in an opposite direction, he rejects the testimony of Scripture. If Scripture says that the sun and the moon stood still and Prof. Janssen with his unbiased mind thinks differently, he has no scruples to follow the latter. If Scripture tells us that Abraham looked for the city that hath foundations and Prof. Janssen judges that he knew nothing of the things to come, he gives his own opinion on the matter. And the result of it all is that Dr. Janssen begins with “writings” and with writings he ends. On his empirical basis he does not find a divine factor, neither can he ever come to a canon, to the organism of the Word of God. He never speaks of the place of any book in the canon, for the simple reason that on his basis there is no canon. There are writings, Scriptures, which the Church accepts as Holy Scriptures. But that is all.

You want me to quote Dr. Kuyper, professor, when he writes about the standpoint to be assumed in Isagogics? Here it is. “De theoloog komt tot deze geschriften niet met een tabula rasa

in zijn bewustzijn, maar met een vastgewortelde overtuiging; met de overtuiging, namelijk, dat elk dezer boeken, zij het ook met onderscheidene beteekenis en verschillend gewicht, deel uitmaakt van die Heilige Schriftuur, die als incorporatie van de waarheid en den wil Gods, voor wat ons bewuste leven aangaat, als vrucht van goddelijke inwerking, en onder het bestel van een Providentia Specialissima, van Gods wege aan Christus Kerk op aarde, en dus ook aan hem als geloovige geschonken is...Die band aan de Heilige Schrift ligt hem in het leven zijner ziel ingevlochten, en zoomin iemand aan eenige wetenschap het recht vraagt om adem te halen, zoomin verwacht de theoloog eerst van eenig wetenschappelijk resultaat het recht om de bindende macht te ervaren en den troost in te ademen die hem toekomt uit Gods Heilig Woord...Elke toeleg om de waardij die deze geschriften des Bijbels voor ons bezitten zullen, eerst door het resultaat van zoodanig onderzoek te laten bepalen, moet eerst hierom als geheel hersenschimmig worden afgewezen. Wie zulk een toeleg koestert heeft in de mystiek van zijn hart reeds met de Schrift gebroken...De eerlijkheid gebied dan ook onbewimpeld te erkennen, dat een in dien zin quasi-onbevooroordeeld en expectatief onderzoek ten opzichte van deze geschriften nog nimmer is ingesteld en nooit ingesteld zal worden” (Encyclopaedie III, pp. 43, 44, 45).³ There is language of our Reformed theologians. This is language that finds response in our hearts, because it is the language of faith. And this language is lacking in the professor’s notes from beginning to end.

³ English translation: “The theologian does not come to these writings with a *tabula rasa* [blank slate] in his mind but with a firmly rooted conviction; with the conviction, namely, that each of these books, although with distinct meanings and different weights, forms part of that Holy Scripture, which as an incorporation of the truth and the will of God, as far as our conscious life is concerned, as the fruit of divine influence and under the order of a Special Providence, has been given by God to Christ’s Church on earth, and thus also to him as a believer...That bond to the Holy Scripture is woven into the life of his soul, and just as no one asks any science for the right to breathe, so no theologian expects first from any scientific result the right to experience the binding power and to breathe in the comfort that is due to him from God’s Holy Word...Every attempt to have the value that these writings of the Bible will possess for us determined first by the result of such research must first be rejected for this reason as completely chimerical. Whoever cherishes such a purpose has already broken with Scripture in the mystery of his heart...Honesty therefore compels us to admit openly that a quasi-unbiased and experiential investigation into these writings has never been instituted and never will be instituted.” (Translation done by Google Translate, with slight editing.)

Here our controversy must end. At first I was sorry that the Publication Committee put a stop to our discussion, especially since this deprives me of an opportunity to reply to the many insinuations of my opponent. He seemed to think that it was in his own interest to shift the attention to something else and to picture his critic as an Anabaptist. But let it be. Perhaps it was the wisest thing for the committee to do, especially since Dr. Janssen in his many articles showed no desire to discuss the subject proper.

We wrote not for the pleasure of it, but to warn the Church. The Church must know these things. And I must know whether the Church will assume the same stand.

As to my stand in the matter of “Common Grace,” I have written in public. And at any time I am willing to give account of my view on this matter, which in brief amounts to this, that the reprobate have in this world all things in common with the elect, except grace. And not receiving grace in their hearts, they corrupt all things and turn it to their destruction.

I have written without malice. And closing I wish to state once more that I do not and did not aim at Dr. Janssen, against whose person I had nothing. But I am worrying about the Church. And personally I am fully determined.

—H. Hoeksema

