



REFORMED

— PAVILION —

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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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And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses sat to judge the people: and the people stood by Moses from the morning unto the evening. And when Moses' father in law saw all that he did to the people, he said, What is this thing that thou doest to the people? why sittest thou thyself alone, and all the people stand by thee from morning unto even? And Moses said unto his father in law, Because the people come unto me to enquire of God: when they have a matter, they come unto me; and I judge between one and another, and I do make them know the statutes of God, and his laws. And Moses' father in law said unto him, The thing that thou doest is not good. Thou wilt surely wear away, both thou, and this people that is with thee: for this thing is too heavy for thee: thou art not able to perform it thyself alone. Hearken now unto my voice, I will give thee counsel, and God shall be with thee: Be thou for the people to God-ward, that thou mayest bring the causes unto God: and thou shalt teach them ordinances and laws, and shalt shew them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do. Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens: and let them judge the people at all seasons: and it shall be, that every great matter they shall bring unto thee, but every small matter they shall judge: so shall it be easier for thyself, and they shall bear the burden with thee. If thou shalt do this thing, and God command thee so, then thou shalt be able to endure, and all this people shall also go to their place in peace. So Moses hearkened to the voice of his father in law, and did all that he had said. And Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people, rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. And they judged the people at all seasons: the hard causes they brought unto Moses, but every small matter they judged themselves. And Moses let his father in law depart; and he went his way into his own land.

—Exodus 18:13–27

Righteous Judgment

Righteous judgment was needed. What is righteous judgment? It is many things. It is to hear the case that a man brings against a man. It is to judge between them and to decide who is right and who is wrong. It is to administer justice by defending the right and punishing the wrong. It is to listen to the questions and concerns of men's lives. It is to give instruction and advice and admonition and encouragement. It is to teach and to warn and to call and to command. In all of this, not just any judgment will do. It must be righteous judgment. Righteous judgment means that all the above is done according to the only standard

of right: God as he is revealed in his word. Righteous judgment means to bring God and his word to bear on men's lives.

In Israel righteous judgment was needed.

The children of Israel were many. They had many matters that required deciding. They had many strifes that required settling. They needed much teaching and explaining and correcting. Each one carried his old man of sin with him, each was tempted to depart from truth and right, and each transgressed against God and each other. To correct and decide and rule and restore, righteous judgment was needed.

God provided this righteous judgment through Moses, his servant. “When they have a matter, they come unto me; and I judge between one and another, and I do make them know the statutes of God, and his laws” (Ex. 18:16). But the work was too much for Moses alone. He would wear out, and so would the people. The greatness of the work became the occasion for a new office in the Old Testament: the office of judge, which was a ruling office and was therefore similar to the later office of judge (Ehud, Gideon, Samson, etc.) and also to the later office of king. Jethro wisely counseled Moses to set up a system of judges who would judge every small matter, saving the hard causes for Moses. From that time forth in Israel’s history, the causes of the children of Israel would be brought before these judges.

But the judges must judge righteously! They must not be covetous (Ex. 18:21). They must not respect persons or fear the faces of men (Deut. 1:17). They must fear God and love truth (Ex. 18:21). They must know the ordinances and laws of Jehovah (v. 20). If they didn’t, they would judge unrighteously! They would usurp God’s

judgment and replace it with man’s tyranny! But hewing to God and his word, they would rightly judge the people at all seasons (v. 26; Deut. 1:16). The judgment was Jehovah’s.

Righteous judgment was needed! Always righteous judgment is needed. This too is one of Jehovah’s ordinances for the wilderness. God commanded Moses so (Ex. 18:23), which means that God appointed it as a permanent rule in his church. As long as the church is here on earth in its wilderness, righteous judgment must be done so that all God’s people may go to their place in peace (v. 23). Let the judges of Christ’s church who bear rule take heed.

And let the judges and the people take heart. For above us all sits the living and true Judge, who goes forth in righteousness for judgment (Rev. 19:11). Listen and rejoice at his judgment: “Righteous by faith! Righteous with the perfect righteousness of the perfectly righteous one!” “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1).

—AL

FROM THE RAMPARTS

Spirit-Led: An Examination (2)

In this article I continue my examination of the claim of the Reformed Protestant Churches (RPC) to be led by the Holy Spirit.

The Assemblies: The Consistory

A charge that came against Reverend Lanning was that he was militating against his Formula of Subscription vow. If that sounds familiar, it should. It was the charge of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) against Reverend Lanning. Neither was this the first or the last time the elders of First Reformed Protestant Church showed themselves to be nothing other than Protestant Reformed. In its

response to Reverend Lanning’s protest against its charge that he violated the fifth commandment, the consistory wrote this:

Reverend Lanning’s Formula of Subscription vow requires him to acquiesce to his consistory’s judgment on creedal matters. He is called patiently to submit to their decision. He can speak the “truth” to them and ask for their deliberations on it, but if he believes himself aggrieved by their decision, he is to wait until broader assemblies have made their judgment on the matter.¹

¹ Agenda for the classis of the Reformed Protestant Churches, May 18, 2023, 63.

Where did we hear that before? Yes, from the PRC, *ad nauseam*. That is the Protestant Reformed understanding of the Formula of Subscription vow, as Reverend Langerak once condemned it on the pages of *Sword and Shield*.² How is it possible for men to condemn a certain understanding of the Formula of Subscription in one denomination but then use the very same understanding they condemned to make a charge only a few short years later in another denomination? The answer is that the men are the same. The names are different, but the spirit within them is the same spirit, which is not the Holy Spirit.

The charge was not true then, and it is not true now. Reverend Lanning's Formula of Subscription vow did not require him to acquiesce to his consistory's judgment about worship. When the Formula of Subscription speaks of acquiescence, it is referring to the judgment made in a minister's Formula of Subscription exam (should that be administered). The above response of the consistory of First RPC could have been written by any of the Protestant Reformed consistories that wrote letters whining about the presence of *Sword and Shield* when it showed up in their members' mailboxes. Consider the letter sent by the consistory of Unity Protestant Reformed Church to its congregation when *Sword and Shield* appeared:

Consistories, Classis East and Synods have spent much time discussing and clarifying...This is the Reformed and orderly way of resolving controversy and disagreements which orderly way is laid out in our Church Order, Art. 31. This process, as it has been followed throughout our history, begins at the Consistory level and proceeds, if necessary, to the Classical level and then finally to the Synodical level. Every office bearer promises to follow this way of decency and good order when he signs the Formula of Subscription which

says, "whenever we shall believe ourselves aggrieved by the sentence of the consistory, the classis or the synod, and until a decision is made upon such an appeal, we will acquiesce in the determination and judgement already passed."

Another charge against Reverend Lanning was that he was militating against the Church Order. Elder Jon Langerak's position, as stated in his protest against Reverend Lanning's sermons, was representative: "Although the statements quoted above [from the sermons] are his interpretation of the regulative principle, yet he has agreed to abide by article 69 of the Church Order unless it is changed by the broadest assembly of our churches." This charge was *the* charge made against Reverend Lanning, by the consistory and shortly thereafter by the members of First RPC. That evolved, of course, to the charge of legalism and conditions.³

The irony of how that turned out is quite something to behold. The consistory charged Reverend Lanning with violating article 69, but in the end they were hoisted by their own petard. They were the ones who violated the article and continue to violate it to this day. Let's follow the history of article 69 at First RPC.

Article 69 has a word in it that is now studiously ignored by the RPC, but that word is quite prominent in the article. That word is "only." Even if you ignore church history (perhaps finding it tedious and unprofitable) and change the actual principle of article 69, you are still confronted with the reality that Church Order 69 uses the word "only" and then goes on to list several songs. And no matter how hard you look, Thomas Ken's hymn is not on that list.

The consistory first tried to solve that problem by declaring that Thomas Ken's hymn was a psalm. This would have solved the problem. The

² Nathan Langerak, "Defense of *Sword and Shield* and Reformed Believers Publishing (2): The Formula of Subscription," *Sword and Shield* 1, no. 7 (November 2020): 12–16.

³ That was not the first time in the short history of the RPC that men made a rash charge of conditionalism against the truth. See Art Tolsma, "Article 21, Conditional?," *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 7 (November 15, 2022): 26–28; Herman Boonstra, "The Living and Abiding Word of Christ Alone, Saves," *Sword and Shield* 3, no. 12 (March 2023): 20–22. To that list can now be added Nathan Langerak, "Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow (3): Conditionality," *Sword and Shield* 4, no. 3 (August 2023): 8–14.

consistory's third ground for displacing a psalm at the beginning of the worship services and replacing it with the hymn by Thomas Ken was "This song complies with Article 69 of the Church Order, 'In the churches...the 150 Psalms of David...shall be sung.'"⁴ This was a novel approach but ultimately an unsuccessful one. Classis told them that no, Thomas Ken's hymn was not a psalm (which a simple internet search would also have revealed). Now what? In the material the consistory distributed to the congregation when it announced the suspension of Reverend Lanning, it had lectured Reverend Lanning that there was a church orderly way to go about things, but in the meantime, "As Reformed churches we have agreed these current songs [those listed in article 69] are allowed in the worship services of our congregations."⁵ Now the consistory was in a pickle. They had suspended a man from the office of minister for not abiding by article 69, but as it turns out, they weren't abiding by it themselves.⁶

What came next was a letter from a member of First RPC to the consistory. The letter contained two concerns and one protest. The member first asked the consistory to apologize to the congregation for claiming that the hymn "Praise God" was a psalm.

As the leaders of our church, you led us wrongly by making a wrong decision. I care not whether your intent was pure or hostile, the point remains that you led us astray. I understand that you are men, just like I am, and we will make mistakes, but when we make mistakes that affect those who follow us, the right thing to do is to own up to it and apologize so we can move forward in the spirit of meekness.⁷

What that correspondent did not realize, but certainly does now, was that he was dealing with a Protestant Reformed consistory and Protestant Reformed men. The same spirit in the consistory of Hope Protestant Reformed Church and the delegates to Classis East was in the consistory of First RPC. When given the choice between a public apology and defending yourself, always choose the latter. With a lengthy, convoluted response that stretched almost a page and a half, which response would have done a Protestant Reformed consistory proud and in which First's elders defended and explained away their decision, they declined to apologize to the congregation, saying, "We do not believe this is necessary for the peace and wellbeing of our congregation." They did apologize "for any confusion our error may have caused you" (25). That could be restated this way: "If you are so simple as to be confused, well, then, we are sorry for that." Again we see the impossibility of a man or a consistory in whom the spirit of the prince of the air works to repent and, in this case, to apologize.⁸

Compare that to what a truly repentant, sorrowful, Holy Spirit-worked response would have looked like.

Dear Brother,

You are correct. Not only were we wrong, but our error also caused others to stumble. Because we declared that this hymn was a psalm, it deceived many. The grievousness of our error is that we caused many in our congregation to take that argument on their lips as to why we could continue to sing that hymn. We are sorry and repent of our error. We

⁴ Consistory meeting minutes, March 23, 2023, article 10.

⁵ Material distributed to the congregation on March 23, 2023, announcing the suspension of Reverend Lanning.

⁶ This was not a case of two parties, the minister and the consistory, not abiding by the Church Order. Reverend Lanning was abiding by the Church Order. The principle of article 69 is "Sing the psalms," which principle Reverend Lanning was faithfully teaching. It was the consistory who was behaving disorderly.

⁷ Agenda for the classis of the Reformed Protestant Churches, September 21, 2023, 22. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this agenda are given in text.

⁸ See Dewey Engelsma, "Repentance," *A Strait Betwixt Two* (blog), May 4, 2021, <https://astraitbetwixtwo.com/2021/05/04/repentance/>.

will be announcing that to our congregation this Sunday and plan on distributing this apology to the members via email as well. We thank you for helping us to see our error and for helping to lead us down the right path.

Sincerely in Christ,
The Consistory of First RPC

The other concern of the member and his protest were similar. Now that we know that “Praise God” is a hymn and not in the list of permissible songs in article 69, and therefore not permitted by the Church Order, we should stop singing it. The expression that was made on the floor of a meeting of classis that in principle there is nothing wrong with singing hymns in church even though it is against the Church Order is lawlessness. “This idea that we can ignore the church order because principally there is nothing wrong with something is very dangerous. That opens the gates to completely ignore the church order on the whims of man” (22). The letter writer was correct. The RPC are lawless. They have a law, the Church Order, and they can trample it whenever they see fit. The member’s protest went to the heart of the matter: “We have the right to change the church order, but it is lawless to openly disobey them” (22). The consistory of First RPC, with this protest and letter of concern, was exposed as lawless.

What would be the consistory’s response? Repentance? Contrition? No, nothing at all like that. “The rules and regulations of the Church Order are not the laws of God” (23). With its response it would further cement its identity as a Protestant Reformed consistory. If the consistory were to change the doxology again, it would “sow confusion and cause unnecessary conflict within our already conflict-weary congregation and denomination (23). And then, after having sowed a massive amount of confusion with its response, the consistory tacked on I Corinthians 14:33, which teaches that God is not the author

of confusion (23). The rest of its response, curiously enough, was how Reverend Lanning and Elder Starrett did not give enough credence to the Church Order. How the elders saw this slander as being a defense for their own trampling of the Church Order is anybody’s guess. The consistory was in an impossible position—humanly speaking and of their own doing but impossible nonetheless. They were trying to argue for being orderly while they were disorderly.

The letter writer saw through their bald subterfuge and responded by protesting all four grounds the consistory had set forth.

To the elders’ response that they should just continue with their lawlessness because the congregation was so weary from battle, the writer had an appropriate response: “The idea that our congregation is too conflict-weary [*sic*] to deal with anymore conflict is absurd” (27). And then he exposed and rebuked the consistory for its use of scripture. “You cherry picked a passage that has nothing to do with this protest but fits your want for peace” (28). What he left out, but what is painfully obvious to anyone reading this exchange, is that the consistory showed itself to be no different than the consistory of Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church. Instead of using Byron’s words that the congregation was “in a fragile state” and “in turmoil,”⁹ the consistory of First RPC said that the congregation was “conflict-weary.” The letter writer was correct when he said that the consistory’s ground not to change the doxology “sounds like the will of man fearing the reaction of the congregation” (27). I am sure the elders never actually wet their fingers and put them in the air, but they did the spiritual equivalent, and the man protesting knew it. Powerful members of First RPC, men and women, had made clear, privately and publicly, what they thought of the switch from “Praise God” to a psalm. And there was nothing, not even God’s revealed will, that would induce the elders to do that again.

⁹ Material distributed to the congregation of Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church on November 12, 2020, announcing that the consistory was requiring Reverend Lanning to resign as editor of *Sword and Shield*.

In its response to the protestant, the consistory tried to do some instructing of its own. It fell as flat as the denomination's previous attempts to instruct. The elders tried to get principled. "The principle of Article 69 is that the churches sing praises to God during her worship services. This principle of singing praises to God is the law that the churches must not disobey" (33–34). Phew! What an important principle to have because churches and individuals the world over are trying to rid themselves and others of that pesky habit of singing praises to God. That is so ridiculous that I marvel that any man, much less a group of elders, could type that up and then approve its being sent out. If the principle of article 69 was "sing praises," then this is how the article would read: "In the churches praises shall be sung." But the article does not say that. It says, "In the churches only...shall be sung." It uses the words "only" and "shall," which means it is restrictive.

This ridiculous principle, which somehow changes from week to week and from speech to speech, does illustrate something. It illustrates the difficulty in arguing with members of the RPC over this issue. They lack principle. Better yet, they cannot stand on principle because, like the sand under your feet, it keeps moving and shifting. Their principle changes every time someone speaks on the issue. And then when you try to make an argument and answer someone with facts (historical, perhaps, as tedious and unprofitable as that might be), he just ignores them and moves on to something else. Arguing with someone who lacks principle, it has been said, is like trying to play chess with a pigeon. It flies in, knocks over all the pieces, poops on the board, and flies away declaring victory. What do you do with that? Let's just say it makes it impossible to engage in any meaningful debate. Of course, pigeons pooping on a chessboard is not a very biblical example.¹⁰ The spiritual

reality of what is going on is that the spirit that is at work in the denomination is the same as that which rules in Protestant Reformed consistories and Protestant Reformed elders. It is the spirit of man. This spirit is interested only in sowing confusion and exalting the will of man. It operates contrary to knowledge and spiritual principles. The elders may be men who are knowledgeable of spiritual things, but they use that knowledge only as a club. The Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ is the Spirit of truth, good order, and principle. The spirit at work in the RPC is the spirit of confusion, ignorance, and violence.

To make sure the protestant knew how serious they were about good order, the elders quoted from the advice the consistory had adopted and sent to the congregation on March 23, 2023. I will quote the entire paragraph, as it laughably makes the case that the elders were the ones who were standing for order—so much so, that they could club their minister to death for being disorderly (which he wasn't), all the while they were the ones who were behaving disorderly. Let's listen to their argument:

That it is the desire of the consistory to follow the Church Order for decency and good order can be seen in the following quote from our publicly distributed advice submitted on 3/23/23. "If one disagrees with or wishes for these ordinances to be changed there is a way to do this. You have this liberty. However, Church Order 86 tells us 'no particular congregation or classis [(which would also include an individual minister)] shall be at liberty to [alter, augment or diminish any article relating to the lawful order of the church], but they shall show all diligence in observing them, until it be otherwise ordained by the general synod.' That is to say that Rev. Lanning has the right to seek to change Church Order Article 69.

¹⁰ The reader will appreciate my restraint. In a biography of Abraham Lincoln that I am reading, it is related how Lincoln had stated his conviction to stand on principle. "By no act or complicity of mine shall the Republican party become a mere sucked egg, all shell and no principle in it" (Jon Meacham, *And There Was Light: Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle* [New York: Random House, 2022], 209). I had a fleeting thought to title one of these articles "The RPC: A Mere Sucked Egg," but I resisted the urge. My restraint notwithstanding, the denomination does remain a hollow institution.

However, for the promotion of decency and good order and for the preservation of peace and unity in the churches he ought to use all wisdom and due diligence of the means available to him for the changing of a church order article. Preaching against a Church Order article [which Reverend Lanning did not do; rather, his preaching was faithful to the Church Order article—DE] is not showing all diligence to observe the lawful order of the church.” (25)

That can be summarized this way: “Ignore what we are doing, and pay attention to what we wrote.” Later they wrote this, still quoting from their earlier decision: “It [the Church Order article] certainly can be changed if necessary in a lawful and orderly way, and Article 86 of the Church Order teaches us this orderly way” (25). And still later, “He [Reverend Lanning] did not seek to correct what he saw as an error in our midst in an orderly and profitable way. He did not seek the advice and input of his brethren” (26). And later, this: “The Church Order is in place in order to help prevent this kind of chaos and independentism in the churches. We need each other in the churches” (26). In the first place, if there was chaos, it was because of the ineptitude of the consistory. Reverend Lanning did not preach against the Church Order. His sermons were faithful to the Church Order. What Reverend Lanning pointed out in his sermon was that it was *First RPC* that was behaving in a disorderly fashion by singing a song that was not a psalm but was a hymn and not listed in article 69.

And if someone would say, “Well, what about article 69 of the Church Order because we have agreed as churches that we’re going to sing the 150 psalms and that we’re going to strictly limit ourselves only to those hymns that were available at that time and popular at that time, singing the ten commandments,

the Lord’s Prayer, the songs of Miriam and Zacharias, certain songs taken from the Bible, and we’re going to sing the morning and the evening hymn; doesn’t that include ‘Praise God?’” It doesn’t. “Praise God” wasn’t written when the Synod of Dordt met in 1618–19. It was written many decades after the Synod of Dordt. The Synod of Dordt, when it adopted article 69 of the Church Order, said wherever in the Reformed churches hymns have spread—because it recognized hymns had spread—they are to be removed in the way deemed most conducive. The Synod of Dordt allowed a process for the removal of the hymns so there could be instruction.¹¹

Second, if the language of First RPC’s consistory doesn’t give you flashbacks, then you haven’t been paying attention. The elders’ arguments, with all their talk about the “orderly way,” could have been written by the so-called Church Order experts in the PRC, Professors Gritters and Dykstra. The phrase “He did not seek the advice and input of his brethren” is exactly the sentiment expressed by an influential Protestant Reformed man in a letter he sent to Byron Center’s consistory in 2020, excoriating the consistory for worshiping during the government lockdown. “I wonder if you consulted with any other consistories or even sought the help of the church visitors for such a weighty and influential decision.” The sentiment behind the Protestant Reformed and Reformed Protestant letters are the same: “The pulpit is no place for such things! You should have consulted with the brethren/church visitors!”

Reading the letters that came out of the consistory room of First RPC sickens me. They are Protestant Reformed to the core. Which is to say they are devilish, as the wisdom of man is always devilish (James 3:15). Reading letters from a consistory gives you a glimpse into the room—and into the elders’ hearts. You don’t have to

¹¹ Andrew Lanning, “No Image Worship,” sermon preached on March 5, 2023, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=35232335114953>.

speculate what is in the hearts of the elders; it is splashed all over their correspondence. As I read through the letters, I was reminded time and again of the writing of Protestant Reformed consistories and theologians. It brought to mind the last paragraph of the book *Animal Farm*, although this time you are not looking inside a farmhouse and seeing humans and pigs, but you're looking inside a consistory room and seeing elders, Protestant Reformed and Reformed Protestant. And you can't tell the difference.

Twelve voices were shouting in anger, and they were all alike. No question, now, what had happened to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which.¹²

The Assemblies: Classis

Needless to say, the appellant was not upheld at the September 2023 meeting of classis. The reasons recommended by the committee and approved by the classis were, to be charitable, poor. Remember, the May meeting of classis had denied First RPC's contention that "Praise God" was a psalm, had acknowledged that "Praise God" was not one of the approved hymns of Church Order 69, and had recognized that the churches' practice was to sing a non-approved hymn in their worship services. In light of this the May meeting of classis recommended that the churches should consider updating Church Order 69 to reflect the current practice of the churches.¹³

The appellant pointed out the disorder of the churches' practice. His point was that, whether classis ever said anything about "Praise God" being right or wrong, the fact that the song is not found in article 69 means it is disorderly to continue singing it. But the committee of pre-advice at classis wasn't having it. The second ground proposed by the committee was to stick the nose of classis in the dung of First RPC's ground that

having a practice which deviates from the Church Order is not necessarily lawless disobedience. The rules and regulations of the Church Order are not the laws of God...That being said, it is the duty of the churches to "show all diligence in observing [the Church Order]." (Church Order Article 86). This is why the consistory is pursuing a change to Article 69 of the Church Order. (23)

Classis liked the smell of that dung, so they approved the advice of the committee to not sustain the appellant.

The consistory made quite a transformation in only a few months. Compare the words the consistory of First RPC used to suspend Reverend Lanning to the words it used to defend itself to a protestant (which the classis would approve):

Also, though the Church order is not a creed and confession of one's doctrine it is a binding document used for "the lawful order of the church." (CO 86) This is in harmony with the teaching of Belgic Confession 32, "it is useful and beneficial that those who are rulers of the church institute [...] establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the church." This is what Church Order Article 69 does. It lawfully orders the church in her singing for the maintenance of the worship of the body of the church. There are songs that could be added to this article and there are songs that could be taken away. But as Reformed churches we have agreed these current songs are allowed in the worship services of our congregations.

If one disagrees with or wishes for these ordinances to be changed there is a way to do this. You have this liberty. However, Church Order 86 tells us "no particular congregation or classis [(which would also include an individual minister)] shall

¹² George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (New York: Penguin Books, 1946), 128.

¹³ Minutes of the May 18, 2023, classis of the Reformed Protestant Churches, articles 20–22.

be at liberty to [alter, augment or diminish any article relating to the lawful order of the church], but they shall show all diligence in observing them, until it be otherwise ordained by the general synod.” That is to say that Rev. Lanning has the right to seek to change Church Order Article 69. However, for the promotion of decency and good order and for the preservation of peace and unity in the churches he ought to use all wisdom and due diligence of the means available to him for the changing of a church order article. Preaching against a Church Order article is not showing all diligence to observe the lawful order of the church.¹⁴

Having a practice which deviates from the Church Order is not necessarily lawless disobedience. The rules and regulations of the Church Order are not the laws of God. (23)

The member who wrote the letters of protest and concern was either satisfied with the responses he received, which I don’t believe for a minute, or he is satisfied being back in the PRC (but with the initials rearranged just a bit). This reveals that whatever spirit was motivating him to write those letters was not the Spirit of Jesus Christ. His letters of protest and concern did not accomplish a single thing in the Reformed Protestant denomination. But that is not to say they were worthless. They did perform one important task, and that was to expose the elders of First RPC as hypocrites and Pharisees. I don’t say that because I like to call names but because that is what they are, according to the word of God. “For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers” (Matt. 23:4).

Having acknowledged that the congregation’s current practice was not in line with the

Church Order, the consistory of First RPC had said a few times that it was going to fix that at the next session of classis:

The consistory intends to bring an overture to the next meeting of classis in order to ask classis to change Church Order Article 69 to include the song, *Praise God*. This will then bring our practice into harmony with our Church Order. (“Let all things be done decently and in order.” 1 Corinthians 14:40) (23)

That overture ended up coming to the January 2024 session of classis.¹⁵ The overture was to remove the morning and evening hymns and the hymn of prayer from article 69 and to add the hymn “Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow.” There were four grounds. The only ground relating to the addition of the hymn that carried any weight was ground two:

The addition of the hymn Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow to the article brings the article into harmony with the church’s current practice. Church Order Article 1 tells us the purpose of the church order: “For the maintenance of good order in the church of Christ...” Therefore in the churches for the purpose of striving to maintain decency and good order our practice and the Church Order ought to agree.¹⁶

That seems reasonable. We just suspended our minister for not agreeing with the Church Order, so we should probably change the Church Order to fit our practice.

The initial advice of the committee of pre-advice was for classis not to adopt the overture on two grounds. First, “Praise God is already in the back of our Psalter that was adopted at the Classis (Joint consistory meeting) of May 2021.” Second, “By adopting this overture Classis would be excluding the other Doxologies that

¹⁴ Material distributed to the congregation on March 23, 2023, announcing the suspension of Reverend Lanning.

¹⁵ You can watch that classis meeting here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhGIBsBDQEI&t=21392s>.

¹⁶ Agenda for the classis of the Reformed Protestant Churches, January 18, 2024, 14.

[are] in our adopted Psalter. This would prevent the Churches in our denomination from using the other doxologies even though that may already be their current practice.”¹⁷ The recommendation was recommitted when it was pointed out that the RPC had never adopted the Psalter.¹⁸ The reworked advice of the committee also advised classis not to adopt the overture of First RPC. The committee gave two grounds. The first ground was that First’s overture would not allow the other churches to sing the other doxologies in the back of the Psalter. The second ground was that First’s argument that “Praise God” was in harmony with the principles of worship could also “be applied to the other doxologies that are in the Psalter.”¹⁹

What is noteworthy when you watch the discussion is that confusion reigns in the RPC about what they sing and why they sing it. The word “confused” was used more than once.

Poor First RPC had a bad day of it. They went to classis expecting to add one hymn to article 69 so that the Church Order could be brought into conformity with their practice; and, lo and behold, they found out there are eight other hymns that are also being sung (and that also aren’t in the article)!

The delegates from First RPC were not very valiant in the battle for this overture. You could tell their hearts weren’t in it. This wasn’t a surprise, since they had twisted themselves into pretzels to this point, first suspending a man for disobedience to the Church Order and then finding out they were the ones who were in violation. Reverend Ophoff’s remark was nonsensical.

I am not in favor of this recommendation [to not adopt the overture]. I believe that the overture that came from First does bring it in line of practice. It does not declare any other songs, other orthodox hymns, to be sin. I think this establishes the principle that stands behind it, which

is *sing the word*, and if another church wants to sing “May the Grace” or doxology 2, 6, or 8, they’re free to do so; and this Church Order article allows for that with this amendment. So I am not in favor of this recommendation. I believe that we should adopt the overture as it stands from First.

I use the word *nonsensical* again not because I want to insult Reverend Ophoff but because that word captures his arguments very well. His words make no sense. If what he said is true and someone could sing whatever orthodox hymn he wanted to, then why in the world was First RPC bringing an overture to add “Praise God”?

The other delegate from First, Matt Overway, then gave it a shot.

I’m not sure, but it seems like there is a logical fallacy here, something that’s missing. None of the doxologies are included in article 69; so, if we are going to go strictly according to article 69, we can’t sing any of the doxologies. So the overture of First does not exclude the other doxologies; it only includes “Praise God” and puts it into the Church Order that this doxology is one that is included for us to sing. If we reject the overture, then, if we’re going to take a strict reading of article 69, none of the doxologies ought to be sung in the churches because it’s not included as a song that we may sing.

It seems like there is a logical fallacy? The whole piece of advice from the committee was terrible. The advice was clearly crafted with only one end in mind, and that was to preserve the other doxologies in the back of the Psalter.

Even Matt equivocated by saying that “the overture of First does not exclude the other doxologies; it only includes ‘Praise God’ and puts it into the Church Order that this doxology is one

¹⁷ Supplements of the classis of the Reformed Protestant Churches, January 18, 2024, 14.

¹⁸ It should have been recommitted for being an abominable piece of work. You should probably interact with the overture if you are going to reject it.

¹⁹ Supplements of the classis of the Reformed Protestant Churches, January 18, 2024, 23.

that is included for us to sing.” Actually, yes, it would exclude the other doxologies. If it didn’t, then why bother adding “Praise God”? If the overture puts “Praise God” into the Church Order so that it is included as a doxology for them to sing, then that would exclude the others.

It was all a sham. A show. The overture was weak, and the committee’s advice was worse. And no one called it out. Someone should have said, “Mr. Chairman, I would like to read article 69. It uses the words ‘only’ and ‘shall.’ How can we be seen following this Church Order if we sing something not listed in the article?” The problem is that if this line were pursued, it might lead to an unsavory discussion about the fact that not one church represented by any of the men around that table was following the Church Order article. And then perhaps, if the Spirit of Christ were in any of the men gathered there, one of the delegates might have said, “Didn’t we just suspend a man for his alleged disobedience to this very article? What are we, a bunch of hypocrites?”

But it was at this point that Reverend Langerak stepped in and headed off that line of thinking. “May I just respond to that based on previous decisions. I think the previous decisions of classis indicated that we are not taking a strict reading of article 69, so that’s already been settled.” He was responding to Matt’s comment about a “strict reading” of article 69.

Reverend Langerak appealed to the fact that this matter had already been decided by previous decisions of classis. He was successful. Reverend Langerak shut Matt Overway down and any further discussion on that matter.

But it shouldn’t have. For Reverend Langerak to make the argument “that’s already been settled” was towering hypocrisy. He again showed himself to be double-minded. His argument was this: “Classis has spoken. It has been

settled, and you may not speak against it.” Yet he wrote against that very argument in rebuking the PRC for such a position, saying to them, “You have forgotten your own history.”²⁰ He excoriated Professor Cammenga for such a view. Reverend Langerak did exactly that which he condemned in Professor Cammenga, a man he mocked as “Professor Settled and Binding”:

He [Professor Cammenga] was not so interested in the truth of article 31 of the Church Order as he was in crafting a club from article 31 to silence opposition to false doctrine. But he does himself what he does not allow in others, and he is not the only one. He feels compelled to lecture everyone else that they *must regard synodical decisions as settled and binding*, but he gives himself wide latitude—lawlessness—to disregard synodical decisions and even to rewrite them.²¹

Less than a year earlier, Reverend Langerak did exactly that which he would not allow from Matt Overway. In the August 2023 issue of *Sword and Shield*, Reverend Langerak gave himself wide latitude to disregard an earlier decision of his classis when he wrote, “The false doctrine of Reverend Lanning is conditional, regardless of what the classis of the Reformed Protestant Churches decided.”²² The classis of the Reformed Protestant Churches had declared that the statement of Reverend Lanning that the consistory of First RPC had hung its argument on to prove that Reverend Lanning had taught conditions was not conditional at all. Did Reverend Langerak see this as a settled and binding decision of classis and therefore not something he should speak against? He did not. The wide latitude that he gives himself—which he does not grant others—is lawlessness. For further evidence of his hypocrisy, read the article he wrote on Church Order 31 and then compare that

²⁰ Nathan Langerak, “A Defense of *Sword and Shield* and Reformed Believers Publishing (1): Article 31 of the Church Order,” *Sword and Shield* 1, no. 6 (October 2020): 11.

²¹ Nathan Langerak, “Professor Settled and Binding (1): A Shabby Screed,” *Sword and Shield* 2, no. 7 (October 2021): 20; emphasis is Langerak’s.

²² Nathan Langerak, “Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow (3): Conditionality,” *Sword and Shield* 4, no. 3 (August 2023): 8.

to his comments on the floor of this classis meeting.²³

After a whole lot of confusion, the classis did not adopt the overture from First RPC. This now allows each man and each church to continue doing whatever seems right in their own eyes regarding singing in worship, all the while completely trampling Church Order 69 underfoot. The RPC is a lawless denomination. They are controlled by a select few, whose views on issues change from one meeting to the next. Such a rule is tyrannical and makes the members subject to the ever-changing whim and desire of man. What is clear is that the spirit that rules in the RPC is not the Spirit of Jesus Christ but is the spirit of man. Which is to say, the spirit of the devil. I could weep for the few tender souls—which is to say, those children of God who have the Holy Spirit working in them—who yet remain in that denomination. May God preserve and gather them.

As to the rest, the members of the denomination have learned well from their leaders. The spirit in her members in their treatment of family and former friends is the same as that of her leaders—a spirit of violence and cruelty. The kingdom of man is violent, going all the way back to Cain. It is striking as well that that spirit almost immediately infected the institutions of the denomination, including one of her school associations (Grace Reformed Protestant School) and her publishing arm (Reformed Believers Publishing); so there is no part of the denomination, from her assemblies to her members to her various institutions that serve her, that is not infected by this spirit. They are under bondage, and the word regarding the RPC is found in Ezekiel 7:23: “Make a chain: for the land is full of bloody crimes, and the city is full of violence.” The leaders say much about liberty, but while they promise the people liberty, “they themselves are the servants of corruption” (II Pet. 2:19).

The spirit of the RPC is not the Holy Spirit but the violent, double-minded, deceitful spirit

of the prince of the air, who transforms himself into an angel of light and thereby deceives many.

Will Worship

The RPC know that their worship is not according to article 69. Neither is it according to the creeds (which are dead silent) or the word of God (because the creeds never point us back to the scripture, and if one mistakenly supposes that the Bible might have the answer, he is branded as a Biblicist). Their worship, then, flows out of the vain imaginations of their hearts. It is not this: “What God commands, that will we do”; rather, the position is this: “What we do, God must accept.” Not this: “What is the will of God for our worship?” but this: “What is man’s will for our worship?”

God rejects the worship of the Reformed Protestant Churches. It is an abomination to him. John Calvin, in a treatise written in 1544 and addressed to Emperor Charles V, addressed God’s hatred of will worship.²⁴ In this letter Calvin addressed the worship of the church (“how God is rightly worshipped”), which for Calvin was the most important thing, and then also the matter of salvation (“whence they must seek salvation for themselves”) (6). In this work Calvin exposed and condemned all worship not done according to the word of God.

This is so difficult to persuade the world of: God disapproves of all worship that has been established beyond His Word. Instead, this persuasion prevails and is as it were formed in the bones and marrow of all people: whatever they do they have sufficiently just approval for it, provided they display some zeal for the glory of God. But since God not only considers empty but also openly hates what we support for worshipping Him beyond his command, what do we profit by doing anything to the contrary? (8)

²³ Langerak, “A Defense of *Sword and Shield* and Reformed Believers Publishing (1): Article 31 of the Church Order,” 9–15.

²⁴ John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, trans. Casey Carmichael (Dallas: Protestant Heritage Press, 2016). Page numbers for quotations from this book are given in text.

It is not that God (begrudgingly) will accept the worship that “bubbles” up within you, even though there is no warrant for it in scripture. God hates it and curses it.

Moreover, we have said that the Word of God is the sign that distinguishes the true worship of God from what is full of vice and evil. From this it is quickly concluded that the whole form of worshipping God that is used in the world today is nothing but mere corruption. For they are not even concerned about what God has commanded or what He approves so that they may obey as it is fitting. Instead, they give themselves a license to devise worship that they later indulge to obey in place of God. Although I may seem to go beyond measure in saying that it must be done, let all works with which the world decides that they may worship God nevertheless be shaken off. With the generous exception of 10 percent, all were born rashly in the minds of people. Why do we want more? God despises, condemns, and curses all invented forms of worship. The bridle of God’s word pierces us to keep us in simple obedience. When, having shaken off the yoke, we wander over to our invented forms of worship and offer to Him what has been fabricated out of human rashness, however much they make us smile, they are empty trifles before Him; no, rather they are filthy pollutions. And Paul certainly confesses

that an appearance of wisdom is visible in them (Col. 2:23). But because God makes more of obedience than all sacrifices, it should suffice to reject any form of worship that is not approved by the commandment of God. (11–12)

We who were called out of the RPC were in disbelief about what happened in that denomination. It was the haste and brutality that left us shocked. “All of this just to preserve a hymn by Thomas Ken?” But that isn’t the answer at all. Ken’s hymn was the occasion, but the spiritual reality goes much, much deeper. When it was preached to the congregation that what she was singing was not according to the command of God to sing psalms or according to the rule found in article 69, the response was not brokenness. The response of First Reformed Protestant Church was, “Wherein? Wherein have we been unfaithful? Wherein is our worship corrupt?” A defense was, “You can’t tell me I’ve been doing this wrong my whole life!” As in the days of Malachi, so in the days of the RPC, the word to the apostatizing church is this: “Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them” (Mal. 3:7).

The question is not, will we have Thomas Ken’s hymn or not? The question is always, who will reign? God or man? For the RPC that question has been answered. The Reformed Protestant Churches are a kingdom of man, in which kingdom the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ takes no part, except to condemn.

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Article LXXI. The New King and His Kingdom (continued)

God's decree or counsel in general, in the broadest, most comprehensive sense of the word, is the subject of our discussion for the present.

We pointed to the importance of this subject. It is a most fundamental doctrine of our religion. And what is true with regard to all doctrine is true especially of such truths as that concerning the counsel of God, — the church of our time has need of a return to them. There seems a good deal of life and activity noticeable in the church of today; there are a good many movements afoot and of new movements we hear almost every day. The church intends to do great things for society and for the world in general. But the sad fact is that the church itself is so weak; weak in almost every respect. She is weak especially in doctrine, in the knowledge of the truth. She is exposed to any wind of doctrine that blows. And this is a fundamental weakness. As a result the church is weak in almost every other respect, except that there is a good deal of outward organization and external activity. The sound preaching of the full Word of God is sought in vain in many a church. There are churches where the very infallibility of the Word is absolutely denied by ministers of the gospel. There are churches where the truths of the atonement and the resurrection, the divinity of Christ in the specific sense, the necessity of regeneration and other fundamental doctrines are not only unknown but positively denied. There are churches where one may listen to a man-made lecture instead of to a sound exposition of the Word on the sabbath. Surely, weakness in regard to doctrine is characteristic of the church of today. Of proper exercise of discipline one hardly dares to

speaking in our day. The church of today deems it her main task to gather in. That it is her sacred duty to keep pure the manifestation of the Body of Christ, that the church must separate as well as gather, is forgotten. In doctrine, walk and discipline the church is weak. In the meantime we hear of great things. Movement after movement is announced. And more and more the church moves in the direction of a general amalgamation. One of the latest movements that promises to assume gigantic proportions is that of the Interchurch World Movement. What the church really needs, a return to the truth and sound doctrine, a return to the exercise of discipline over her own members, in short, true, inward, spiritual strength is not emphasized. And one cannot help to receive the impression that what is lacking in inward strength must be supplied by outward organization!

We frankly state that we expect little good of all these movements. I for one refuse to endorse them. We are no enemy of united effort. But we cannot cooperate with everybody in the cause of the kingdom. If the Interchurch World Movement means to be a movement of evangelical churches, let it assume a very definite evangelical basis first of all. Let it in as general a way as it deems fit give expression in that basis to all the great doctrines that must needs be subscribed by anyone to be entitled to the name evangelical. Let it have the courage to exclude any church and any representative that does not subscribe to such doctrines as the infallibility of the Word, vicarious atonement, the divinity of Christ, etc. Let it moreover exclude from its membership all lodge members and those that lead lives in any way offensive to the church as the Body of

Christ. Perhaps cooperation would then be conducive to some good. But to cooperate with liberals and moderns, who may think that they still have a claim to the name evangelical just because they can speak in some vague way of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man, we do not deem advisable.

At any rate, what the church needs first of all is a return to sound doctrine and instruction of young and old in the whole counsel of God. And, therefore, a thorough discussion of such truths as that of the counsel of God is certainly not superfluous, whatever the world may think of it.

We reminded you, too, of the fact that the counsel of God in its broadest sense must not be confused with predestination. The latter is only part of God's counsel. And we are discussing as yet not the doctrine of predestination with election and reprobation, but the decree of God in general, His eternal good pleasure with regard to all things.

That counsel, so we stated, is a unity. God did not make different plans with regard to different things, separate little counsels so to speak, but His decree is one. And thus we came to the truth that the counsel of God is dominated by unity of purpose, and the question was asked: what is that purpose of God in His eternal counsel? We found that all Reformed people agree that the highest purpose of God's counsel is His own glory. But there seems to be a question sometimes as to whether the glory of God must be called the only purpose, so that all other things are subservient to it as a means to an end; or whether it must be called the highest purpose while the salvation of man is also a purpose, be it of secondary significance.

Now, there is apparently but little difference between these two ways of expressing ourselves in regard to the purpose of God's counsel. I may say that God's glory is the highest purpose of the eternal decree while man's salvation, the salvation of God's people, is a secondary purpose. But if at the same time I maintain the unity of God's counsel, the result will be that essentially that highest purpose, the glory of God, becomes the

only aim God had in view. Man's salvation becomes at all events subservient to the glory of God, and with a view to the latter the former is a means. And, therefore, the difference seems small and non-essential. Yet, personally we prefer to say that the only purpose God has in view in His eternal decree is the glorification of Self and that all things, even the salvation of God's people, are subservient to that highest purpose as a means to an end. The danger is not imaginary that otherwise we will gradually so emphasize the salvation of man as a purpose in itself, as something God aimed at outside of Himself, that after all our Reformed conception receive a touch of Pelagianism.

Neither need we fear that by expressing ourselves in this form we go beyond Scripture. On the contrary, the truth that in all things God aims at His own glory can hardly be stressed more emphatically than the Word of God does it for us. To many passages we might refer in this connection. But it will suffice to call your attention to that memorable passage of Romans in which the apostle Paul finally assigns to all objectors to this doctrine the place of the clay in the hands of the potter. Paul is there quoting the well-known historical example of Pharaoh, who exalted himself against Israel's God. Says he: "For the Scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth." Let us notice that the Lord here speaks to Pharaoh, the mighty king that oppressed the people of God and that refused to obey the word of Jehovah to let Israel go. Now, the Scripture says to Pharaoh by the word of Moses (Ex. 9:16 of which Rom. 9:17 is a quotation) that in all that Pharaoh does he serves a purpose. In the hardening of his heart, in the oppression of the people of Israel, in his rebellion against the Word of God, — in all his wickedness he serves a certain definite purpose. Still more. The purpose he serves is God's purpose. Pharaoh may apparently and as far as the intent of his sinful heart is concerned purpose to rebel against Israel's God. In doing so he establishes his own guilt. But the fact remains

that in all he does he serves a higher purpose. Not for a moment is he able to escape the purpose unto which he is set according to the counsel of God. For the Scripture saith: "Unto this same purpose have I raised thee up." And what is that purpose? It is that the power of Israel's God may become manifest and the glory of His name may be published abroad! Pharaoh's purpose is the glory of God! For that purpose he is raised up by Jehovah!

Now, in order to understand the words correctly we must take a look at the context. Paul in this passage is discussing the important truth of election and reprobation. He illustrated this truth in the fact of Jacob's acceptance and Esau's rejection before the children were born. Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated, thus it was said of them before they saw the light of the world. And in discussing this truth Paul came to the very probable question of the objectors: "Is there, then, unrighteousness with God?" 9:14. That question he answers, and it is of significance to learn how he does it. Essentially he really says: "God forbid that we should speak thus. There can be no question of unrighteousness with God for the simple reason that He is God! What He does is righteous, not because it is in harmony with a certain law that should be above Him, but for no other reason than that He, the absolutely righteous, performs it thus. The very idea of our calling God before the bar of human judgment to determine whether He is righteous or not is absurd, wicked, blasphemous. There is no other standard of righteousness than God Himself. All He does is righteous, must be righteous, for He is God!" For the same reason, namely, that God is God, it is perfectly beyond all human criticism that God seeks the glory of His own name in all things. He is the Highest. As the Highest there is nothing to seek above Him. The very fact that He is the exalted sovereign God postulates that He must seek Himself and that He cannot seek anything outside of Himself. Such is His divine glory and blessedness. The creature is never the highest good, and for that reason the creature

may not seek self. The blessedness of the creature is to seek the glory of God. But God must seek Himself, and He does so in His entire counsel, both in the elect and the reprobate. So, then, the end of all dispute is this: God is God and you cannot judge Him. He does as He wills. "For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Or if you please, referring not only to the elect but also to the reprobate: "Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth." And if still the objection is raised that in that case God can lay nothing to the blame of the creature whom He thus controls according to His counsel, the apostle answers with the figure of the potter and the clay. Is it not inconceivable that the clay would criticize the potter in regard to the work of his hands? Well, then, just as improper it is for the creature to call God to account for what He is doing. For less than the clay in the hand of the potter are we in relation to our God. And, therefore, the conclusion of the whole matter is that there is unity of purpose in the decree according to which God works all things. And this one purpose is expressed by the apostle in vss. 22, 23: "What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory."

The manifestation of his power and of the riches of his glory, the glory of His own name, — such is the purpose of the counsel of God. And that we might be manifestations of that glory He makes us His vessels even as the potter forms vessels of the clay.

Thus the Scripture saith. And if this fundamental principle of Scripture is fully accepted by faith there is no further difficulty in regard to the counsel of God.

The whole question is, whether we shall leave God **God**.

—Grand Rapids, Mich.