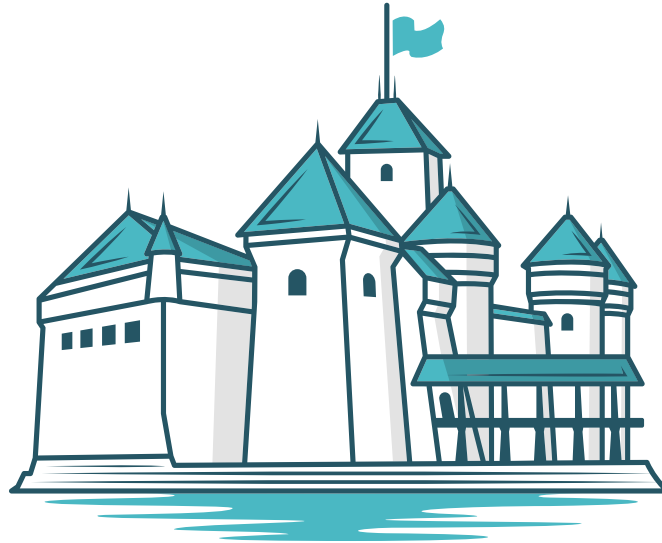




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*For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion:
in the secret of his tabernacle shall he hide me;
he shall set me up upon a rock.
—Psalm 27:5*

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MEDITATION

And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy.

—Exodus 33:19

Free, Good, Gracious

God said to Moses, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” This means that our God is free, he is good, and he is gracious.

God is free.

In everything God is free. His decrees, his works, and his thoughts are his own. He does his own will, solely according to his good pleasure. Nothing and no one binds God to his course. Nothing and no one compels God to a thing. No one stays his hand; no one says to him, “What doest thou?” (Dan. 4:35). He is unfettered and unrestrained and has no counselor and needs no advisor and seeks no permission. His purpose and his counsel stand. God is sovereign. God is God. In everything God is free!

Especially God is free in the bestowal of his grace and mercy. “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” His will and his will alone determines the objects of his grace. His good pleasure and his good pleasure alone determines the recipients of his mercy. It is not the will of man to believe God or to receive God that draws God’s grace. God is free! Free of the will of man! It is not the works of man to love and obey God that draw God’s mercy. God is free! Free of the works of man! “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” How carnal man hates this! He thinks that God must be under man’s obligation and in man’s debt. He demands that God compensate man’s goodness. He insists that God repay man’s good will. But God is free!

“I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious.” And man has nothing to say about it.

God is good.

Inevitably, wicked man charges God with injustice. Or tyranny. Or cruelty. Or barbarity. God says, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious.” Wicked man says, “It is not fair.” Wicked man knows that when God says, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious,” it also means “I will not be gracious to everyone.” It means “I will choose the one to whom I will be gracious, and I will choose the one whom I will harden.” It means “Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth” (Rom. 9:18). And man says, “It is not fair because he does not treat all the same.”

But God is good! So Moses saw. “I will make all my goodness pass before thee,” said God, “and I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.” You see, the goodness of God is not measured by man. Man thinks he knows what is good and right and just and true, and he calls God to give account to him. But God’s goodness is not measured by man. God’s goodness is measured by God! Only God is good and right and just and true. When God is gracious to whom he will be gracious, it is good. God is good! And man has nothing to say about it.

God is gracious.

God’s grace is his favor for sinners. It is his eternal mercy for his people, who deserve no mercy. In his eternal counsel and according to his eternal good pleasure, God is gracious to those who of themselves only deserve destruction. Would you see that grace? Behold Jesus Christ. For God

hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began, but is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. (II Tim. 1:9–10)

And man has nothing to say about it. Except for the poor sinner! God gives his people this to say:

I thank God! His grace is my salvation! For where my will and my works could not draw God to me, his grace and his mercy have brought me to him. “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.” And he has given us this to say about it: “But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth. O turn unto me, and have mercy upon me” (Ps. 86:15–16).

Behold our God! Free, good, and gracious!

—AL

EDITORIAL

The End of Herman Hoeksema’s *Banner* Articles

The reprint of Herman Hoeksema’s article elsewhere in this issue marks his final contribution to the *Our Doctrine* rubric in *The Banner*. For four years—from September 5, 1918, to August 31, 1922—Hoeksema contributed an article nearly every issue as the editor of *Our Doctrine*. The result was more than 170 articles of solid, Reformed, doctrinal exposition in the main English-language magazine of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC).

In his articles Hoeksema set out to develop the whole body of Reformed doctrine from the point of view of God’s kingdom. It was then, and remains today, a fresh and breathtaking perspective from which to view all things. Prominent in Hoeksema’s theology was the sovereignty of God. The truth of God’s sovereignty and the truth of God’s kingdom go hand in hand: God is the sovereign king over all his works. In fact, the truth of God’s sovereignty is the nerve and energy of the Reformed faith. The truth of God’s sovereignty could be considered the first principle—the foundational truth of all truths. God is God! In his theology Hoeksema took hold of this foundational principle and applied it to every doctrinal topic that he investigated. Having hold of the nerve of the Reformed faith as he did, Hoeksema’s treatment of Reformed doctrine in his articles was sound, constructive, and engaging.

At times Hoeksema erred in his doctrine, following the doctrinal line of the CRC on topics such as God’s image in man. Not to excuse his error but to explain it, Hoeksema was a young minister in the bosom of the rapidly apostatizing CRC. However, Hoeksema as a young minister also stood firm against many errors that had already infected the CRC. And in subsequent years God would graciously correct Hoeksema’s thinking where he was wrong, thus delivering to Hoeksema’s spiritual descendants a body of sound doctrine. The church in every generation must always be returning to the old paths of the truth of the scriptures (see Jer. 6:16). Such a return, given by God in his grace to his people, is true reformation. In Hoeksema’s *Banner* articles one can see this reformation being given.

Although Hoeksema’s plan was to lay out the whole body of Reformed doctrine from beginning to end, he sometimes detoured from his plan to address the issues of the day. The years during which Hoeksema wrote the *Our Doctrine* rubric were momentous in the CRC. The Christian Reformed synods of 1918, 1920, and 1922 all dealt with significant doctrinal issues. The same 1918 synod that appointed Hoeksema to be the editor of *Our Doctrine* also deposed Rev. Harry Bultema for his premillennial doctrine. The 1920 synod exonerated Prof. Ralph Janssen of the charge of

teaching higher critical views of scripture. The same 1922 synod that did not reappoint Hoeksema to be the editor of *Our Doctrine* also condemned and deposed Janssen after further investigation. From the time that Hoeksema began writing in the autumn of 1918 to his closing articles on the churches of Revelation in the summer of 1922, these doctrinal issues would make their appearance on the pages of *Our Doctrine*.

Hoeksema's exchanges with Janssen during this time were particularly significant for later events. Hoeksema opened his rubric to Janssen and invited him to have his say about his view of scripture. The two wrote back and forth for several months, until the Publication Committee of the CRC shut down any further public writing on the matter. Janssen's tactic in these writings was to avoid addressing his own views of scripture and instead to accuse Hoeksema of denying the doctrine of common grace. Janssen painted Hoeksema's denial of common grace as anti-Calvin; anti-Kuyper; anti-Christian Reformed; and, ultimately, anti-Reformed.

Janssen's tactic did not save Janssen, as he was deposed by Synod 1922. But Janssen's tactic brought the doctrine of common grace to the foreground in the CRC. Hoeksema became well known in the CRC for his denial of common grace and his teaching of particular grace. In this, Hoeksema applied the truth of God's sovereignty to the doctrine of God's grace. The sovereign God had sovereign grace only for those whom he had sovereignly elected in Christ. But the CRC was so infected with zeal for the doctrine of common grace by the early 1920s that the denomination would turn against Hoeksema with a vengeance. The synod of 1924 would adopt the infamous three points, and Classis Grand Rapids East would depose Hoeksema. All of these events were foreshadowed in Janssen and Hoeksema's exchanges in *The Banner*.

An intriguing question remains: why was it that *The Banner* replaced Hoeksema as the editor

of *Our Doctrine* in 1922? *The Banner* was a denominational magazine, and the Christian Reformed synod appointed the editors of the magazine and of the various rubrics, or departments. Synod 1922 nominated seven men for the *Our Doctrine* department, including Hoeksema and Rev. H. J. Kuiper. Kuiper was elected, ending Hoeksema's four-year tenure in the *Our Doctrine* department.¹

Was H. J. Kuiper's election to replace Hoeksema merely part of the normal rotation of editors and writers that occurs from time to time in the publication of a magazine? Perhaps. There are no grounds given in synod's minutes to indicate otherwise. At the time, H. J. Kuiper gave every appearance of being of the same mind as Hoeksema. Hoeksema and Kuiper worked together on the committee that had investigated the views of Professor Janssen and that had recommended that Synod 1922 depose him. Hoeksema and Kuiper had also founded and were writing together in another magazine—*The Witness*—that was circulated within the CRC. *The Witness* had begun as an answer to *Religion and Culture*—still another Christian Reformed magazine, which promoted a spirit of confessional indifference, disdain for Reformed principles, inclusiveness with other Christian denominations in America, and amalgamation with American worldliness. Over against such an anti-confessional spirit, *The Witness* sought to keep the CRC moored in the Reformed confessions. Hoeksema would later write about his relationship with H. J. Kuiper, among others,

Men like Professors L. Berkhof, S. Volbeda and K. Schoolland and the Reverends Y. P. De Jong, H. J. Kuiper, H. Danhof and H. Hoeksema, frequently discussed the lamentable condition of the churches in general and the rise of this new movement in particular, and for a time they even held their monthly meetings for this purpose. They all agreed that an attempt must be made to save the church from the inroads of Arminianism and

¹ Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), 1922 Acts of Synod (English translation), 47–48, https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/crcna_synod-agendas/93. The full nomination and decision reads as follows: "The Committee presents the following nominations to which Synod adds some names...Our Doctrine: Rev. K. Bergsma, Rev. H. J. Kuiper, Dr. H. H. Meeter, Rev. P. A. Hoekstra, Rev. H. Hoeksema, Rev. D. H. Kromminga, Rev. H. Kuiper. Elected: Rev. H. J. Kuiper."

from the grave danger of being swallowed up into the world.²

Taking all of this into account, perhaps there is nothing to read into synod's replacing Hoeksema with Kuiper in *The Banner*.

However, even from the long distance of a century away, it would be naïve to think that synod's replacing Hoeksema with Kuiper was merely routine. First, the Publication Committee of the CRC, which oversaw the publication of *The Banner*, had not supported Hoeksema's open debate with Janssen in the pages of *Our Doctrine*. In fact, the Publication Committee had stepped in and required that the debate in *The Banner* cease. Notice of the committee's decision had appeared a full year before, in April 1921. "The Publication Committee has decided to discontinue the debate of Prof. Ralph Janssen and Rev. Herman Hoeksema after April 21. The Publication Committee."³

The committee reported on its action to Synod 1922. In its report the committee did not support Hoeksema but implied that he had failed to lead in an effective manner.

The Janssen case, which for the entire church was and still is a painful experience, has also created difficulty for your Committee. Only a short time ago it gave account in *De Wachter* concerning its decision to close the church papers for discussion of this matter, so that it does not have to be restated here. That the Committee did not please everyone by its decision or could have pleased everyone has become evident. It is itself convinced that with many the distaste for strife over differences of opinion concerning the truth bears a morbid character, coming from an indifference with respect to maintaining principles, or from a spirit of considering maintaining the peace at any price to be more godly than

"fighting the good fight of faith once for all delivered unto the saints", to which the Scripture admonishes us. It is something characteristic of our day of a flagging of the boundaries, wherein the extremes meet one another. Hence your Committee for a long time withstood the desire to make an end of this strife. But it cannot be denied that this case has also another angle, an angle which gave food of the above mentioned dislike for all strife, viz., that it appeared difficult to lead the strife in a meaningful and effective manner. This fact has also contributed to grant the request of the Curatorium with respect to this matter.⁴

When Synod 1922 received the Publication Committee's report, synod agreed with its committee and implied that Hoeksema was partly to blame for the manner in which Janssen had conducted the debate.

Concerning point 4 Synod declare the principle "that healthy debate concerning serious ecclesiastical questions is very profitable for our ecclesiastical life"—nevertheless your Committee advises that Synod approve the action of the Publication Committee under the given circumstances. Grounds:

- a) Because many times personalities entered in;
- b) The debate often was not conducted in a worthy and effective manner (Acts 1910, Art. 17, 4, a).

Adopted.⁵

Neither the Publication Committee's report nor synod's decision was fair to Hoeksema. Hoeksema had done everything he could to give Janssen the opportunity to explain his views of scripture. Janssen had refused and instead had called Hoeksema un-Reformed for Hoeksema's denial of common grace. For the Publication Committee and

² Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America: Their Origin, Early History and Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: First Protestant Reformed Church, 1936), 17.

³ See *Reformed Pavilion* 3, no. 9 (June 7, 2025): 7.

⁴ CRCNA, *1922 Acts of Synod (English translation)*, 216–217.

⁵ CRCNA, *1922 Acts of Synod (English translation)*, 42.

Synod 1922 to leave the impression that Hoeksema was at least partially to blame was the first of many injustices that Christian Reformed synods would perpetrate against him.

A second reason to think that synod's replacing Hoeksema in *The Banner* was anything but routine is the fact that some of the churches in the denomination were beginning to express themselves publicly and on the record against Hoeksema. For example, Classis Hudson had sent an overture to Synod 1922 asking synod to take the editor of *Our Doctrine* in hand. Although the classis did not mention common grace by name, it referred to common grace as an "important part of our doctrine." The classis would not suffer common grace to be "denied" on the pages of *The Banner*. Synod did not enter into the overture, but neither did synod state its support for Hoeksema and his doctrinal writings in *The Banner*. The full decision is as follows:

Overture from Classis Hudson with respect to a series of articles on "Our Doctrine" in *The Banner*.

Synod see to it that under the department of *Our Doctrine* that no important part of our doctrine be denied as is happening now.

Synod declare that this overture cannot be considered since no proof is given for what is claimed in this overture.⁶

A third reason to think that synod's replacing Hoeksema in *The Banner* was not merely routine is that almost all the men who had appeared to be like-minded with Hoeksema leading up to Synod 1922 turned against him very quickly after synod. Examples could be multiplied, but consider what happened to Hoeksema at *The Witness*. With Hoeksema removed from *The Banner*, and its pages closed to any writing that related to the Janssen

case, Hoeksema and Rev. Henry Danhof were of a mind to write their view of God's particular grace in the pages of *The Witness*. After all, both men were editors of that magazine. And because *The Witness* stood opposed to amalgamation with the world, that magazine was an obvious vehicle for articles warning against common grace. But the staff of *The Witness*—including H. J. Kuiper—preferred to accept Hoeksema and Danhof's resignation from the magazine rather than open its pages to their continued writings. Not only that, but the staff of *The Witness* went on to unite the magazine with *Religion and Culture*, even though the two ostensibly took opposite views.⁷

Taking all of this into account, it is hardly conceivable that synod's replacing Hoeksema in *The Banner* was merely the routine business of the day. Rather, it almost certainly was a faint rumble of the storm to come. Thus, after four years of being the doctrinal column for the Christian Reformed Church, Hoeksema's articles in *The Banner* came to a sudden end.⁸

But whatever men's motives may have been in replacing Hoeksema, God was working out his own purpose and good pleasure. That purpose included causing his people to see ever more clearly the truth of God's sovereign, particular grace. God's purpose also included calling his people out of the apostatizing Christian Reformed Church by establishing the Protestant Reformed Churches in 1925. With Hoeksema's removal from *The Banner* in 1922, God had already begun the process of separating his people and calling them out of Babylon. When the institutions of the CRC began to close their doors to Hoeksema, it was because Christ was leaving the CRC. The denomination would see to it that the doctrine of God's sovereign, particular grace could have no place among its member churches. Christ would still have his true church in the world, but

⁶ CRCNA, *1922 Acts of Synod (English translation)*, 45.

⁷ See Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, 21–22.

⁸ Interestingly, Hoeksema writes "(To be continued)" at the end of his final article, even though his articles on the churches of Revelation would not be continued in *The Banner*. Perhaps what happened is that Hoeksema had submitted a stack of articles to the editor to fill the remaining weeks of his rubric, each article ending with "(To be continued)." For whatever reason, the editor never removed the cliffhanger. However that came to be, it does add an appropriate sense of abruptness and suddenness to the close of Hoeksema's term in *Our Doctrine*. From here on out the CRC would be dealing abruptly and suddenly with him, culminating in his deposition in 1924.

that church would soon be outside the Christian Reformed denomination.

The end of Hoeksema's articles in *The Banner* emphasizes for the child of God that salvation is of the Lord. Man at his best is altogether vanity. And the church in the world at her best is made of members whose flesh is wretched and empty and vain. The members of the church hardly recognize this. We think that we are something in the world. But the members who would become the Protestant Reformed Churches carried the folly of Christian Reformed flesh with them. And the members of Remnant Reformed Church carry the folly of Protestant Reformed flesh with us. Always, salvation is of the Lord. Always, man is nothing, and God is everything.

How wonderful are the ways of God! And how good! For it is of his mercies that we are not consumed. Covering our sins and our corrupt flesh in the blood of Christ, God stands us before himself in righteousness. And in every age he reforms his church and preserves his gospel for his name's sake and for his people's salvation and comfort. As we come to the end of Herman Hoeksema's *Banner* articles, let us revisit what Hoeksema wrote

near the beginning. The words ring as true today as then. And may the church of Jesus Christ that endures these hard times for the flesh rejoice that these times are splendid for faith. For God is God! And Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

These are serious times. Times, no doubt, pregnant with significance for the development of the Kingdom of God. Times that cause us to lift up our heads in expectation. Hard times for the flesh, splendid times for our faith. Surely, at all times we ought to long for the completion of the Kingdom of glory and the coming of our King. But nevertheless it is in times as the present that the Holy Spirit undoubtedly concentrates the attention of the Church upon the things that are to come according to God's Word. It is in times as these that God's people learn to pray more consciously than ever, more longingly than before: "Thy Kingdom come!"

May no one take our crown!⁹

—AL



⁹ Herman Hoeksema, "God's Kingdom—All Comprehensive," *The Banner* (September 19, 1918): 673. See *Reformed Pavilion* 1, no. 2 (April 22, 2023): 50.

Reflections on the PRC's Centennial Celebration Commemorative Book (2)

I now return to the Protestant Reformed Churches' (PRC's) official retelling of the controversy in its centennial celebration commemorative book and conclude my analysis.¹

Byron Center PRC

Alexei Navalny was a Russian dissident who repeatedly returned to his motherland despite knowing the danger and ultimately paid for it with his life. In his autobiography he recounts an encounter with those who had falsely accused him in order to silence him. He writes this about his accusers:

If I were to take a photograph of the three of you [the judge and the two prosecutors], or better still of you together with representatives of the so-called victims, those people with whom I've been dealing in recent times, it would show people with downcast eyes, staring at the table. Do you realize that you are all constantly staring down at the table? You have nothing to say.²

He goes on to say that these judges and prosecutors, together with the so-called witnesses who had been brought in to support the false charges, stared at the table and said nothing because they knew that what they were doing was wrong. He aptly describes these people as those who “when all they need to do is *not* do something vile, they go ahead and do it anyway.”³

This describes the consistory of Byron Center PRC in the years of our Lord 2020 and 2021. There were times during consistory meetings when

certain elders would not make eye contact with you. They knew what they were doing was vile and indefensible, so they just sat there mute and stared at the table. Neither was this a one-time event. When the church visitors were invited in to help advise—a word which I use loosely—the consistory, a church visitor pleaded with the elders to say something in defense of “their” decision to suspend their pastor. Instead, they sat mute. This happened again at the meeting of classis. Someone asked the elders of Byron who were in favor of deposition to say something in support of their decision, but they did not utter a word. The reason they remained silent was simple: it was not their decision (although they are responsible for it). It was the decision of the church visitors. You know, the five (!) church visitors, two of whom had charges of sin against the pastor, who came into Byron Center's consistory room and had their way with the consistory.⁴ All Byron's elders had to do was *not* do something vile, but they went ahead and did it anyway.

From the consistory to the classis, they were kangaroo courts. The courts of the PRC rivaled those that repeatedly condemned Alexei Navalny, except that the Russian courts had the decency not to do their evil deeds in the name of God.

Byron Center PRC's biography in the centennial book leaves all of that out, naturally. To quote John Adams, facts are indeed stubborn things, and in this case they do not serve well the cause of whitewashing the history.⁵ The article by Byron

¹ See Dewey Engelsma, “Reflections on the PRC's Centennial Celebration Commemorative Book,” *Reformed Pavilion* 4, no. 15 (July 18, 2026): 4–11.

² Alexei Navalny, *Patriot: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2024), 236.

³ Navalny, *Patriot*, 237.

⁴ For more on this farcical event, see Dewey Engelsma, “Bullied,” *A Strait Betwixt Two* (blog), March 4, 2021, <https://astraitbetwixttwo.com/2021/03/04/bullied/>.

⁵ John Adams, our nation's second president, famously said, “Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts.”

Center PRC mentions the strife and trials due to the schism, but the elders know better. They know that they once had a prophet among them, and they murdered him. They did something vile, and they will carry that with them to their graves.

I did find it striking that Byron Center’s biography had the audacity to claim that Byron Center PRC “has long been known as an outgoing, friendly congregation.”⁶ Yes, that is true, so long as they do not hear a rebuke. Once they hear a rebuke, however, their friendly demeanor evaporates, and their ugly begins to show.

That same spirit was evident when men and women from Hope PRC sought membership at Byron Center. The only crime these members had committed was that they wanted to hear justification by faith alone and not be disciplined for defending it. Byron Center PRC’s response was not to welcome them but to despise them. One elder captured the spirit of the congregation well when, during a meeting to discuss these membership requests, he exclaimed, “We don’t want them here!”

This attitude toward these members of Hope PRC who joined Byron Center PRC is shared by both Dan Van Uffelen and Prof. Brian Huizinga. Both cast aspersions on the motives of the members who left Hope PRC for Byron Center, as well as on the minister they went to hear. Dan writes of the new members who were attracted by Reverend Lanning’s “fiery preaching.”⁷ Professor Huizinga writes about the many families who were “migrating from Hope PRC,” adding that this was “ominously generating unnatural growth.”⁸

The lack of charity displayed by both men is startling. Was it really ominous for these members to leave a church where justification by faith alone had not been preached for years and where those

who defended it had been spiritually abused and murdered? After enduring the meat grinder that was Hope PRC, all they wanted was to hear the gospel preached without having the work of man mingled with the work of Christ. It had become evident that they would not hear that gospel at Hope, and so they left—but only after expending themselves in every effort to call their church back to the truth. After all their labor and after all the abuse they endured, Van Uffelen and Huizinga, neither of whom lifted a finger in defense of the truth, can find nothing better to do than cast aspersions on their motives and, by implication, on the minister they went to hear. Such remarks reflect far more on Van Uffelen and Huizinga than on those against whom they are made.

As for Byron Center PRC? What it should have written in the centennial book is this: “As long as Byron Center PRC has a pastor who will scratch our itching ears and as long as certain people do not join, we are, and will remain, an outgoing, friendly congregation.”

Unity PRC

In its history Unity PRC also writes some things that are true. Sadly, they are only partly true, which means that Unity brings the truth in only to serve its deceit. Unity writes that the congregation formed because Byron Center PRC had become too large for its building. That is true, but it is not the whole truth. Not long before that, when it became clear that Byron Center was outgrowing its facilities, the congregation voted, with only one dissenting vote, to purchase the adjacent property in order to build an addition. That plan changed, however, as the controversy intensified. The word of God came to the congregation with admonitions, and members from Hope PRC increasingly sought membership at Byron Center PRC.

⁶ *Stories of Grace: The Protestant Reformed Churches in America Centennial Celebration Commemorative Book, 1925–2025* (Wyoming, MI: The Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2026), 104.

⁷ *Stories of Grace*, 37.

⁸ *Stories of Grace*, 356. Huizinga even includes a rather silly footnote devoted to counting heads. He analyzes the *Acts of Synod* from 2018 and 2021 to determine how many members left Hope PRC and joined Byron Center PRC, though he admits the numbers are difficult to determine because Byron Center organized a daughter congregation during that time. Apparently, this is thought to be a helpful contribution to understanding the controversy. Should someone happen to cross paths with Professor Huizinga, perhaps he could tell the professor that no one disputes that members left Hope PRC and joined Byron Center PRC. The question is not whether they left. The question is why they left.

Should anyone dispute the statement that the members who would make up Unity PRC refused to hear a rebuke, consider their reaction to Reverend Lanning's sermon "The Tears of Bochim."⁹ Rather than protesting the sermon through the proper ecclesiastical channels, they committed actual schism within the denomination by refusing to allow Reverend Lanning—at the time a pastor in good standing—to preach the sermon from their pulpit. Not because they disagreed with its doctrine, of course, but because they disagreed with its application, which happened to contain a rebuke.¹⁰

Unity PRC speaks of living out its name and caring for one another. And it has done that. As long as they have the right people as members (and exclude certain others) and as long as the preaching remains free from rebuke, the members of Unity PRC live peacefully together in unity.

Perhaps the incident that best summarizes the foundation of Unity PRC took place just before the congregation began worshiping separately. A protest was introduced in the consistory of Byron Center PRC against the conditional preaching of then-Reverend Ron Van Overloop. The vote to adopt the protest as the consistory's protest was unanimous—among those who voted. Two elders, however, refused to vote either yea or nay. Instead, they announced that they would simply pass. Like a politician voting "present" so as not to take a side, both elders voted "pass." Those were the two elders who had been chosen to serve as Unity PRC's inaugural elders. That attitude of indifference toward gross doctrinal error has, no doubt, formed the foundation upon which Unity PRC stands.¹¹

That will do for now. Now it just leaves me to draw some conclusions about the whole matter.

Conclusions About the Whole Matter

What will one conclude after reading the PRC's official retelling of the controversy? This: the denomination behaved righteously and honorably, and it was only because of a few discontents and firebrands that the split—no, the schism—occurred. What about doctrine? No one has ever shown—or can show—that the PRC has deviated in the slightest from the sound doctrine of the Reformed creeds.

Everyone knows this is not true. But as long as everyone in the denomination agrees that it is true, apparently that is enough. The emperor has beautiful clothes, after all.

But what is the spiritual implication of the PRC's view that she is righteous and honorable and has never deviated from sound doctrine? This: the members of the PRC are not sinners. They are righteous. And that is exactly what their centennial book reflects. It is a book filled with men's defending their denomination, justifying themselves, and preserving their own righteousness.

When a man is not a sinner, he does not need a savior. That explains the complete indifference of the PRC to the fact that they, by the testimony of their own synod, displaced Christ. They displaced Christ, but no one cares.

My plea to the denomination and its members is simply this: be sinners, for it is sinners whom Christ came to save. Indeed, the publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before the righteous (see Matt. 21:31).

What can we learn by studying both the controversy itself and the PRC's official retelling of it? We learn again that man at his very best, even when richly endowed with gifts, is altogether vanity. Man is empty, vain, silly, foolish, and wicked. A denomination that prided itself on being none of those things was exposed. Yet even now, rather than confessing their sins, men continue to spin

⁹ Andrew Lanning, "The Tears of Bochim," sermon preached on January 19, 2020, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermons/119201646461657>.

¹⁰ Dewey Engelsma, "Foxes in the Desert," *A Strait Betwixt Two* (blog), December 23, 2022, <https://astraitbetwixtwo.com/2022/12/23/foxes-in-the-desert/>.

¹¹ Perhaps those men knew the fallout that would follow if the protest passed. The denomination was furious that one consistory had dared to protest the false doctrine of Reverend Van Overloop, the darling of the denomination. That spirit was captured in the conduct of one member who, upon learning of the protest, spat in the face of a Byron Center elder. From a political standpoint those two elders made exactly the right decision by refusing to vote altogether.

the whole affair in an effort to justify themselves. There is something profoundly pathetic about that.

What you find in their centennial book—which is, in the end, little more than a glowing paean to the empty honor of man—is simply an extension of their theology. In the end, what matters is what man must do. No one is free simply to be a sinner and to say, “I sinned. I did all that has been exposed and much more. Indeed, the depravity of my heart is greater than you can imagine.” No one is free to be a sinner because, in the PRC, one’s standing with God and man depends upon one’s performance. What bondage.

Is it any wonder, then, that abuse is so prevalent in the denomination? When your theology is “do more so you can get more,” abuse is inevitable. Whether in marriage or in the consistory room, it can never be rooted out because the underlying theology remains unchanged.

As I read through the centennial book, I was filled with sadness. God’s people are in that denomination. If their leaders would simply speak the truth and call the people to repentance, the Spirit of God in the hearts of those members would respond with brokenness and sorrow for their sins. God’s people would grieve over what they have done and turn from those sins in repentance.

Instead, Prof. Brian Huizinga and Dan Van Uffelen, indeed, all who wrote in the centennial book, labor to justify the denomination and preserve their own righteousness. To that end they employ lies and deceit. In doing so they show themselves to be deceitful witnesses, whereas “a true witness delivereth souls” (Prov. 14:25). What a shame. What a grief.

Men rewrite history so that they come out looking better than they did during the actual events. But this too is folly. What does it matter what the earthly record says or what man says about you? Man is a fickle creature. He loves you one day and stones you the next. The record that matters is the one found in heaven.¹²

¹² Not to mention the fact that if we apply the PRC’s theology to that record, they’d better get to repenting if they want forgiveness of their sins or fellowship with God because, last I checked, a glowing centennial book is not one of the prerequisites for salvation.

The Comfort

There is also a word of comfort for the child of God who has endured the loss, pain, and turmoil of the last eleven years. Indeed, what comfort is there for the one who has, in a very real sense, lost his life for Christ’s sake? That comfort is found in Jesus Christ himself. After all, it is not ultimately you whom men slander, murder, or cast out of their company. It is Jesus Christ and his truth against whom they rage. And that truth has never suffered defeat. It has never known even the slightest setback but marches on from victory to victory. “And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer” (Rev. 6:2).

The truth is above all because Jesus Christ is above all. Whether a congregation numbers five or five hundred does not matter. Whether you worship in a house or a beautiful, multimillion-dollar auditorium or a garage does not matter. You cannot judge the condition of a church by its outward appearance or its circumstances. Christ’s kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36–37). Neither does it come with outward observation (Luke 17:20–21).

There is one way, and only one way, to perceive the realities of the kingdom of God, and that is by faith. Not this: “I can see how strong and spiritual my church is because the auditorium is beautiful; the attendance is large; the people are friendly; and when we sing, the windows rattle.” But this: “I believe an holy catholic church” (see Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 21, Q&A 54–56). The true church and the false church are distinguished not by earthly circumstances but by their spiritual marks, and the chief mark is what they do with the truth.

Come Out, God’s People, Come Out

The child of God does not belong in the PRC. Come out, and either form a true church or join one. Not because if you remain you will be punished or cursed. The kingdom of Christ is not advanced by threats or coercion. Rather, come out for this reason: Christ is not there. For the child of God, that is reason enough.

The controversy will fade into history. The names of the men who were engaged in it will likewise pass away. But Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. His righteousness has not changed. His gospel has not changed. His promise has not changed. Neither has his church. The name of that church may change, and often does, as men get their hooks into her and corrupt her. But God will preserve his church from the

beginning of the world to the end, as he has promised (Belgic Confession 27). According to his grace, and contrary to the desires of our flesh, he will continue to reform his church.

The history of this controversy has shown once again what the history of the church has always shown: man is nothing, and God is everything. To him alone be all honor, glory, and praise.

—DE

THE SCRIVENER

God's Covenant with Adam: Question and Answer Session

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

You talk about the covenant with Adam and the covenant of grace. The Old Testament speaks of the covenants with Noah, Abraham, David, etc., etc. There are so many covenants in the Old Testament. What is the relationship among them? What is their relationship to the covenant with Adam?

This question gives us opportunity to see that all of these other covenants in the Old Testament were simply fuller revelations of the one covenant of grace in Christ. We may speak of God’s covenant with Noah, but that does not mean that God’s covenant with Noah was something different than the covenant of grace in Christ. The same holds for the covenant with Abraham, etc. All of them are the one covenant of grace in Christ.

Why did God establish his covenant, then, with Noah and with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and David throughout the Old Testament? It was to reveal certain aspects of the covenant. In the covenant with Noah, for example, God revealed that his covenant is what we might call cosmic or universal. In other words, God’s covenant is not

just with human beings, so that they will exist in a vacuum in heaven. Rather, God’s covenant with his elect in Christ comprehends the entire creation. God made his covenant with the head, Jesus Christ; in Christ with his elect people; and in his elect people with the whole creation. There will be a new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. There will be all manner of creatures in that new heavens and new earth, under the dominion of elect and redeemed man. Romans 8 speaks of that further, that the creation now groans and travails, waiting for the resurrection of the children of God. We also groan in our waiting for that day. At the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead, the creation will be burned up; and out of its ashes (so to speak), God will make the new heavens and the new earth. In that new heavens and earth there will be no death and no vanity, to which the creation is subject now. The covenant with Noah reveals the cosmic aspect of the covenant.

So it is for all the various manifestations of God’s covenant. Each one highlights an aspect of the one covenant of grace in Christ. The covenant with Abraham reveals that the covenant is with Abraham’s *seed* and with his generations. That seed has an identity: it is Christ, as Galatians 3:16 says. The covenant with David shows that God’s

¹ Andrew Lanning, “God’s Covenant with Adam,” *Reformed Pavilion* 4, no. 15 (July 18, 2026): 12–20. The question and answer session can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Cd1fCm7R_g.

covenant is also his kingdom. David as the king is the man after God's own heart, and Jesus Christ is that man and that king. So also all of these Old Testament revelations of the covenant were types and shadows to further unveil and reveal the glory of the one covenant of grace in Christ. God's covenant with Adam fits in with these other covenants as a revelation of the covenant of grace. It was not a different covenant, not a covenant of works or a conditional covenant, nor was it something in between a covenant of works and a covenant of grace. Rather, it was simply the covenant of grace in typical form, revealing some of the things that we have talked about this morning.

Thank you for your message this morning, which makes it very clear what the covenant of works actually is. With regard to the previous question, I think all those so-called different covenants with Noah, David, and so on, are actually God's revealing progressively the covenant of grace. You could say that he was revealing the different facets of the covenant of grace because in the Old Testament times, when they did not have the whole Bible yet, God was revealing the covenant to them, the church underage, slowly, like teaching little children.

The Westminster Confession speaks of the covenant of works. What proof do defenders of a covenant of works use from the three forms of unity to defend their position about a covenant of works?

Those who hold to the covenant of works often refer to the Westminster standards, which do use the phrase "covenant of works." That term itself is problematic. That term does not merely refer to a certain unfolding, or revelation, of the covenant. It refers to a kind of covenant, and it is a different kind than the covenant of grace. We do not follow Westminster's view of the covenant with Adam.

Others in the Reformed tradition appeal to the confessional distinction between the law and gospel as proof that God's covenant with Adam was one kind of covenant (law) and God's covenant of grace in Christ is another kind of covenant (gospel). However, that appeal assumes what must be proven, namely, that God's covenant with Adam equates to God's law and God's covenant of grace

equates to God's gospel. The features of God's covenant with Adam are friendship and fellowship, not conditions and merit, as we have seen.

This question also gives opportunity for us to remark that the covenant of works *cannot* be equated with the law. Scripture makes clear that God's purpose with the law was never to give life by it. The law speaks of life: do this, and live. But God's purpose with the law was never to give life by it. Paul says that if there had been a law that could have given life, righteousness would have come by the law (Gal. 3:21). But there was no such law. There never was such a law because God's purpose with the law was never to give life by that law. Other passages speak of the weakness of the law. The law "was weak through the flesh" (Rom. 8:3). Romans 5 speaks of God's purpose with the law: "the law entered, that the offence might abound" (v. 20), not that life might be given. God's purpose with the law was never that life or salvation come by it. God's purpose was always that life and salvation come by Jesus Christ.

I have gone a little bit beyond what you were specifically asking: Where do those who teach a covenant of works appeal in the creeds? The specific answer is that they appeal to the law/gospel distinction in the confessions, but they erroneously try to apply that true distinction to God's covenant.

How is the covenant of works related to the obedience of the law? We are told that it is. And then Christ's dying on the cross is actually to fulfill this law of obedience. Because he is man, that is how he merited our salvation.

This is a good question that reinforces some of the points that were made today. Many in the Reformed tradition teach that the possibility of Christ's meriting with God is that the incarnate Christ fulfilled the covenant of works. The point we are making today is that this is not the correct conception of Christ's merit. Rather, the possibility of the incarnate Christ's meriting is who he is: the Lord from heaven.

Our opposition to the doctrine of the covenant of works is not that it teaches that there is such a thing as the law. Scripture teaches that there is

such a thing as the law, which is different from the gospel. Nor do we object to the concept of Christ's meriting by his obedience to the law. Scripture teaches that Christ fulfilled the law and, by his fulfilling of the law, earned or obtained salvation for us—and that Christ even fulfilled the law in our place, so that what he did counted for us. Our objection to the covenant of works is not that there is a teaching about the law, not even that there is a teaching about Christ's earning.

Our objection is that the covenant of works equates the covenant with Adam with the law. The covenant of works transforms the covenant—which is the furthest thing from law—into the law. The covenant of works transforms the gracious fellowship of God with man into conditions and contingency. And our objection is that the covenant of works gives to mere man the ability to merit with the living God.

The truth is that the covenant that God made with Adam was a covenant of friendship. That is an amazing thing. Adam was the friend of God! It was not a covenant arrangement, a covenant contract, by which Adam could obtain anything more. It was simply a covenant of friendship, as a picture of the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ.

The reason that Christ could earn, or merit, or fulfill the law, is *not* because there is a covenant of works. It is because Jesus is the Lord from heaven. Jesus is God, and he can do as God come in the flesh what Adam or any other mere man could never do. By his perfect obedience to God, he perfectly fulfilled God's law on our behalf and merited for us eternal life. None of this was possible for Adam because he was of the earth, earthy. But Jesus is the Lord from heaven.

Our objection to the covenant of works is not to the teaching that there is a law, that Jesus fulfilled it, and that his obedience merited eternal life for us. Rather, our objection to the covenant of works is that it makes God's covenant conditional and makes man's friendship with God to be by the works of the law.

I learned another word for the covenant with Adam: the covenant of creation because Adam is also

related to creation. So when Adam fell, the creation fell; that is what I learned from calling it the covenant of creation. Another is that the terms Old Testament and New Testament mean old covenant and new covenant. Can I say that the old covenant and the new covenant are all by grace?

First, we have heard the covenant with Adam called the covenant of creation—not the covenant of works, not the covenant of grace, but the covenant of creation. I would say that is probably, in recent years, the main way that the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) refer to the covenant with Adam. They rightly reject the term *covenant of works*. They sometimes call the first covenant the covenant with Adam. They sometimes call it the covenant of creation. In seminary I was taught to call it the covenant of creation. That is not necessarily objectionable because it does not imply that there were conditions. It doesn't teach that there was a contingent, contractual relationship.

However, there is something not quite satisfactory about the Protestant Reformed Churches' calling it the covenant of creation because that term stops short—and it is meant to stop short—of calling it the covenant of grace. The PRC, to my knowledge, do not identify the covenant with Adam as the covenant of grace in typical form. They identify it as a third thing. I believe that there are ministers in the PRC who have recognized that the denomination has work to do to understand that covenant more fully. But to this point the Protestant Reformed Churches have stopped at calling it the covenant of creation or the covenant with Adam.

What we are talking about today is meant to be a proposal for further understanding of what God's covenant with Adam was. It was a covenant of grace. It was the covenant of grace but in typical form. That is the way the scriptures point us. What is unsatisfactory about leaving it as a covenant of creation is this: where does Christ fit in that covenant of creation? In a typical covenant Christ is there in his types: in Adam and the tree of life and paradise and the river. Christ is there in his types as the one in whom that covenant is established. To call it a covenant of creation leaves it short of what it is.

If you will permit me just one more comment on that question, the great development that God gave to Herman Hoeksema, many years ago already, was to see that the doctrine of a covenant of works is not true and that the covenant with Adam was a covenant of friendship, a covenant of fellowship. That is where the PRC have been since then: it was a covenant of friendship, a covenant of fellowship. For whatever reason they have not taken the one step further, to say that it was actually the covenant of grace in typical form. But as soon as one says that God's covenant with Adam was a covenant of friendship, one must proceed to call it the covenant of grace. Man's friendship with God can only be through Jesus Christ, the covenant head. That is God's covenant of grace in Christ.

Your second question was about the Old and New Testaments: Is it correct to say that the old covenant and the new covenant are all grace? Yes, it is correct to say that. The words *old* and *new* do not distinguish between works and grace, as if the old covenant were a covenant of works and the new covenant were a covenant of grace. But rather, those terms distinguish between that covenant as it was revealed in all of its types throughout the Old Testament and that covenant as it is revealed in the fulfillment of those types in Jesus Christ. The book of Hebrews works through that difference between the old and the new at length, as it shows all of the Old Testament types and what they meant and how Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all of them.

If I may add a little bit regarding the Old and New Testaments, I think the old and new are to distinguish between the old dispensation before Christ comes and the new after he comes.

Today I heard from you how the covenant of works and the covenant of grace have been connected to the law and the gospel respectively. But in my previous church, when they talked about the covenant of works, they developed the covenant of works from the fact that there are parties involved and that there are conditions and promise and punishment; and it is from there that they derived this idea that the covenant with Adam is a covenant of works.

Those in the Reformed tradition who taught a covenant of works followed exactly that method

in deriving the doctrine of the covenant of works. In Genesis 2:1–17 there is a command: thou shalt not eat. There is also a righteous judgment pronounced: in the day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt die. However, there is no probationary period either stated or implied. There is no promise of life upon conditional obedience. The condition, the promise, and the probation were all inferred from the command. But they were inferred without good and necessary consequence. In fact, they were inferred contrary to the actual revelation of God's covenant with Adam as fellowship.

When we fast forward to today, I think that the teachers of the covenant of works would make the same derivation, and they would use the same arguments from Genesis 2:1–17. But the main application today is in the difference between the law and the gospel. The law and the gospel have been under attack. In Reformed churches they have been under attack by the federal vision. Those who hold a covenant of works see the solution as equating the law with the covenant of works and the gospel with the covenant of grace. The problem is that they are trying to fight the fire of the federal vision heresy with the fire of Arminian conditionalism. All it does is make a bigger fire. You cannot answer federal vision conditionalism with more covenant conditionalism. Those who are trying to fight the federal vision today end up filling even the covenant of grace with conditions. And even though they say the new condition is faith, faith as a condition is nothing but a new meritorious work.

The Reformed opponents of the federal vision have taken their stand in the wrong place. They should abandon their insistence on a meritorious covenant of works. That concept of the covenant of works is not necessary to defend Christ's substitutionary merit. The correct place to take our stand is that Christ's merit is located in his identity. The possibility of Christ's merit is not that God deals conditionally with men but that Jesus is the Lord from heaven. Adam could never have merited with God because of who he was: of the earth, earthy. But the last Adam can merit with God because of who he is: the Lord from heaven. Here is the answer

that can stand up to the conditional theology of the federal vision without introducing more conditions.

There is a teaching that connects the covenant with Adam with the free will of man. During Adam's time, in the covenant of works, Adam had a freedom of choice: he could choose either to obey God or to disobey God. He chose to disobey. So after the fall man's will was that he could only sin. Then, after Christ came with salvation and man was regenerated, things went back to how they used to be: man has the freedom to choose right and wrong. And finally, when men go to heaven, they cannot sin anymore. In other words, they are trying to teach that now, when you are born again, you are enabled to choose to obey or disobey.

That is a very interesting application of what Adam was and what he became and what we will be in heaven. I agree with your assessment that men try to use that teaching to sneak in the free will of man now, between redemption and heaven. The truth of the matter is that Adam in the garden was able not to sin (in the Latin in which Augustine originally taught it, *posse non peccare*). After the fall Adam died spiritually and was only able to sin—or not able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*). In heaven Adam is made perfect and is not able to sin anymore (*non posse peccare*).

That is a true presentation of things, as far as it goes. But if men use that today to imply that our condition in Christ is similar to Adam's condition in paradise, they are wrong. If the implication is that redeemed men have a free will to choose good or not to choose good, they are wrong. The doctrine of a free will—even if it is a will that is empowered by God—that is able to act or not to act at the discretion of the sinner is a denial of salvation by grace alone. It is a gross error to make man a party over against God, so that God does his part (enabling) and leaves it to man to do his part (willing and choosing). The truth is that God gives man not only the ability to believe and obey but also the actual believing and obeying. The believing and obeying do not proceed out of enabled man but out of God's sovereign grace.

The teaching is that what Adam lost, Christ restored. Adam lost the ability to choose and obey, but Christ

restored the ability to choose and obey. Therefore, you must exercise your will's ability to choose and obey. You are enabled. You are born again.

The child of God is in Christ. Not only our ability to believe and obey but also our very believing and obeying are gifts given to us by God in Christ. And the good works that God gives us to do we spoil with our sin, so that even our love must be forgiven. But our love of God is the fruit of his love for us. It does not come from our enabled will, but it is his sovereign gift. He is not beholden to us for what we do, but we are beholden to him for the obedience that he gives.

Many years ago, Herman Hoeksema made a warning to the Protestant Reformed Churches that has come true. He said that if the churches would go in the direction of emphasizing man's work and activity, they would lose the doctrine of election. Notice, the warning was not this: if you teach false doctrine about man's work and activity... Rather, the warning was this: if you emphasize man's Spirit-wrought work and God-given activity, you will lose the truth of God's sovereignty in eternal election. That is a warning that must be heard by us yet today. We might have the right doctrine about man's Spirit-wrought work. But if we go in the direction of emphasizing man's work, we will lose the gospel of God's sovereignty.

There is this question that goes around: According to the Heidelberg Catechism, God has created Adam righteous and holy; then how was Adam able to sin and disobey God? Through my observation of what you have taught us this morning regarding the types and shadows—well, as you said, the types are meant to fail because the types cannot merit and cannot fulfill the law. Only Christ is able to fulfill the law. And also we have to understand creation and redemption through the view of the preeminence of Christ, that everything comes from Christ. The Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world, and Adam had to fall. So I believe this is my answer to those who ask this question, how Adam is able to sin against God.

That is a good answer because that answer locates Adam's fall in God's counsel, as serving God's purpose in Christ. That is always the truth regarding man's sin, man's fall, man's iniquity, reprobation,

all the evil works of the devil: they are all decreed by God. They are all governed by God in service of his counsel in Christ. So I would agree with your

answer and heartily support that idea of locating the ultimate answer in God's counsel.

HERMAN HOEKSEMA'S *BANNER* ARTICLES

The Banner

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(pp. 534–35)

Our Doctrine by Rev. H. Hoeksema

Article CLXXII: The Seven Churches in Asia: The Church Growing Lax in Discipline (continued)

II. We read of the church in Pergamum in the first place that it kept the faith. "And thou holdest fast my name," is the testimony Jesus gives of it in this letter. The question might be raised whether it were not advisable for the little church to migrate out of that wicked city where the devil had his throne and dwelling place. It might be more safe for it in other cities in the vicinity. But that is not the message John must deliver to the church. Nor is this the attitude of Scripture in general. Mark, we are dealing with the church as a whole, not with the individual Christian. The Word of God does not approve of the dangerous worldly-mindedness of many a Christian, who for material advantages separates himself from the communion of saints and lives in isolation from the church of Christ in the midst of the world. Much rather does it call our attention to the sad history of Lot's family in such cases.

On the other hand, the Scriptures never tell us that the church of Christ as such must emigrate from the world and live in literal and local isolation. This were impossible. No, in the world, though not of the world, is the rule that holds for the church of all ages. And, therefore, the church of Pergamum is not commanded to leave its wicked and devilish surroundings, but rather to be a faithful witness of the name of its King and Savior. And faithful it had been in the past. It had kept the faith, and held fast the name of Jesus.

Naturally, this must be understood in contrast with the environments of the little church. In the city the name of Jesus was not honored or

confessed. It was the name of Aesculapius and of Caesar that was on the lips of all. And in the midst of these idolatrous surroundings they held fast to the only name that is given under heaven for salvation, they confessed the name of Jesus Christ. They kept the faith. They were not seduced. They were not shaken in their faith and hope and love, but they clung to the name of him that walketh in the midst of the golden candlesticks.

Still more, the Lord witnesses of them in their favor. They were not only a believing church, but they also publicly confessed the name of their King and Lord. It were conceivable that they kept the faith and clung to the name of Jesus, but that they kept it all for themselves, that they lived in seclusion, rather timid to publicly express their relation to the Christ, so that they avoided an open clash with their wicked environment. But once more, this is not the calling of the church of Christ. Christ does not establish his church in the world in order that it should exist in oblivion, hiding itself in some secluded little corner of the world or seeking refuge on some solitary little island far from society. It is in the world to let its light shine, to witness of the grace and the glory of its King; it may not hold its peace even when the world threatens with devilish fury. The church must confess, and not to confess is to deny. And also in this respect the church of Pergamum had been faithful. For the Lord testifies of it, "and hast not denied my name." They, therefore, confessed. They were not silent. How could they? There they lived in the midst of an

environment that proclaimed a false god savior and a man their lord and god! Would it not have been unfaithful of the church had they been silent and kept their peace? Would it not have been a dishonor to the name of their Lord and their King if they had left the impression that they lacked the courage to confess him? They could not. Over against the cry of the town, “Aesculapius is savior!” they boldly maintained: “There is no other name than that of Jesus!” When the world proclaimed that Caesar was God and as such was to be worshipped by all, they could not submit, but opposing the world also in this respect they confessed that Christ was King and that the Lord God and he alone is worthy of worship. And thus it is also the calling of the church of today to let the testimony go forth over against the man worship of modernism. “Jesus Christ is King, and he alone is the Savior of the world!”

But still more there is implied in this faithful confession of the name of Jesus over against the world on the part of the church in Pergamum. The Lord speaks of days of persecution and tribulation the church had experienced in the past, the days of Antipas, one of Christ’s faithful witnesses, who had been killed among them, where Satan dwelled. Nor does it cause us surprise that the world could not tolerate the witnesses of Christ in the city. Surely, the church may escape the bitter hatred of the world and persecution from its side for a long time, as long as it will only be silent and unfaithful and hide its light under a bushel, as long as it does not condemn the world in its self-made religion and man worship and boldly confess the name of Jesus. But no sooner does the church realize its calling and faithfully unfurl the banner of its King than the hatred of the world of that detestable Jesus of Nazareth and his “blood theology” will manifest itself in bitter persecution. Thus it had been in Pergamum in the past. Nothing else is known of the Antipas mentioned in the letter than that he was a faithful witness and had been killed for the testimony he had given, but surely, this incident is proof of the fact that the church had experienced dark and evil days, days of tribulation, even as the church in Smyrna experienced. And in all this they had been faithful and not denied the name of Jesus!

III. From what we have considered of the church in Pergamum thus far, we would be inclined to draw the conclusion that it was a beautiful and most perfect specimen of a church, in no respect inferior to the congregation of Smyrna. And we would surely not anticipate any form of rebuke in this letter addressed to it. Also here we have the picture of a church in tribulation, in the midst of a world that cannot tolerate its existence, yet flourishing spiritually and faithful to the Lord, its King. Yet the Lord holds a few things against it. And in order to understand how this is possible, we must notice in the first place that there is a noticeable difference between this church and the one in Smyrna. The latter was right in the midst of tribulation; in fact, the darkest days for it were still in the future; but with Pergamum it is somewhat different. The Lord refers to the days of Antipas as belonging to the past. The church still lived in the midst of a hostile world; it had experienced the hatred of that world and had been persecuted for the testimony they had. But evidently, the first wave of fury had passed. Pergamum had lived through its first attack from Satan and the world, now it was a time of relief for the church. And history plainly shows that such times are dangerous for the church of God. In close connection with this fact stands the other, namely, that the church in Pergamum was defective in discipline of its own members. This is a feature not mentioned of the church in Smyrna; in fact, I imagine that there was not much occasion for discipline in that congregation for the simple reason that it was a church in tribulation. But in Pergamum discipline had become lax, while there was abundant occasion that called for strictness in this respect. No, the situation in Pergamum was not as serious as that in Ephesus, but the defect was of such a nature as to call for a rebuke from the Lord nevertheless. Discipline is the Christ-ordained guard in the church of Jesus. It is the sentinel standing watch by the purity of doctrine according to the Word and the holiness of the sacraments, as well as over the walk of believers. Where that sentinel is not placed on guard, or is sleeping while on duty, the church is exposed to the evil, seducing influence of false doctrine as well as to the degenerating influence of the world upon the life of its individual members.

In Pergamum that sentinel was fast asleep, for the Lord reprovingly calls its attention to the fact that it has there “some that hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication,” some that “hold the teachings of the Nicolaitans in like manner.” There were, therefore, evil men in the church of Pergamum, men that did not belong to the church in spirit and in truth. And they were allowed.

The reason why the church was lax in disciplining these men is not revealed. Hardly would it seem conceivable that the church was not aware of their existence in its midst, for they must have labored for the spread of their evil influence. Perhaps it was afraid that, since the congregation already had to cope with so many difficulties and had a hard battle to fight against the world, the disciplining of its own members would weaken it still more. Perhaps the excuse was given which is so often offered for laxity in discipline in our own time, namely, that the church must save. The church must save and not reject, so we often hear it in our time. Who knows whether these evil members, if they are borne with patience and longsuffering, will not come to repentance! On the basis of such false excuses, evil men are tolerated within the church of Christ. Some churches defend the membership of those that belong to secret societies on that very basis: if only they are in the church once, they may be persuaded to sever their connection with the lodge! Men that hold a false doctrine are tolerated, and the church that does exercise discipline over them is rebuked, because true faith is after all not a matter of doctrine, but of the heart, and it would be cruel and indicative of a “holier than thou” spirit of intolerance if such men were excommunicated from the church of Christ. We are, perhaps, acquainted with the flimsy arguments that are used in defense of a laxity of discipline. Jesus will not have it so. And whatever may have been the cause of this laxity of discipline in the church of Pergamum, the Lord holds it against them and in his letter speaks of it rebukingly.

Exactly in what manner these evil men in the church of Pergamum had made themselves objects

of discipline the letter does not tell us. They were Nicolaitans, here as in Ephesus where they were hated and not tolerated. In this letter, however, we receive some more definite information about them. They are compared with Balaam, that most abominable of all false prophets pictured in the Old Testament. Second to Judas, who betrayed the Savior for thirty pieces of silver, it is perhaps difficult to think of a meaner, more abominable and debased creature mentioned in Scripture than this Balaam, that agent of the devil. You are acquainted, of course, with the history of the man. Sent for by Balak, king of the Moabites, to curse the children of Israel that are encamped in the plains of Moab, the thing appeals to Balaam, though he knows it is wicked and against the will of Jehovah, for the simple reason that there is money in it. Repeatedly the hypocrite implores the Lord to let him go with the king’s ambassadors till finally because of his importunacy Jehovah grants him the wish of his heart and lets him walk in his evil way. On the way thither he receives another warning through his mute beast, but without effect; he travels on. Arriving at the place of his destination and beholding from the heights the children of Israel, he cannot but pronounce upon them the blessing of Jehovah which the Spirit gives him to speak, and in spite of his own miserly soul and the provocation of the king of Moab, he must confess that he cannot curse whom the Lord Jehovah would bless. And what now does this debased instrument of Satan do? He gives the king some practical advice and according to Num. 31:16 he counsels him how he may shrewdly bring destruction upon the people of God. He speaks: “You send some of the nice girls that are connected with the service of Baal-Peor into the camp of the Israelites, and the sons of the Israelites will surely commit fornication with them and eat of the sacrifice to your idols. Thus you will wipe out their distinctive character as a people of Jehovah and accomplish by strategy what force cannot bring about!” That was the advice of Balaam to the king. Its immediate object was the obliteration of the distinctive character of the people of God, their amalgamation with the people of Moab.

And now the text compares the Nicolaitans to this Balaam who offended the people of God. I imagine that they were a sort of Antinomians, people who deliberately taught that it mattered not how the Christian lived here upon earth, since Christ fulfilled the law and the old Adam was doomed to destruction anyway. They were not very scrupulous as to their own lives, would feast with the heathen and eat of their sacrifices. In a word, they were a class of people that threatened by their doctrine and life to obliterate the distinction between the church and the world in Pergamum, even as the counsel of Balaam was calculated to wipe out the characteristic difference between the people of Israel and the Moabites.

And thus the church of Pergamum, by allowing these people to exist in the church, was in grave danger of losing its distinctive character as a church of Christ. The plan and subtilty of the devil in this scheme is transparent. In the recent past he had made an attempt to wipe out the church and make it unfaithful to its Lord by subjecting it to bloody persecution, but he had failed. For the time being

he now abandoned this course of action in order to try the method of corrupting the church and thus wiping out the distinction between the church and the world. I think in this respect the letter of Christ to the church in Pergamum has a great lesson to teach us. Is not obliteration and amalgamation characteristic of all the devil does today? Are we not told that it matters not what form of doctrine we embrace if only we will all be brothers? Is he not busily engaged in socializing and secularizing the church of Christ? And, on the other hand, is not the church of Christ growing more lax in discipline and weaker in its hold upon the truth of the Word every year? I am convinced that such are the conditions indeed. And, therefore, the church in Pergamum, in this respect at least, is a true picture of the church of today, and the message which the Lord instructs John to write to that congregation may also be applied to us: "Repent, therefore, or else I will come to thee quickly, and I will make war with them with the sword of my mouth!"

(To be continued)

