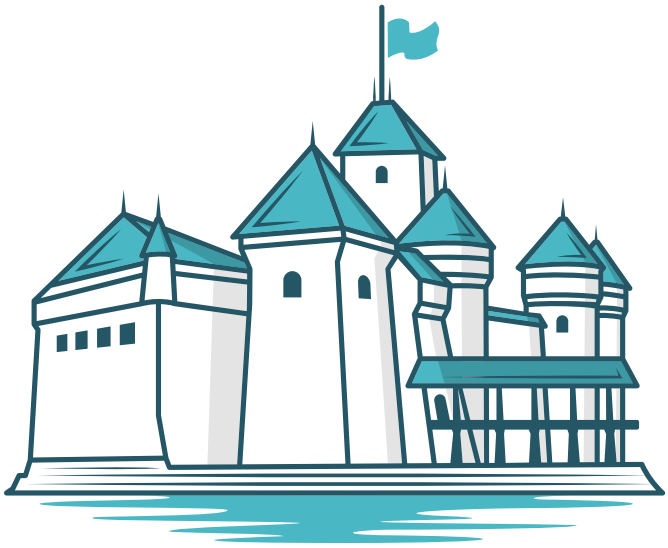


REFORMED PAVILION

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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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Even as it is meet for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart; inasmuch as both in my bonds, and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers of my grace.

—Philippians 1:7

Partakers of My Grace

Paul was confident that God would preserve the Philippian Christians (Phil. 1:6). Nothing could thwart God's performing his good work of salvation in them. But God's preservation of the Philippians was about to be put to the test. Many long miles away from Philippi, in the city of Rome, Paul's trial before Caesar was about to begin. Paul was on trial for the sake of the gospel. If Caesar would condemn Paul for the gospel, then the Philippians—and all Christians throughout the Roman empire—would be condemned for the gospel as well. In light of the Philippians' potential condemnation, should not Paul revise his assessment of their preservation? Should not Paul take back his confidence that "he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (v. 6)? Not at all! Paul took nothing back but affirmed that his confidence in God's preservation of them was right and true. "Even as it is meet for me to think this of you all" (v. 7). Let us draw near and learn of the wonderful grace of God for his people in Christ.

As Paul wrote to the Philippians, he was a prisoner in Rome. He lived twenty-four hours a day "in my bonds" (Phil. 1:7). Paul's imprisonment was house arrest; that is, he was confined to a house or room that he was required to rent (Acts 28:16, 30). Because Paul had been committed to the emperor's Praetorian Guard—"the captain of the guard" (v. 16)—Paul's room was likely located in one of the many apartment blocks near the Praetorian barracks. Paul could receive visitors, preach, write, and send letters from his room; but he could not leave (v. 30). Paul and his gospel would soon become known throughout the entire Praetorian barracks (Phil. 1:13, where "palace" is literally "praetorium"), for at all times Paul must remain chained to one of these elite Roman soldiers (Acts 28:16). The prisoner's chain that ran from Paul's limbs to the Roman guard on duty in his room was the "bonds" to which Paul refers (Phil. 1:7). The years that Paul spent confined to this room were heavy to bear. The apartment blocks of those days were often in disrepair, and the hardened Roman soldiers were not known for their gentleness, their manners, or their consideration of the comforts of their prisoners.

But as Paul wrote from Rome to the Philippians, his long-awaited trial was about to commence. Paul used two legal terms to describe what would be heard at the trial before Caesar: "defence" and "confirmation." The defense was Paul's legal plea that he was not guilty of the charges against him. The confirmation was the set of facts that would support Paul's plea. Paul would soon be required to appear before Caesar, enter his plea, and make his case.

But when Paul wrote to the Philippians about his impending trial, he described the trial in remarkable terms. He did not call it "my defense" and "my confirmation." Rather, he wrote of "the defence and confirmation *of the gospel*" (Phil. 1:7). Paul was not on trial; the gospel was on trial! Even though Paul would appear before Caesar, plead not guilty, and produce his facts, the entire trial was really about the gospel. What will man do with the gospel? What will man do with Christ? Paul saw to

the heart of the matter: his trial was not about him but about the gospel.

The implication of that truth was that all Christians were on trial with Paul. That is what Paul meant when he wrote, "I have you in my heart" (Phil. 1:7). Paul was not speaking of his affectionate feelings toward the Philippians, though he would soon do that. Rather, the word "heart" in this context means roughly the same as "person" does for us today. Paul was saying that the Philippians were there with him. Even though they were miles and miles away from Paul, they were right there with Paul in his rented room, sharing in his bonds. They would be right there with Paul when he stood before Caesar. Their cause was one. Their gospel was one. Their savior was one. Their case was one. Their trial was one. Paul was saying, "I have you with me both in my bonds and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel."

And therefore Paul could be absolutely sure that God would preserve the Philippians. Regardless of what Caesar ruled, God would complete the good work of salvation that he had begun in them. How could Paul be so sure? Because Paul knew God's grace to him. And knowing God's grace to him, he knew God's grace to the Philippians. "Ye all are partakers of my grace" (Phil. 1:7). Oh, had God been gracious to Paul! Yes, to Paul, who had consented unto Stephen's death (Acts 8:1); had "made havock of the church"; had entered "into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison" (v. 3); and had breathed out "threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord" (9:1). Paul deserved to die! He deserved the storm of God's wrath to come crashing down from heaven upon him. He deserved that Jesus Christ—whom he had persecuted!—would suddenly appear to cast him into outer darkness. But what did God do to Paul, the sinner? Why, God was gracious to Paul! Jesus Christ did not appear suddenly to cast Paul into the darkness of hell but to surround him with the light of heaven (v. 3). What grace God showed to Paul! What favor for such an undeserving sinner! And this according to God's eternal decree of election, for Paul was a chosen vessel unto God (v. 15). Well did Paul know that "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Rom. 5:20). And now Paul speaks of it: "my grace" (Phil. 1:7). That is, God's grace to me, the sinner!

The relationship between Paul and the Philippians ran as deep as that grace. For the Philippians were partakers of the very same grace of God as Paul. The word "partakers" that Paul uses is as strong a word as possible for sharing together in something. By adding a prefix in the original Greek, the word stacks togetherness upon togetherness to emphasize the idea of joint participation. We could translate it "together-partakers" or "joint-partakers" or "with-partakers." By this word the Holy Ghost means that the very same grace of God that he had shown to Paul he had also shown to the Philippians. They were together-sinners who together-deserved eternal wrath but were together-partakers of God's grace in Christ.

So let Caesar say what he will. Let man rise up against God's gospel. It matters not, for the gospel cannot fail, just as the grace of God cannot fail. Oh yes, Paul was right to be confident of the Philippians' preservation. And we are right to be confident by faith! For Paul, the Philippians, and we share the same gospel, the same grace, and the same God. "Even as it is meet for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart; inasmuch as both in my bonds, and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers of my grace" (Phil. 1:7).

—AL

From the Editor

Here at *Reformed Pavilion* headquarters, the nights have begun to dip below freezing. What a scene it is when the Lord "scattereth the hoarfrost like ashes" (Ps. 147:16). By the same almighty power, "he sheweth his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his judgments unto Israel" (v. 19). And God's people, beholding God's wondrous works, have only one thing to say: "Praise ye the Lord" (v. 20).

In this issue of *Reformed Pavilion*, Dewey Engelsma begins a brief series on the truth of marriage. The first installment revisits an old case in order to set our feet on solid biblical ground. And not a moment too soon, for the doctrine of marriage in much of Reformed Christianity today is sorely lacking a solid biblical foundation. Dewey's article reminds us readers of the lovely gospel that God will preserve his doctrine of marriage among his people. Though we would undoubtedly corrupt it, God will preserve it. How gracious is our God!

The question and answer session from the Reformation Day lecture at Remnant Reformed Church will appear next week. And the Canons series will resume soon as well. All of this, the Lord willing.

The season's final chores are wrapping up. The last of the leaves are raked, the garden hoses are taken in, and the fleece blankets have been dug out of the closet. Time to settle in for this week's issue of *Reformed Pavilion*.

—AL

From the Ramparts

If the Case of the Man Be So… (1)

The year was 1987, and a matter concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage was coming before the Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC).

What finally came before synod was the culmination of a dispute that had pitted many of the denomination's trained theologians, on one side, against one man, whose academic record ended with the eighth grade, on the other side.

The controversy arose over whether a man, Charles Brown in this case, could marry again while his former wife was still living. His church, Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Wyckoff, New Jersey—and over time, several of the denomination's theologians—maintained that he could, on the ground that his previous marriage had not been a valid marriage in the eyes of God.

Their position was that because the woman to whom Charles had been originally married was herself divorced from a previous husband, her subsequent marriage to Charles was adulterous and therefore not a valid marriage in the eyes of God. Consequently, they maintained that Charles had never been truly married (in the eyes of God) and was therefore free to marry another woman. The woman he intended to marry was Candace Hoeksema, the daughter of Prof. Homer Hoeksema.

In the consistory's words, "We ought to allow those who have been divorced from adulterous marriages to marry a lawful husband or wife" and "that thus we take the position that as far as the Word of God is concerned, the brother is unmarried and may seek a wife from God."[1]

[1] *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America 1987*, 200.

Covenant PRC had given its blessing to the marriage of this couple, and that news had reached a man in Grand Rapids, Michigan. On December 24, 1985, he wrote to the consistory of Covenant. He informed the elders that he had learned of the intended marriage and had confirmed from reliable sources that the consistory of Covenant PRC had approved it. Believing that the decision wrongly granted the right of remarriage, he informed the consistory of his intention to protest and requested the minutes pertaining to the matter.[2]

After receiving the minutes, he formally protested the decision on February 17, 1986. The consistory's decision, which had been based upon a study report by Covenant's pastor, Rev. Ron Hanko, came down to this: Is an adulterous marriage truly a marriage in the eyes of God? Covenant PRC, under the leadership of Reverend Hanko, said no. In its response to the protest, the consistory wrote, "We believe God does not recognize marriage that is adulterous. We believe when scripture speaks of adulterous marriages, it is doing so in mere formality."[3] Therefore, although the state recognized the marriage as valid, Covenant maintained that God did not and that the man was consequently free to remarry.

The protestant disagreed, and the matter went to Classis East. Classis upheld his protest, maintaining that an adulterous marriage nevertheless constitutes a marriage in the eyes of God.

This decision was not well received. Seven protests challenging the decision were brought to a subsequent meeting of classis. In addition to a protest from one individual and the consistory of Covenant PRC, several ministers protested: Revs. Ken Hanko, Ron Hanko, Ron Cammenga, Tom Miersma, and Gise Van Baren. One put the issue in stark terms, saying that the decision of classis to uphold the protestant was a "repudiation of [the] fundamental teaching of Scripture and [the] Protestant Reformed Churches" that marriage is only between one man and one woman for life.[4]

Classis nevertheless reaffirmed its previous decision. Among its grounds, classis judged that the protestants had failed to prove their positions from the word of God or the confessions and had violated two fundamental principles of biblical interpretation. The first was that "words must be taken in their literal sense unless such literal interpretation would involve an evident absurdity or contradiction." The second was that in "grammatico-historical exposition" "a word or sentence can have but one signification in one and the same connection."[5] Classis went on to show how the protestants had violated these principles.

Still dissatisfied, the protestants appealed to Synod 1987. Synod upheld Classis East, affirming that an adulterous marriage is nevertheless a valid marriage in the eyes of the state *and the church*. Consequently, a man divorced from a woman who had been previously married and divorced was not free to marry another while his former spouse was still living. Such a marriage would constitute remarriage while his original spouse lived.[6] And with that the matter was closed.

Why resurrect this history nearly forty years later? It was, after all, a very unusual case and not one that will be repeated. Synod itself recognized this, characterizing it as an "exceptional marriage case."[7] I do so for three reasons.

First, I hope to write a short series on marriage, divorce, and remarriage; and this controversy provides a fitting place to begin. The devil always

[2] It is striking that in his letter to the consistory, the protestant first informed them of his intention to protest and then requested a copy of all the minutes pertaining to the matter. The consistory, for its part, rather than lecturing him about the church orderly way and insisting that he waste the next six to twelve months of his life corresponding with them, sent him the minutes. And after receiving and responding to his protest, they informed him that if he remained dissatisfied, instead of continuing to correspond, he should "refer the matter to Classis" (*Acts of Synod 1987*, 265). My, how things have changed.

[3] *Acts of Synod 1987*, 265.

[4] Rev. Ron Cammenga, quoted in *Acts of Synod 1987*, 202.

[5] *Acts of Synod 1987*, 206.

[6] *Acts of Synod 1987*, 29.

[7] *Acts of Synod 1987*, 30.

has the truth of marriage in his crosshairs; and although the details of this particular controversy may seem a bit peculiar to us today, the heart of the matter could not have been more serious. Had the broader assemblies not supported the protestant, the PRC's stand on marriage, divorce, and remarriage would have been seriously compromised. Once the door is open a crack, it is soon thrust all the way open. Just ask the churches that once took their stand on remarriage only for the innocent party.

The details may change, but the devil has not stopped attacking the institution of marriage. In fact, it is no overstatement to say that as the day of our Lord approaches, his attacks will only increase. Those attacks have one goal in mind: to have the church teach something other than that taught by Jesus and the apostles. That is because ultimately the devil's attacks are aimed at Jesus Christ. What a church says about earthly marriage, it is saying about the marriage of Christ and his church. Divorce for many reasons? A breaking of the marriage bond for reasons other than death? Free remarriage once a few tears have been shed? To corrupt the earthly picture is to corrupt the reality it was designed to reflect.

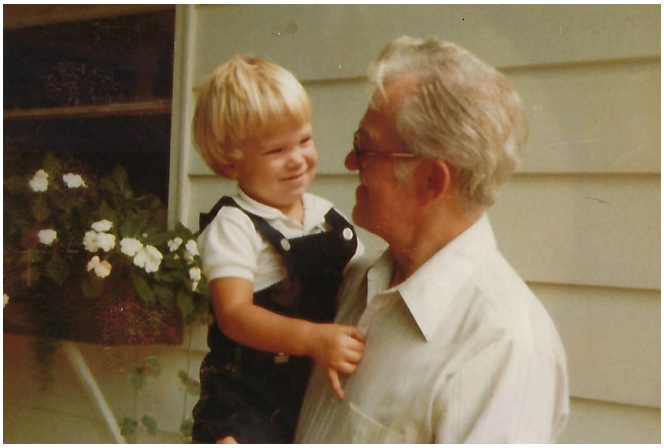
Many today treat the truth of marriage as little more than a trifle. This is clear when you see how little a church's teaching about marriage, divorce, and remarriage weighs on a man when deciding on church membership. As long as a church gives a man what he wants—and what a man wants, approximately 100% of the time, is an easier life and, above all, the avoidance of any future controversy or even the possibility of it—it matters little what that church teaches about marriage. But the child of God and the true church of Jesus Christ may not regard marriage lightly. That truth is precious because it reflects something immeasurably precious: the unbreakable bond of Christ and his church.

The proper view of marriage was not popular in Jesus' day, and it is no more popular today. In this series I hope to examine the disciples' striking response to Jesus' teaching on marriage: "If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry" (Matt. 19:10). So astonished were they by Jesus' teaching that they concluded it would be better not to marry at all.

Yet if the disciples heard what the church world teaches about marriage today, would they have responded with such astonishment? Why would they? If your first spouse does not suit you, shed a few tears and find another. Who could object to that?

Second—and here the reader will forgive me a bit of sentimentality—the man who brought the protest was my grandfather, Mr. Dewey Engelsma. I have the 1987 *Acts of Synod* on my bookshelf alongside a picture of the two of us (which you can see below).

I find something deeply moving in the thought of this man, with only an eighth-grade education, hearing about a decision in a church hundreds of miles away that he believed threatened the church's teaching on marriage and then sitting down on Christmas Eve to draft a letter objecting to its decision and requesting the minutes.



Two Deweys: one holding fast to the truth of marriage, the other just happy to be held fast

His course was not an easy one. Those close to him advised him to drop the matter, warning that "they would eat him alive" at the broader assemblies. Not only was the woman involved Professor Hoeksema's daughter, but also a number of trained ministers and theologians opposed the position for which he contended. The pressure to leave the matter alone must have been considerable.

But he did not drop it. The matter at issue was marriage, and marriage was worth fighting for.

Third, the issue may seem clear once the dust has settled and many years have passed. But reading the protests and responses makes clear that it was not so obvious in the heat of controversy. If we judge merely by what learned men write, matters can become very confusing. The word of God is clear, however. Men, for all their learning and earthly wisdom, have a remarkable ability to make complicated what God has made clear. Nowhere is this more evident than in what men do with the crystal-clear teaching of God's word on marriage.

I will conclude with this. I have indulged in a bit of sentimentality—and I thank the reader for his indulgence—but what is important in this history is not the man whom God used to accomplish his purpose. Put differently, God does not use weak and foolish things so that we might later exalt them. He uses the weak things of the world to confound the mighty that God and God alone might receive the glory. Man labors, yet not man.

Marriage belongs to God. It is his institution. He will preserve it. Let the devil tempt, let man corrupt, and let the church connive and compromise; but God's truth of marriage will stand. And therein lies the comfort of the true church of Jesus Christ. The preservation of the truth of marriage does not depend upon the strength or wisdom of men.

Men know it is not possible to build a glorious kingdom of man by teaching what Jesus taught about marriage. So they alter his teaching, changing it until it becomes palatable to the nature of men. And that desire—to be recognized, to have security, and to build something that causes men to stop and take notice of us—is in all of us. That means the ability, and even the desire, to compromise lies not far beneath the surface in any of us. Let the man who thinks himself a rock, who imagines that he will stand for the truth of marriage, come what may, take heed lest he fall.

But as surely as Christ will present his church to himself as "a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27), so surely will God preserve the truth of marriage, for the comfort of his people and the glory of his name.

—DE

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