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Editor's Notes

Two articles in this issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* will be of general interest to all Reformed readers, while two others will be of specific interest to members of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA).

Of general interest are the first and fourth. Rev. Joshua Engelsma contributes the first article in a two-part series. It is a historical-theological examination of these questions: Is saving faith a bond of union with Jesus Christ? Or is the Holy Spirit Himself that bond? And more specifically, what did Reformed writers in the past say about this? The historical investigation has specific relevance to the PRCA, in which a common understanding is that saving faith, as to its essence, is a bond that unites us to Christ.

Peter Vander Schaaf presents a translation of another part of Harm Bouwman's commentary on the Church Order of Dordrecht (1619). In the translated section, Bouwman treats Articles 31, 33, and 36 of that Church Order, regarding the relationship of the individual churches and consistories to the broader assemblies, and the authority of the broader assemblies. To our knowledge, this has not previously been translated into and published in English. Read the translator's introduction to the article for a fuller summary of what Bouwman is saying.

The two of specific interest are the second and third articles. Rev. Steven Key put into print form the content of an oral/visual presentation that he gave at the PRCA's centennial commemoration this past June. He recounts the perspectives of the first fifty years of the PRCA, as told by people who were interviewed in the 1980s. The article contains fascinating history that will appeal to readers who are not quickly inclined to read our *Journal* because of its more academic flavor.

Prof. Douglas Kuiper presents his third installment of the history of Classis West of the PRCA. This article surveys major issues that the classis faced and presents precedent-setting decisions. Classis expressly permitted the publishing of these decisions in this instance and form.

Six books are reviewed. Two are significant translations of older works. The *Synopsis of Purer Theology* (1625) set forth Reformed

orthodoxy after the Synod of Dordrecht (1618-19). (This year marks the 400th anniversary of the *Synopsis*). All who are interested in the church's formulation of doctrine and the history of doctrinal controversies will want to read this book. And the third volume of Herman Bavinck's *Ethics* is reviewed. More development is needed in the area of Reformed ethics, but this book is foundational.

Two other books regard church history. One covers the history of Christianity in America, and the second other reviews the third edition of Herman Hoeksema's history of the formation and early years of the PRCA.

And two regard the Bible. One regards the history of the creation of the NIV, while the other is an apologetic, that is, a defense of the trustworthiness of the New Testament.

God requires us to think on, and therefore also to read about, that which is true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report (Phil. 4:8). The writers of the following articles consciously set out to provide wholesome reading material, and we pray that you be blessed in reading it.

DJK

The Historical Development of the Concept of Faith in Relation to Union with Christ

Joshua D. Engelsma

Recently there has been discussion among clergy and members of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA) about the concept of faith. Among other things, this discussion has been about whether it is necessary and accurate to define faith using the specific terminology of “bond,” that is, as a bond of union with Jesus Christ.¹

In an attempt to help shed light on this subject, this article presents a historical survey of how Reformed theologians of the past have addressed the question of faith in relation to union with Christ. The article begins by noting the writings of some of the early reformers on the continent and then narrows the focus to theologians in the Dutch Reformed tradition.

This paper does not proceed very far into the twentieth century, nor does it address the use of this concept among theologians in the PRCA. A future article, God willing, will address the use of the concept in the PRCA.

It ought to be noted from the outset what are the advantages and limitations of a historical survey of faith in relation to union with Christ.

The *advantages* of this approach include the following. First, it helps us gain a broad feel for how the concept of faith was used throughout many centuries in the Dutch Reformed tradition to which we belong. Second, a sense of how Reformed theologians of the past have addressed this question gives us opportunity to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of our own use of it.

The *limitations* of this historical approach include the following. First, a broad, historical survey limits our attention to the major works of some of the major figures in the Reformed tradition. Second, a historical survey is descriptive and not prescriptive, that is, describing

¹ See the exchange of letters in *Standard Bearer*, May 15, 2024, 392-93, and July, 2024, 445-47.

what other Reformed theologians have said about the question tells us what they believed but does not necessarily mean that they were correct and that this should be normative for Reformed theologians today.

Reformed Theologians of the Sixteenth Century

This historical survey begins by considering the works of some of the influential reformers on the continent. To begin with the reformers is not to say that the way in which they spoke of faith was entirely novel; there is evidence to suggest that the concepts they used with respect to faith have roots going back to the writings of Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274).²

Second-Generation Continental Reformers

First, we will consider two men who belonged to the second generation of Reformed theologians: John Calvin and Wolfgang Musculus.³

The mature theological thought of **John Calvin** (1509-1564) is found, of course, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which was first published in 1536 and frequently revised until its final edition in 1559. In the third book of the 1559 *Institutes*, Calvin treats “The Mode of Obtaining the Grace of Christ.” He begins this section by stating: “We must now see in what way we become possessed of the blessings which God has bestowed on his only-begotten Son.” He explains that we can only possess the blessings of salvation if we are united to Christ:

And the first thing to be attended to is, that so long as we are without Christ and separated from him, nothing which he suffered and did

2 Maarten Wisse, “*Habitus fidei*: An essay on the history of a concept,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56, no 2 (2003): 174ff; Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 218 (n17).

3 The language of “second generation” comes from Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), pages 41, 56, 179. Others often cited as belonging to this second generation of Reformed theologians include Heinrich Bullinger, Jan à Lasco, Peter Vermigli, Andreas Hyperius, and Pierre Viret. Theologians belonging to the first generation include Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, and Johannes Oecolampadius.

for the salvation of the human race is of the least benefit to us. To communicate to us the blessings which he received from the Father, he must become ours and dwell in us. Accordingly, he is called our Head, and the first-born among many brethren, while, on the other hand, we are said to be ingrafted into him and clothed with him, all which he possesses being, as I have said, nothing to us until we become one with him.

Calvin believes that faith is the means whereby we receive these blessings, but then indicates that it is necessary to proceed to explain how a person has faith, which is by the working of the Holy Spirit: “And although it is true that we obtain this by faith, yet since we see that all do not indiscriminately embrace the offer of Christ which is made by the gospel, the very nature of the case teaches us to ascend higher, and inquire into the secret efficacy of the Spirit, to which it is owing that we enjoy Christ and all his blessings.” He summarizes this discussion by saying: “The whole comes to this, that the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually binds us to himself.”⁴

In what follows, Calvin explains the faith that is wrought in the hearts of those united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, and defines faith this way: “We shall now have a full definition of faith if we say that it is a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favor toward us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds, and sealed on our hearts, by the Holy Spirit.”⁵ And later he says of faith, “Christ given to us by the kindness of God is apprehended and possessed by faith.”⁶ What he means by this is that the elect child of God, united to Christ by the Holy Spirit and given the gift of faith, lays hold of Christ consciously by faith.

In another work, his *Confession of Faith in [the] Name of the Reformed Churches in France* (1562), Calvin writes similarly about faith:

13. How We Partake of Jesus Christ and His Benefits—of Faith

Now we understand that we are made partakers of all his blessings

4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 3.1.1; 1:462-63.

5 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.7; 1:475.

6 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1; 2:37.

by means of faith; for this it is which brings us into communication with Christ, in order that he may dwell in us, that we may be ingrafted into him as our root, that we may be members of his body, that we may live in him, and he in us, and possess him, with all his benefits. And that it may not be thought strange that we attribute such virtue to faith, we do not take it for a fleeting opinion, but for a certainty which we have of the promises of God, in which all these blessings are contained, and by which we embrace our Lord Jesus Christ as the surety of all our salvation, and apply to our own use what he has received of God his Father to impart unto us. This faith we likewise know that we cannot have if it be not given us from above, and as Scripture declares (Eph. 2:9; 1:18) till the Holy Spirit enlightens us to comprehend what is beyond all human sense, and seals in our hearts what we ought to believe.⁷

Ronald Wallace summarizes Calvin's view of faith in relation to union with Christ this way:

Faith unites man to God and makes God to dwell in man. It should be noted that the movement of faith in the laying hold of what is in Heaven and bringing it down to earth is reciprocal, in Calvin's thought, to the movement of the Holy Spirit who brings the heavenly grace of Christ down into the human heart, and raises our hearts up into Heaven in response to His grace."⁸

Nowhere in his section on faith does Calvin address the matter of a faculty or seed of faith. He does, however, briefly touch on the subject later in the *Institutes* when he defends infant baptism. Calvin combats several arguments of the Anabaptists against infant baptism, one of which was that baptism is a sacrament of faith and repentance

⁷ John Calvin, *Treatises on the Sacraments*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Great Britain: Christian Heritage, 2002), 144-145. Quoted in Angus Stewart, "'Christ is Made Ours': Calvin's Doctrine of Union with Christ," in *Union with Christ* (Ballymena, Northern Ireland: British Reformed Fellowship, 2024), 130-31.

⁸ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 23. Quoted in Stewart, "Calvin's Doctrine of Union," 131. Richard Muller comes to similar conclusions regarding Calvin's teaching; see *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 205-12.

and therefore does not apply to infants: “In order to gain a stronger footing here, they add, that baptism is a sacrament of penitence and faith, and as neither of these is applicable to tender infancy, we must beware of rendering its meaning empty and vain, by admitting infants to the communion of baptism.” In his answer to this objection, Calvin writes,

In fine, the objection is easily disposed of by the fact, that children are baptized for future repentance and faith. Though these are not yet formed in them, yet the seed [Latin: *semen*] of both lies hid in them by the secret operation of the Spirit. This answer at once overthrows all the objections which are twisted against us out of the meaning of baptism.⁹

Take note of these elements of Calvin’s thought: the bond that unites the elect to Christ is the Holy Spirit; faith properly defined is a firm and sure knowledge of God’s favor toward us; being united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, we lay hold of Christ by faith; there is a seed of faith wrought by the Holy Spirit within the children of believers.

An important contemporary of Calvin was **Wolfgang Musculus** (1497-1563). Although not as well known by us as some of the other reformers, Musculus was in his own day a well-known and influential theologian.¹⁰ He studied under Martin Bucer in Strasbourg and then served in Augsburg and later in the Swiss city of Bern. It was while in Bern that he published his *Loci communes sacrae theologiae* (*Common Places of Christian Religion*), which first appeared in 1560.

In his discussion of faith in his *Common Places*, Musculus defines faith this way: “If you will have the definition of the name or word, it appears that faith is the constant assent of the heart unto those things which be told or promised by the word. For to believe is to assent unto the same which we do hear.”¹¹ Later, Musculus includes a subsection

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.20; 2:542-43.

¹⁰ For the significance of Musculus, see Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 39, 47; and Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 41.

¹¹ Wolfgang Musculus, *Common Places of Christian Religion* (London: R. Woulfe, 1563), folio 195.

entitled “When faith is given by God” and there he addresses the question of whether infants have faith. He writes,

Before that we do proceed to that which follows, I suppose it to be convenient...to admonish the unlearned reader of the opinion of them, which do dispute of the faith of the infants, supposing that there is faith given to them from God, to some, while they be a Christening [baptized], to some before they be Christened, to some while they be yet in their mother’s womb. In my opinion they do take that word of faith for the secret working of the Holy Spirit, when he worketh in the elect according to the free will of God, by the prevenient grace: whereof I cannot judge. He doth pour into them a certain seed (Latin: *semen*) of faith, which is denied to the reprobate. But when we do speak of faith, we do differ [distinguish] it from this secret seed, and we do define what it is, and whereof it cometh, according to the Scriptures: which definitions no doubt can take no place in the infants new born, until that they may be able by age to receive this faith.¹²

Notice these key elements of Musculus’ thought: he defines faith as the assent of the heart to the word of God; he treats the matter of a “seed” of faith in relation to the young children of believing parents and their salvation, acknowledging that there is a secret seed of faith poured into such children; but he indicates that this is not actually what is meant by the biblical concept of faith, but ought more technically to be referred to as the work of the Holy Spirit within them.

Third-Generation Continental Reformers

Next, we will consider four individuals belonging to the third generation of Reformed theologians: Girolamo Zanchi, Theodore Beza, Zacharias Ursinus, and Caspar Olevianus.¹³

Girolamo Zanchi (1516-1590) was an Italian-born theologian

¹² Musculus, *Common Places*, folio 202. I have modernized the English slightly to make it more readable. I have also compared it to the original Latin where in places the old English copy was indecipherable; see Wolfgang Musculus, *Loci communes sacrae theologiae* (Basel: Herwagen, 1564), 240.

¹³ Theologians belonging to the “third generation” include Zacharias Ursinus, Caspar Olevianus, Theodore Beza, Girolamo Zanchi, Amandus Polanus, and Lambertus Danaeus; see Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 56.

who was influenced by Peter Martyr Vermigli and later served as a professor of theology in Strasbourg and in Heidelberg. In his *De religione christiana fides* (*Confession of the Christian Religion*), he devotes an entire chapter to the subject of union with Christ being necessary for salvation; the chapter is entitled “Of the true dispensation of the redemption, the salvation, and life which is laid up in Christ alone: and therefore of the necessary uniting, and participation with Christ.”¹⁴ He connects union with Christ to faith when he writes,

For we believe that although the grace of redemption, salvation and eternal life which God bestoweth, be earnestly propounded and offered unto all men by the preaching of the gospel (for, that very many are not made partakers of the same, it is through their own fault:) yet is it not indeed communicated, but unto those, who (being from the beginning chosen and predestinate unto it in Christ, as in the head of all the elect, that they should be his members and so made partakers of salvation) were afterwards in their time called by the gospel, endued with faith and so grafted into Christ and made one with him.”¹⁵

He goes on to explain that our being united to Christ by faith follows upon Christ uniting us to Him by His Holy Spirit:

[W]e come unto him by our spirit, because he came first unto us, by his: and therefore we embrace him by faith, because he first, by virtue of his spirit embracing us, stirreth us up to faith: so we also can by no means cleave and be united unto him, unless he first do join and unite himself unto us. For the one is the cause of the other, the first of the latter.¹⁶

In a later chapter Zanchi treats the subject of faith proper. He again states the necessity of faith in terms of union with Christ:

To the ingrafting into Christ, and the helping forward this communion,

14 Girolamo Zanchi, *Confession of the Christian Religion* (Cambridge: John Legat, 1599), 75-91. Available online here: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/cebo2/A15857.0001.001?view=toc>. Muller examines the views of Zanchi on this subject in *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 219-222.

15 Zanchi, *Confession*, 76.

16 Zanchi, *Confession*, 77.

the Holy Ghost useth the outward instruments, of the gospel, and the sacraments: But unless the same Spirit do also stir up in us, faith, by which we may embrace Christ with all his benefits offered unto us: we hold, that those instruments can profit us nothing to salvation: And therefore we doubt not but to the union with Christ and participation of all his benefits, faith is most necessary.¹⁷

Zanchi then defines faith this way:

Now by the name of faith we understand, not a certain human opinion, or persuasion, concerning God, and Christ: but a gift of divine wisdom and prudence, stirred up by the Holy Ghost in our hearts, by hearing the word of God: whereby we with a sincere, firm and constant mind do assent to the whole word of God revealed in the scriptures for the authority of God speaking therein, but especially to the gospel, which bringeth the glad tidings of redemption purchased by Christ; and do truly understand in it God himself, his will, Christ our mediator, and all his benefits: yea we certainly know them, lovingly embrace them, and call upon God with an assured trust in his mercy and in his unspeakable love towards us: and we are encouraged to love him again, and also provoked to the performance of a faithful obedience to him, and to glorify him in good works, and duties of charity towards our neighbor, even to the end of our lives.¹⁸

Another significant theologian of the third generation was **Theodore Beza** (1519-1605), Calvin's successor in Geneva. In 1558, Beza wrote to his father his personal confession of faith, *Confession De Foi Du Chretien* (*Confession of the Christian Faith*). It quickly became a popular summary of the Christian faith among Reformed believers. Beza addresses the matter of the faculty of faith in connection with his defense of infant baptism over against the Anabaptists. He writes, "[T]here is a special regard to be had to the infants of believers, for although they do not have faith in effect such as those do who are of age, yet they have the seed (French: *la semence*) and the spring (French: *le germe*) in virtue of the promise which was received and apprehended by their elders."¹⁹

¹⁷ Zanchi, *Confession*, 136.

¹⁸ Zanchi, *Confession*, 137.

¹⁹ Theodore Beza, "Confession of the Christian Faith" in *Reformed*

Like Calvin and Musculus, Beza does not define faith according to its being a seed and does not even mention this in his explanation of faith. He also raises the matter only in connection with the salvation of the children of believers, and, like Calvin, does so over against the objections of the Anabaptists. Like Calvin and Musculus, Beza uses the specific language of faith as a seed.

In his *Quaestionum et responsionum (A Booke of Christian Questions and Answers)*, Beza states that not all men are saved by Christ, but only those who are “by belief conjoined to Christ” and “in a manner incorporated into him.”²⁰ He then defines “faith or belief” as “a steadfast assent of the mind accompanying the same insight, whereby it cometh to pass, that each man applieth particularly to himself the promise of everlasting life in Christ...as if he were in full possession of it already.”²¹ He raises this question later: “There is yet one doubt behind, how your saying that Christ is taken hold on by faith agrees with that which you said afore when you avouched that all gifts do flow into us from Christ taken hold upon by faith. For it seemeth to follow, either that faith is not of the Father’s gift in Christ, or else that this your latter saying is untrue.” He gives this answer:

The beginning of our salvation cometh of God, who first chose us in Christ ere we were born, yet and ere ever the foundations of the world were laid and also first loveth and knoweth us in the time of our being born, when as yet we be not given unto Christ and grafted into him in very deed, but are to be given and grafted. Therefore if you have an eye to the very instant of the time: we do both believe, and also take hold by belief upon Christ offered unto us, both at once. For the cause of a thing cannot be working in very deed unless the effect of it come forth together with it. But if you look to the order of causes, I grant that the traynment [training, bringing up] of faith (yea of true faith)

Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 2:293. The original French is found in Theodore Beza, *Confession de la foy chrestienne* (Geneva: J. du Pan, 1563), 125.

20 Quoted in Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 222.

21 Theodore Beza, *A booke of Christian questions and answers, wherein are set forth the chief points of the Christian religion in manner of an abridgement*, trans. Arthur Goldinge (London: William How, 1578), fol. 23. I have modernized the English at points to make it more readable.

goeth before the taking hold upon Christ, and so consequently is given not to them who are already grafted, but to them that are at the point to be grafted into him. Yet followeth it not thereupon that faith is not given unto us in Christ, considering that the heavenly Father, setting his determination in his only Son, doth not then first behold us in Christ when we be given unto him, but hath chosen us, known us, and loved us in him, yea even before the foundations of the world were laid, and much rather when as yet we hated him: like as Christ himself also took hold of us first, to the end that we might take hold of him afterward. Again look, what is begun in us by grace, that we might thereby be grafted into Christ, and therefore as in respect of the order of causes, is done before our taking hold upon Christ.²²

Beza seems to be saying here the same thing as Calvin and Musculus: that Christ first takes hold of us, and then we take hold of Him by faith.

Of importance in this period were the Heidelberg theologians, Ursinus and Olevianus. **Zacharias Ursinus** (1534-1583) addresses the subject of faith in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism. In speaking of the effects of the gospel in connection with Lord's Day 6, he mentions faith first and then "through faith, our entire conversion to God, justification, regeneration and salvation; for through faith we receive Christ, with all his benefits."²³ When he treats Q&A 20 which speaks of being ingrafted into Christ and receiving all His benefits by faith, Ursinus deals with it as a transitional point between Lord's Day 6 and Lord's Day 7: "This twentieth question is, therefore, preparatory to the doctrine of faith, without which neither the Mediator, nor the preaching of the gospel, would be of any advantage."²⁴ He explains the relation between union with Christ and faith this way:

The reason why only those who believe are saved, is, because they alone lay hold of, and embrace the benefits of Christ... The sum of this whole matter is therefore this: that although the satisfaction of Christ, the mediator for our sins, is perfect, yet all do not obtain deliverance

²² Beza, *Questions and Answers*, fol. 39.

²³ Zacharius Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (1852; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1985), 105.

²⁴ Ursinus, *Commentary*, 106.

through it, but only those who believe the gospel, and apply to themselves the merits of Christ by a true faith.²⁵

Later, when dealing with the definition of faith in Q&A 21, he writes that faith “is the means by which we are made partakers of the Mediator.”²⁶

Ursinus later raises the question “To whom is faith given?” and answers that faith is “given to all the elect, and only to them, including even infants, as it respects an inclination to faith.”²⁷ He later faces the objection of some who say, “Many infants are included in the number of the elect, and yet they have no faith. Therefore, all the elect do not possess faith.” He gives this answer:

Infants do not, indeed, possess actual faith, as adults, yet they nevertheless have a power or inclination to faith which the Holy Ghost works in them according to their capacity or condition. For, since the Holy Ghost is promised to infants also, he cannot be inactive in them. Therefore, that which we have said, that saving faith is granted to all the elect, remains true.²⁸

Ursinus’ colleague **Caspar Olevianus** (1536-1587) addresses the subject of faith in relation to union with Christ in his *Vester Grundt* (*Firm Foundation*). He writes,

Do we then participate in Christ and all His benefits only by a true faith and trust in the promise of God in the gospel? A. By faith or trust alone. ...In sum, Christ is offered to us by the Father in no other way than through the foolishness of preaching, or the promise of the gospel (1 Cor. 2). Hence he cannot be accepted in any other way than by believing the promise of the gospel in one’s heart.²⁹

Later in this work Olevianus speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit

25 Ursinus, *Commentary*, 106.

26 Ursinus, *Commentary*, 107.

27 Ursinus, *Commentary*, 113.

28 Ursinus, *Commentary*, 114.

29 Caspar Olevianus, *A Firm Foundation: An Aid to Interpreting the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 11.

in connection with faith and union with Christ. He says of the Holy Spirit, “He has been given to me personally...so that, by true faith, He makes me share in Christ and all His blessings.”³⁰ Then, in speaking of the “office” of the Holy Spirit and “the fruit we reap from Him,” he concludes, “In sum, the Holy Spirit is that bond of union by which Christ abides in us and we in Him. As the branches incorporated into the vine receive their nourishment and life from the vine, so we are incorporated into Christ by the Holy Spirit so that we might have true fellowship with Him and receive eternal life from Him (John 15:1).”³¹ A little later he says again, “For there is no other means whereby we can share in Christ and all His benefits than the Holy Spirit, who incorporates us into Christ.”³² Later he writes of the relation between the Holy Spirit and faith, “Not only is the Holy Spirit *given* through the preaching of the Holy Gospel; He is *received* through faith and prayer.”³³

In his *Expositio symboli apostolici* (*An Exposition of the Symbole of the Apostles*) Olevianus writes of the Holy Spirit, “that through faith he may so engraft me into Christ as a branch into a vine and may make me a partaker of Christ, and all his benefits, John 15.” He says “this conjunction with Christ and his benefits” is something “the Holy Ghost doth work in us.” He says, “In which the office and end of the Holy Ghost given unto us is shewed that through faith it may most nearly knit us unto Christ.”³⁴

Dutch Reformed Theologians of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Moving forward into the history of Reformed theology, the focus is narrowed to the *Dutch* Reformed tradition. At this point the Dutch Reformed churches had written and adopted their confessional standards, and theologians were carefully systematizing theology, often using scholastic methods of distinction.

30 Olevianus, *Firm Foundation*, 90.

31 Olevianus, *Firm Foundation*, 92.

32 Olevianus, *Firm Foundation*, 92.

33 Olevianus, *Firm Foundation*, 93.

34 Caspar Olevianus, *An Exposition of the Symbole of the Apostles* (London: H. Middleton, 1581), 232.

One of the early theologians in the Netherlands was **Franciscus Junius** (the Elder, 1545-1602), who was professor of theology at the University of Leiden. In a disputation he led on the subject of justifying faith, Junius first distinguishes the faith of adults from the faith of infants. He defines the faith of adults this way: “Faith in adults is not merely knowledge and assent to the doctrine handed down to us by the Prophets and Apostles, but also a sure and firm confidence and apprehension founded on the truth of the free promise in Christ, which is revealed by the Holy Spirit in our minds and sealed in our hearts.” With respect to this faith of adults, he writes: “The form is the acknowledging apprehension of Christ with all the benefits necessary for salvation, and the particular application of the free remission of sins in him.”³⁵ After writing about the faith of adults, he concludes with a note about the faith of infants:

These things concerning the faith of adults. But we also affirm that the same, as a seed (as John calls it, 1 John 3:9), or as the principle of a disposition is also in elect infants. For it is certain that the covenant pertains to the children of the pious and elect (Acts 2:39 and 3:25), and that the kingdom of heaven is promised to them (Matt. 19:14), therefore they are reborn, for it is clear that only the reborn enter into heavenly life (John 3:3), and have faith without which no one can please God (Heb. 11:6). Some have wanted to refer to what Christ said, Matt. 18:6, ‘But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.’ This faith, then, is a habit (so to speak) in seed form, kindled in infants without the ministry of the word, immediately by the Holy Spirit from the gracious word of promise, who, in accord with their capacity and nature, gradually brings forth new impulses and inclinations within them, producing the faith of adults, so that they may live to God and serve him in spirit.³⁶

Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641) was a major figure in this period, both for his opposition to Arminius while at the University of Leiden and his role at the Synod of Dordt. In the course of his labors

³⁵ Franciscus Junius, *Opuscula theologica selecta*, ed. Abraham Kuyper (Amsterdam: F. Muller, 1882), 207. When a Dutch work is cited, unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine, with the help of internet resources.

³⁶ Junius, *Opuscula theologica selecta*, 208.

as professor of theology Gomarus gave a theological disputation on “Saving Faith.” Early in the disputation, Gomarus says that “living and saving” faith can be “considered either as an inherent habit or as a transitory action.” He then gives his definition of faith:

Living faith is a supernatural virtue, freely given by God, infused into the hearts of the elect (who repent of sin and long for deliverance), through the Gospel and regeneration, for their righteousness and salvation and for his own glory; through this faith they recognize the truth of the divine Word, and especially that Jesus is the Christ, the only Son of God and the perfect Savior of all who truly believe, and therefore also their own Savior.

He then explains what he means when he speaks of faith as a virtue: “It is called a virtue, because it is a habit of mind conforming to the commandment of God.” He then defines what he means by “habit”: “since it is a lasting quality, giving rise to believing.”³⁷

William Ames (1576-1633) was born in England, where he was influenced by William Perkins. He later moved to the Netherlands, where he served as advisor to Johannes Bogerman while the latter presided over the Synod of Dort. Ames later served as a professor at Franeker, during which time he prepared his major theological work, *Medulla theologica* (*The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*).

Quite early in this work Ames writes of faith, describing it this way: “Faith is the resting of the heart on God, the author of life and eternal salvation.”³⁸ Later in the chapter he connects faith and union with Christ: “Since faith is the first act of our life whereby we live to God in Christ, it must consist of union with God.”³⁹

In a later chapter he explains the saving call and its relation to faith. He says: “We have dealt with application in general; now we consider its parts. 1. The parts of application are two, union with Christ and partaking of the benefits that flow from this union.”⁴⁰ He defines union

37 Franciscus Gomarus, *Opera theologica omnia* (Amsterdam: Joannis Janssonii, 1644), 3:98.

38 William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John D. Eusden (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 80.

39 Ames, *Marrow*, 82.

40 Ames, *Marrow*, 157.

as “the spiritual relation of men to Christ by which they obtain the right to all the blessings provided in him.”⁴¹ He states that “this union is accomplished by calling,”⁴² and then distinguishes the calling into two parts: “the offer of Christ and the receiving of him.”⁴³ He defines the first part as: “The offer is an objective presentation of Christ as the sufficient and necessary means to salvation.”⁴⁴ He defines the latter part as: “The receiving of Christ occurs when Christ once offered is joined to man and man to Christ.”⁴⁵ He then further distinguishes the receiving of Christ: “As for man, receiving is either passive or active.”⁴⁶ He speaks of passive receiving this way: “The passive receiving of Christ is the process by which a spiritual principle of grace is generated in the will of man.”⁴⁷ He speaks of active receiving this way: “Active receiving is an elicited act of faith in which he who is called now wholly leans upon Christ as his savior and through Christ upon God.”⁴⁸ In explaining faith, he then writes, “This act of faith depends partly upon an inborn (Latin: *ingenerato*) principle (Latin: *principio*) or attitude (Latin: *habitu*) toward grace and partly upon the action of God moving before and stirring up. John 6:44, *None can come to me, unless the Father...draws him.*”⁴⁹

Later, when speaking of the church, he again speaks of faith and union with Christ:

The church is indeed the company of men who are called.... Because the end of calling is faith and the work of faith is a grafting into Christ, and this union brings with it communion with Christ, the church can be defined at once as a company of believers, a company of those who are in Christ, and a company of those who have communion with him.⁵⁰

41 Ames, *Marrow*, 157.

42 Ames, *Marrow*, 157.

43 Ames, *Marrow*, 157.

44 Ames, *Marrow*, 157.

45 Ames, *Marrow*, 158.

46 Ames, *Marrow*, 159.

47 Ames, *Marrow*, 159.

48 Ames, *Marrow*, 159.

49 Ames, *Marrow*, 159. Confer the original Latin in William Ames, *Medulla theologica* (Amsterdam: Apud J. Janssonium, 1659), 114.

50 Ames, *Marrow*, 175-176.

Ames also composed a work entitled *The Substance of Christian Religion* in which he explained the fifty-two Lord's Days of the Heidelberg Catechism. In his *Substance*, Ames speaks of faith in relation to union with Christ. He states this doctrine first: "All are not saved by Christ, but such only as are united or grafted into Christ by faith."⁵¹ His second doctrinal point is this: "Faith is the tye whereby we are first united to Christ, and ingrafted into him."⁵² He goes on to explain the second point this way:

for there are three tyes of Union, whereof there is need in our conjunction with God, and Christ; the *Spirit*, *Faith* and *Love*. The *Spirit* is that tye, whereby Christ layeth hold upon us, and tyeth us to himself. *Faith*, is that tye whereby we lay hold upon Christ, and apply him to ourselves, and is alway the effect of the [S]pirit in some measure. *Love*, is the band of perfection, whereby we wholly give over ourselves to Christ, and consecrate ourselves to his will, and is the effect of both the former: Amongst these, Faith is the first bond by which we lay hold on Christ. For though it follow the operation of the Spirit, as its effect, in that respect, it is called the gift of God, and the gift of the Spirit of God; yet it goes before both Love and Hope that are saving.⁵³

The subject of faith comes up again in Ames's treatment of the believer's partaking of the Lord's Supper in Lord's Days 28 and 29. There he sets forth this point of doctrine: "This nourishment, which in Christ we receive, is by the working of faith." He explains this with three "reasons": "Because by faith it is that we have union with Christ," and "Because by faith in Christ, we draw as it were, and suck unto us all grace and spiritual life," and "Because as the principle of our spiritual life is faith, so from the further intention and extention of this faith, depends our nourishment and growth in the same life." He then provides this "direction:"

that in the use of the Lord's Supper, we take great care to stir up our faith, because unto nourishment and growth, is not only required the

51 William Ames, *The Substance of Christian Religion, or A plaine and easie Draught of the Christian Catechisme in LII Lectures, on chosen Texts of Scripture, for each Lords-day of the Year* (London: T. Mabb, 1659), 46.

52 Ames, *Substance*, 47.

53 Ames, *Substance*, 47-48. Emphasis is Ames'.

habit and disposition of faith, but also the actual exercise of it, in so much that all, even believers and faithful, are not worthy receivers of this Supper, unless they rouse up the faith that they have, and exercise it as the exigency of that time and business require.⁵⁴

Johannes Maccovius (1588-1644) served as professor of theology at the University of Franeker from 1615 until his death, although he is probably best known for having to appear before the Synod of Dort to give account of his supralapsarian theology. In his *Loci communes theologici*, Maccovius writes about the habit of faith,

The apostle speaks of actual faith, not habitual, which is part of our regeneration. For our regeneration consists in our divinely infused habits. And the same thing applies here as in the act of vision. Namely for this, in order that one may see, both the eye and the object are required. The eye is like the habit, the object like the word of God. From these two the actual vision is finally elicited. Thus also from habitual faith, and the Gospel preached, actual faith is elicited.⁵⁵

In a later section of this work, Maccovius writes that a man “cannot be regenerated unless he has faith. The reason is that he who is born again lives a spiritual life. But he cannot live in this, unless he is implanted into Christ, as is clear from John 15. But he cannot be implanted, except through faith. Therefore he who is born again has faith.”⁵⁶

In his section on regeneration, he addresses the arguments of some who said that hearing the word of God and believing comes before regeneration:

This is the question of what kind of faith we are talking about here, whether it is habitual or actual. ...Therefore first God gives eyes to see, and a mind to understand, which is habitual faith: afterwards he sets forth his word, so that when these eyes and the mind are turned, they see that this word of God is the word of God, from certain signs which these words contain. They believe, therefore, that all that is set

⁵⁴ Ames, *Substance*, 184.

⁵⁵ Johannes Maccovius, *Loci communes theologici* (Amsterdam: Ludovicum & Danielem Elzevirios, 1658), 114.

⁵⁶ Maccovius, *Loci communes theologici*, 175-176.

forth in this word is most certain, most true, and divine; so also the promises which are set forth in Christ are divine: and because they acknowledge that these promises were made to the faithful, and at the same time from the collation of what they feel in themselves with the description of faith which is handed down in the word of God, they see that they are of the number of the faithful, therefore these as if belonging to each other, they embrace. In this manner actual faith arises from the word of God, so that it presupposes eyes to see and a mind to understand, which is regeneration itself.⁵⁷

Later, at the beginning of his treatment of faith, he speaks similarly: “We call this [faith] the effect of regeneration. For here we consider actual faith, which flows from the habit (however, not without the intervention of the divine word, Rom. 10:17), which habit is a part of regeneration.”⁵⁸

Dutch Reformed theology of this period owes much to the work of **Gisbertus Voetius** (1589-1676). He was a man of towering intellect and was a careful systematizer of the Reformed faith, thus giving him a widespread influence.

In a disputation on “the practice of faith” delivered in 1638, Voetius carefully distinguishes between the “potency,” the “disposition,” the “habit,” and the “act” of faith: “Living or saving faith is distinguished in potency, disposition, habit and act of faith.” He writes the following regarding the “potency” of faith: “1. [By *potency* we understand] the root, the faculty, the supernatural principle, the seed or germ out of which, in due course, grows faith. This is imprinted and implanted in the first regeneration—which should be taken in the strict sense here. It is also present in children who are going to be saved, and it is more specifically called by some the spirit of faith.” After defining what he meant by “potency,” Voetius then clarifies that this technically should not be called faith: “However, we explicitly notice that this faith can only be called faith analogically, improperly, and metonymically as its cause or principle; in essence, it is as little faith as a seed is a tree,

⁵⁷ Maccovius, *Loci communes theologici*, 643. Maccovius cites in support of this view “Cartwright,” by which he evidently means Thomas Cartwright (1535-1603), an English theologian who spent some time as a pastor of English exiles in the Netherlands.

⁵⁸ Maccovius, *Loci communes theologici*, 686.

an egg is a chicken, and a bud is a flower.”⁵⁹

Voetius then defines the second distinction he made, that of faith as “disposition”: “2. Faith as a tendency or *disposition* is generally given and infused by the efficient calling or actual conversion. That we can distinguish this disposition from the habit which is formed afterwards by the intervenient acts and exercises of faith, can be concluded, it seems to us, from 1 Cor. 3:1-2, along with Phil. 3:15 and Hebrews 5:14.”⁶⁰

Voetius writes the following regarding the third distinction he made, that of faith as “habit”: “The habit in the strict sense—because in a wider sense the disposition is also a habit—is assured and full-grown faith, which, furthered by exercises of piety and tested by afflictions, the easier and more perfectly performs acts of faith. We think that in Scripture, this kind of faith is distinctly called the perfection of faith, assured faith, great faith and the habit of faith.”⁶¹ Reflecting on Voetius’ distinctions, Maarten Wisse makes the point that Voetius was more technical and careful in his use of these terms than other theologians. Some theologians used the term “habit” to refer to faith as the first seed implanted in regeneration, but the term technically refers to the habit formed in the life of a believer after having received the seed of faith.

As Voetius goes on in the rest of his disputation to describe the “act” of faith, he connects faith with union with Christ. He writes:

The formal and intrinsic act of justifying faith, formally so called, must be distinguished from other acts of faith, which are called such by a certain respect and denomination. The former is unique, as it can be distinguished by different respects and degrees, but it neither can nor ought to be multiplied; since it is unique in form and appearance, and consequently its formal effect (which is union with Christ and justification) is also unique. This act of faith is a certain or firm assent, affirming that Christ is my savior, that God is my God in Christ, and

59 Quoted in Wisse, “*Habitus fidei*,” 181-182. The original Latin is found in Gisbertus Voetius, *Disputationes selectae* (Utrecht: Johannes Waesberge, 1655), 2:499. It is worth noting that Herman Bavinck quotes these words of Voetius with approval in his *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:114-115.

60 Quoted in Wisse, “*Habitus fidei*,” 181-182.

61 Quoted in Wisse, “*Habitus fidei*,” 176.

to that extent all the promises of the Gospel belong to me. This is called reception, apprehension, or the application of Christ, a special or applicative faith, as well as certainty, assent, trust, and confidence, but all these are understood through an external denomination.⁶²

Earlier, in a disputation on regeneration, Voetius similarly relates faith and union with Christ; he speaks of the “effects arising from and dependent on faith” and mentions first: “Real and passive or received union with Christ and grafting into the new covenant, thus communion of all goods in Christ.”⁶³

Johannes Hoornbeek⁶⁴ (1617-1666) was a professor of theology at the Universities of Utrecht and Leiden. He was a student of Voetius and a supporter of his views. He wrote *Institutiones theologicae* in which he quotes at length from many earlier Reformed theologians to defend his positions.

In a chapter on the saving call, he writes, “The end of the vocation is union, with our Christ, and communion.” He then quotes the lengthy section (cited above) from William Ames’ *Medulla* regarding faith and union with Christ.⁶⁵

In his defense of infant baptism, Hoornbeek quotes approvingly from Calvin, and says that Calvin’s position is the same as that of Ursinus and Bucanus. He then writes that infants “were to be reckoned among the believers; because there is in them the seed or Spirit of faith, which some call a habit, others an inclination, from which then by hearing the word actual faith is gradually formed, sometimes more quickly, sometimes more slowly.”⁶⁶

In another work, a theological disputation on faith given while professor at Utrecht, Hoornbeek speaks throughout of union with Christ. He begins: “Our union with Christ is given by faith in such

62 Voetius, *Disputationes selectae*, 2:499-500.

63 Voetius, *Disputationes selectae*, 2:453.

64 Hoornbeek’s last name is also spelled Hoornbeck and Hoornbeeck. The spelling in this article is consistent with how his name appears in the following source from which the quotes come. -Ed.

65 Johannes Hoornbeek, *Institutiones theologicae* (Leiden: Francisci Moyardi, 1658), 356.

66 Hoornbeek, *Institutiones theologicae*, 600.

a way that by faith Christ is said to dwell in our hearts. Eph. 3.17.”⁶⁷ He describes the nature of this union this way: “A union so close, so firm, heavenly, and truly divine, that we are both in God and in Christ; on the other hand, God and Christ are in us, and reciprocally, we are in them, and they are in us.”⁶⁸ He says this union is by faith: “Now by faith we apply ourselves to Christ; through Christ, to God,” with appeal to John 17:20-21 and 1 Peter 1:21.⁶⁹ One of the characteristics of this union is that it is “reciprocal,” as in a marriage relationship.⁷⁰ He writes further: “To the union follows the communion of the benefits of Christ.”⁷¹ He describes “acts of faith” as “trusting in Christ, receiving, and being united with him.”⁷²

In a later disputation on faith given while professor at Leiden, Hoornbeek connects faith and union with Christ. He notes the biblical language regarding faith is that we believe *in* or *into* Christ. He explains, “Not only must the promise made about him be accepted, but also he himself altogether.” He continues, “Because what we seek in the promise is so closely and necessarily founded in the person, we think that faith is to be defined not by the act or assent of the mind alone, but by the transition of the whole man into Christ the Savior, and the reception by faith of the whole Christ, for whole and complete salvation.”⁷³ He later writes, “It is the casting and delivering of oneself into Christ, and the first bringing and acceptance of Christ to us as Savior.”⁷⁴

Francis Turretin (1623-1687) is another highly influential Reformed theologian of this period. He was of Italian heritage but

67 Johannes Hoornbeek, *Disputatio theologica de fide, pars quarta et ultima* (Utrecht: Johannes Waesberge, 1652). This work is not paginated, so I will give the reference to the thesis. This particular quote is from Thesis 1.

68 Hoornbeek, *Disputatio theologica de fide*, Thesis 3.

69 Hoornbeek, *Disputatio theologica de fide*, Thesis 3.

70 Hoornbeek, *Disputatio theologica de fide*, Thesis 5.

71 Hoornbeek, *Disputatio theologica de fide*, Thesis 7.

72 Hoornbeek, *Disputatio theologica de fide*, Thesis 8.

73 Johannes Hoornbeek, *Disputatio theologica de fide* (Leiden: Johannes Elsevirius, 1661), Thesis 14. A translation of this disputation is found here: <https://onkuoh.substack.com/p/translation-of-hoornbeek-on-faith#foot-note-anchor-1-143212658>.

74 Hoornbeek, *Disputatio theologica de fide*, Thesis 15.

born in Geneva, where he later served as pastor and then professor of theology. His three-volume *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*) was widely read and appreciated for generations, including in the Netherlands (for example, van Rijssen wrote a work entitled *Compendium of the Didactic and Elenctic Theology of Francis Turretin* summarizing Turretin's *magnum opus*) and America; it was the textbook used by Charles Hodge at Princeton Seminary in the 1800s until Hodge published his own work.⁷⁵

At the beginning of his discussion of faith, Turretin writes of its necessity in relation to union with Christ: "So great is the necessity of faith in the matter of salvation that as Christ alone is the cause of salvation, so faith alone is the means and way to Christ. Hence it is celebrated as the bond of our union with Christ because he dwells in us by faith (Eph. 3:17)."⁷⁶ He goes on to distinguish various acts of faith, the fifth of which is the "act of reception and union": "The fifth is the act of reception of Christ or of adhesion and union, by which we not only seek Christ through a desire of the soul and fly to him, but apprehend and receive him offered, embrace him found, apply him to ourselves and adhere to and unite ourselves to him." Turretin regards this as "the formal and principal act of justifying faith, usually termed 'reception'...also sometimes described as an act of 'reclining'...as also an act of adhesion and binding closely, and of the most strict union by which we are bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh and one with him; and Christ himself dwells in us (Eph. 3:17) and we in him (Jn. 15:5)." He then writes: "From this union of persons arises the participation in the blessings of Christ, to which (by union with him) we acquire a right."⁷⁷

Turretin later addresses the question of whether it can be said that the infants of believers have faith. He writes, "They [the orthodox] deny actual faith to infants against the Lutherans and maintain that a seminal or radical and habitual faith is to be ascribed to them against

⁷⁵ Paul C. Gutjahr, *Charles Hodge: Guardian of American Orthodoxy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 214.

⁷⁶ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 1994), 2:559.

⁷⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:562-563.

the Anabaptists.”⁷⁸ He also writes: “Although infants do not have actual faith, the seed or root of faith cannot be denied to them, which is ingenerated in them from early age and in its own time goes forth in act (human instruction being applied from without and a greater efficacy of the Holy Spirit from within).”⁷⁹ Turretin continues,

Although habitual faith (as the word ‘habit’ is properly and strictly used to signify a more perfect and consummated state) is not well ascribed to them, still it is rightly predicated of them broadly as denoting potential or seminal faith. Now by “seed of faith,” we mean the Holy Spirit, the effector of faith and regeneration (as he is called, 1 Jn. 3:9), as to the principles of regeneration and holy inclinations which he already works in infants according to their measure in a wonderful and to us unspeakable way. Afterwards in more mature age, these proceed into act (human instruction being employed and the grace of the same Spirit promoting his own work by which that seed is accustomed to be excited and drawn forth into act).⁸⁰

Turretin concludes: “If any of our theologians deny that there is faith in infants or that it is necessary for their salvation (as is gathered from certain passages of Peter Martyr, Beza and Piscator), it is certain that this is meant of actual faith against the Lutherans, not the seed of faith or the Spirit of regeneration (which they frequently assert is ascribed to infants).”⁸¹

A Dutch Reformed pastor who was influenced by both Voetius and Turretin was **Leonard van Rijssen** (1636-1700, also known by his Latinized name *Leonardus Rijssenius*).⁸² Van Rijssen studied under Voetius at the University of Utrecht and went on to serve as

78 Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:583.

79 Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:586.

80 Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:586.

81 Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:587.

82 For information on Van Rijssen, cf. J. Wesley White, “A Translation with Introduction to *A Summary of Elenctic Theology* by Leonard Rijssen” (master’s thesis, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 2009), <https://www.weswhite.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Rijssenius-Greenville-Final.pdf>. A portion of this thesis was also published as *Leonardus Rijssenius*, “On Justification,” trans. J. Wesley White, *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 16 (2005), 115-131.

pastor of many churches in the Netherlands. As a pastor he wrote a number of books that supported the views of Voetius. Van Rijssen is not a well-known theologian, yet he was an influential figure in his time; evidence for this is the fact that the German theologian Heinrich Heppe (1820-1879), in his summary of Reformed theology in which he quotes extensively from major Reformed figures, includes a number of quotations from van Rijssen.

On the matter of faith as a seed, van Rijssen writes,

Although actual faith does not befall infants, the seed or root of faith cannot be denied them, i.e., the beginnings of regeneration and holy inclinations which are begotten in them by the H. Spirit from a tender age in a manner for us indescribable and in their own time issue in action, with the addition of the human institution without and the greater effectuality of the H. Spirit within. ...so nothing prevents the faithful from being called before actual faith, because the seed which is given them is the beginning of faith, in consequence of which they are rightly so called, just as they are rightly called sinners, although they cannot yet perform acts of sin.⁸³

In referring to this quote from van Rijssen in support of what he believed to be the Reformed position on this matter, Heppe provided this summary: “Only in regard to elect children must it be acknowledged that God imparts to them as heirs of His testament and partners in His covenant of grace, not ‘actual faith’ but still the ‘seed of faith,’ the ‘inclination of regeneration’ by the H. Spirit.”⁸⁴

Van Rijssen writes in his *Summa Theologiae Elencticae*,

Controversy 6—*Is faith a permanent disposition (habitus), not only an act?* We affirm against the Arminians.

83 Quoted in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), 541. It is important to note that Heppe often quotes from a work of van Rijssen in which he summarizes Turretin; Heppe provides these quotes believing he is quoting from van Rijssen when he is actually quoting from Turretin. See White, “Translation,” li-iii.

84 Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 541.

Arguments

1. It is infused and given by the Spirit; therefore, it is a disposition (Eph. 2:8, 2 Cor. 4:13).
2. Faith remains in man, and this is a characteristic of a disposition (Jn. 15:4).
3. It is the origin (*principium*) of works (Gal. 5:6, 22; 2 Cor. 5:7).
4. It is a virtue, but every virtue is a disposition (1 Cor. 13:13, 1 Tim. 6:11).
5. It has its gradations, increases, and decreases; therefore, it is a disposition (Rom. 12:3, Col. 1:23).
6. Otherwise, when a man sleeps, he would not have faith.⁸⁵

Van Rijssen also says,

Controversy 6 (II)—*Are there infused dispositions (habitus), and is faith such a disposition?* We affirm against the same.

Arguments

1. Love is an infused disposition; therefore, faith is also (Rom. 5:5).
2. Faith is given to us through the indwelling Spirit; therefore, it is an infused disposition (2 Cor. 4:13).
3. It is given in an instant, which is a characteristic of infused dispositions (Acts 11:17, 16:34).
4. Otherwise it could not be called a gift of God and of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁶

Another notable figure of this period was **Herman Witsius** (1636-1708). Witsius served as professor of theology at the Universities of Franeker, Utrecht, and Leiden, and was a mediating figure between the theologies of Voetius and Cocceius. In his work *Conciliatory Or Irenical Animadversions, on the Controversies Agitated in Britain, Under the Unhappy Names of Antinomians and Neonomians*, Witsius attempted to give direction to the churches in Great Britain in the midst of controversies they were experiencing. Witsius writes,

By a true and real union, (but which is only passive on their part,) [the elect] are united to Christ when his Spirit first takes possession

⁸⁵ Van Rijssen, *Summary*, 157.

⁸⁶ Van Rijssen, *Summary*, 157.

of them, and infuses into them a principle of new life: the beginning of which life can be from nothing else but from union with the Spirit of Christ. ...Further, since faith is an act flowing from the principle of spiritual life, it is plain, that in a sound sense, it may be said, an elect person is truly and really united to Christ before actual faith.⁸⁷

He continues,

But the mutual union, (which, on the part of an elect person, is likewise active and operative), whereby the soul draws near to Christ, joins itself to him, applies, and in a becoming and proper manner closes with him without any distraction, is made by faith only. And this is followed in order by the other benefits of the covenant of grace, justification, peace, adoption, sealing, perseverance, etc.⁸⁸

Wilhelmus à Brakel (1636-1711) lived and labored in the Netherlands at the same time as Witsius, their lives overlapping for almost the exact same years. Though he served as a pastor his whole ministry and never as a professor of theology, he wrote a major theological work entitled *Redelijke Godsdienst (The Christian's Reasonable Service)*.

Brakel speaks of union with Christ when he treats the doctrine of the church and the communion of the saints. He says that this union is established “by the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ in believers” and “by spiritual marriage,” and then in the third place he says it is “by faith which, by its very nature, unites” and references Ephesians 3:17 (“that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith”).⁸⁹ Later, in his section on faith, Brakel speaks of the “effects” or “fruits” of saving faith and lists ten things; the fourth in this list is: “Union with Christ, and through Him with God” and lists several passages of Scripture as

87 Herman Witsius, *Conciliatory, or Irenical Animadversions, on the Controversies Agitated in Britain, under the Unhappy Names of Antinomians and Neonomians*, trans. Thomas Bell (Glasgow: W. Lang, 1807), 68. I was made aware of these quotations from Witsius in the following article: Mark Jones, “The Act & Habit of Faith in Relation to Union with Christ,” <https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/the-act-habit-of-faith-union-w.php>.

88 Witsius, *Animadversions*, 68.

89 Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993), 2:89.

proof (1 Cor. 6:17; Eph. 3:17; John 17:21).⁹⁰

Brakel was unique among Reformed theologians in that he was hesitant to affirm the idea of a seed of faith. This hesitancy was due to the fact that he did not believe this idea could be found anywhere in the word of God. He wrote: “Do all the elect from the moment of their conception have the seed of faith in them, even though they do not actually exercise faith? We answer negatively, for first of all, Scripture does not speak anywhere of the seed of faith or of faith in seminal form. It is therefore rather bold to maintain this and to establish an entire doctrine on this.”⁹¹ Those who have studied the work of Brakel have noted that he placed a great deal of emphasis on faith as an activity.⁹²

Johannes Markius (1656-1731) was a professor of theology at the universities of Franeker, Groningen, and Leiden. He gives this definition of faith:

Finally, saving faith, which others have called justifying, living, true, effectual for the elect through charity, etc., is defined as follows: A habit of the mind, infused into the elect by the Spirit through the ministry of the word and the sacraments, whereby they acknowledge, embrace, and apply to themselves with confidence the word of God, the Gospel revealed in it, and its promises, for salvation, righteousness, true holiness, and the peaceful hope of the soul.⁹³

He follows this up by saying: “Thus we hold that it is not a bare act, but a permanent *habit*,” and appeals to Colossians 1:23; 2 Timothy 1:5; 2 Corinthians 6:15.⁹⁴ He then says, “There is no other distinction between the elect, except that faith, both actual and habitual, is generally to be denied to infants before they are capable of reason.” He faces and answers a number of objections to this statement:

90 Brakel, *Reasonable Service*, 2:291.

91 Brakel, *Reasonable Service*, 2:268.

92 Cf. Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 219, 222 (n40).

93 Johannes Markius, *Christianae theologiae medulla didactico-elenctica* (Philadelphia: J. Anderson, 1825), 221. This work was an abbreviated version of Markius’ much larger work *Compendium theologiae Christianae didactico elencticum*.

94 Markius, *Christianae theologia medulla didactico-elenctica*, 221.

Objection 1: Infants are called believers, Matt. 18:6. Response: It means either children a little older, or children in humility.

Objection 2: There are clear examples in Jeremiah and John the Baptist, Jer. 1:5; Luke 1:15, 44. Response: The former refers to their calling to a special office; the latter, however, is an extraordinary case.

Objection 3: Without faith, no one can be saved. Response: This is true of adults, while the merit of Christ is applied to infants in a manner that is inscrutable to us.

Objection 4: The soul is always thinking. Response: It is wrongly assumed; nor is it the case that infants think about Christ in their early childhood. However, we completely agree that infants are granted objective and seminal faith, as well as the merit of Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁵

The last theologian to be cited from this period is **Alexander Comrie** (1706-1773).⁹⁶ He was born in Scotland, and in his youth was influenced by the Marrow Men, such as Thomas Boston, Ebenezer Erskine, and Ralph Erskine. He moved to the Netherlands, where he studied theology, and he served his entire ministry as the pastor of the Reformed church in Woubrugge. He was concerned about the influence of Brakel on certain points of doctrine, including his emphasis on faith as activity. He also wanted to guard the churches against the Arminian direction that some were taking.

In his *Stellige en praktikale verklaaringe van den Heidelbergschen catechismus* (*Explanation of the Heidelberg Catechism*), Comrie takes his lead from Q&A 20, which speaks of being engrafted into Christ by faith, and defined faith not as an act but as a faculty. He believes that “this question is terribly wrested and distorted by those that always speak of faith as an *act* or *acts*.”⁹⁷ In contrast, Comrie begins with the faculty of faith: “The imparted faith, which we have defined as an *imparted faculty and habit, wrought in the elect by the Holy Ghost*

⁹⁵ Markius, *Christianae theologia medulla didactico-elentica*, 222-223.

⁹⁶ For information on Comrie, see Beeke, *Quest*, 214ff. and the biographical essay “Alexander Comrie: Advocate of Experiential Piety” by Leen J. van Valen in Alexander Comrie, *Distinctive Marks of Saving Faith*, trans. Bartel Elshout, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2024), xv-xxxv.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1900), 393.

*with re-creating and irresistible power, when they are incorporated into Christ; by which they receive all the impressions which God the Holy Ghost imparts unto them through the Word (regarding children in a manner unknown to us)."*⁹⁸ He continues, "So that, although no acts spring from it, as in deceased elect children, yet they possess the *true faith*, from which acts would have sprung if they had been able to employ their rational faculties."⁹⁹ He adds, "The same is true of the inwrought faith; with reference to the habit of faith it is imparted and perfected by the supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit in a moment, but it does not act until the soul becomes conscious of it."¹⁰⁰ He writes,

For among the Reformed this is an established rule, that through the operation of the Holy Spirit we first receive a faculty, from which subsequent activities proceed; and that this imparted faculty does not work of its own energy except it be wrought upon...by the Word and the omnipotent power of the Holy Spirit accompanying that Word, in which and by which it enters and penetrates the soul as its instrument and organ, to excite the soul to activity and to flow into that activity.¹⁰¹

He concludes, "*No act or acts can give faith its form or being.*"¹⁰²

One might be tempted to think from these quotations that Comrie had no place for the act of faith in his theology. But this was not the case. Comrie writes elsewhere,

But, secondly, one becomes also Christ's from our side. When we have received saving faith by the inner working of the Holy Spirit in our heart, we also actually believe and embrace the Saviour offered to us, which God reveals in our souls by His Word and Spirit; we submit ourselves wholly, completely and willingly to Him, and we crawl and hide ourselves so deep in the opened wounds of our Saviour, that neither God as Judge, nor the Law, nor the Devil can get any hold over us, and cannot see anything of us outside Christ.¹⁰³

98 Quoted in Kuyper, *Work of the Holy Spirit*, 393.

99 Quoted in Kuyper, *Work of the Holy Spirit*, 394.

100 Quoted in Kuyper, *Work of the Holy Spirit*, 394.

101 Quoted in Kuyper, *Work of the Holy Spirit*, 395.

102 Quoted in Kuyper, *Work of the Holy Spirit*, 395.

103 Quoted in Wisse, "*Habitus fidei*," 184.

He says, “I defend a passive Christianity when it comes to receiving [faith], but I defend an active Christianity when it comes to carrying it out, which is clear from all of my work, if one only compares the parts with each other.”¹⁰⁴

In another work entitled *Verhandeling van eenige eigenschappen des zaligmakenden geloofs* (*Distinctive Marks of Saving Faith*), Comrie again speaks of the relation between faith and union with Christ. He writes that our union with Christ is first the work of the Holy Spirit: “[W]e are to note the bonds that constitute this union. ... First, there is the Spirit of Christ. He unites Christ to the elect sinner by efficaciously calling him out of the powers of darkness.”¹⁰⁵ He continues, “We thus conclude that the elect sinner is entirely passive when this union is initially established. At the moment when Christ, by the Spirit, lays claim upon the elect sinner as His property, the elect sinner is dead in sins and trespasses and is as incapable as any dead person is to make himself alive.”¹⁰⁶ Comrie then writes of union with Christ by faith:

Second, there is true, saving faith. God the Holy Spirit unites Himself to the elect sinner, and the elect person, being quickened by the Spirit, likewise unites himself most intimately to the person of Christ by true, saving faith, which is the bond of union from the side of the sinner. This union is mutual, and therefore, we read, “I in them,” that is, by the Spirit, “and they in me,” that is, by faith. And this union is fittingly compared to the marriage bond in which the elect person is identified as the bride and wife of the Lamb. We know, however, that marriage presupposes mutual consent, and such is also the mutual bond of union between Christ and the elect sinner. It is a double knot wherewith Christ and the elect are bound to each other, a knot that will never be untied.¹⁰⁷

He adds, “Faith, in the act of appropriation, does not so much unite itself to the benefits of Christ but first and foremost unites itself to Christ, which consequently results in being united to His benefits.”¹⁰⁸

104 Quoted in Wisse, “*Habitus fidei*,” 184.

105 Comrie, *Saving Faith*, 13.

106 Comrie, *Saving Faith*, 14.

107 Comrie, *Saving Faith*, 14-15.

108 Comrie, *Saving Faith*, 18.

Dutch Reformed Theologians of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

We move now into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to consider how theologians in the Dutch Reformed tradition reflected on the nature of faith and its relation to union with Christ.

First to consider is **Abraham Kuyper** (1837-1920). Kuyper was an original thinker whose influence in so many areas was titanic.

In his book *Het Werk des Heiligen Geestes* (*The Work of the Holy Spirit*), Kuyper treats the mystical union in his chapter on regeneration. He first speaks of union with Christ in the eternal decree and then in Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection. He then speaks of a "third stage" of union which "begins when we ourselves appear not in our birth, but in our regeneration; when the Lord God begins to work supernaturally in our souls; when in love's hour Eternal Love conceives in us the child of God."¹⁰⁹ The next stage in this union, according to Kuyper, begins "with the first *conscious exercise of faith*." He explains, "For, although in regeneration the faculty of faith was implanted, it may for a long time remain inactive; and only when the Holy Spirit causes it to act, producing genuine faith and conversion in us, is the union with Christ established *subjectively*."¹¹⁰

In his chapter on faith, Kuyper considers the views of Brakel and Comrie with respect to faith. While indicating his appreciation for Brakel, he criticizes Brakel for his view of faith and champions the position set forth by Comrie.¹¹¹ Like Comrie, he defines faith according to its being a faculty before it is an activity. He writes, "Saving faith should always be understood as a disposition of man's spiritual being by which he can become assured that the Christ after the Scripture, the *only* Savior, is *his* Savior."¹¹² This faculty is given to the child of God in his regeneration, and remains even though the child of God fails to demonstrate his faith, "so by virtue of regeneration is faith present as a disposition in man's spiritual being, even though he believes not yet, or believes no more."¹¹³

109 Kuyper, *Work of the Holy Spirit*, 335-336.

110 Kuyper, *Work of the Holy Spirit*, 336.

111 Kuyper, *Work of the Holy Spirit*, 390-96.

112 Kuyper, *Work of the Holy Spirit*, 402.

113 Kuyper, *Work of the Holy Spirit*, 402.

With this understanding of faith as faculty, Kuyper explains how faith relates to salvation: “Hence everything depends upon the correct understanding of Ephes. ii.8. For faith is not the act of believing, but the mere possession of faith, even of faith in the germ. He that possesses that germ or faculty of faith, and who at God’s time will also exercise faith, is saved, saved by grace, for to him was imparted the gift of God.”¹¹⁴

Kuyper’s concern, like that of Comrie, was to beat back the advances of Arminianism:

It is of vital interest that the *exercise* of faith and the *faculty* of faith be no longer confounded, and that it be acknowledged the latter may be present without the former. Otherwise there will be a complete deviation from the line of the Scripture, which is also that of the Reformed churches. It will make salvation dependent upon the *exercise* of faith, i.e., upon the act of accepting Christ and all His benefits; and since this act is an act, not of God, but of man, we imperceptibly lose our way in the waters of Arminianism.¹¹⁵

In his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism (*E Voto Dordraceno*), Kuyper speaks similarly when he comes to the subject of faith in Lord’s Day 7. He writes, “Now, in order to fully understand this answer, the reader should note that one can speak of faith in two senses.”¹¹⁶ Kuyper then illustrates this point by speaking of an eye, which has the capacity to see even when we are not always actually seeing, such as when we are asleep. He believes that this accurately illustrates the truth of faith. He says,

In the vast majority of moments of your life you do not believe, even after your conversion. You do not believe when you are asleep, you do not believe when you are sitting idly, you do not believe when you are absent-minded, you do not believe when you sin. But while in this way you sometimes for hours let your faith remain inactive, and it was as if you had no faith, a child of God nevertheless possesses it

114 Kuyper, *Work of the Holy Spirit*, 411.

115 Kuyper, *Work of the Holy Spirit*, 411.

116 Abraham Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno: Toelichting op den Heidelbergschen Catechismus* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1892), 1:125.

thoroughly.¹¹⁷

He continues, “So distinguish between the two as sharply as possible. The *faculty* of faith that is hidden in your soul is one thing, and the *act* of believing, when you use your faith and the faculty of faith is working in you, is quite another.”¹¹⁸ He continues, “What our Catechism now deals with in Question 21 is not and *cannot* be the working of faith in its perfection, but *must* be the nature of faith as an instilled, inwrought and implanted faculty.”¹¹⁹ Part of Kuyper’s concern in defining faith had to do with the children of believers who die in their infancy: “Firstly, many young children die who have not come to any *working* of faith, and secondly, many adult children of God die without the working of faith having developed in them *to perfection*.”¹²⁰ After quoting Ephesians 2:8, Kuyper says, “Thus we are not speaking of *our* activity of faith, but of a gift which an *ungodly* man receives from his God; receives at the moment of regeneration; and receives it in such a way that it immediately brings him into communion with salvation.”¹²¹ He concludes, “‘Faith’ here therefore signifies the habit (Dutch: *hebbelijkheid*) or faculty (Dutch: *vermogen*) to believe, which the Holy Spirit implants in us at the hour of his good pleasure.”¹²²

Next, consider **Herman Bavinck** (1854-1921). Bavinck served as professor of theology at the Theological School at Kampen before a highly-scrutinized move to serve at Kuyper’s Free University.

In his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (*Reformed Dogmatics*), Bavinck addresses the issue of the faculty of faith in his chapter on faith. He explains that, while it is possible to call the life given in regeneration the life of faith, it is more accurate to call it the life of the Holy Spirit: “The life that originates in rebirth can, from the human perspective, be called a life of faith (Gal. 2:20), but objectively it is the life of the Spirit, the life of Christ, the life of God in the believer.”¹²³

117 Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, 126.

118 Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, 126. Emphasis is Kuyper’s.

119 Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, 126. Emphasis is Kuyper’s.

120 Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, 126. Emphasis is Kuyper’s.

121 Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, 126. Emphasis is Kuyper’s.

122 Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, 126-127.

123 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:89.

Like Kuyper, Bavinck reckons with the position and arguments of Comrie:

This danger moved Comrie and his followers, in defining faith, to work back from the act to the disposition (*habitus*). ...It is for this reason [for Comrie] that in justification faith is not at all considered as act but solely as disposition (*habitus*). ...This is the reason Comrie distinguishes the ingrafting into Christ by faith as disposition from the acts of faith and accords it precedence over these acts by which we on our part accept Christ and so forth. This is also why in his exposition of Q&A 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism he proceeds from the answer to question 20.

However, unlike Kuyper, after considering the arguments of Comrie, Bavinck was not convinced:

However astutely Comrie unfolds all this, one cannot suppress the question whether this interpretation does justice to the words of answer 21 and to the position of the Reformers. Can the disposition of faith (seed, root, faculty or principle of faith) really be formally called faith? Was Voetius not right when he wrote concerning faith as root, faculty, and so forth? “This [principle] cannot be called faith except by analogy and improperly by metonymy of the cause or of the principle: formally this is no more faith than a seed is a tree, or an egg a chicken, or a bulb a flower.”¹²⁴

Bavinck later uses the word “bond” in connection with faith’s activity to emphasize the relational aspect of union with Christ. He writes,

In Scripture, however, faith is not merely an intellectual act of accepting the witness of the apostles concerning Christ, but also a personal relation, a spiritual bond, with Christ who is now seated at the right hand of the power of God. ...It is the principle of the Christian life as a whole, the means by which we obtain Christ and all his benefits, the subjective source of all salvation and blessing. While through Scripture it binds us to the historical Christ, it at the same time lifts us up to the invisible world and causes us to live in communion with

124 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:114-115.

the Lord from heaven.¹²⁵

He continues,

But regeneration in a restricted sense, as the infusion of the principle of the new life, may also temporally precede faith. In their polemic with the Anabaptists, the Reformed gradually arrived at the insight that the faculty, seed, or disposition of faith, in other words, regeneration in a restricted sense, could already occur in infancy before the awakening of consciousness, in or before baptism, or even before birth.¹²⁶

Later he writes, “In the history of the Reformation, which aligned itself on this point with the teaching of Scripture, faith increasingly became the name for that new, normative, spiritual, and comprehensive relationship in which God first of all (in regeneration or habitual faith) directs us to himself, and we, with all our capacities and powers (in actual faith), direct ourselves to God.”¹²⁷

Bavinck returns to the matter of the faculty of faith when he treats the doctrine of infant baptism. Bavinck was aware that the Anabaptists challenged the baptism of infants by claiming that infants could not demonstrate faith: “But the Anabaptists consistently advanced still another argument against infant baptism. They asserted not only that infant baptism is not mentioned in Scripture, but also that children could not experience or demonstrate faith and repentance and therefore were not permitted to be baptized.” Bavinck then sets forth the Reformed response, which includes an appeal to the faculty of faith:

Over against this position the Reformed argued that though children could not—as the Lutherans held—possess the acts of faith, they could most certainly possess the disposition (*habitus*) of faith. They employed a wide variety of expressions—like the seed, the root, the inclination, the potency, the disposition, or the principle of faith, or the seed of regeneration, and so forth. But on the issue itself there was complete agreement. On the basis of Scripture, Jer. 1:5 and Luke 1:35, and in keeping with the catholicity of the Christian religion, all the Reformed maintained against the Anabaptists that children as

125 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:121.

126 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:123.

127 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:130.

well as adults could be received by God through grace, regenerated by his Spirit, and gifted with the seed of faith. And over against the Anabaptists this was enough for them.¹²⁸

Another important figure in the Dutch Reformed tradition of this period was **Geerhardus Vos** (1862-1949). Vos served as professor of theology in the Theological School of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) for a brief time, from 1888 to 1892, after which he joined Princeton Seminary. During his time as professor in the CRC, Vos drafted his own *Reformed Dogmatics*, which was in catechetical format. In his section on faith, Vos considers,

87. What is the difference between a ‘seed of faith’ and a ‘disposition of faith’?

The former is given in regeneration, and thus is faith as an undeveloped potentiality. A disposition, on the other hand, is the inclination developed by the activity of faith that furthermore now underlies this activity. From this it follows that for adults, when they are regenerated, the principle or the seed of faith also immediately becomes a disposition of faith. For children it is otherwise. Children who die before years of discretion and are children of the covenant are regarded as having also received the seed of faith with regeneration. For them, however, one can hardly speak of a disposition (*habitus*), although some theologians do use this terminology. Those who express themselves more accurately speak of a *seed* of faith (*semen fidei*).¹²⁹

Vos returns to this issue when treating the salvation of children of believers in his section on justification:

44. How are they justified who do not arrive at a conscious activity of faith; for example, the children of believing parents who die in infancy? For them one must assume that God’s justifying act follows immediately upon the implanting of the seed of faith, and thus upon regeneration. Scripture, however, does not speak expressly about such a justification, because justification belongs to the conscious side of the *ordo salutis*. There can be no thought of consciousness in this life

128 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:525.

129 Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 4:132.

for children dying in infancy.¹³⁰

The final figure of this period to be considered is **Louis Berkhof** (1873-1957). He served as professor in the Theological School of the CRC from 1906 until his retirement in 1944. The fruit of his labors was his *Systematic Theology*.

In a chapter on the mystical union, Berkhof treats of the mystical union as more than the organic union, but does speak of “the union of life subjectively realized by the operation of the Holy Spirit.”¹³¹ He writes of the connection between faith and union,

In view of what was said, it is quite evident that it is not correct to say that the mystical union is the fruit of man’s believing acceptance of Christ, as if faith were not one of the blessings of the covenant which flow unto us from the fulness of Christ, but a condition which man must meet partly or wholly in his own strength, in order to enter into living relationship with Jesus Christ. Faith is first of all a gift of God, and as such a part of the treasures that are hidden in Christ. It enables us to appropriate on our part what is given unto us in Christ, and to enter ever-increasingly into conscious enjoyment of the blessed union with Christ, which is the source of all our spiritual riches.¹³²

In describing the characteristics of this union brought about by the Holy Spirit, he says that “it is a union that implies reciprocal action” and explains it this way: “The initial act is that of Christ, who unites believers to himself by regenerating them and thus producing faith in them. On the other hand, the believer also unites himself to Christ by a conscious act of faith, and continues the union, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, by the constant exercise of faith, John 14:23; 15:4, 5; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:17.”¹³³

With respect to the faculty of faith, Berkhof writes,

True saving faith is a faith that has its seat in the heart and is rooted

¹³⁰ Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:181.

¹³¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 449.

¹³² Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 449.

¹³³ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 450.

in the regenerate life. A distinction is often made between the *habitus* and the *actus* of faith. Back of both of these, however, lies the *semen fidei*. This faith is not first of all an activity of man, but a potentiality wrought by God in the heart of the sinner. The seed of faith is implanted in man in regeneration. Some theologians speak of this as the *habitus* of faith, but others more correctly call it the *semen fidei*. It is only after God has implanted the seed of faith in the heart that man can exercise faith. ...The conscious exercise of faith gradually forms a *habitus*, and this acquires a fundamental and determining significance for the further exercise of faith. When the Bible speaks of faith, it generally refers to faith as an activity of man, though born of the work of the Holy Spirit.¹³⁴

Conclusions

To conclude, I summarize some of the significant findings of this historical survey, first with respect to faith itself, and then with respect to faith's relation to union with Christ.

Regarding what these theologians taught regarding faith itself, note five things.

First, many Reformed theologians affirmed the reality of the faculty of faith given to the elect at the moment of regeneration. Not all Reformed theologians gave the concept a place in their theology; some theologians apparently did not mention a faculty of faith. One theologian (Brakel) mentioned the concept, but then apparently rejected it. But the rest of the influential theologians included in this survey gave the concept some place in their works. Clearly, there is a longstanding precedent for its inclusion in Reformed theology.

Second, the many Reformed theologians who affirmed the concept of the faculty of faith differed in the emphasis they placed upon it. Most of the theologians surveyed defined faith according to its activity, while affirming that one could by necessary implication reason back to a faculty of faith (for example, Voetius and Bavinck). A few theologians (Comrie and Kuyper) placed greater emphasis on the faculty of faith, even going so far as to make this faculty, rather than faith's activity, the definition of faith.

Third, theologians saw the concept of the faculty of faith as having a necessary place in Reformed theology for several weighty reasons.

134 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 503.

For many, especially the early reformers (Calvin, for example), they included this concept as part of their defense of infant baptism over against the objections lodged against it by the Anabaptists. The idea of a faculty of faith was necessary, therefore, in understanding the work of God in the hearts of the children of believers, especially those children of believers that died in infancy. Most of these theologians clarified that this was not actual faith (something the Lutherans taught), but faith in seed form. Another reason why some later theologians (Comrie and Kuyper, for example) developed the concept was as a corrective to Arminian idea that faith is an act of one's free will.

Fourth, Reformed theologians used a wide variety of language in reference to the faculty of faith. Bavinck made this point: "They employed a wide variety of expressions—like the seed, the root, the inclination, the potency, the disposition, or the principle of faith, or the seed of regeneration, and so forth."¹³⁵ Some theologians (Voetius, Vos, and Berkhof, for example) were very precise in how they employed terms like "potency," "disposition," and "habit," while others used these terms in a less technical sense. Richard Muller is helpful in summing up the fine distinctions of terminology when he defines the "seed of faith" as

the ground or beginning of personal faith, brought about or implanted by the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. Some of the Protestant scholastics use *semen fidei* as a synonym for the disposition of or capacity for faith, the *habitus fidei*; others make the *semen fidei* more basic and regard the disposition, or *habitus*, of faith as a fully developed capacity arising out of the seed, or *semen*.¹³⁶

The Reformed tradition recognizes no one term as being the standard of orthodoxy but allows for a wide variety of terminology so long as there is agreement on the basic idea itself.

Fifth, as far as I can tell, none of the theologians surveyed referred to faith as a faculty by referring to it as an unconscious "bond." Even those who placed the most emphasis upon the faculty of faith (Comrie

¹³⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:525.

¹³⁶ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 329, under *semen fidei*.

and Kuyper) did not refer to it by using the precise language of “bond.” Those theologians which did connect the idea of faith with the idea of “bond” (Ames, Comrie, and Bavinck, for example) meant something different than an unconscious, passive connection to Jesus Christ (as we will see below).

This leads us to consider two conclusions regarding what Reformed theologians said about faith’s relation to union with Jesus Christ.

First, many of the Reformed theologians surveyed (Calvin, for example) taught that, to be precise, the *Holy Spirit*, not *faith*, is the bond that unites the elect child of God to Jesus Christ. By His Holy Spirit, Jesus takes hold of the elect sinner and unites that elect sinner to Himself in a living union at the moment of regeneration.

Second, many Reformed theologians spoke of faith as the bond that unites the elect child of God to Jesus *subjectively* and *consciously*. Theologians who spoke of faith using the terminology of “bond” (Ames, Comrie, and Bavinck) did not by that mean an unconscious, passive connection to Jesus Christ. What they meant is that faith is a bond in the sense of the believer’s conscious experience as by faith he embraces and appropriates Jesus Christ. Even those theologians who most emphasized the faculty of faith (Comrie and Kuyper) still spoke of this union to Christ subjectively and experiential by faith. The biblical passage most often appealed to for proof of this idea was Ephesians 3:17 (“that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith”). At least one theologian (Hoornebeek) also grounded this idea in the biblical language of believing *in* or *into* Jesus Christ.

In summary, Reformed theologians taught that the Holy Spirit is the bond that unites the elect to Christ, in so doing implanting within them the seed or faculty of faith; that seed or faculty of faith comes to expression in active faith by which the child of God consciously embraces and appropriates Jesus Christ; thus, faith is the bond to Christ in the sense of the believer’s conscious experience.

Voices From the Past: Perspectives of Protestant Reformed People Who Lived the History¹

Steven R. Key

This article has its origins in a church history project conducted by seminarians Russell Dykstra, Steven Key, and Charles Terpstra, at the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary in 1985. These three were the first to go through the four-year seminary program. One of the reasons to expand the curriculum to four years was to add an internship, but this was not yet implemented. So we were given additional coursework, including this church history project.

Each interviewed several individuals in the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA) who had lived the history of the churches up until 1985. The ten interviews I conducted rendered 189 pages of material. Combining that with the other interviews gives one an idea of the amount of material that needed to be reviewed for this article.

This article provides a brief glimpse into each decade of the history of the PRCA. The overview is taken from the perspectives of men who lived that history. It must be emphasized that these are *perspectives*. Because of our imperfections, perspectives can be faulty in some instances, and memories can be clouded as we age. But we can still learn from those perspectives, and it is important that we not lose sight of our history.

¹ This article is the written version of an audio-visual presentation given in June 2025, at the centennial celebration of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America. The quotations will not be footnoted; they are all found in the oral history interviews conducted by Russell Dykstra, Steven Key, and Charles Terpstra in August 1985. The files can be found in the archives of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, Wyoming, MI, box 270. The article will present the quotes without noting interjected thoughts and using many ellipses.

The 1920s

Remembering the cultural background is important. World War I, the war thought to end all wars, had concluded in 1918. The great influenza pandemic raged in 1918 and 1919, with more than one-half million deaths in the United States and more than twenty million deaths worldwide. The labor movement had begun and was taking root in the United States, and the League of Nations had just been founded in 1919. The 1920s was known as “The Roaring Twenties,” a time of economic prosperity fueled by rapid industrial growth, the era of prohibition that gave rise to illegal nightclubs and organized crime, a cultural revolution with the popularity of jazz and dance, and young women (known as flappers) challenging traditional norms with their bold fashion and behavior. On the church scene, the loudspeaker had just been invented in 1919. The Pentecostalism movement, tracing its origins to 1906, continued to take root and develop. And in the 1920s, the liberal theology that had its origins in Europe began flourishing in the United States.

The influence of higher criticism and modernism had made its way into the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), evidenced in the seminary instruction of Professor Ralph Janssen. But while common grace was at the root of Janssen’s teaching, many others in the CRC and in the seminary had been influenced by and had embraced Abraham Kuyper’s novel teachings about common grace, while denying the implications embraced by Janssen.

George Ophoff, one of the founding fathers of the PRCA, was a seminary student at the time. Herm Ophoff, a son of George Ophoff, relayed what he had learned from his father about that history:

He (that is my father, George Ophoff) was given an assignment to prepare a paper on common grace, that is, to show from the Scriptures that it was indeed scriptural. It was presupposed, you see, that everyone accepted the theory of common grace, himself included. He struggled with that and he was finally, so to speak, at wits end. He could not square common grace with the Scriptures. So he finally decided that he would take the stand that there wasn’t common grace. And I can hear him say this yet, “And then the light went on.” That was exactly the turning point in my father’s life; my dad saw clearly that this whole issue of common grace was heresy.

When George Ophoff was ordained in 1921 and became minister at Hope CRC southwest of Grand Rapids, he, in the words of Herm,

did not know or had never been introduced to Rev. Herman Hoeksema. My dad would say, 'I saw in his writing that he was a champion of the truth.' That's all that he really knew about Herman Hoeksema. Not much later they would stand together, along with Henry Danhof, wrongfully deposed for their convictions contrary to the adoption of the false teaching of common grace.

Charles Pastoor was a teenager whose family was well established in Eastern Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, his maternal grandfather an elder. In the words now of Charles Pastoor: "Eastern Avenue Church was a big congregation, over 500 families and was located...right in the heart of one of the biggest Groninger settlements in the United States. So by and large the people that went to Eastern Avenue Church were Groningers, immigrants and their children."

Pastoor gives us an idea of what Eastern Avenue CRC was like prior to the arrival of Herman Hoeksema: "Rev. Groen was the minister. He was a very capable man and a very powerful preacher. But Groen was ahead of his time. He was pro-labor, he was for women's suffrage, and he was for prohibition. And the congregation didn't at all approve of the bulk of these ideas. So the congregation to a certain extent soured on him." Especially one man:

...involving women's suffrage, one of the parishioners tried to kill Groen. He came with a gun and shot at him. The man was deranged and was later committed to Pine Rest for the rest of his life. But this incident changed Groen. He was never the same after this. About 1916 or 1917 Groen developed a bad heart, and we were without a minister for three years because he was incapacitated. The congregation just kind of drifted, church societies simmered off, and catechism classes were poorly attended. In other words, the interest was gone. After about three years it was decided that Groen could no longer serve and the congregation should call another minister.

Making the point that the congregation was quite weak when Hoeksema arrived in 1920, Pastoor continued:

When Rev. Hoeksema came to Eastern Avenue (in 1920) we had policemen in the gallery. The boys up there were troublemakers and they would play cards up there during the service. When Rev. Hoeksema came, one of the first things he did was he got rid of those policemen. He controlled the situation from the pulpit. He would say, "I know what you are doing up there and if you don't stop I'll mention your names." And this stopped them.

We [members] were just sleeping. But Hoeksema followed Groen and just revitalized it. And this vitalized church was on fire in 1924 because of his vitality. When Hoeksema came we had 500-plus families, and he just rejuvenated the whole business. He was a dynamic man and his preaching was electrifying. In no time he whipped that congregation right into shape. We were real excited and happy. I looked forward to going to church on Sundays. And he was a tremendous orator and he had a fine baritone voice, very dramatic, and his sermons were well worked out.

One ought not think that the change in the congregation was instantaneous, nor that there were no serious doctrinal or lifestyle problems that needed to be addressed. Apparently many of the Dutch immigrants of the Afscheiding in the Netherlands were affected by the error of mysticism that had become entrenched in certain areas of the Dutch Reformed. Quoting Charles Pastoor again,

There was a strange conception that they had. In order to make confession of faith one had to have a sudden conversion. Well, there were many people that never had that experience of having a sudden conversion, so they were very reluctant to make confession of faith and they never did. And when Rev. Hoeksema came he worked on that. And many of these older people then made confession of faith. I had one uncle, I think he was forty years old when he made confession of faith. And then there were a number of those who had neglected the means of grace, but were on the rolls.

Pastoor said that discipline was restored in the church and there "was a rather wholesale cutting off of those people. I might add that at this time a number of people left, but also quite a few came and we also

drew a lot of malcontents, who couldn't find it anywhere, excitement seekers and so forth."

Many of the problems experienced by megachurches who have preachers with strong personalities affected Eastern Avenue CRC. This observation about Herman Hoeksema's vibrant personality was echoed by John M. Faber, for many years the editor of the "News from Our Churches" column in the *Standard Bearer* magazine. When interviewed, he made the following remarks:

There are people who say that it's too bad we don't have the enthusiasm for the truth as we did in those days. But a lot of that (80% maybe) was Hoeksema. He had charisma; he could preach and draw crowds. It was his personality. He was a wonderful preacher, no doubt of that. But it was his personality that was behind it. He had leadership. You believed what he said because he showed you.

What Faber said needs emphasizing: "*You believed what he said because he showed you.*" That is true leadership, to show from the Word of God and our Reformed confessions the truth that draws people. Faber did not say, "You believed what he said because he was such a charismatic figure"; rather, "you believed what he said *because he showed you.*"

Dick Kooienga joined the "Protesting CRCs" (as the PRCA was called in its first two years) immediately after the controversy of 1924. Kooienga would have been twenty-two years old and was very much aware of the common grace controversy, "mainly through the influence of my father who had, prior to 1924, read Rev. Hoeksema's articles and books on the subject of common grace and the covenant." (Note the importance both of reading *and* of parental instruction). But when asked, "Do you think the people in the CRC that you knew understood the issues of 1924," Kooienga's response was, "No; the church was very apathetic, showing very little interest in the issues, that is, the Three Points of Common Grace." When asked what the PRCA was like right after 1924, he responded, "I can recall there was great enthusiasm among the people, especially the older generation whose forebearers belonged to the church of the Separation of 1834 under Rev. H. De Cock."

But not all was well even among those who followed Herman Hoeksema and the deposed consistory of Eastern Avenue after the common grace controversy culminated in the formation of the Protesting CRC, soon to be the PRCA. While there was much enthusiasm among many, and great interest in the issues, many continued to be ignorant of the issues.

When contemplating the 450 or so families that followed Hoeksema and his deposed consistory, and the additional families that soon brought the congregation to over 500 families, Charles Pastoor said,

I doubt very much whether very many people understood the problem of common grace; but the big thing was, “Don’t touch our dominee.” The fact seemed to be borne out when in 1953 many of those left. Also, after 1924 there were a lot of people who left. My father never understood, and his brothers never understood. My mother’s brothers were much more capable in the Scriptures and a couple of them understood it well. But some didn’t understand at all. It was mostly, “Don’t touch our dominee.” We were instructed. We were thoroughly, thoroughly instructed from the pulpit. Even today how many people are instructed? I mean, they’re Christian, but they don’t have a great understanding. And it was the same in those days.

As an aside, I found a measure of encouragement as a pastor in that observation. Especially with so many having left us in recent years, I examine myself as a minister and wonder if I have failed to give clear and faithful instruction. But I am reminded that while God’s people need to be clearly and faithfully instructed in the truth of the Word of God, only the Holy Spirit can apply that in such a way that it is embraced by faith and incorporated into our minds and brought to expression in our lives. We need to continue to pray for the Holy Spirit’s work in applying the truth of the gospel in our midst.

Richard Teitsma was a young boy, baptized in Eastern Ave. CRC, and only nine years old in 1924. But he remembered from his boyhood perspective many of the details of 1924 and of First PRC in the late 1920s: “The people were so much more interested in doctrine and the truth of the Word of God. Also, the idea of the importance of church order and living according to the Church Order and the confessions.

As I get older and look back on this I see the importance of it more and more.”

Teitsma spoke of his family walking to church after Herman Hoeksema was deposed in 1924: “I can remember that we lived on Baxter Street at that time, and we would walk downtown to the St. Cecilia building when we no longer could hold services in Eastern Avenue church.” (That was a walk of almost two miles one way, and more for a lot of people.) He continued:

We held services there (St. Cecilia Auditorium) until we started meeting in Franklin Community House. I can remember our first Christmas program there. The building had a big old stove up front, and those that sat near it got roasted and those that sat in the rear froze. I remember the building of the church (at Fuller and Franklin) and how we started meeting in the basement before the upstairs was finished. There were no partitions in the basement as yet. One Sunday we had rain and everyone was moving his chair around because the rain was coming through the ceiling. It didn’t dampen anyone’s enthusiasm.

J. M. Faber said, “There weren’t very many cars. Everyone walked downtown [to the St. Cecilia building] from the Eastern Avenue neighborhood. It was a regular parade.”

John Heys, later to become Reverend Heys, was fourteen in 1924, a freshman in Grand Rapids Christian High at the time. He said, “We were ridiculed, we were mocked, called ‘Hoeksemites.’ When we put that church up on Fuller and Franklin—I remember that empty lot with scrub oak on it—I even still today can see that. And then when we did move in there, they ridiculed us about going to and being members attending ‘St. Herman’s Cathedral.’”

Cornelius Hanko was a student at Calvin College at the time Classis Grand Rapids East deposed Herman Hoeksema. Hanko said that at Calvin “there was an announcement from the chaplain that there might be no more debate between” between those who followed Hoeksema and the other students.

When the PRCA formed in 1925, its future was unknown. That especially was the case when Henry Danhof separated from us in 1926. But it soon became evident that there was interest from all over the

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country in what the PRCA represented.

Herman Veldman, who grew up in Chicago, said that right after the split, Herman Hoeksema “delivered three lectures on the Three Points, one in Chicago, one in Roseland, and the third one was somewhere else—maybe in South Holland.” There were many other speaking engagements in the West, followed by the organization of congregations.

And lest the size of First Church, a megachurch, leave the wrong impression, the other congregations organized with seven to twenty-five families, and very humble beginnings. That is a reminder that the PRCA historically knew enough not to despise the day of small things. First PRC of Holland, MI, began in a bakery; Byron Center PRC in the Byron Center Town Hall. Hudsonville PRC began in Spoelman’s barn, and Roosevelt Park PRC in a converted automobile service station.

With all the new congregations there was a great need for ministers. Herman Veldman reflected on how that great need for ministers affected our history from his perspective: “When I went to seminary I had only two years of high school education. I think that was a handicap. But in those days we needed preachers, and before I finished my first year in the seminary I was out preaching already. The subjects taught were not nearly as many as today. That was the trouble! I’m convinced of that. I think we had too many ministers who became ministers in our churches because it was easy to become a minister. (For many their) only Christian education was when (they) got into our seminary.” Many, in other words, had received their primary and secondary education in the public schools.

The 1930s

The 1930s was a period of economic hardship. The stock market crashed in October of 1929, and the early 1930s were the years of the Great Depression, with widespread unemployment and poverty. The Midwestern United States was also affected from 1934-1940 with drought and the Great Dust Bowl. It was during the 1930s that President Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced “The New Deal,” bringing all kinds of social reforms and increased dependence upon the government.

Not from these interviews, but from my first year in the ministry

I have a story about the Great Depression. I was in my first round of conducting family visitation when I visited one of our elderly couples in Southeast PRC, Gerald and Jean Korhorn. I do not remember the theme of our family visits anymore or how the conversation came up, but they talked about life during the Great Depression. They were a young family then, with (I think) three children in Christian school. Gerald was out of work and would go out and pick up odd jobs and do whatever he could to provide for the family. They testified that he would come home with his meager earnings, and the first thing he and Jean would do was separate out the money for the church budget and Christian school tuition. They would then live on the rest. "Often we only had soup and bread to eat, and many times the soup had to be watered down; but God provided." For us who have never known such economic hardship as did those who lived during that Great Depression, I wondered if our priorities would be the same today.

Dick Kooienga and his family transferred their membership closer to home when Byron Center PRC was organized in 1925. The congregation lasted less than twenty years, disbanding in 1944, with most of the families transferring to other Protestant Reformed congregations. There had been unresolved trouble in the congregation, but it was also greatly affected by the financial difficulties arising out of the Great Depression. Kooienga said,

These were the years of the Great Depression in the 1930s. Many families had produce farms and had some very lean years. There were crop failures, poor market prices, farm foreclosures, etc. Incidentally, we also lost our basement church through foreclosure and were back in the old town hall again. So when the economy began to get better, people began moving elsewhere to get work. We left in 1937 and moved to Walker, MI, and joined the Hope Protestant Reformed Church. We had heard that there was muck land available there just north of the old Hope Church. We investigated and bought land there just north of the old Hope Church.

Roosevelt Park PRC, which would become Second PRC and eventually Southwest PRC, also lost its church building during the depression. John Kalsbeek was a young man of twenty-four years old and a member of Byron Center when he and his family transferred to

Roosevelt Park PRC. Kalsbeek recollected, “The meeting place was a basement when we joined. I believe the intent was to build a church above this basement structure later on. The basement was located on Roosevelt. Because of the Depression, the building value was also depressed and making monthly payments became difficult.” The congregation then lost the building. They moved into a new building in 1939, and the name of the church was then changed to Second PRC.

George Lubbers served in Doon, IA from 1934 to 1937. He said this: “The Doon years were very difficult years from many points of view. This was the time of the Great Depression, and there were many financial hardships. I had a very small salary during these years, around 500 dollars. We had no telephone in our house, nor any other modern conveniences.” The Lubbers moved to Pella in 1937: “These years did not improve any as far as our finances were concerned. In fact, I did some painting to supplement my income. I painted some homes in the area. And when I went back to Grand Rapids for vacation, then I would do some painting also. I even painted old Hudsonville church.”

Marinus Schipper was born in 1906 in Holland, Michigan, a member of Fourteenth Street CRC where Herman Hoeksema served as his first pastorate. Schipper did not enter seminary until 1933, after several years working in sales. He said,

We were very poor in those days, so when I started seminary there was that rule that all married students could not get any financial help, so the only thing that we could live on was what my wife could earn. She did a little nursing and she used to work for a doctor and knew a little about the care of the aged, so that’s how we got along. Bills piled up, and when I came out of seminary I had \$925 debt and it took me three and a half years in Grand Haven, five and a half years in Roosevelt Park, which later became Second Church, and two years in South Holland before I had my debts paid up. When I started seminary it was the Great Depression, the poorest time from a financial point of view to do something like that. But the Lord was with us and I prospered in the ministry.

Speaking about the difficulties from the late 1920s into the early 1940s, Schipper made the observation that, apart from First Church, “all of our churches were very small and the consistories were very

limited. We have men who were just taken from the raw and suddenly imposed on them the office of elder or deacon. That thing was so pronounced in the early part of our history that I believe today that it was the cause of much of our strife.” This underscores the importance of maintaining the biblical qualifications for elders and deacons, as well as that of ministers.

Schipper made another observation that came from those early decades in the history of our churches: “Whenever a church organizes, you can bank on it, there are going to be maybe a third of the group that doesn’t really belong there. They may go along because they are dissatisfied for other reasons, most of them personal reasons, not doctrinal reasons. We organized and almost immediately ran into this problem.” It is so important to belong to a church because of spiritual conviction and for the truth’s sake, for doctrinal reasons, guided by the three marks of a true church as our Belgic Confession instructs us.

In the PRCA, one major characteristic of this decade was the tension over using English in the worship services instead of the Dutch language, which many yet considered “the language of heaven.” From Homer Kuiper, a member of Kalamazoo PRC, we hear this:

It was kind of a tumultuous period for a while. The use of the Dutch language...there were many differences of opinion: some wanted none at all, some wanted as much as possible. So there was a lot of tension in the congregation on the question of the Dutch language. Of course, the people who had children were strongly advocating that they get the English language, because the children were not benefiting from the church services. The only people who benefited were some very old people, and they were in too poor health to even attend the services. So it took a little doing to bring people around to the point of view that we’d better get the English language and get it quick. That was one of the first things that Rev. (Herman) Veldman did. During the pastorate of Rev. Veldman he met a lot of people and sort of bridged the gap between the Dutch and the English question rather successfully, and his preaching attracted other people to the church.

Lammert Lanting, a member of South Holland (IL) PRC added this:
Changing from the Dutch to the English was not so easy for some people. There were some who said that if we used the English, then we can’t speak the truth. They felt that if you take out the Holland

language, you lose the truth too. But, you know, we had so many young people there, and they went to school and learned English. Oh, they picked up a little Dutch at home, but they couldn't understand the Dutch. And I thought, too, that it's time that we change. I would just as soon that we heard it in Dutch, but they couldn't even speak it. So then we had two or three families leave over this. But two of them came back later on.

In 1939 the Dutch theologian Dr. Klaas Schilder from the Liberated Churches in the Netherlands made his first visit to our country and to our churches, a visit that would prove pivotal in subsequent PRCA history. Homer Kuiper was in seminary at the time, although he never entered the ministry. He said,

At that time Dr. Schilder came to America for the first time, and naturally all the seminarians were involved, along with the ministers, and attended all the meetings that were held between Dr. Schilder and Rev. Hoeksema. It was a very interesting period of time, because there was quite a bond between Rev. Hoeksema and Dr. Schilder at that time. Dr. Schilder was the first European theologian to support Rev. Hoeksema's position on common grace, and they went to Westminster Seminary together for sort of a colloquium or whatever you want to call it. And they had other contacts with the Christian Reformed Church at the time. There was a notorious conference at the Pantlind Hotel. All these things were going on, and it was a very active period. Prof. Schilder gave a couple of lectures in First Church, and the church was jammed with people from all over. He preached in Christian Reformed churches, and a good many of our people went. I went also to hear what he had to preach about. He preached in Eastern Avenue, he preached in Dennis Avenue and other places.

Notice that the CRC gave Schilder opportunity to preach. The PRCA did not, until Schilder returned to the States after World War II. We will have more about that in our treatment of the 1940s.

The 1940s: The War Years

The early 1940s, of course, were marred by World War II. One of the regrets that I have looking back over my interviews is the failure to ask how that affected the churches and the work of the pastors during

that time. Many PR young men were serving our country during that time. In First PRC's congregational publication, *Fuller's Courier*, June 1945, under the heading "Away From Home," one finds twenty-one pages of one-paragraph reports of the men from the congregation who were serving at the time. *Eighty-five men* from First Church were "away from home," many seeing action and some injured.

Marinus Schipper had taken the call to South Holland (IL) PRC in 1945. The War was not yet over. He said,

We had no young men in our church; all of them were in the service. I don't know just how many there were; probably eight or ten young men who were in the service in the South Pacific. The war with Germany was finished before the war with Japan. So these young men were out there in the islands of the Pacific. Of course, these boys all came home and it wasn't long and they all wanted to get married. I think I had twelve weddings in South Holland that first year after these boys came home.

The 1940s: Post-War Years

These were not only the post-war years, but also the beginning of what might we call "War Years" within our churches, the battle being waged for the truth of the unconditional covenant of grace.

First PRC, Grand Rapids, being the megachurch that it was with well over 500 families, had two ministers from 1939-1947, and added a third, Cornelius Hanko, in 1948. According to Hanko, the ministers divided the workload, with Hoeksema preaching in the morning and De Wolf and Hanko each taking one of the other services (the afternoon Dutch service or the evening service). When Hoeksema was unable to preach, the other two ministers would take the morning service in turn. Weddings and funerals were divided equally, as were the catechism classes, the number of students being so many that there were double classes for each section of the catechism curriculum. Family visitation involved making 750 visits. Apparently Hoeksema was no longer conducting family visits because of his workload in the seminary. The other two ministers each had 250 visits to make, while the elders took the other 250. When that proved unsustainable, the elders cut the ministers' visits down to 150. In the words of Hanko, when it came to visiting the sick and shut-ins the elders "made a schedule and insisted

that we make the calls, and not only that we make them but that we report on the bulletin every Sunday. That meant we (De Wolf and Hanko) would each have to make about 15 calls a week to keep up.” We must realize that this pace is unsustainable, and that it is impossible to maintain the proper spiritual oversight of a congregation as large as that. Such becomes evident in the following remarks of Hanko: “But the big problem was the antipathy in the congregation. Because of the large congregation we were gradually getting a strong carnal element. There were unbelievable evils in that church.” Hanko gave several examples in his interview, which led to the discipline of the members when the consistory found out about them. But the underlying problem was the impossibility of exercising proper spiritual oversight in such a large congregation. These excerpts from the interviews give some insight into the spiritual condition of First Church in particular, but to some degree other congregations as well during the events that brought about the schism of 1953. Through many chastisements and for nothing in us, God would faithfully maintain His church.

During the 1940s the influence of Schilder and the Liberated continued to work its way into our churches. Back to Homer Kuiper:

After that first visit he (Dr. Schilder) returned to the Netherlands, and when war broke out over there he was incarcerated for a while because of his views of the German powers that ruled in the Netherlands. There was some contact through the underground with him somehow or other. There was some exchange of correspondence at that time. And then, when the war was ended, Dr. Schilder came back to this country for his second visit, and he again gave moral support to the PRCs. He preferred them over the CRC, and for this he became sort of *persona non grata* with the CRC and their leaders. Then we gave him the right to our pulpits. I don’t know which of our PRCs he preached in, but he did preach in Kalamazoo, because I heard him preach there.

Cornelius Hanko, who was serving in Manhattan, MT prior to his call to First Church, noted the division evident in the churches, and especially between the ministers in Classis East and in Classis West. Quoting Hanko: “Particularly Rev. Andrew Cammenga, who had been in Rock Valley and later was in Hull, was sort of trying to separate the West from the East. He made his own catechism books and didn’t

want to use those that were made by synod or by Rev. Hoeksema. He had his own *Concordia* then, that is a church paper. He had his own radio program. There was growing tension between the East and the West.” This began to expose the doctrinal division in the churches at that time. Hanks added, “The situation in our churches was that they did not want to be positively Protestant Reformed anymore. They laughed at the word *distinctive*.”

John Kalsbeek said,

It soon became apparent in those days that the covenant views of the Liberated churches in the Netherlands were accepted by many ministers and members in our PR churches. This became very plain when the “Declaration of Principles” was adopted by Synod (1951).² Before adoption it was studied and treated by every consistory. The position of every minister and officebearer on this matter was then revealed. I was a deacon at the time, but the deacons were also included in the consistory. Only three men on our consistory voted in favor of the “Declaration of Principles,” elder Pete Cnossen, deacon Sid Offringa,

2 Another presentation covered the doctrinal aspects of the controversy. Note here that the “Declaration of Principles,” among other things, sets forth the PRC’s understanding of the covenant and what conceptions of the covenant are excluded by the confessions. The introduction to the “Declaration of Principles” says, “The confessions rule out the notion that the promise of the covenant is conditional and for all who are baptized....On the other hand, the Declaration demonstrates that the Confessions teach the following:

- All the covenant blessings are for the elect alone.
- God’s promise of salvation is only for the elect, and He always fulfills His promise.
- Election is the sole cause and fountain of all our salvation, out of which flow the gifts of grace, including faith.
- Faith is a gift of God, and a God-given instrument whereby God’s people appropriate salvation in Christ.
- The preaching comes to all, and God seriously commands to faith and repentance, and that to all those who come and believe God promises life and peace.”

See “Introduction to the Declaration of Principles,” in *The Confessions and Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 411.

and myself.³

Concerning that “Declaration of Principles,” George Lubbers stated the following in his interview with Charles Terpstra:

The evidence shows that Rev. Cammenga (and that is Rev. Andrew Cammenga) asked for some kind of statement. He was looking for a much more middle-of-the-road statement to make room for the Liberated. They could have their position, we can have ours. You can say the promise is upon condition, and we will say the promise is to those that believe. We mean the same thing. That’s what he was looking for. Finally the Declaration was adopted with a preamble which stated that this was not a creed at all, but it was to be used only by the Mission Committee and missionaries for organization of prospective churches on the basis of Scriptures and the confessions as these have always been maintained in the Protestant Reformed Churches and as these are now further explained in regard to certain principles.

This provides the transition into the 1950s and the schism and after-effects, again, from the perspective of those who lived through this controversy.

The 1950s

The early 1950s were dominated by the developing schism in the churches that would result in the split of 1953.

Herman Veldman accepted a call in 1950 to serve the PRCA congregation in Hamilton, ON, during that period of time when many immigrants were coming from the Netherlands. Because those who had come from the Liberated churches were encouraged to join our churches, the congregation in Hamilton consisted largely of Dutch immigrants from Liberated churches. Veldman said,

3 The 1950 Yearbook of the PRCA did not include the number of officebearers in a congregation. However, it indicates that Second PRC had 73 families and 319 members at the time, so it is safe to say that they had at least five elders and four deacons. That gives some context to Kalsbeek’s testimony that only three voted in favor of the “Declaration of Principles.”

I had no trouble in Hamilton with my preaching. My preaching was very well received. But the trouble in Hamilton was we had a Liberated church in Hamilton with the name Protestant Reformed. That was the trouble. It was a church Protestant Reformed in name only. It was really Liberated. And as far as receiving new members into the church was concerned, the consistory did not want to require that they be Protestant Reformed. No, they had to be Liberated in the sound sense of the word. Then they would certainly accept them.

An interview with Dingman Scheele, an immigrant from the Vrijgemaakte (Liberated) who settled in Chatham and became an elder there upon organization, confirmed Veldman's perspective. That opposition to Protestant Reformed doctrine increased with new arrivals from the Netherlands who, after being accepted as members of the congregation in Chatham, agitated against the preaching by our ministers. Scheele confessed,

We knew the differences, and it is not true that these were glossed over. But most of us were dishonest. We had expressed a willingness to be instructed further in the Protestant Reformed truth, which we (some) acknowledged to be the truth of Scripture; and not to agitate against it. We nevertheless in practice denied the first and did the latter. Most of us were still Liberated and intended to remain Liberated—in the PRC or otherwise.

After expanding upon this at some length, Scheele said,

In the light of all this, and more could be added, I am of the opinion that we, the Liberated, are largely responsible for the split of 1953. I have been told that already before these happenings there had been signs of discontentment on the part of some in the PRCs. And I have reasons to believe that. [But] I think it is safe to say that the conflict was forged by the opposition. Consider the plainness of many of the articles of Revs. H. Hoeksema, G. M. Ophoff, H. Veldman and others, and the vagueness, evasiveness, and confusion of articles from Rev. Petter. The latter and others with him, in their efforts to be "nice" to the Liberated, bent over backward...too far! They got involved to such an extent that they couldn't retract any more.

the Scheeles moved to Lynden, WA to become charter members of our Protestant Reformed congregation there on March 6, 1952, only, by his own confession, to make the wrong choice and side with the De Wolf faction the following year. It was approximately twenty years later that the Scheeles returned to Lynden PRC under the ministry of Bernard Woudenberg.

Robert Harbach was a young minister in the Reformed Episcopal Church on the east coast when he first came across the book *The Wonder of Grace* by Herman Hoeksema. Prior to that he had not heard of the PRCA. In the late 1940s he and two other Reformed Episcopal ministers came into contact with Rev. Marinus Schipper. These men were struggling over the book *Common Grace* by Cornelius Van Til, when Schipper sent Harbach the book *God's Goodness Always Particular*. That set those men on a path that led them out of the REC and to our seminary to become ministers in our churches. This happened, mind you, in 1950, right when our churches were entering the throes of the controversy. Harbach said,

Some people said, This must have been hard on you. But it was not. I could see it was not a personality issue; it was a doctrinal issue. The gospel is particular throughout. That's where I had to stand. We could not stand with conditional theology, because we left all of that. We had all that kind of thing, such as 'the offer' and the 'accepting of the offer' and the fulfilling of conditions... We left it all.

Part of that history unknown by most was revealed by Herm Ophoff. His father, George Ophoff, is often pointed to as the one who brought things to a head by exposing a letter in the *Standard Bearer* that revealed the treachery of some of our ministers, and by his involvement as an elder in First PRC in addressing the statements of Hubert De Wolf that had been made in First's pulpit. Herm said:

De Wolf was a very good preacher and he was a likeable fellow. And it was not difficult to be drawn to him as an individual. So he had quite a following. And at that time he had a very large following in the denomination. That was a serious time, I'll tell you. I can remember Rev. De Wolf would come to my folks—this was in the early part of the controversy—and my father would go over and over this thing with

Rev. De Wolf, and he would be convinced; that is, De Wolf would be convinced that those statements were wrong. And he would say to my dad, "I'm going to apologize for those. I condemn those statements." But, you see, the problem was that after he would leave my father's house after those long conversations he had, it wasn't long and he would be persuaded the other way when he would be among his own followers again. My father said to him one time—he called him his son—he said, "If you will condemn those statements, as you say you will, I will even go on the platform with you and together we will reveal the error and see if we can't once again get unity back into the church." But, of course, that never happened.

John Heys was a minister in 1953, helping Hope (Walker, MI) PRC weather the storm. He said, when interviewed,

What I remember about 1953 is on the classical level. Rev. De Wolf was slated to preside over those meetings when his statements were being discussed. And, of course, he couldn't do that, so alphabetically I was next. I presided over all those seven-and-a-half days. I'll never forget it. Some of those things are as clear as if they had happened an hour ago. I recall, for example, with regard to that first statement, "God promises every one of you that if you believe you will be saved," we had a committee appointed to give us advice on it. They came back with a report defending De Wolf. Then we got into the discussion. One minister, who is still with us, tried to defend De Wolf's statement by saying, "When De Wolf came on the pulpit, he raised his hands and pronounced the blessing on the 'Beloved in our Lord Jesus Christ.'" "Those were the ones," he said, "De Wolf had in mind when he said 'God promises every one of you.'" And of course, that would change the picture somewhat. Those that are already regenerated, those that are born again, those are the believing children of God. To say to them "God promises you" makes it different. But I'll never forget it. It's just as though it happened an hour ago. De Wolf got up and said, "Mr. Chairman, I don't mean that at all. I believe that I can say to any man that I meet on the street, 'God promises you that if you believe, you will be saved.'" And the Classis said, Well, if that's what he means, the meetings are all done with; we can never support him. And the minister that is still with us today too, said, "No, if that's what he means, I'm through. I won't defend him one bit anymore." I can't forget that.

As far as the second statement is concerned, I won't forget that either. I remember presiding there one morning. Rev. Kok was there with a *Standard Bearer*. He asked for the floor and I gave him the floor. He read out of a meditation of Herman Hoeksema on Matthew 18:1-3. It was in Dutch. What he read sounded very damaging. It sounded as if H.H. also taught that our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter the kingdom. That was the second statement. And it sounded very, very much as though H.H. was preaching that same thing and wrote it years before. I looked at H.H. and he sat there and didn't bat an eye. He didn't move a finger or anything, just as solid as can be. That happened maybe around 9:30 or 10:00 in the morning. All morning he did not ask for the floor to defend himself. It was kind of strange, and we went on and discussed the whole thing back and forth, and he never helped us or argued against anything that was said. Then he went home for dinner. We had dinner in the church, but he always went home. I was walking outside in front of the church before we began again in the afternoon, and he came up to me and said, "John, I would like to speak right after we open with prayer." And I noticed he had a bound volume of the *Standard Bearer*. "Well," I said, "I've got two men on the list and they still have to be heard." "That's all right," he said, "I just wanted to be able to speak." So I let these other two men ask their questions, and then I called on him. And I can remember so clearly what he said to the classis. He said, "Rev. Kok read a few scattered sentences out of my *Standard Bearer* article." He said, "I've got that *Standard Bearer* article here with me. I'm going to take the liberty to read the *whole* meditation, and you can see things in their context." So he did. It was all in Dutch. And then he explained what he had written there and how what he wrote in that article condemned rather than upheld that statement of De Wolf. After he got through, there was a sudden change in De Wolf. De Wolf was just like a pupil sitting at the feet of his teacher asking questions. He asked all kinds of questions, and you could tell by his questions that he had accepted what H.H. said, and that he was trying to learn more about it. And then Rev. H. Veldman asked for the floor. "Mr. Chairman," he said, "Why don't you ask Rev. De Wolf now whether he will admit that his statement is wrong? Why not strike while the iron is hot?" I said, "Well, Rev. De Wolf, after you heard what Rev. Hoeksema said and made clear to you, do you want to retract that statement and say that you were wrong in preaching it?" I'll never forget what he answered. I can give it to you word for word. "Mr. Chairman," he said, "I'd rather not. I might be sorry for it tomorrow." And so he went home. And sure

enough, he talked with Andrew Cammenga, their leader. He talked to the rest of them. The next day he was right back at it again defending his statement, and we were condemning it. Those things live in my soul as though they happened yesterday.

Following the schism of 1953, the churches endured many hardships. The schism that we experienced recently, as painful as it has been, really does not compare to 1953 when more than half the membership of the PRCA and ministers left, taking many of the churches and parsonages with them.

John Heys and family moved to Hull in 1955 and was there until December, 1959. He said,

I came in January. And that was an experience that I will never forget. It was hard. In five years we lived in five houses. They had no parsonage. The others (who left in 1953) had the property. At first we were shipped off to a farm house just outside of Sioux Center in January. Then in March, Prayer Day in fact, we moved into Hull next to the Kooiker Manufacturing plant. We were only there a month or two. We moved in the latter part of May to another house. We had catechism in the old town hall. It's not there anymore. I taught catechism one Saturday there with overcoat on, hat and other clothes on, it was so cold! There was an old pot-belly stove, but that didn't give heat, and all around the baseboard was this white frost. It was so cold! We had our society meetings in there too. And we had that community building for our services, down in the basement—a hollow, echoing place. A cute story came out of this. We were in that basement of the community building and on the south side was a bowling alley. That didn't bother us on Sunday, because it was closed. But on times like Prayer Day, Ascension Day, any meetings that you had during the week, they were bowling there. And you could hear those balls while you were preaching. Kids at school were ridiculing our kids that we didn't have a good church. They had nice big buildings, the Reformed Church and Christian Reformed Church, and they teased them about that. But this one boy said, "No, but we've got a better church than you've got. We got a bowling alley at our church." It was kind of a rough time. You did have to suffer for the truth's sake. I don't regret it. It would have been nicer, of course, if we had nicer facilities. The main thing is we had the truth.

George Lubbers was serving in Creston PRC, Grand Rapids during the time of the schism. “When I came to Creston there were around thirty-three families, but after 1953 there were eight. It was time of searching of the heart. It was a difficult time to be a minister. There were relatives involved, families were split up; it was tough. And as a consistory we had the task of deposing elders and deacons.”

After the split the churches immediately saw the need to continue mission work. Lubbers, who received the call at the end of 1954 to serve as missionary, recollected: “The former missionaries were gone. We didn’t have much money in the kitty. I know that at the end of the first year of my being missionary, we had \$28,000 in the kitty again. We started from scratch as churches. That’s the exact amount that had been confiscated from us. We bemoaned the fact that we had no money, but the Lord in heaven gave us plenty of money, and we had a \$28,000 balance.” He went to Pella and Northwest Iowa, both areas where several Protestant Reformed congregations left with the De Wolf faction, before going to Loveland and laboring for about three years. “It was a wonderful experience. Every meeting was an event. People were so interested. Life began for them in Loveland. It was a great experience to be there.”

The 1960s

George Lubbers continued his labors as a missionary until 1964, during which time he labored in Isabel, SD, Forbes, ND, and Houston, TX, all those labors bearing fruit in the establishment of congregations, although in Houston the seed planted by Lubbers did not bear the fruit of an established congregation until several years later.

The early 1960s also saw trouble with the departure of more ministers, the most prominent being Richard Veldman who left Southeast with some thirty to forty families, including officebearers with the exception of two deacons, to go to the CRC. He had secretly paved the way for a classical examination in the CRC. The Lord led Marinus Schipper to Southeast to restore and build up that congregation once again. He labored there for over sixteen years before receiving his emeritation in 1978. He died in 1985, soon after these interviews were conducted.

Kalamazoo’s congregation was also troubled by the departure of

its pastor, Alvin Mulder, who resigned in 1961 to seek and be given ministry in the CRC. Sadly, he had influenced many of the young people of the congregation, and many of them left the congregation. Here is another reminder that the young people suffer the most in church controversy and must receive the most attention as we attempt to restore stability in such times. In the words of Homer Kuiper, a member of Kalamazoo PRC at the time, "It was a very trying time for us spiritually. Many ridiculed us and we were scorned and derided. They thought we were out of our minds to want to continue as a church, and all kinds of insinuations and inuendoes were hurled at us. It was a very difficult time. Right shortly after that we called Rev. Harbach from Lynden, and he came here rather quickly."

The 1970s

This decade began with George Lubbers, who from 1964 until 1970 had been serving as pastor at Southwest PRC, receiving and accepting a call to serve as missionary in Jamaica. Lubbers spoke about that history:

About 1962 or 1963, while I was in Houston, TX, the Mission Committee had contact, by way of Trans-World Radio, with the island of Jamaica. (There) came a letter to the Mission Committee from a man (who) said he was the bishop of some churches there, and he would like to have us come and help him with his churches. So men went down there. While I was in Texas, men worked there for two years. Two were Henry Meulenberg and Harry Zwak. Later Rev. Heys and I think Thys Feenstra went there before I ever went there. So they had some teaching by Rev. Heys while he was there as an emissary and some correspondence courses had gone to ministers there, who sent back answers to study lessons. They were being instructed in that way.

Lubbers ended up laboring in Jamaica from 1970-1975. His interviews contained loads of information about his life and labors as a missionary that time fails us to relate. But note that missions has always had a place of importance in the PRCA, regardless of what one thinks about the methodology used, the focus of the labors, and other related matters. We can always learn and improve as churches in our mission work and our zeal for those labors. But the churches

have always recognized the importance of the call given by Christ and recorded in Mark 16:15, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” May God give us grace to be faithful in that calling.

General Observations and Words of Wisdom

This article concludes by calling attention to some of the general observations and concluding words of wisdom that came from our interviewees.

When asked how our churches have changed, John Heys said,

I don’t see our churches as strong today as they were in 1924. Of course, that’s true of the whole church world. I can remember in 1924 groups of men, retired men, on street corners and in stores arguing and debating infra- and supra-lapsarianism, common grace, and all that. You’re not going to find that today. Where can you find people like that today? Even outside of church on Sunday, what do they all talk about? When they go to visit, what do they want to talk about? You don’t find that zeal or enthusiasm. I don’t think we live our doctrine. I think we still have the truth, (but) the world is crowding in so. What percentage of men go to Men’s Society? What percentage of women go to Ladies’ Society?

We certainly have reason to examine ourselves from this point of view. How deep is our love for Christ’s bride? How important is His Word to us?

Herman Veldman was addressing me as a seminary student anticipating the ministry in our churches. He said: “You must be true, distinctively, to your calling. We must remain distinctive, absolutely. If not, we’re done. We must have preaching in our churches that they don’t get anywhere else. After all, that’s why we exist. If we want to preach the way others do, why have churches of our own?”

John Kalsbeek concluded: “Looking back, we see how the establishment of our own schools is a great blessing. Where would we have been today without them? We can hardly over emphasize their importance.

And Dingman Scheele remarked, “We are still a struggling

church, beset with many weaknesses. Yet, we have the truth. May we fervently strive to preserve that truth in our midst. And may we not—as individual members and as churches as a whole—return to folly. Be alert always. Let past history be a warning to all of us. May henceforth we ever be faithful. As individuals and as churches may we stand for the truth, defend it, love it, and live it. And, if need be, sacrifice for it again.”

Richard Kooienga added, “From the doctrinal point of view I am convinced our churches haven’t changed. We still maintain the three marks of the true church, namely, the pure preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and Christian discipline is exercised. Our covenant conception has not changed; the counsel of God’s sovereign grace is proclaimed, I believe, in all our churches.” Kooienga went on to give a serious caution:

We do not always live the antithesis. There seems to be a tendency toward worldly-mindedness, which is perhaps due to the affluent age we are living in. Materialism, seeking the pleasures of the world through amusements, sports-mindedness, social drinking which often leads to drunkenness, ...all these things, if done in excess, bring on a departure from the spiritual things of life. And these things bring on a lack of zeal and enthusiasm for the spiritual life in the church of Christ. I could wish it were as in former years. May the Lord continue to bless our Protestant Reformed Churches.

When asked to compare the spiritual life of the churches in the early 1980s with that of the previous fifty years, Marinus Schipper stated,

I believe that our people in general are much stronger doctrinally than they were fifty years ago. By that I mean they are more knowledgeable of the truth. On the other hand there is a tendency of worldliness which I think is in evidence among all of our people. In connection with that, we are really affluent today. We’re going to be tried and tested. Are we prepared for it? I think the church will remain and will be faithful, but there is going to be a falling away, and there’s going to be a considerable falling away. Are we prepared for that?

Cornelius Hanko, when asked about the direction our churches

are going, responded with the following observations:

I think there has been the positive trend that we are more and more a positive church rather than a negative church. I think one of the faults after 1924 was that we were negative. We opposed common grace and we opposed the well-meant offer of salvation. But at first at least, we didn't have anything positive to put in the place of it. But gradually Rev. Hoeksema developed our view of the covenant in such a way that I think that became the chief stone in our churches. I think that is our strength. I believe that that is the heart of the Reformed faith. On the other hand, we are getting away from the past and I think it is a good move that there is an effort put forth to be reminded of the past. We might have the danger that we are going to lose our distinctiveness. If we would go in that direction, for instance, that we would say, "Let's not talk about the differences, but let's talk about what we have in common with other churches," then we would lose our right of existence. Why should we exist if we are going to try to be as much like other churches as we can be? We'll have to maintain our distinctiveness, otherwise we are lost.

Herm Ophoff gave these words: "I love our church and I love our truth. I'm aware that we have weaknesses, but I know this too, that by grace God has sustained us in the way of the truth. I believe that as surely as I'm sitting here. And I guess that if a fellow didn't, he's just going to the wrong church."

Robert Harbach summed up his observations of some thirty years in our churches when he said,

We have a glorious faithful Savior above. And that's our only comfort in life and in death, that we belong to Him who gave His precious blood fully to satisfy for all our sins and deliver us from the power of the devil. And that's what counts, and that's what we hear in the preaching; that's what we always want to hear preached. To the Lord our covenant God be all the glory!

History of Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America

3. Issues

Douglas J. Kuiper

Ecclesiastical bodies—consistories, classes, and synods, in Reformed church polity¹—exist to serve churches. Consistories are the basic ecclesiastical body, found in every congregation. They serve their congregations by administering God’s Word to the congregation as a whole and supervising the spiritual lives of its members.

Synods are generally the broadest assembly or body in a denomination. Synods serve the entire federation of churches by making decisions regarding activities that the churches *carry out* in common (mission work, training theological students, contact with other denominations) and regarding matters that the churches *share* in common (matters of a doctrinal or church-political nature, including judging appeals that members bring).

Between the consistory at the local level and the synod at the broadest level, one finds classes (pronounced “class-eze”), the singular form of which is “classis”; the adjective form is “classical.” Classes are geographic districts comprised of every congregation in a certain region.

1 The four church assemblies mentioned in the Church Order of Dordrecht, 1618-1619, are consistories, classes, regional synods, and national synod. See the Church Order of Dordt, Articles 29, 36, 41, 47, and 50, in Richard DeRidder, *Translation of ECCLESIASTICAL MANUAL including the decisions of the Netherlands Synods and other significant matters relating to the government of the churches*, originally written by P. Biesterveld and H. H. Kuyper (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1982), 166-69.

For the purpose of this article, the division of regional synod is not relevant. And the term “national synod” presupposes that the Reformed churches in a country are all federated into a state church, or a state-wide church. As the Reformed churches splintered into many denominations, the broadest assembly became the denominational synod, not a national synod.

Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA) is such a geographic district. The first article in this series (*PRTJ*, April 2023) surveyed the history of Classis West as a geographical division of the PRCA and noted prominent features of Classis' history during different eras.

Classes serve the churches in several ways. First, they provide a check and balance for individual consistories in their work of disciplining members. Before a member is erased or excommunicated for censurable sin, the consistory must present the matter to its classis. Second, classes provide a check and balance for individual consistories in other judgments they make about members, and issues in the congregation. The consistory is not required to seek classical approval in these areas, but members who disagree with the decisions of a consistory, and do not by a formal protest convince the consistory of its error, may bring the matter to classis by way of appeal.

Classis West, therefore, is not merely a *geographic* district of the PRCA, but is primarily an *ecclesiastical body*. The most recent article in this series (*PRTJ*, April, 2024) focused on Classis as an ecclesiastical body, holding regular *meetings* and doing official *work*. The article sketched the main components of a classis meeting and noted significant decisions Classis West has made regarding how Classis does its work. The article also explained the various functionaries of Classis (president, stated clerk, classical committee, church visitors, and others), including decisions regulating their work. And it surveyed routine aspects of Classis' work, facing issues that pertain to the churches in common. Issues that Classis faces routinely include supplying vacant churches with classical appointments, approving subsidy requests, treating requests of consistories for advice whether to erase a baptized member or increase the discipline of a confessing member, helping consistories that face problems that they cannot resolve themselves. Less occasionally, Classis faces matters of organizing or disbanding a congregation, as well as examining candidates for the ministry.

Continuing the thought of the last article, this article also focuses on Classis West as an ecclesiastical body. But whereas the last article focused on routine work, this one examines significant issues that Classis has faced and decisions it has made.

What are some of those significant decisions that Classis has made, and why is it worthwhile to recall them? This article answers those questions by examining decisions regarding schools and education, marriage, labor unions, Sabbath keeping, doctrine, the use of advocates, and more. Some of these topics represent a distinct interest of the PRCA throughout her existence. Yet Classis treated these issues, not merely because they were of interest to the PRCA, but because men or women protested decisions of their consistory to Classis West. The article does not enter at length into who raised the issues and why, but relates the judgment that Classis gave in these instances.

Protests and appeals declared not legal

The matters related below usually came to Classis in the form of protests or appeals. The words “protest” and “appeal” are technical terms in the realm of church government. When a person disagrees with the decision of an ecclesiastical body, he or she writes a formal *protest*.² Such a protest is neither a verbal nor informal expression of disagreement. Rather, a protest is a written statement addressed *to the ecclesiastical body that made the decision*, quoting the decision with which one disagrees and giving reasons for one’s disagreement. The reasons must be weighty, drawn from Scripture, the Reformed confessions, the Reformed liturgical forms, or the Church Order. A protest calls for a formal response from the ecclesiastical body to which it is addressed.

Protests may be written against the decision of any of the ecclesiastical bodies. If one thinks a consistory erred, one writes a protest to the consistory. If the Classis or synod erred, one protests to the next meeting of those bodies.

By contrast, an *appeal* is a formal address to the ecclesiastical body that is *immediately broader* than the body which made a decision with which one disagrees. One must protest first; but if a protestant is not satisfied with the response to his protest, he may appeal the decision. If not satisfied with a decision of a consistory, one appeals to classis;

2 See “Explanation of Rules for Protests/Appeals/Overtures” in *The Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches and Constitutions of Standing Synodical Committees*, 2020 edition (Wyoming, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2020), 106-112.

if not satisfied with a classical decision, one appeals to synod. The appellant (the one making the appeal) forwards all the documents of his protest, as well as the consistory's response to it, to the broader assembly; for the purposes of this article, that assembly is Classis West. In a brief cover letter to the appeal, the appellant explains that he is not satisfied with his consistory's response and asks classis to judge.

The last article in this series noted that Classis, before treating the material of the appeal, first determines its *legality*.³ Classis declares a protest or appeal legal when the protest or appeal regards an ecclesiastical matter, when classis is convinced that the matter is finished at the level of the consistory, and when the protest or appeal is written by a member of the denomination who has followed the proper procedure for addressing his grievance.⁴

Not infrequently, Classis West has judged that it would not treat a protest or appeal because the matter was not legally before the Classis. The most common reason for judging a matter to be not legal is that the appeal did not meet the requirements of Articles 30 or 31 of the Church Order. Following are some less common reasons for judging that appeals and protests were not legally before Classis: the appeal or protest was brought to the wrong body;⁵ it did not regard an ecclesiastical matter;⁶ its author was not a member of the PRCA;⁷ it was not signed;⁸ the appeal really amounted to an overture, a request to do something, so that a different procedure should have been followed;⁹ a person under discipline, who may still protest his or her discipline but no other matter, was protesting a matter not related to the censure;¹⁰

3 Douglas J. Kuiper, "History of Classis West of the PRCA, 2: Meetings," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 57, no. 2 (April 2024): 105.

4 Such are the requirements as based on requirements of the Church Order of the PRCA, Articles 30 and 31. See *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 389-90.

5 Minutes of Classis West (henceforth, MCW) March 1946, Art. 40, and March 2009, Art. 18.

6 MCW March 1967, Arts. 43-45.

7 MCW September 1975, Art. 17.

8 MCW March 1953, Arts. 64-65, 71.

9 MCW March 2003, Art. 14.

10 MCW September 1960, Arts. 49-50, 54-60; March 2000, Arts. 21, 31;

and the matter did not appear in the agenda, or was not submitted by the deadline for inclusion in the agenda.¹¹ This list is not exhaustive.

No classis or synod may be arbitrary in deciding whether a matter is legally before it, nor may an ecclesiastical body declare a matter not legally before the body *for the purpose* of not treating the matter. An ecclesiastical body treats a protest or appeal, or does not treat it, as an *effect* of its decision regarding legality.

Schools and Education

Protestant Reformed Christian schools are not parochial, that is, they are not church-governed. They are established, maintained, and governed by separate societies of Reformed believers. No consistory, and therefore also no classis or synod, may speak to matters regarding the support or governance of these schools. All the more is this true of non-Protestant Reformed schools: They also are not within the jurisdiction of an ecclesiastical body of the PRCA.

Schools are not ecclesiastical bodies

Several decisions of Classis underscore that schools, school associations, and school boards are not ecclesiastical bodies. The first category into which these decisions fall regard requests for support for Christian schools.

Two men, representatives of Western Christian High School in Hull, IA, appeared at the meeting of September 1944 in Edgerton, MN and asked Classis to encourage churches in its jurisdiction to take collections for Western Christian. Classis' answer was: "Inasmuch as there are several churches resorting under Classis West that have their own local schools to support, Classis cannot, as Classis, advise our churches to financially support this Christian High. We advise the Board to address the consistories in Sioux and Lyon Counties and in Minnesota directly and ask for their financial support."¹²

One factor in Classis' decision was its large geographical extent:

September 2009, Art. 22; March 2010, Art. 22.

¹¹ MCW September 1966, Arts. 24-25; March 1983, Art. 28; September 1983, Art. 26; September 1999, Art. 54; March 2001, Art. 46.

¹² MCW September 27, 1944, Art. 34.

In addition to the church in Minnesota and five in northwest Iowa, Classis included two churches in southern California, one in Montana, and two in central Iowa. These last-mentioned five churches were unlikely to support Western Christian because the school was far away from them, and they had local Christian schools that needed support. But Classis did not even promote the cause of Western Christian among the churches that were closer; Classis' recommendation that the representatives of Western approach the local churches themselves illustrates that Classis would stay out of support of the schools.

The matter was no different when it regarded support of Protestant Reformed schools. The consistory of Hope, Redlands (CA) asked Classis to ask all its churches to take collections so that the Redlands Hope Christian School Society could raise funds to buy property. When bringing this request to Classis, the consistory probably remembered that churches must receive classical approval to ask other churches to take collections for building funds and evangelism work. Because Classis is an *ecclesiastical* body, and collections for church buildings and evangelism work are *ecclesiastical* causes, this procedure is proper. But because Classis has no jurisdiction over schools, it responded to Redland's consistory "that a Christian School Society may ask the churches to take collections without the approval of Classis or Synod."¹³

The second way in which Classis recognized that Christian schools are not ecclesiastical bodies is by not entering into disputes between individuals, consistories, and school boards. Several members of a congregation had protested decisions of a school board. When disappointed with the decisions of the school board, they appealed to the local consistory, and then brought the matter to Classis. Classis declared that these protests were not legally before it, because "the appellants are guilty of treating a School Board and a School Association as being under the jurisdiction of the consistory." Contrary to the appellant's assumption, school boards and school associations "are not ecclesiastical bodies under consistorial jurisdiction, and decisions of Boards and Associations are not ecclesiastical matters."¹⁴ Of course, if the conduct of a school board *member* becomes an issue,

13 MCW February 1974, Art. 48.

14 MCW March 1967, Art. 42 and Supplement 12.

his consistory may labor with him regarding that conduct. But the consistory and Classis may not and will not enter into and overturn decisions of school boards or associations.

Use of and promotion of the Christian schools

Although Christian schools are not ecclesiastical bodies, the students in such schools are covenant children, and the church has a vested interest in its children receiving a Christian education. The Church Order of Dordrecht originally included this requirement: “All consistories shall see to it that there are good schoolmasters who not only teach the children reading, writing, languages and liberal arts but also train them in godliness and in the catechism.”¹⁵ That was written in a day when the Dutch government controlled all schools in the country; Christian, parental education was unknown. Because the situation in North America is different, in 1914 the Christian Reformed Church revised Article 21 of the Church Order to read: “The Consistories shall see to it that there are good Christian Schools in which the parents have their children instructed according to the demands of the covenant.”¹⁶

This gave Classis West reason to make decisions regarding Christian education, not by trespassing into the school’s terrain, but by insisting that Christians should use Christian schools rather than public schools. The classical church visitors reported to the meeting of March 1958 that officebearers of some churches were convinced that “because of the heretical teachings of Common Grace in the existing Christian schools, one may well be excused when he sends his child or children to the public school.” Opposing this, the church visitors “stressed the calling to send our children to the Christian school” and advised Classis “to admonish the churches” regarding this. By adopting this recommendation,¹⁷ Classis upheld Article 21 of the Church Order. Classis also acknowledged, at least implicitly, that a Christian school in which common grace is taught is better than a public school that

¹⁵ DeRidder, *Translation of Ecclesiastical Manual*, 164.

¹⁶ Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1941), 92; the historical information immediately preceding the quote is gleaned from pages 93-94. The PRCA have adopted as their own the Christian Reformed Church’s revision of Article 21.

¹⁷ MCW March 1958, Arts.18-20 and Supplement 3.

completely lacks a God-centered and Christian-influenced education.

Yet, as a later Classis recognized, to use the public schools is not, in itself, a censurable sin. One consistory placed a member of its congregation under censure for several reasons, one of which was that the member had taken his child out of the local Protestant Reformed school and enrolled the child in the public school. Classis advised this consistory that such an act was not a censurable sin in and of itself, but that the consistory should labor with the individual long and patiently.¹⁸ The reader gathers that Classis was encouraging the consistory to consider *why* the father chose to use the public school, and not simply censure anyone who sends his children to public schools regardless of the reason.

If consistories are called to encourage the use of Christian schools, then pastors will also promote Christian education, and even Protestant Reformed Christian education, in their preaching. But even this must be done wisely. In a particular case, Classis judged that a consistory improperly involved itself in matters of the local Christian school and promoted the good cause of Christian education in a radical way.¹⁹

The consistory did this in several ways, Classis said. One was by admonishing a father for removing his child from the local Protestant Reformed school without asking him his reason for doing so. Another was by insisting that not having one's children educated in the local Protestant Reformed school is sin. A third was by viewing the parents' affirmative answer to the third question of the baptism form ("Whether you promise and intend to see these children . . . instructed and brought up in the aforesaid doctrine") as a promise to use the local Protestant Reformed School. Also, the consistory as a body approved its pastor making unwise statements in sermons that increased the division, rather than working pastorally to unify a divided congregation.

How, then, must the pastor promote Christian schools, and even Protestant Reformed Christian schools, in his preaching? By *urging*, not *coercing*, the use of these schools, and that in a wise and timely

18 MCW September 1982 and Supplements 11 and 20. Classis also referred to Van Dellen and Monsma, 98-99. As these decisions deal with a case of discipline, public access to them is restricted.

19 MCW September 1983, Arts. 77-79 and Supplement 19.

way.²⁰ The issue is not whether to promote the Christian schools, even Protestant Reformed schools where they exist. Consistories and preachers must—with wise and patient instruction and encouragement.

“According to the demands of the covenant”

A year before making this judgment of a consistory, Classis had received a request from a different consistory regarding the interpretation of Article 21 of the Church Order, particularly the phrase “according to the demands of the covenant.” This request did not come in the form of a protest or an appeal, but the consistory brought the request, desiring guidance in light of disagreement in its congregation regarding the necessity of a Protestant Reformed school.²¹ The consistory itself did not question the necessity or benefit of Christian education, but asked Classis whether a *Protestant Reformed school* was inherently necessary “according to the demands of the covenant” (the expression used in Article 21) even for a small and remote congregation. The consistory presented three mutually exclusive ways of thinking:

1. Article 21 required the existence of Protestant Reformed schools. Every PR congregation that did not have one was in violation of Article 21. But in that case, when and how must consistories discipline parents who do not use one?
2. Protestant Reformed schools were always desirable but not always possible. When facing whether to establish a Protestant Reformed school, Reformed believers could consider their local circumstances. And the most that consistories can do regarding parents who do not use one is encourage and admonish.
3. Christian schools were necessary, but to think they always had

²⁰ Same citation as previous. Classis then referred to Van Dellen and Monsma, *Church Order Commentary*, 95-96.

²¹ Technically, the consistory brought this request to the attention of Classis in its answer to the fourth question that the president of the classis meeting puts to every delegation: “Do you need the judgment and help of the classis for the proper government of your church?” See Church Order, Art. 41, in *Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches and Constitutions*, 23. Although the matter came before the Classis through Article 41, the consistory had sent a letter that spelled out the matter, so that it could be included in the classical agenda.

to be *Protestant Reformed* schools was legalistic.²²

Classis judged the matter legally before it.²³ This is noteworthy; Classis is not quick to answer questions in the abstract. In this case, however, Classis declared that it would help the consistory. The matter was properly before the Classis in view of Article 41 of the Church Order. But Classis' response would be to provide an interpretation of the phrase in Article 21 of the Church Order, *not* to speak to a specific case. Keeping in mind this limitation, Classis expressed the following six points:

1. Because God's covenant is with believers and their children, our children must be instructed according to the "demands of the covenant." These demands are not conditions unto salvation, but are a matter of faithfulness to our calling and thankfulness to God for redemption. Gen. 17:7, Acts 2:39, the Baptism Form.
2. Christian parents have the calling to train up their children in the way they should go according to the Word of God. That parents have this calling is clear from: Deut. 6:6-8, Ps. 78:4-6, Gen. 18:19, Eph. 6:4, Third Question of the Baptism Form.
3. This covenant instruction is accomplished not only in the home and church, but also in the day school. Therefore, Reformed believers establish Christian day schools to meet this educational demand of the covenant. These Christian schools are extensions of the home, and not of the church. Whether our own school is immediately possible or not in a given areas does not affect our calling to have our schools. Our calling is "to the utmost of our power": this requires our own schools when possible. [Classis then quoted two sections from Van Dellen and Monsma, *Church Order Commentary*, 95, 96.]
4. The consistory is called to encourage the organization of our schools by the members of the congregation. [Classis then quoted from Heyns *Handbook for Elders and Deacons*, 121; Van Dellen and Monsma, 95; and J. L. Schaver, *The Polity of the Churches*, 215.]
5. The consistory has the duty to admonish and exhort those

22 MCW September 1982, Supplement 19.

23 MCW September 1982, Arts. 51-53.

parents who fail to carry out their covenant obligations. [Classis then quoted from Heyns, 122, and referred to Van Dellen and Monsma 98-99.]

6. Consistory members themselves ought to support our own Christian schools. See quotes above under 5.²⁴

Today many PRCA congregations have an associated Protestant Reformed day school, and most members of the PRCA use those schools. Recounting the decisions of Classis West regarding the importance and promotion of Christian education, may Protestant Reformed readers remember *why* we have them, and not merely use them as a custom or merely earthly preference in light of the state of public education in the United States today.

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

The PRCA recognizes the biblical teaching that the institution of marriage is a creation ordinance of God, that every individual marriage is a covenantal bond between one man and one woman, and that God creates this bond at marriage (before which two are not permitted to become physically and sexually one) and dissolves the bond by taking one spouse in death. For this reason God alone may specify when divorce is permissible, and He teaches in Scripture that divorce is permissible only in the case of adultery. A legal divorce frees the spouses from their calling to live in an intimate covenant relationship with each other but does not dissolve the bond that God created. So the remarriage of divorced people is not permitted until one spouse dies.²⁵ The PRCA did not clearly recognize this latter point immediately, in part because the Dutch Reformed tradition did not recognize it.²⁶ But

24 MCW September 1982, Arts. 95-102 and Supplement 26.

25 For a fuller explanation of the doctrine and practice of marriage in the PRCA, see Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 389-98.

26 For a brief overview of the Reformed tradition's stand on divorce and remarriage, see David Engelsma, "The Reformed Tradition," in *Marriage, The Mystery of Christ and the Church: The Covenant-Bond in Scripture and History*, revised edition (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1998), 157-180.

in the first three decades of her existence the PRCA came clearly to see that the remarriage of divorced persons, when both spouses are still alive, is adultery.²⁷

Decisions of Classis West reflect this doctrine of marriage to which the PRCA holds. Classis always made these decisions in response to particular cases and applied the PRCA's understanding of the teachings of Scripture to these cases. Classis never treated or developed the PRCA view in the abstract.

In this vein, Classis approved the erasure of a baptized member who was divorced for unbiblical grounds ("extreme cruelty") and did not heed the consistory's admonition not to divorce for extreme cruelty.²⁸ Later Classis advised a consistory to increase discipline in the case of a man who divorced his wife for unbiblical grounds and married another.²⁹

In 1947 Classis approved a consistory's request to erase a baptized member who was guilty of adultery for refusing to attend public worship and for "remarrying before the divorce action against his first wife became legal."³⁰ The wording raises questions to which the classical record provides no answers. Was his divorce of his first wife a biblical divorce? Assuming it was a biblical divorce (this is an assumption *only* for the sake of the argument), was Classis saying that the man would have been free to remarry *after* his divorced was finalized? Was his adultery *merely* his remarriage before the divorce action was legal? Almost all Reformed and Presbyterian churches would agree with that; even the civil government requires a divorce before a second marriage. *Or* was Classis really saying in 1947 that the remarriage was inherently adultery, and that its adulterous nature was only exacerbated by his remarriage before the divorce was granted? This would be consistent with the later position of the PRCA.

Although the classical record does not give an answer to these

27 Biblical passages to support this position include Jesus' words in Matthew 5:31-32, Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11, and Luke 6:18, as well as the inspired reiteration of these words by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11. "Letting her depart," in the last cited passage, is not the same as divorcing her, but refers to not hindering her from leaving.

28 MCW September 1943, Art. 18 and Supplement 5.

29 MCW September 1960, Arts. 66-69.

30 MCW September 1947, Art. 16 and Supplement 6.

questions, it is unlikely that Classis (and the consistory that brought the case) was merely holding to the position of Reformed and Presbyterian churches generally that remarriage of the innocent party is permitted after divorce. It is reasonable to interpret this decision to mean that the man's remarriage prior to the finalizing of his divorce was not the main sin, but rather an illustration of how intent the man was on committing adultery by remarrying. Regardless of how Classis' decision was worded, Classis in 1947 likely understood remarriage after divorce to be adultery. For already in 1943 the current view of the PRCA was being taught.³¹

Certainly by the 1950s, the current position of the PRCA had been established. By then, if a protestant tried to convince any consistory or classis that a person who was married and now divorced, and whose ex-spouse was still alive, was free to remarry, that protestant could not convince the consistories or classis merely with appeals to passages like Matthew 19:9. The protestant would have to make a quite different argument.

A "quite different argument" came to Classis in 1963. A consistory asked Classis' advice regarding a member who had remarried after divorce. "Advice" in this context is a technical term. The consistory was not suggesting that it was unsure how to handle the matter and needed direction; rather, it had already placed the remarried individual under discipline and was ready, but only with Classis' *approval*, to proceed with discipline by announcing the sinner's name to the congregation. This *approval* (or disapproval) constituted *advice*.

But a member of that congregation believed the consistory acted wrongly. The appellant argued that the member under discipline had not been previously married in the sight of *God*, but only in the sight of *men*. An indication of this was that the first marriage had been performed in a *civil ceremony* outside the church, and therefore was not legitimate in God's sight. Because *God* had not joined in wedlock the spouses of the first marriage, they never were married, and so were free to marry properly, in God's sight. Such was the argument, accompanied by explanations of Scripture passages that seemed to

31 See Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake*, 386-88; and David Engelsma, "The Development of Herman Hoeksema," in *Marriage, the Mystery of Christ and the Church*, 145-156.

support it.

The consistory disagreed, and so did Classis when the person appealed the matter. Even in civil marriages, said Classis, *God* joins in marriage. It supported its contention with reference to 1 Corinthians 7:14, and also gave a different explanation of Matthew 19:6, 9 and 2 Corinthians 6:14 than the appellant had given. It concluded that this “recent marriage was an act of wonton rebellion which is sin,” pointing to the censured individual’s awareness of and disregard for the PRCA’s position on the matter. Finally, it referred to Romans 7:2-3 as a passage that clearly indicated that a second marriage, while one’s first spouse was alive, was sin. Again, this underscores that the current position of the PRCA was established by the early 1960s: the member had been admonished “of the position of the church in regard to remarriage of divorced persons.”³² Following is the main part of Classis’ decision.

1. The protestant points out that not all marriages are joined by God and that the particular sister was really never married before the Lord because her marriage was with an unbeliever. In reply [Classis declares that] in 1 Cor. 7:14 Paul writes that the believing wife sanctifies the unbelieving husband by dwelling with him, thereby proving that the church recognizes the marriage of believer and unbeliever even though the marriage was performed before either party was converted. Therefore every marriage legally contracted is recognized by God. If there was no marriage in the world recognized by God, there would be also no possibility of adultery among unbelievers, as far as breaking the marriage bond is concerned. (Cf. also verses 12 and 13; Mark 16:17-18.)
2. The protestant refers to two passages in support of her position.
 - a. The first text is Matt. 19:6 and 9.
 - (1) The protestant’s argument here is:
 - (a) The word “what” in the phrase “what therefore God hath joined together” implies that God does not always join together when a man and a woman are united in marriage.
 - (b) That the word “therefore” refers to God’s counsel so that only the elect are united by God.

32 MCW September 1963, Art. 50 and Supplement 12.

- (c) In connection with verse 9 the protestant seems to be arguing that Jesus is saying that one who puts away his spouse for adultery cannot remarry without committing adultery. But if one puts his spouse away for any other reason he may remarry. In the case under protest the one under censure put away her husband for reasons other than adultery and may therefore remarry.
- (2) Our answer is as follows.
 - (a) In verse 6 Jesus does not mean to exclude any people by the word “what,” nor does He refer to the elect by the word “therefore.” It is evident from the context that Jesus is saying that the nature of marriage is that in every case where a man cleaves to his wife they become one flesh. God makes them one flesh, not man. The conclusion of this is that man may not put them asunder. This is true of every marriage.
 - (b) In connection with verse 9 it is obvious that the reasoning of the protestant is fallacious. Consider the following example: If a man’s wife commits fornication he may divorce her, but may never remarry. If, however, his wife burns the toast he may divorce her not only, but then may also remarry.
 - (c) Also in this verse Jesus does not make fornication a legitimate ground for remarriage after divorce.
 - 1) This is evident from many texts which clearly state that any violation of the marriage bond is adultery and only death can dissolve this marriage bond. Cf., e.g., Mark 10:11, Luke 16:18, and Romans 7:1-3.
 - 2) Jesus’ argument here is that the marriage bond can never be dissolved except by death; that fornication is the only ground on the basis of which a man may put away his wife; but that this putting away of his wife is only separation, not a dissolution of the marriage bond. Thus remarriage is always adultery when the former spouse is still living.

- b. The second text quoted is 2 Cor. 6:14.
 - (1) It is evidently the protestant's argument that because Scripture admonishes the elect to walk in the light, to have no fellowship with those that walk in darkness, that a believer and an unbeliever can never have the fellowship of "one flesh" in marriage.
 - (2) In answer we state:
 - (a) Because Scripture admonishes us against this fellowship, it is evident that the possibility of this sin actually being committed certainly does exist.
 - (b) It is conceivable that a child of God may actually marry an unbeliever even though this is a grave sin. It can only be a sin because the marriage is real. Cf. 1 Kings 11:1-3.
 - (c) Nevertheless, it ought to be noticed that the principle laid down in this text is broader than the marriage relation. It speaks of any kind of fellowship between light and darkness in every sphere of life. The believer is called to live antithetically in every part of life.³³

The PRCA understands that its position on marriage, divorce, and remarriage is more stringent than the position of other Reformed and Presbyterian churches, yet is convinced that its position rests on firm scriptural foundation. Members of the PRCA are not required to agree with the PRCA position in every instance, but they may not teach contrary to this position or violate it. Officebearers, on the other hand, must readily teach and defend the position of the PRCA. In one instance Classis upheld an appellant who argued that a consistory erred in nominating for office men who do not agree with this stand of the PRCA. Officebearers, Classis said, must reject errors that militate against the teachings of Scripture and be ready pastorally to help people regarding this issue. To do these things requires PRCA officebearers to agree with the denomination's position.³⁴

Labor Unions

33 MCW September 1963, Supplement 12 as amended and adopted by Classis in Arts. 44-51.

34 MCW May 2009, Art. 19.

Another PRCA distinctive is its opposition to labor unions. Our consistories have made exceptions in the case of federal, state, and local government employees whose unions do not permit them to strike and do not require an oath that the individual puts the principles and practices of the union above every other cause. To these cases the objections of the PRCA do not apply. The PRCA's objections are that the unions assume a division in society between capital and labor, which division has no scriptural basis; that the unions are materialistically minded; that striking violates the fifth commandment; that making ungodly oaths violates the third commandment; and that the central issue at stake is the doctrine of the antithesis. For this reason, the PRCA objects to labor unions that promote the rights of the worker over against the employer and that force the employer to do the will of the worker.³⁵

The trajectory of the PRCA in this matter is the opposite of its trajectory regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage, regarding which the PRCA has come to apply the teachings of Scripture more consistently than much of the Reformed church world, even in centuries past. However, the PRCA is not the first denomination in North America to oppose labor unions. Many who once opposed labor unions (and lodge membership, for that matter) no longer do, while the PRCA still does.

Classis faced the issue of labor union membership concretely in light of a consistory's request to erase a baptized member who would not resign his union membership. Demonstrating that Classis' advice regarding erasure or increase of discipline is not a rubber stamp, Classis in this case asked the consistory to delay the member's erasure while Classis studied the matter, and appointed a committee that reported to the next meeting of Classis. In open session, because this regarded a the teachings of Scripture and the confessions, Classis adopted the report with two amendments. Later, in closed session because the matter was one of discipline, Classis advised the consistory to proceed with erasure on the ground that the baptized member continually refused to repent of the sin of holding membership in an antichristian labor

35 See Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake*, 188-93; also David Engelsma, "Labor Union Membership in the Light of Scripture" (Lansing, IL: Peace Protestant Reformed Church, 2003).

union. Classis decided:

- A. From the above letter [the committee of preadvice had quoted the letter of Synod 1946 to the President of the United States, see Acts of Synod 1946, Article 17, 20] we infer that the position of our churches is that membership in the godless unions and church membership are incompatible on the following grounds:
1. Because we believe that the principles of the class-struggle, dividing society into the two opposing groups of capital and labor, are contrary to Holy Writ and to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ;
 2. Because we cannot agree with the materialistic motives and purposes that so manifestly actuate the unions, but believe that we should first seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness;
 3. Because we believe that unionism is often defying authority and taking the law in its own hands, is in conflict with the Word of God which enjoins us to honor those that are in authority over us;
 4. Because the union seeks its own end through the employment of force and coercion, which militates against the principles and spirit of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ;
 5. Because we refuse to affiliate ourselves with any organization whose principles and practices are so plainly in conflict with the teaching of Holy Writ.

III. Scriptural Basis:

- A. The above decision of the Synod of 1946 contains no scriptural basis although it contains repeated statements to the effect that “we believe...to be contrary to the Word of God...the gospel...the principles and spirit of the gospel, etc.”
- B. The above position can be supported with many, many passages of Scripture of which we cite but a few:
- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1) 2 Corinthians 6:17, 18 | 8) Jeremiah 22:13 |
| 2) Romans 12:1,2 | 9) Malachi 3:5 |
| 3) 1 John 2:15-17 | 10) Leviticus 19:13 |
| 4) Ephesians 6:5-9 | 11) James 5:4 |
| 5) Colossians 3:22-25 | 12) Deuteronomy 24:14 |
| 6) Titus 2:9 | 13) Colossians 4:1 |

IV. Conclusion:

...In the light of the above it is evident that it is the stand of our churches and the position of Scripture that impenitence for the sin of real membership affiliation in a godless union is a valid ground for the erasure of a baptized member from the church.

We further caution that in each particular case dealt with, a firm determination must be made by the consistory that one is “real” member of a union that in principle, practice or both is godless.³⁶

The significance of this decision is threefold: it states the position of the PRCA formally and officially; it provides explicit scriptural support for the PRCA’s position; and in the concluding sentence it underscores that there are *two kinds* of labor unions, *one* of which is *godless*, and membership in that *godless* union is incompatible with one’s confession of Christ as Savior and Lord.

Sabbath Keeping

Classis’ decisions regarding keeping the weekly Sabbath involved both *principle* and *practice*.

They involved principle. A pastor made statements about the nature of the New Testament Sabbath, and his consistory supported him. In sum, the minister taught that a) the church worships on the first day of the week not because the fourth commandment requires it, but for practical reasons; b) the fourth commandment does not require us to consecrate a day to the worship of Jehovah; and c) the fourth commandment’s prohibition of work on the Sabbath does not apply to the New Testament Lord’s Day. A member protested these teachings to the consistory and then appealed to Classis.

Classis was less sympathetic toward the pastor’s teaching than was his consistory. Classis declared the consistory’s teaching regarding the fourth commandment to be unbiblical. Classis asserted that the fourth commandment requires the observance of one day of the week, which in the New Testament is the first day of the week, the Lord’s

36 MCW March 1970, Arts. 23-27, 45-46 and Supplement 8.

Day. On this day Christians must set aside their work (although works of necessity and mercy are permitted) and worship Jehovah on that day. Classis provided biblical, confessional, and historical support for this position, including an appeal to a relevant decision of the Synod of Dordt.

Classis' summary of the consistory's reasons for defending the pastor's teaching, and Classis' grounds for sustaining the appeal of the member, were:

1. The teaching of the consistory regarding the fourth commandment is
 - a. That God in the fourth commandment does not set apart in the new dispensation one day out of seven, the first day of the week, to be observed by the New Testament saint for the worship of God. [Two demonstrations were provided].
 - b. That God in the fourth commandment does not command the New Testament saint to observe the first day of the week and consecrate it solely to the worship of Him. [One demonstration was provided].
 - c. That God's prohibition of working in the fourth commandment does not apply to the New Testament saint as regards the Lord's Day. [Two demonstrations were provided.]
2. [Classis declares] that God in the fourth commandment commands the New Testament Christian not only to enter into the rest of God all the days of his life, but also by setting apart one day out of seven, which is in the new dispensation, the first day of the week, which is God's Sabbath or the Lord's Day, to cease from work in order that he may totally consecrate the day to God in worship and service.
 - a. Scriptural grounds.
 - (1) The fourth commandment as part of the moral law of God is eternally valid and which is binding upon the New Testament saint as part of his service of gratitude.
 - (a) Rom. 3:31, Matt. 5:17.
 - (b) Ex. 32:16, "graven upon the tables" of stone.
 - (2) God has set aside in the new dispensation one day out of seven, the first day of the week, as the Lord's Day.
 - (a) Rev. 1:10.

- (b) God has commanded that the first day of the week be hallowed as the Sabbath day in the new dispensation.
 - i) John 20:1, resurrection of Christ on the first day of the week.
 - ii) Acts 2:1, Christ's return to dwell in His Church on this day.
 - iii) Acts 20:7, preaching on the first day of the week.
 - iv) 1 Cor. 1:16, assembling together on the first day [Presumably the proper reference is 1 Cor. 16:1 - DJK.]
- (3) God prohibited working on the first day of the week, the Sabbath, in order that we may consecrate this day to His service.
 - (a) Only certain kinds of work may be performed on the Sabbath, Luke 6:9.
 - (b) It is called the Lord's Day, Rev. 1:10.
 - (c) Necessity of ceasing from work in order to rest, Gen. 2:2,3, cf. Heidelberg Catechism Q and A. 103.
- b. Confessional grounds.
 - (1) Heidelberg Catechism LD 38 Q and A 103 teaches that there is one day, Sunday, in distinction from other days, which must be observed as the Sabbath of the Lord.
 - (2) Article 67 of the church order, "The churches shall observe . . . Sunday." This is explained by Monsma and Van Dellen in their commentary on page 275 [which is then quoted].
- c. The historical position of the Reformed churches is the following as declared by the Synod of Dordt 1618-19, see Van Dellen and Monsma page 276: "The great Synod of Dordt 1618-19 adopted six points regarding the Sabbath which, translated almost verbatim, read as follows:
 - (1) In the fourth commandment of God's law there is a ceremonial and moral element.
 - (2) The rest on the seventh day after the creation, and the strict observance of this day with which the Jewish people were charged particularly, was ceremonial.
 - (3) That a definite and appointed day has been set aside

to the service of God and that for this purpose as much rest is required as is necessary for the service of God and for hallowed contemplation. This element is moral.

- (4) The Sabbath of the Jews having been set aside, Christians are in duty bound to hallow the Day of the Lord solemnly.
- (5) This day has always been kept in the early church since the time of the apostles.
- (6) This day must be so consecrated unto the service of God that upon it men rest from all servile labors, except those required by charity and present necessities, and likewise from all such recreations as prevent the service of God.³⁷

Classis' decisions also involved *practice* based on principle. What sort of works fall under the category of works of necessity and mercy? The work of a policeman is a necessary work, but may a Christian do this work on Sunday? Should not the Christian policeman set aside his work on Sunday? Should not he or she be present at the worship services?

An appellant brought this matter to the attention of Classis. The appellant did not argue that every policeman should not work on Sunday; that would be absurd. He argued that the Christian policeman should not work on Sunday and should always be present in the worship service with the rest of the congregation.

The appellant had begun by protesting the matter to his consistory. The consistory did not agree with him, but defended the permissibility of those engaged in works of necessity, such as police work, to be absent from worship. And Classis agreed with the consistory, explaining that the work of the civil magistrate, including police work, is a good work (here meaning valid and worthy, not "good work" as

37 MCW September 1975, Art. 89 and Supplement XII. For the decisions of the Synod of Dordt, see DeRidder, 187. For a fuller treatment of the decision see more on the decisions of the Synod of Dordt, see Richard Smit, "The Synod of Dordrecht and the Sabbath," *Standard Bearer*, May 1, 2007, 348, and Ryan Barnhill, "The Synod of Dordt and the Sabbath Question," *Standard Bearer* May 1, 2019, 351.

Scripture uses the term), and a work of present necessity. For this reason, the child of God is permitted to do this work “if this work does not occasion the neglect of the means of grace on the Sabbath day.” Classis was silent regarding what constituted neglect of the means of grace. This decision also is reproduced in full; the reproduction incorporates numerous amendments that Classis made to the report of the committee of preadvice. For the following reasons, Classis upheld the consistory’s position.

- A. [Consistory] shows, and [appellant] admits, that police work is a work of necessity.
 1. The work of the magistrate, including law enforcement, is a good (valid and worthy) work.
 - a. The magistracy is an institution of God, Rom. 13:1-6; I Pet. 2:13-15.
 - b. There are many examples in Scripture of believers who functioned in the office of the magistrate:
 - (1) The Roman soldiers who followed John the Baptism.
 - (2) The centurion Cornelius, Acts 10:1ff.
 - (3) The deputy, Sergius Paulus, Acts 13:4-13
 - (4) Philippian jailor, Acts 16.
 2. [Consistory] shows that the work of the magistrate, including law enforcement, is a work of present necessity.
 - a. This is an ongoing calling of the magistrate.
 - b. The magistrate is called to protect the well-doer and punish the evil-doer on the Sabbath Day as well as on the other six days of the week, Rom. 13:3, 4; I Pet. 2:14.
- B. [Consistory] shows that because police work is a work of present necessity, it is a work in which the child of God is permitted to be engaged, if this work does not occasion the neglect of the means of grace on the Sabbath day.
 1. [Consistory] demonstrates that Scripture allows the believer to be engaged in works of present necessity on the Lord’s Day: Luke 6:6-9; Luke 14:1-6; Matt. 12:1-14; John 5:10-17; John 9:4-14.
 2. [Consistory] demonstrates that this is also the precedent in Reformed churches.
 - a. The statement of Dr. A. Kuyper in his work on the

Sabbath Day, in which he describes police work as a legitimate work of present necessity on the Lord's Day, reflects the thinking of the Reformed church in the Netherlands.

- b. The quotation from Rev. H. Hoeksema, *Standard Bearer*, vol. 18, p. 198, indicates that he held a similar position.
- c. The fact of the matter is that our churches have in the past, and do right now, have several members who serve as police officers and are required periodically to work on Sunday.³⁸

Here Classis stood in the line of the Synod of Dordt. Classis called the work of government a "good" work. The parenthetical explanation "valid and worthy" was added to the motion by amendment from the floor. This served to distinguish the good work of government from the child of God's good works of thankful obedience to God, which manifest the new life of Christ in us. The work of government is good in that it is necessary, God-ordained, and serves God's purpose regarding those who do well and those who commit crimes and sins. Also the words in B, "if this work does not occasion the neglect of the means of grace on the Sabbath day," were added by amendment. Classis recognized that those who do works of present necessity will at times miss worship, but encouraged them to have the mindset to attend worship when at all possible. Classis did not further define what actually constituted "the neglect of the means of grace" for those whose work is one of present necessity.

Doctrine

Preachers will inevitably preach things that some in the congregation do not like to hear, whether the reason lies ultimately with the preacher or the hearer. At times the preacher is in error; the previous reference to a minister preaching about the nature of the New Testament Sabbath is a case in point. Other times he is not, as the following case illustrates. Either way, the pastor's preaching is subject to the consistory's oversight and, when necessary, to Classis' judgment. But the issue at the heart of this following case is also dear

38 MCW September 1983, Arts. 62-69 and Supplement 18.

to the Protestant Reformed Churches.

A pastor preached that God lays demands and obligations on His covenant people—in other words, that we *must* obey the imperatives found in Scripture (including the law), and that the regenerated child of God *can* keep them. The pastor did not propose that God’s children keep these commands sinlessly, but he opposed the idea that the regenerated child of God could not keep them at all. Some of his hearers denied that God lays upon us demands and obligations in His covenant. They argued that such teaching makes the covenant conditional and promotes a dualism: the preacher declares God’s grace in Christ on the one hand and a necessity of keeping the law on the other. In their protest to the consistory, the members specifically referred to a sermon in which the minister called the congregation to repent and warned those who do not repent that they would perish. The consistory upheld the teachings of the minister, and two protestants appealed to Classis.

Classis appointed a committee of preadvice to prepare recommendations for Classis. It adopted those recommendations with only minor changes. First, Classis emphasized that God indeed lays covenantal demands and obligations on His covenant people and that pastors must preach these to the congregation. Classis said,

That there are demands and obligations in the covenant which also must be preached in the congregation. Proof:

- 1) Scripture: Ps. 78:4, 5; Luke 13:1-5; Rom. 12:1,2; II Cor. 7:1; Eph. 4:22-24, 5:8-11; II Thess. 3:6.
- 2) Confessional: HC LD 4, Q.A. 9; LD 32 Q. A. 86; LD 44, Q.A. 114, 115. Canons of Dort, III, IV, Art 17. Belgic Confession, Art. 24.
- 3) Liturgical: Baptism Form, p. 55, 3rd paragraph; Art. 21 of the Church Order.
- 4) Calvin, Institutes, Vol. 1 p. 326.
- 5) Hoeksema, S.B., vol. 3, p. 535.³⁹

Second, Classis declared that the excerpt of the minister’s sermon “contains no false doctrine.”⁴⁰ Finally, Classis gave pastoral advice to

³⁹ MCW September 1981, Art. 40 and Supplement 12; see also Art. 58 and Supplement 14.

⁴⁰ MCW September 1981, Arts. 50-52 and 60-62.

the appellants. Classis had judged their doctrinal position to be wrong, but desired that they come to a clearer understanding of the doctrine. The consistory was the body that could help these men come to that clearer understanding. So Classis exhorted both brothers to “inquire” of the consistory about this doctrine and urged the consistory “in a spirit of love, [to] encourage and assist” the brothers better to understand the doctrine.⁴¹

Note two relevant points. First, in history and background, the matter was not related to the recent controversy in the PRCA. But the central doctrinal issue certainly relates to the recent controversy. Second, Classis was pastoral, and encouraged the consistory to be pastoral. Protestants take positions regarding an issue or doctrine, and consistories are also forced to take a position. In the process of taking a position, it is possible that either the protestant, or the consistory, or both become frustrated with each other, and the doctrinal issue is no longer the greatest point of friction, but how the one side views and speaks about the other. This may not happen between brothers in Christ. Particularly elders, pastors, and consistories may not do this, for theirs remains the calling to pastor and instruct the congregation and its members.

A Mond

May anyone be a *mond*, and who decides? *Mond* is the Dutch word for “mouth.” As used in Dutch Reformed church polity, the term refers to a person who represents another or who is the spokesman for another in a church political proceeding, such as defending oneself against a charge by a consistory. Our Church Order itself says nothing about using a *mond*, but Church Order commentators in the Dutch Reformed tradition indicate that advocates are permissible.⁴² Classis West has acknowledged this permissibility and has permitted advocates more than once. But in a particular case Classis insisted that the consistory must approve of a specific person being a *mond*, and that a *mond* may not go beyond being a *mond*, a *mouth*. In other words, the *mond* must not interject his own ideas and arguments regarding the issue between the consistory and individual but must set forth the arguments and

41 MCW September 1981, Arts. 53 and 65-67.

42 Van Dellen and Monsma, 142.

desires of the individual for whom he speaks.

This Classis did in response to an appeal. Classis declared a protest written by an advocate to be not legally before it for two reasons. For one, the *mond* did not truly function as the voice or mouth of the one in whose defense he wrote; he did not represent the person's concerns in the person's words. Rather, the *mond* wrote his own protest and had the defended person sign it, thus entering personally into another person's case. For another, the person whose case it was did not ask the consistory for permission to use an advocate, or to approve of that particular person being the advocate. Following are Classis' grounds for declaring the appeal not legally before it:

- a. In the protest *mond* does not speak as the *mond* (mouth) of [appellant].
 - (1) Art. 31 of the Church Order gives a brother the right to personally protest a decision. It does not give another brother the right to protest for him.
 - (2) Van Dellen and Monsma p. 142 - "Concerning this Jansen recommends that an appeal should include the following points: (1) Presentation of the matter at issue in the appellant's own words."
 - (3) The protest of [appellant] is not in his own words, but throughout the protest *mond* speaks of him as a third party.
- b. [Appellant] did not ask his consistory for help in finding an advocate, nor receive its permission to have *mond* as his advocate.
 - (1) The material of [appellant's] case is confidential and should not be given to another person without the permission of his consistory.
 - (2) The consistory ought to judge whether or not a person needs an advocate and who would be a qualified person.
 - (3) According to the Dutch scholar on the Church Order, H. Bouwman, the church itself (whether consistory or major assembly), must make a decision to recognize, appoint or authorize a *mond* (*Gereformeerd Kerkrecht*, 2:45, 46), and such a request for a *mond* must originate either with the appellant or by suggestion of the church.⁴³

43 MCW March 1999, Art. 23. It should be noted that Classis sometimes uses the word "appeal" and other times "protest" to refer to the document. But

The person whom Classis declared to be an improper *mond* protested this decision to the next meeting of Classis. Classis then defended the decisions of the previous meeting and more helpfully reiterated several points. The decision need not be quoted in full, but the following main points are noteworthy.

First, Classis defended the previous Classis in its assertion that the *mond* was not really *being* a *mond*. An advocate is not one who *replaces* the one bringing a protest or appeal, but is “the medium or vehicle through whom and by means of which the protestant/appellant speaks.” The advocate must “speak the ‘words’ of the protestant/appellant,” that is, he must “bring only the ideas of the protestant/appellant as though the protestant/appellant were presenting his grievances.”

Second, Classis reiterated another point that the previous Classis had made: the need to seek the approval of an ecclesiastical body to have a particular person as a *mond*. Not the right to a *mond* per se, but that a *certain person be* that *mond*, must have consistorial or classical approval. And the one desiring to be the *mond* may not be the one to initiate this process.

Third, Classis stood by the earlier Classis for saying that the person who attempted to be a *mond* “seriously erred and improperly involved himself in the discipline of [the] consistory when he actively obtained and considered the confidential material of a discipline case which was only to the point of the first public admonition.”⁴⁴

Throughout the documents, the word *mond* and “advocate” are used interchangeably. *Mond* is the Dutch word that has been used in Dutch Reformed church polity; “advocate” seems to refer to the *function* of the *mond*. Of late the PRCA’s ecclesiastical assemblies have more commonly permitted some to advocate for others. If “advocate” and *mond* are interchangeable terms, these decisions of Classis set precedent that must not be forgotten.

Odds and Ends

Brief references to other decisions of Classis West will give the reader a sense of the variety of issues that Classis faced. Each of

the document certainly had the nature of an appeal, because the consistory had treated the matter already.

44 MCW September 1999, Art. 57.

these decisions was Classis' response to an appeal of the decision of a consistory.

When a member under discipline asks to end his membership in a congregation and leave the denomination altogether, must the consistory grant the member's request? Or may the consistory deny that request and continue its discipline of the member? The latter is not permissible, said Classis. While the consistory may admonish the person and encourage him or her to submit to the discipline of the church, it may not refuse to dismiss from its membership those who ask.⁴⁵

Those who wish to join a congregation ask the consistory for permission to join, and the consistory decides whether to receive. When it receives new members, may the consistory merely notify the congregation of this decision or must it give members of the congregation an opportunity to approve the decision and perhaps object to it? Does Article 61 of the Church Order require the approbation of the members of the congregation in such a case? No, said Classis, Article 61 does not require that.⁴⁶ The appellant who raised the matter was not convinced by Classis' answer, took the matter to Synod 2000, and received an answer in his favor.⁴⁷ Classis' decisions have weight and authority, but Classis is not the broadest ecclesiastical assembly and therefore not the final court of appeal.

May a mother work outside the home? To be clear, this was only one point, and not the most important point, that was raised in a protest and appealed to Classis. The appellant had one specific mother, and one specific case, in mind. The appellant was convinced that this mother should *not* work outside the home, and that she had sinned by doing so. Classis refused to make a blanket rule about mothers working outside the home and declared itself unable to render a judgment in the particular case.⁴⁸

45 MCW September 1991, Art. 31-34.

46 MCW March 2000, Art. 39.

47 *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches 2000*, Arts. 27, 29. Synod recognized that this appeal was not merely a theoretical testing of Article 61 of the Church Order, but that the members in question had been publicly reported to have engaged in sin in the past, making the approbation of the congregation all the more necessary in this case.

48 MCW September 1985, Arts. 65-71.

Conclusion

Classis West faced more issues than these. But why recount these, and what lessons do we learn from this recounting?

First, decisions set precedent. When they are accord with the teachings of Scripture, the Reformed Confessions, and the Reformed Church Order, and are made wisely and in love, they set *good* precedent. The decision regarding works of necessity on the Sabbath is often consulted today and has been the decision most frequently requested from the classical stated clerk.

Sometimes the precedent is not good, and the decision should be overturned. Protests to the next Classis and, if necessary, appeals to Synod are the way to address such decisions. It does not fall to the reader of the minutes of past Classis meetings to decide for himself whether the precedent is good or not.

Second, these decisions indicate that Classis remembered its obligation to treat only ecclesiastical matters, and only those ecclesiastical matters that could not be finished at the level of the consistory. Classis remembered the line of distinction between ecclesiastical bodies and parental organizations, such as school societies; it did not make a broad, precedent-setting decision regarding mothers working outside of the home; and it declared not legal numerous protests and appeals that were not finished being treated by a consistory.

Third, especially when studied in the archived material and in their context, these decisions indicate that Classis has repeatedly faced, even *wrestled* with, *thorny* issues. This article reported the final conclusions to which Classis came on various matters. It did not inform the reader of the time that Classis and its committees of pre-advice took to formulate these decisions carefully. Often a pre-advice committee worked for much of an afternoon and evening, bringing its advice to the floor the next day. At least one pre-advice committee worked throughout the night, foregoing all sleep, to bring its advice in the morning. While appreciating the committee's diligence and self-denial, I am bold to say that this should not happen again; good deliberation of issues requires a sharp mind.

This article also reported the decisions of Classis in their final form, without indicating times when Classis treated a committee's report and then sent it back to the committee for more work, or indicating the various amendments to the advice that Classis made on the floor. Some aspects of Classis' work are enjoyable; others are toil.

Fourth, these decisions, and how Classis made them, indicate that delegates must understand broad doctrinal, scriptural, and Church Order principles in order to make good decisions on issues. At the same time the delegates must understand carefully the specific facts about specific cases and properly apply the principles to the cases. Application of clear principles to specific cases is not always easy.

Parishioners are encouraged to pray for their consistory members and delegates to Classis and Synod. These men need the wisdom that only God gives to guide them in their work and to ensure that their decisions serve for the good of the church.

This article and the two previous have surveyed Classis West as a geographic entity of churches in the western United States and Canada, and as an ecclesiastical body that makes decisions pertaining to the churches. One more viewpoint needs to be presented: the meetings of Classis West as an opportunity for good spiritual fellowship. The Lord willing, a future article will conclude this series by addressing that viewpoint.

Introduction to the Translation of Harm Bouwman, *Reformed Church Polity*, Chapter 62, “The Binding Authority of the Decisions of the Broader Assemblies”

by Peter Vander Schaaf

In chapters 59-61 of *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht (Reformed Church Polity)* Harm Bouwman commented on Articles 29, 30, and the first part of 31 of the Church Order of Dordrecht (1619). The translation of this section appeared in the April 2024 issue of the *PRTJ*. With Chapter 62, “The Binding Authority of the Decisions of the Broader Assemblies,” Bouwman completes his commentary on Article 31 and gives comments on Articles 33 and 36. These articles read:¹

...and whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God or with the Articles of the Church Order, as long as they are not changed by a General Synod. (Art. 31)

Those who are delegated to the assemblies shall bring with them their credentials and instructions, signed by those sending them, and they shall have a vote in all matters, except such as particularly concern their persons or churches. (Art. 33)

The Classis has the same jurisdiction over the Consistory as the Particular Synod has over the Classis and the General Synod over the Particular.” (Art. 36)

As we have seen, Bouwman followed the order of the articles of

1 These Church Order Articles are quoted from Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1941), 140, 150, 160. These are presented as the Articles would have appeared in the Church Order of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands in Bouwman’s day.

the Church Order in a thematic way. He is primarily concerned with showing the principles and the history that underlie the Church Order. At this point in *Reformed Church Polity*, Bouwman has completed his consideration of the nature and purpose of the denomination and of the broader assemblies within the denomination. He now turns to the nature and the extent of the authority of broader assemblies.

Bouwman believes that the authority of the broader assemblies grows naturally out of the nature of the denomination. The denomination is a federation of congregations formed on the basis of unity in the Reformed confessions. The purpose of the federation is to serve the good of the churches in those things that they have in common or could not properly finish independently from each other. The denomination grows out of the need of the churches for unity, purity of doctrine and discipline, good order, and the work of missions. The authority of the broader assemblies, then, is the bringing together of the authority of the consistories in those matters that are properly before the assemblies. Bouwman did not shy away from the distinction between the essence of the church and its well-being. He used a Dutch wordplay to make the point. The *zijn*, the *being* or essence of the church of Christ in this world, lies in the congregation. The *welzijn*, her *well-being*, is in the church federation. This distinction does not diminish the importance of the denomination. Rather, it establishes the place of the church federation in the life of the church of Christ militant.

In chapter 62 Bouwman addresses the following matters:

1. How should decisions be made at broader assemblies? And what are the two things that would invalidate a decision of a broader assembly?
2. What is the relationship between God's Word and the necessary provisions of the Church Order?
3. What is the difference between the authority of Reformed ecclesiastical assemblies and the Romish hierarchy? Why are the Independents wrong to deny broader assemblies any authority other than an advisory role?
4. What is the role of credentials? Who may be granted credentials, and who may vote at broader assemblies?
5. What is the scriptural foundation for Article 36, which

establishes the authority of the broader assemblies?

6. What is the nature and source of the authority of broader assemblies? And how should that authority be exercised?
7. What is the extent of the authority of broader assemblies?

The reader will notice that Bouwman takes one-third or more of his commentary to defend the position that the synod indeed has authority to depose officebearers, even entire consistories. He bases his contention on three things: on ancient authority, that is, the commentary on Reformed church polity by Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676); on history and experience (the depositions of Remonstrant ministers by the Synod of Dordt and the deposition of Johannes Geelkerken (1879-1960) and the consistory of Amsterdam-South by the Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in 1926; and by a simple comparison: If a synod has the authority to expel an entire congregation, why would it not have the authority to depose an officebearer or a consistory, especially if doing so would clear the way for the faithful part of the congregation to remain within the denomination? Bouwman believed that there were clear guidelines by which to determine when a synod could enter into a congregation and depose its officebearers.

Bouwman responds at length to Dr. Jan van Lonkhuyzen (1873-1942), who wrote two pamphlets in defense of the position that the synod has no authority to depose officebearers. Van Lonkhuyzen was a minister in the Christian Reformed Church of Chicago, IL and later of the Reformed Church in Zierikzee, Zeeland, in the Netherlands. He wrote two pamphlets, *Een ernstige fout (A Serious Mistake)* that was published in the United States, and *In eigen rechte lijn (In Its Own Straight Line)*, published in the Netherlands. Herman Hoeksema referred to Van Lonkhuyzen in his history, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*.²

It is fair to say that the twentieth century was not kind to the idea that the authority of synods extends to the deposition of office bearers and consistories. The Protestant Reformed Churches, the Reformed

2 Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America: Their Origin, Early History, and Doctrine*, 3rd ed. (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2025), 104, 144-45, 242.

Churches of the Netherlands Liberated and her daughter denominations throughout the world, and the Heritage Reformed Churches all count the improper exercise of classical or synodical authority as parts of the controversies that led to their founding.

The issue of the authority of synods over disobedient officebearers and consistories remains current. Recent synods of the Christian Reformed Church have condemned the sin of allowing homosexuals and transgender people into church office. According to one report, the consistories of eighteen congregations adopted positions in opposition to the decisions of the synod. Some officebearers filed gravamina, asserting “confessional difficulty” with the decisions of the synod. Synod 2024 of the CRC decided that “There is not, nor has there ever been, a provision in the Church Order allowing an office bearer to maintain a settled conviction contrary to (i.e., an exception) the doctrines contain in the creeds and confession.” Synod further voted

to instruct churches ‘who have made public statements, by their actions or in any form of media, which directly contradict synod’s decision on unchastity to repent and to honor their covenant commitments to the CRCNA.’ The same resolution said, ‘all office-bearers from churches in non-compliance, by actions or in any form of media, be placed on a limited suspension.’ Those that adopted the Better Together protest letter were also placed on limited suspension, meaning such officebearers could not be voting delegates at Classis or Synod.³

There are two ways in which Articles 31 and 36 can be violated. First, it is violated when classes and synods exercise a power that the Church Order does not give them. Second, the binding advice of broader assemblies has been disobeyed by those who are bound by those decisions. This might happen when there are deep-seated differences within the churches regarding doctrine or discipline. An officebearer or a consistory might simply decide not to act on the advice of the broader assembly; or they might make decisions that are at odds with the clear intention of the assembly. The broader assembly might find it necessary, at multiple meetings, to call this disobedience to the

³ Aaron Vriesman, “A Recent History of The CRC,” published by The Abide Project; accessed at www.abideproject.org/p/a-recent-history-of-the-christian, on October 6, 2025.

attention of the officebearer or the consistory. Or the church member who first brought an appeal might be forced to reassert the matter at several meetings of the same assembly in order to gain a proper compliance. A classis or the synod might find that it is necessary to remind congregations that Articles 31 and 36 bind all of their members and their consistories.

The Reformed Church Order of Dordrecht begins with “For the maintenance of good order in the church of Christ it is necessary that there should be: offices, assemblies, supervision of doctrine, sacraments and ceremonies, and Christian discipline...”⁴ Members of Reformed churches willingly submit themselves to that order, not because they think that there *cannot* be sharp differences of opinion within the churches, but because they know that there *can* be. The Church Order guides believers away from the tyranny of self-willed men and to the leadership of the church’s King. It is the binding guide to the wisdom of God’s people as they deliberate, seeking to apply His Word, the Reformed creeds, and the Church Order itself to any matter that is properly before their assemblies. The Reformed Church Order provides the way, the one way, by which autonomous congregations can together maintain truth in doctrine and in discipline. It provides the way, the one way, in which members of the federation may together sing “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity. It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron’s beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.” Psalm 133

Editor’s addendum:

The translator’s introduction indicates which articles of the Church Order are treated in the following translation. The Dutch source for the translation is Harm Bouwman, *Gereformeerde Kerkrecht* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1928), 1:47-83. Stylistic changes in the translation reflect English formatting standards; one instance is that citations are placed at the end of the quotations rather than the beginning, where Bouwman put them.

4 Van Dellen and Monsma, *Church Order Commentary*, 13.

Bouwman included footnotes in his work, and these have been retained, sometimes without being translated. In addition, both the translator and the editor added their own footnotes. Any footnote that does not include the note -transl. (referring to PVDS) or -ed. (referring to DJK) is either an original footnote of Bouwman, or a footnote that contains only bibliographic information that was evident from the body of Bouwman's work.

Online translation tools speed up the work of translation. However, such tools do not recognize that Bouwman uses some terms in a specific church political context in the first half of the twentieth century. The translator and editor have taken pains to note words that have a technical meaning and ensure a translation of them that is contextually correct. If any reader familiar with church political Dutch recognizes that a word could be better translated, please email the editor.

DJK

Reformed Church Polity, Chapter 62, “The Binding Authority of the Decisions of the Broader Assemblies”

by H. Bouwman

Translated by Peter Vander Schaaf

Edited by Douglas J. Kuiper

§ 62. The Binding Authority of the Decisions of the Broader Assemblies.

It will be clear after what we have written about the jurisdiction of the broader assemblies that the authority of the broader assemblies is limited. The Reformed did not wish the autonomy and the rights of the local churches to be compromised, and sought to cut off an oligarchy, a governance by a few people in the church, or a monarchy, as in the Romish Church. In the old church orders it was also stated that no matter should be brought to the major assemblies unless it could not be dealt with in the minor assemblies or unless it pertained to the churches in general.

This does not change the fact that the Reformed recognize that the denomination rests on divine ordinance; and that they have declared its necessity based on the unity of believers and of the churches in Christ. Also, believers and churches are called to practice the communion of saints, to watch over one another, support one another, and work together for the building up of the congregation and the coming of God’s kingdom. Precisely for this very reason, when drawing up church orders, Reformed churches included various provisions that also affect the life of the local churches, and by which the local churches voluntarily bound themselves to the decisions of the broader assemblies, placed various matters that pertain to the general welfare in the hands of the classes and synods, and recognized the authority of the broader assemblies.

This binding authority of the decisions of the broader assemblies is grounded in God’s Word. In Acts 15 there is mention of a foundational

principle¹ of a broader assembly. This is denied by Dr. D. Jacobs in his dissertation *The Relationship between the Local and the Universal Church in the First Three Centuries*. Dr. Jacobs' purpose is to expand on the autonomy of the local churches and to revive the sense of responsibility of these churches and their officebearers. But he goes so far that he answers in the negative the question whether we can base the authority of our broader assemblies on the apostolic council. He states that, according to him, the New Testament teaches us that there are "locally organized, autonomous congregations without any authoritative or representative body above them. [Such a body] is not hinted at anywhere; and the so-called apostolic council *cannot serve as a precedent* for later times."²

Now it is true that the council at Jerusalem was not a synod in the later sense of the word, but it is difficult to refute that it was indeed a foundational principle of a synod where decisions were made by representatives of churches and which had to be followed by the churches. That Paul and Barnabas were sent as delegates by the church of Antioch is evident from Acts 15:2, where we read, "So they (namely the church) determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this question." The Greek words used, *etaksan anabainein* ("they appointed or instructed them to go up"), indicate a delegation. It is also not accurate to say that they went up to Jerusalem only to receive advice from the mother church. It is true that Acts 15:6 mentions only apostles and elders, but this does not exclude [Paul and Barnabas], and it is highly unlikely in light of Galatians 2 that Paul did not actively participate in the deliberation and decision of the assembly. That the decision of this assembly was binding for the churches in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia is clearly evident from the form of the decision (verses 22-29), particularly from the words "to lay upon you no greater burden," and from 16:4, where it is reported that Paul and Silas delivered the decrees (*dogmata*) which were ordained by the assembly in Jerusalem to the churches in Syria and Cilicia for them to observe.

1 The word "foundational principle" here and throughout the document is the translation of the Dutch *beginsel*. -Ed.

2 *De Verhouding Tussen de Plaatselijke en de Algemeene Kerk*, D. Jacobs (Ginsberg; Leiden, 1927), 115.

Now some, including Dr. Jacobs, argue that the assembly of Acts 15 cannot serve as a model for the later synod because the apostles made a decision with infallible authority. However, Voetius rightly points out that, according to Acts 15:6, the apostles and elders deliberated together, which they would not have done if the apostles alone had given an infallible decision.³ Furthermore, it cannot be said that the elders were infallible. Acts 15 does not state that the decision was infallible. This decision was also not an obligation for all places and all times, but for certain churches under specific circumstances. The phrase introducing the decision in the letter to Antioch, “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things,” should be understood in this sense: the Holy Spirit was the proper leader and the principal of the assembly. The apostolic church always lived with the awareness of being the temple of the Holy Spirit.

When Voetius, in the fourth part of his *Politica Ecclesiastica*, discusses the unity of the churches and their governance in classes and synods, he also refers to other places in the New Testament: 2 Corinthians 8:1-4 and Romans 15:26, where it is said that the churches in Macedonia acted jointly through letters or decisions (Col. 4:16; Matt. 18). However, he refers in particular to Acts 15, especially in his argument against the Independents.⁴

The authority of synods does not rest only on ecclesiastical law but also on divine ordinance. Those who oppose the power that Christ has given to the synod challenge the ordinance of Christ. The Reformed, although they strongly opposed every form of hierarchy, upheld this conviction in their opposition to the Independents. The *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, the standard work of Reformed theology from the seventeenth century, states: “The institution of the synod is based not on human but on divine polity.”⁵ Peter van Mastricht teaches that the synod not only possesses nurturing, charitable⁶ power by giving advice and excluding from the community of congregations as the

3 Gisbertus Voetius, *Politica Ecclesiastica*, 4:129, 838.

4 *Pol. Eccl.*, 4:129; 225; 891-898. (“Independents” refers to those who use a Congregationalist church polity. -Ed.)

5 *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, ed. Bavinck, 593.

6 The Dutch term translated “charitable” is *caritatieve macht*; the idea seems to be that of advisory power. -Ed.

Independents advocate, but truly holds real⁷ power and authority, as is evident in the synod of Jerusalem (Acts 15:28-29). The synod, he continues, “has not only doctrinal and teaching authority but also critical, judging authority, insofar as it deals with spiritual penalties, admonitions, excommunications, depositions, etc., against heretics, offenders, and the obstinate according to the Word of God (Matt. 18:16-20, 1 Cor. 15:4-5).”⁸ So spoke other dogmaticians from the best period of our church life.

The Remonstrants aimed to reduce the authority of the synod, and they cited Festus Hommius, asserting that the decisions of councils should not be presented as mandates of the government or as Persian ordinances, but instead that the actions of the councils should be sent to all churches to be examined according to the rule of God’s Word, to be accepted willingly but not under compulsion. Although this was entirely in line with the Reformed doctrine that synods should not act in a hierarchical manner, it does not change the fact that Hommius, at the Synod of Dort, expressed his opinion that the Remonstrants should be expelled from the synod and judged based on their writings. He also participated in the deposition of the Remonstrant consistories.

As we have shown earlier, from the beginning the Reformed have made it a rule for all ecclesiastical assemblies, at the establishment of the church association, that whatever is approved by the majority of votes shall be considered binding and settled, unless it is proven to be contrary to God’s Word. From the once-established [denominational] bond, it follows that the local churches not only sought the advice and support of the collective churches, but also granted authority to the broader assemblies, and recognized that this authority was grounded on God’s Word. Ultimately, no one denies the authority of the synod in making decisions regarding matters of doctrine, order, and discipline, which implies that these decisions are considered binding on all churches under its jurisdiction.

This does not mean that the broader assemblies may arbitrarily bind the local churches or infringe upon their freedom and autonomy. Already at Wesel, a distinction was made between more significant matters “which concern the general interest” and indifferent things

⁷ The Dutch term translated “real power” is *potestatief magt*. -Ed.

⁸ *Beschouwende en Prakticale Godgeleerdheit*, 3:346.

that “neither have a firm foundation in the teaching or example of the apostles nor ultimately have any necessary and unavoidable cause.” Indifferent matters, which were left to the freedom of the churches, included whether to sprinkle once, twice, or three times during baptism; whether to baptize before or after the sermon; “or whether the care for the baptized should be entrusted to specific witnesses called for that purpose or to the parents and the entire church.” Regarding the administration of the Lord’s Supper: whether to sit, stand, or circulate during the administration; whether to read from the Holy Scriptures or sing psalms; and similar matters. These things should not be removed from the free decision of each congregation except for significant reasons. In “those things, however, which are of a different nature, because they are either founded in God’s Word or in the practice and example of the apostles, or in the continuous and well-founded custom of the churches, one should not lightly deviate from common agreement and ingrained custom.”⁹

Indifferent matters are thus those things not explicitly prescribed in God’s Word, or based on a clear example of the apostles, or derived with necessary deductions from God’s Word.¹⁰ Therefore, indifferent matters also include: whether house visits should be conducted by a minister with an elder or by two elders; whether church members should be given the opportunity to draw attention to candidates for office or not, whether the reconciliation of a censured person should be done publicly before the congregation or not. In such matters, each consistory may act in the way that best serves the edification of the church. The churches must be free to follow a path in these matters that they judge to be better than that followed in other churches.

Voetius holds a similar view. In the chapter in which he discusses the authority of synods, he poses the question: “Whether nothing should be done or omitted by the ministers and the local consistories, or also by the classis, that serves the greater edification of the churches, unless it is based on specific common synodical decisions?” And he answers:

⁹ *Articles of Wesel*, 1:2, 9-11.

¹⁰ Dr. W. Geesink, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, 2:195-202; Dr. F. L. Rutgers, *Van de censuur*, 163; Joh. Jansen, *Be Bevoegdheid der meerdere vergaderingen*, 48.

Ecclesiastical regulations and decisions deal either with doctrine, or with general and substantive matters of church governance, or with external incidental and changing matters of that same church governance, and other indifferent things. From this it follows:

1. In matters of doctrine, no local church or its consistory, no classis, and no minister may publicly confess and spread the opposite opinion, whether by word or in writing. If anyone believes that something that is contrary to the Word of God as expressed in the general forms of doctrine needs to be brought up, or that the synods have erred so far, he should not spread this in a disorderly manner beforehand, but must follow the order that the commonly used subscription form for ministers, elders, and theological professors precisely indicates, to which we have all committed ourselves.
2. The same applies to the substantial matters of our church government. For instance, concerning the ordination of elders; the presbyteral government; the ecclesiastical calling of ministers; church discipline and its proceedings and steps, for instance, suspension and excommunication in schools, consistories and classes; one may not, following the opinion of Erastus and others, teach something different, or prevent its practice or change it into the opposite; because in this way one comes into direct conflict not only with the synodical regulations, but also with our liturgy and catechism, to which all ministers, candidates,¹¹ elders, professors, and school administrators must subscribe.
3. However, regarding synodical regulations and actions that deal with incidental and variable matters of church governance, or any adiaphora (indifferent things), a completely different judgment must be made. Therefore, ministers and believers should not be as strictly regulated in the execution and application of these matters in certain actions, circumstances, and affairs of particular churches, as if all these things depended on an indivisible point, or as if we were living in the republic of Plato. Much less should the national churches elevate themselves in a contentious manner over other national churches, provincial churches over other

11 Here the Dutch word translated “candidates” is *proponenten*. When referring to candidates later in the article, such as his reference to them in the next paragraph (regarding the twentieth session of the synod of Dordt), Bouwman uses the word *candidaten*. -Ed.

provincial churches, classes over other classes, consistories over other consistories, and ministers over other ministers, due to some minor point of liturgy, formality, or order that was omitted or done differently than the particular nature or state of affairs and churches elsewhere demand. For it is certain that all these things have not been regulated by the synods in their acts and regulations in such a way that all would be bound to them as to the perpetual laws of God without any exception, and that nothing has been left to the prudence and freedom of the local congregations to apply in the most appropriate manner in each case. In its twentieth session the illustrious Synod of Dordrecht 1618-1619 decided correctly regarding candidates for the ministry: 'But it has also decided that these matters should not be imposed so strictly upon all churches, but that it would suffice if they were earnestly recommended.' Therefore, some things were merely recommended, others added as advice. Yet other things were recommended to be handled cautiously or patiently in this state of affairs to prevent greater and continued unpleasant difficulties, which otherwise could hardly be avoided. Still other things were imposed upon some churches which were in this or that condition, either to allow or to do them, but not prescribed generally to all. Still other things were ordained, but in such a way that no exceptions or exemptions or mitigations were excluded if the classis or the consistory deemed such advice necessary. There is no law of such a nature that it has no irregularities if it were to be applied to all activities without any exception; and the highest right is sometimes the greatest wrong.¹² So, what I mean to say by this is that not all synodical decisions and regulations concerning indifferent and passing matters are fundamental or laws of church governance which require discipline, even though they are rightly determined.¹³

The binding authority of ecclesiastical decisions rests on scriptural and ecclesiastical grounds. According to Matthew 18:20 and Acts 15:22-29 and 16:4, the congregation must follow the guidance of the consistories, and the local churches must submit themselves to the decisions made by the churches collectively in dependence on the King of the church. God desires that all things in the church be done

12 The Dutch has *en het hoogste recht is soms het hoogste unrecht*. -Trans.

13 *Pol. Eccl.*, 4:221-224.

decently and in order. Just as the body is one with its members, and all members must work together for the well-being of the body, so too must the individual churches cooperate so that the whole body of the church may attain its growth and edification. According to the Church Order 53, the delegates come to the classes and synods in the name and by the mandate of the churches, to act and decide together according to this rule: “And what is approved by the majority of votes shall be considered settled and binding; unless it is proven to be in conflict with the Word of God, or with the articles established in this General Synod, as long as they have not been altered by another General Synod” (Art. 31). The churches gathered in the classis and synod bring together an authority that corresponds to the unity of the assembled churches. Churches that have voluntarily bound themselves to the Church Order cannot and may not arbitrarily withdraw from the authority of the broader assemblies. Brotherly loyalty and obedience to Jesus Christ, the King of the church, require adherence to ecclesiastical regulations.

The Reformed were convinced that the foundational principles of their Church Order were grounded in Holy Scripture. Calvin begins the third chapter of the fourth book of his *Institutes*, which deals with the church and its governance, with these words: “Now we must speak of the order by which the Lord wills His church to be governed,” and he further speaks of “the manner of church governance which God has established in His Word” (4.3.3). At the beginning of the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances of Geneva* (1541), it is stated that the Lord has instituted spiritual government in His Word. The French Confession of Faith (Art. 25) declares: “We believe that the order of the Church, which has been established in its authority, must be sacred and inviolable,” and the Belgic Confession agrees almost word for word, stating that “the true church must be governed according to the spiritual polity which the Lord has taught us in His Word” (Art. 30).

Officebearers are not representatives of the will of the people. Rather, Christ is the King of the church, who calls His servants to office through His congregation. Thus, ministers and elders are bearers of an office ordained by Christ and are bound to execute their duties according to the mandate given by Christ. When, according to the Church Order, the delegates of the churches are sent to a broader assembly, and there, in submission to Christ and His Word, decisions

are made, then the churches represented at the classis or synod are also bound to uphold the decisions made there. These decisions are taken collectively and then sent to the churches so that they may verify whether they align with God's Word and the church order and so that they may uphold the decisions of the broader assemblies.

In contrast to the Roman Catholics, the Reformed have always maintained that the decisions of synods are not infallible. Repeatedly, wrong decisions have been made by councils which were not submissive to God's Word. Even synods that do wish to be submissive to God's Word can err. However, decisions made in the name of the Lord, [and] in accordance with God's Word, must be recognized and upheld in the churches. But, as Voetius says, this power is a subordinate, not a supreme one, a hypothetical and dependent [authority], not an absolute one, when it is compared with the authority of God and Scripture. But it is a public, governing, and guiding power when compared with the subsequent and private power and freedom of every believer to judge (1 Cor. 2:10, 16; 1 Thess. 5:21).¹⁴

How should decisions be made in an ecclesiastical assembly? Article 31 states: "What is approved by the most votes shall be held as settled and binding." The majority decides. This principle was established already in 1571.¹⁵ In chapter III, Article 3, it was determined, "The president shall present each mandate separately and properly, and the whole assembly shall decide, having listened. He shall gather the ballots declaring what is the opinion of the majority. The clerk shall record this and, having done so, he shall read it clearly so that it may be confirmed by common consent."¹⁶ The matter is first brought up for discussion, then a vote is taken. The majority made the decision, and the minority accepted it, so that at the end of the article it can be said

¹⁴ *Pol. Eccl.*, 4:220.

¹⁵ The reference to "1571" is to the Synod of Emden, considered to be the first synod of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands.—Trans.

¹⁶ Rather than retranslating this quotation from Synod of Emden, the translation is taken from *The Church Orders of the Sixteenth Century Reformed Churches of the Netherlands Together with Their Social, Political, and Ecclesiastical Context*, Richard R. De Ridder, trans. (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1987) 129. "Each mandate" refers to the instructions on each set of credentials from the various consistories. —Ed.

that the decision was adopted unanimously.¹⁷ The Synod of Dordrecht (1578, Art. 23) also expressed the same idea: “In all matters (always except those about which we have an express word of God), when the opinions have been diligently weighed, the advice of the majority shall be followed in order then to decide which decisions each one shall be duty bound to follow.”¹⁸ The custom that prevailed in the provincial and national States General was adopted. There was no desire to overrule the minority. If a minority had voted against a proposal, an attempt was made to persuade the minority to conform itself to the opinion of the majority. The word *conformeeren*¹⁹ [conform] is derived from the Latin *conformare*, which means to form, to agree, to arrange. To conform means to agree with someone’s opinion, with the decision of a meeting, to approve such a decision and to act accordingly. We read in Trigland’s *Church History*: “The previously written act (concerning the holding of the Synod of 1618/19) having been read, those of Gelderland declared that they conform to it as requested, finding it good that it be recorded. Those of Friesland consent likewise, henceforth conforming themselves to it. Those of Groningen and the Ommelanden conform to the previously written act, agreeing that it be recorded” (1061).

If there is a minority which cannot agree with the decision of a meeting, they should state their reasons. If it appears that their objection is not of overriding importance, then it should not be difficult for the dissenters to conform. If it is a serious objection, the majority must try to persuade them to change their minds so that they can agree with the decision, and it is thereby adopted by unanimous vote. If the objection is of a very serious nature, it may be advisable not to implement the decision taken. Or if it is difficult not to implement a certain decision, [disagreement] may be tolerated in someone, in such a way that a person is not forced to do or promise something that he cannot do or promise before God in his conscience, provided that he does not openly or secretly oppose the ecclesiastical decisions.²⁰

17 At this point, Bouwman inserts the Latin phrase *ut omnium calculis probetur*. -Ed.

18 The translation is that of De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 213. -Ed.

19 *Se ad alicujus voluntatem conformare*, Cic.

20 *Pol. Eccl.*, 4:178.

A broader assembly must therefore be governed with prudence and firmness. If there is a serious difference of opinion, the votes must be weighed whether it is desirable, with a view to the well-being of the churches, to proceed with the implementation of the decision, and if the meeting has considered and tried to overcome the objections, it will “decide, by which decision everyone will be obliged to comply.”

The rule is and must be that all abide by what is determined in a meeting by a majority vote. The decision loses its binding authority only in two cases, namely when it is proven to conflict with the Word of God or with the articles adopted in the general synod, as long as these have not been changed by another general synod. This provision was partly incorporated into the church order in 1578 and for the second time in 1581 and adopted in the following revisions.

The Word of God is absolutely binding. When a decision conflicts with the Word of God, it should not be taken, and if taken, it should not be implemented. But that must be proven. This should not be a mere pretense, but a serious defense of the Word of God.

In this context, it is good to ask the question: *Should not all articles in the Church Order be derived from the Word of God?* This question was raised by the churches of Cologne at the Synod of Emden (question 2). The synod replied “that matters of conscience must be supported by God’s Word but the things that concern the good order of the churches or are indifferent must not be held to such a requirement.”²¹ This question was also related to an objection raised from Holland, that by convening such a synod one would come to human institutions. Only the Word of God should bind. Beyond the Word of God, nothing was necessary. For that reason, the synod declared that not all matters in the Church Order needed to be proven by the Word of God, but that one was bound to the Word of God in matters that touch the conscience. Ecclesiastical ordinances had to be based on the Word of God but did not need to be proven with texts. The same answer was also given by the synod of 1578 (Particular Questions, 1).²² Some texts do not reflect all the instruction of Scripture that are expressed in a synodical decision dealing with a non-indifferent matter. Therefore, one may add texts, provided one remembers that these texts do not reflect all of the

21 Translation of De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 123. -Ed.

22 See De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 223. -Ed.

instruction of Scripture.

Who must prove that a decision is contrary to God's Word? According to the earlier view, the person burdened with the objection had to demonstrate this. It had to be a serious, conscientious objection. On the basis of this objection, the Reformers considered their opposition to the Romish hierarchy completely justified without waiting for the decision of a council. "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). This is also what our Dutch Confession of Faith says, Article 7. Although it is generally true, as Prof. Kleyn says, that one must begin by submitting to the broader assembly,²³ this submission is not possible if one is convinced in his own mind that God's Word forbids compliance with what has been approved. The Romish church maintained that the synods had to decide what was according to God's Word, and that the members and the local churches had to submit to that. But the Reformed replied that "one may not equate any human writings, however holy they may have been, with divine scriptures, nor custom with the truth of God." It is obvious, as Voetius says, that the church or the person who is aggrieved should demonstrate that the decision of the broader assembly is not in accordance with the Holy Scripture.²⁴ If the person who is aggrieved convinces the assembly, then the difficulty is removed. If he does not convince [the assembly], and the assembly to which the appeal has been made says that it has not been proven to them that their decision conflicts with God's Word, and the aggrieved person sticks to his opinion and cannot obey according to his conviction, and the synod wills the decision to be carried out, then there will be a conflict. When there is unanimity in the confession this conflict will not arise quickly, because both parties bow to God's Word and may not be led by stubbornness or arbitrariness, but by the right and the love of God. The authority in the church may therefore not be of such a nature that the majority forces the minority, or that a synod acts as a tyrant over a congregation or a classis. The authority of the church is not the same as that of the government.

The authority of the broader assembly is none other than that of a brotherly help. And decisions are made in such a way that the

²³ Kleyn, *Alg. kerk en plaatsel. gemeente*, 1888, 106.

²⁴ *Pol. Eccl.*, 4:122, 123.

right, freedom, and equality of the churches are not compromised, but that actions are taken as they should be among brothers of the same household according to God's Word. If the broader assembly, in the judgment of a congregation, exceeds its authority, and the decisions are found to be contrary to God's Word, and if the broader assembly demands that its decisions be carried out, threatening discipline, then such a congregation, says Voetius, must withdraw from the church fellowship rather than act against God's Word and its own conscience.²⁵ Conversely, however, when it turns out to be a pretense that there are objections based on God's Word and conscience, and it appears that it is a matter of evading the demands of the Word, the confession, and the Church Order, then the broader assembly is obliged to take disciplinary action. If the entire congregation unites with [its] consistory, then the ecclesiastical bond is broken. But if objections arise in the congregation against the consistory and the help of the broader assembly is invoked, then the assembly is called to help these objectors and to bring them justice over against the apostatizing consistory.

The second case in which a church decision is not binding is when it conflicts "with the articles decided in this general synod, as long as they have not been changed by any other general synod." This is mandated in order to avoid decisions that conflict with previously made decisions. According to Article 20 of the Acts of the National Synod of 1578, before the credentials and instructions were written, the articles of the previous synods had to be read first "so that matters which once have been finished shall not be presented again."²⁶ When a formal Church Order came into effect in 1581 and a distinction was then made between the canons or provisions of the Church Order and the decrees or synodical decisions, both initially retained the same force. This view had an effect on the National Synod of Dordrecht in 1619, because the changes made to the Church Order at that time were, as Rutgers says, "as far as the formal aspect is concerned, not proposed and treated as changes in the Church Order, but they were (according to the *Post acta*, passim) simply synodical decisions that were made in response to specific gravamina."²⁷ Here, therefore, the rule was

²⁵ *Pol. Eccl.*, 4:123.

²⁶ De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 212. -Ed.

²⁷ Rutgers, *De geldigheid van de oude Kerkenordeningen (The Validity*

expressed that a decision taken by an ecclesiastical assembly is not binding if it conflicts with a provision in the Church Order. There must be unity and good order in the decisions of church assemblies. It is not advisable to overturn a newly adopted decision at a subsequent meeting unless there are compelling reasons. Nevertheless, exceptions to this have repeatedly been allowed in the past. Even in these exceptions a certain rule was followed, not through deliberate stipulations, but because men allowed themselves to be guided by principles that were grounded in God's Word and arose from the nature of the matter. First of all, as Rutgers says, an exception had to be based "on the interest of the church itself, in order to 'maintain good order' in it, according to the purpose stated in Article 1. And therefore, [an exception was permitted] when strict compliance could hardly be achieved without the freedom of the church, or its external peace, or its inner peace, or its well-being being seriously endangered, and when at the same time fewer objections were attached to the exception."²⁸ Furthermore, according to the rule stated in Article 86, nothing would be changed in the Church Order itself such that the exception would also be imposed on others, nor could it be held against others under similar circumstances. And finally, according to the foundational principle expressed in Article 31, when there was a difference of opinion about the necessity or usefulness of the exception, from which a greater evil would naturally arise, then the individual church minister would have to submit to the consistory, and the individual church to the classis, and the individual classis to the synod. In this way, there was room, but within certain limits, and regularity without formalism. There could be freedom without that freedom degenerating into licentiousness and arbitrariness. And thus the purpose of the entire church order was promoted. Even with the exception itself, it was fulfilled.²⁹

The decisions of the broader assemblies therefore have a binding character. Only in two cases does the decision lose its binding authority, namely when it is proven to conflict with God's Word or with a provision of the Church Order. But otherwise, the broader assemblies have the right to make binding decisions for the churches. After all,

of the Old Church Orders), 39.

²⁸ Rutgers, *Validity*, 43.

²⁹ Rutgers, *Validity*, 43; Voetius, *Pol. Eccl.*, 1:272-274; 284-288.

the churches themselves are present in the broader assemblies. The churches bring their authority together through their delegates and express their judgment through their delegates.

For that reason, the delegates must be provided with *credentials* showing that they are legitimate delegates. This is not a meaningless formality but is necessary because it determines the character of the broader assembly. Without credentials, it is not clear that the delegates have been lawfully sent and have a mandate to act on behalf of the sending churches; and therefore they cannot take a seat. A verbal testimony is not sufficient. Rather, in order to take a seat, a written statement is required from the sending church or churches, signed by the chairman and the secretary, with a mandate and authority to act on behalf of the sending church or churches.

Because a broader assembly is a gathering of churches, only churches can issue such a credential. The Reformed churches desire nothing to do with government rule over the church. In the Lutheran church, as in the Anglican church, the sovereign has the authority to command. In the Reformed church of the Palatinate the government also had the highest authority, as the Libertines³⁰ in the Netherlands also wished. But the Reformed churches recognized Christ alone as the Head of the church, and therefore the classes and synods also had to be purely ecclesiastical assemblies. And the churches themselves had to appoint and instruct the delegates. The Synod of Dordrecht, 1574, declared “that the church ministers who are deputized to go to the synod, bring testimony from the consistory and classis and not from the government.”³¹ It did happen here and there, in the early days after the Reformation, that members appeared at the classical meeting with a credential from political persons, but this is an aberration. In 1604 this still occurred in Gelderland. In the classis Lower Veluwe, two delegates from Hattem were admitted with political credentials, but not before the promise was made that this would not happen again in the future.

30 The term “Libertines” refers to those in the Dutch Reformed Church who preferred state control of the church, probably because the Libertines were theologically liberal and did not want to have to answer to orthodox church bodies. -Ed.

31 Bouman gives no citation for this quote -Trans.

It lies in the nature of the matter that the delegates are bound to God's Word, to the Confession, and to the Church Order. These are the agreement³² of ecclesiastical life. Whoever does not wish to act according to this agreement cannot be recognized as a member of the ecclesiastical assembly. Under this condition, the delegates receive an unlimited mandate to act on those matters that are lawfully brought to the broader assembly. The churches of Voorne, Putten, and Overflakkee gave their delegates this mandate in 1574, that they could act with that authority "as if our entire classis and each individual church were present there in particular."³³ A limitation of that mandate was not allowed by the old synods. At the synod of 1582, the delegates of the Classis of The Hague appeared with a restrictive mandate, namely that they had to return home as soon as it became clear that the synod would proceed with the excommunication of Coolhaes. The synod desired nothing to do with such a restriction and admonished the delegates to inform the classis that this should not happen again in the future.³⁴ The Synod of Hoorn in 1584 also decided that the credentials should not be limited. The churches must therefore declare in their delegation that they will act according to the church order, as Article 31 states that what has been approved by the majority of votes will be considered settled and binding. Otherwise, no meeting is possible and no binding decisions can be taken. Then one can hold a conference, but not an ecclesiastical gathering. In this way, the unity of the churches would also be lost. And yet establishing the external unity of the churches was the goal of the organization of the churches at the Synod of Emden.

Although the Reformed have always warned against giving delegates to broader assemblies a binding mandate, in special cases that is permissible and even necessary. The Synod of Zierikzee (Oct. 1618) instructed the delegates to the National Synod of Dordrecht that they should not allow any tolerance in matters of doctrine at the synod. If this [toleration of false doctrine] were discussed, they were

32 The Dutch is *accoord*. "Agreement" is a literal translation, but perhaps the idea here is not that we agree with Scripture, the Reformed Confessions, and the Church Order, but rather that they are in harmony with each other, and in this way are the basis for the church's doctrine and practice. –Ed.

33 Rutgers, *Acta*, 187.

34 *Acta*, Reitsma and Van Veen, 1:91, 110.

not allowed to give their consent without consulting again with those who gave [them] their credentials. The Particular Synod of Delft (Nov. 16, 1618) instructed its delegates that the various doctrinal points at the National Synod should be determined by vote, and not by accommodation, as the Remonstrants desired. In the well-known case of Van Leenhof, a preacher in Zwolle, who was accused of Cartesian and Spinozist errors and dismissed in 1708 by the Synod of Overijssel but was upheld by the consistory and the government of Zwolle, the churches in various provinces instructed their delegates to decide in the meetings of classes and synods that Reverend Van Leenhof would not be recognized or admitted to the ministry in any ecclesiastical function anywhere. And, that as long as the consistory of Zwolle saw fit to tolerate him in the office, no preacher from Zwolle would have access to a pulpit elsewhere, and that no more attestations from Zwolle would be accepted. When a classis or synod decides something that is contrary to the Word of God or to the confession of the churches, a congregation cannot accept such a decision. “If the decisions conflict with it,” says Voetius,

one must either request that the decisions not be applied; [but] if that is not obtainable, then one must tolerate the evil so as not to break the good order, that is, only tolerate it in such a way that one is not forced to do or promise anything that one cannot do or promise with one’s conscience. But if the weight of the matter calls for it, one must openly protest against the imposed order. Cases can also arise in which men (the consistory) must remove and withdraw the members of the church from the party of the evildoers.³⁵

When it comes to very important matters concerning the maintenance of doctrine and order, or the purging of errors, then a binding mandate can be given. It is in the nature of things that only in very special cases, when there is a danger of deviation [from] or of non-maintenance of God’s Word or the confession, can there be any question of such a binding mandate. For in a healthy Reformed church life, all ecclesiastical assemblies must adhere to Article 31 of the Church Order which stipulates that “what is approved by the majority of votes shall be held firm and binding, unless it is proven

35 *Pol. Eccl.*, 3:294.

to conflict with the Word of God or with the Articles decided in this General Synod.”

The authority of broader assemblies, therefore, depends on the credentials. There is no need for a specific and fixed form of a credential. The mandating assembly can decide for itself in what way and in what form it wishes to bind. However, the credentials must state the names of the delegates and the mandate. Furthermore, it is necessary that it be clearly expressed that the delegates are sent in accordance with the agreement of the ecclesiastical fellowship, that they are bound by the Word of God, the confession, and the Church Order. It is not necessary that this be expressed in so many words, because this is stated in Article 31; but it is absolutely necessary that the delegates are sent to participate on behalf of the sending church in the deliberations and decisions of the broader assembly according to the existing Church Order.

A sending church can also give its delegates specific *instructions*, i.e., give them a mandate to address certain matters. Precisely because a broader assembly is a meeting of churches and not of individuals, not all arbitrary matters may be dealt with at a classis or synod, but only those brought there by the sending churches and which, according to the Church Order, belong to the churches of the broader assembly in common.

In connection with the foregoing, it is clear that only the delegates have voting rights. More people may be admitted to attend the meetings. As a rule, there are people at every broader assembly who have something to report and who can therefore also advise on those matters; but they are not delegates with voting rights. The professors of theology at the Theological School [of Kampen] and the Theological Faculty of the Free University [of Amsterdam] occupy a special place at the general synods, who, according to the rule in our churches, are invited as advisory members to attend the sessions of the synod. However, only the delegates of the churches, who represent the churches themselves, have a decisive vote.

According to Article 33, delegates have voting rights, “except in matters that concern their persons or churches in particular.” This restriction is necessary. After all, no one should be a judge in his own case. As long as someone’s personal affairs or the affairs of the

church that delegated them are at issue, that person is a party to the dispute. They should be given the opportunity to clarify the matter in question as much as possible, but otherwise, they must leave the decision to the assembly which is called upon to pronounce a judgment. Especially when it concerns a matter between the church and members of the congregation, the chairman of the meeting must ensure that the delegates of a church do not exert undue influence so that the broader assembly can express its opinion completely freely, [and] so that there is some guarantee that this opinion is just. As a result of this provision, the delegates from North Holland did not sit on the committees of inquiry at the General Synod of Assen in the handling of the Dr. Geelkerken case. And only after the other members of the synod had cast their votes were they asked if they could agree with the judgment of the synod.

That the classes and synods can make decisions that bind the churches follows directly from the church federation. All churches have, according to the rule set by the Church Order, placed their authority in the hands of the broader assembly; and therefore every broader assembly also has the right to ask the churches to accept and implement the decisions taken. After all, the churches themselves, since they were represented by their delegates, have taken part in making the decisions. And the accord of fellowship, which serves to strengthen and build up the life of the church, must be maintained. This was expressed already by the first synod of the French churches (1559, Art. 39): “No church may do anything of great consequence, or which could be understood to be in the interest, or to the damage of, the other churches, without the advice of the provincial synod, if it is possible to assemble it. And if the matter presses, it will communicate and obtain the advice and consent of the other churches of the province, at least by letters.” And the synod of Lyon (1563, Art. 3) stated: “All sentences of excommunication confirmed by the provincial synod shall be settled and valid in the future.” The Scottish church placed strong emphasis on the unity of the church from the beginning. The reformation of the church [in Scotland] came about with the help of the government of the country. In 1560, parliament abolished the Roman Catholic worship, along with papal jurisdiction, and adopted a confession drafted by Knox (Aug. 7, 1560). The principles of church

government were further formulated in a church order: The First Book of Discipline, 1561 and The Second Book of Discipline, 1578, which were later replaced by the Church Order of Westminster (The Form of Presbyterial-Government), approved in 1645 by the General Assembly of Scotland. Regarding the authority of the synods, it said: “It is lawful and agreeable to the Word of God, that there be a subordination of congregational, classical, provincial, and national assemblies, for the government in the church.”³⁶

In the Dutch churches, this foundational principle of *subordination* was adopted from the beginning, but first formulated in 1581 (Art. 27) as follows: “The classis has the same authority over the consistory as the particular synod has over the classis, and the general synod over the particular.”³⁷ This article was maintained unchanged in later revisions of the Church Order (1586, Art. 33³⁸; 1618/19, Art. 36). The idea expressed in this article is based on Scripture, where, in Matthew 18:15-20, the decision is given in a specific case [and] in the highest court, and in Acts 15 where decisions are made by the delegates from Antioch with the congregation in Jerusalem which are binding on the churches.

This subordination has sometimes been presented as if there were an ascending rank among the various governing bodies. However, this would be collegial³⁹, whereas even in secular government, as well as in the church, there is a descent of power from the highest to the lowest level. This is neither the intention nor is it reflected in the wording

36 Neal, *The History of the Puritans* (1837), III. In the Dutch translation (1753), II, Part 1, 422.

37 De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 278.

38 De Ridder, *Church Orders*, 355.

39 Bouman will later say that “According to the collegial conception, the churches are parts of the great whole.” Herman Hoeksema gives this explanation of the term “collegialism”: “Collegialism is the name of a form of Church-government which attributes authority and power to a broader gathering over a local consistory. Over against this view the Reformed conception maintains that the local church is autonomous and that the only governing body in the local congregation is the consistory.” See Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches in America: Their Origin, Early History, and Doctrine*, third ed. (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association 2025), 240. In earlier editions the page number is 219. -Ed.

[of the Church Order]. There is indeed mention of a jurisdiction or authority, which word is used in the Latin translation, of the synod over the classis and of the classis over the consistory, but not of the consistory over the congregation. If the intention in Article 36 of the Dordrecht Church Order were to describe an ascent of ecclesiastical powers in terms of rank, then the authority of the consistory over the congregation should also have been mentioned. This authority of the consistory over the congregation is entirely unique and can never be transferred to the classes or synods. It is a power instituted by Christ to shepherd the congregation of God, to ensure that the ministry of the Word and sacraments takes place regularly, that all things are done for edification, that the sick and lonely are visited, that the straying are sought, the mourners are comforted, so that the congregation may attain its full development. But here it is not even stated what authority the classis has over the consistory. Nor is there any mention of absolute authority of the classis over the consistory, for then it should have said: The classis has authority over the consistory. Moreover, an ascent of power would be contrary to Reformed church polity and the nature of the organization of the denomination, since here the power rests primarily with the consistory as representing the congregation. As we have discussed previously, the authority of the broader assemblies is:

- a. *Not original but derived*. A consistory has its power originally and inherently from the King of the church; but a classis and a synod have their power as a derived and delegated power, through delegation.
- b. *Not general but limited*. Not all matters can be dealt with in a classis or synod, but only those that are brought there, or that belong there according to the order of the churches.
- c. *Not a higher but a broader authority*, in that at a classes, etc., more churches are represented. One can speak of an assembly that adjudicates in a higher court, but not of an assembly that represents a higher authority.
- d. *Not overruling but serving*. She will not apply external punishments, but speaks and acts as she believes, according to the Scripture, she must act or speak. If a complainant cannot agree with the pronouncement, he remains entitled to submit his reasoned objection and to do everything to obtain a change in the decision or, if he believes he is not getting justice, to submit or break ties with the church federation.

e. *Not continuous but temporary*. When a meeting of classis or synod is finished, it can no longer actively function.

The authority of the broader assemblies over the narrower ones is therefore of a different nature. A consistory is certainly necessary for the proper institution and care of the congregation; but broader assemblies are necessary for the well-being of the church. A consistory does not exist for the sake of the broader assemblies, but the broader assemblies do exist for the sake of the local churches to serve them in word and deed. The authority of the broader assembly does not rest on higher rank, but on the greater number of churches gathered together in their delegates. And thereby there is more assurance that the pronouncement of that assembly is the voice of the Holy Spirit and that the ordinances of God are better applied. This guarantee is by no means absolute, for it is possible that one person may be right against many. But when a large number of competent and godly men work together in sincerity there is more assurance that a decision is according to God's will than in the voice of a few.

The authority of a classis or synod flows forth out of the organic relationship of the churches. The Independents rejected any binding classical or synodical relationship. They declared in their Savoy Declaration: "Synods may indeed meet to deliberate and give advice on disputes concerning doctrine and church government, but these synods have no ecclesiastical authority in the proper sense, and are not equipped with any jurisdiction or judicial powers over the churches, or to impose their decisions on the churches or their officebearers."⁴⁰ But the Independents overlooked the unity and organic character of the churches. The unity that the churches have in Christ is indeed first and foremost spiritual, a unity of faith, hope, and love, a unity of life. But this unity must also manifest itself in the visible, in the common confessing and service of God, in organic cooperation. Without her organization, the church on earth cannot fulfill her calling. That is why a local church is not free to remain on its own and remain outside of

40 The Savoy Declaration (1658): The Institution of the Churches, and the Order Appointed in Them by Jesus Christ, paragraph 26. For another translation, see The Savoy Declaration in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 4:494. –Ed.

all church fellowship. It may sometimes be necessary, in a particular case, for a church to remain outside of the community of churches in a particular region, for example, when a single Reformed church is located in a Romish country; but this is an exception. The rule is that the churches of the same confession, as much as possible, all unite to work together toward each other's perfection and the building up of God's kingdom.

The authority of the broader assembly follows out of that organic relationship. When a local church enters into the fellowship of churches, it receives guidance and support from the sister churches; but it also submits to the leadership of the broader assembly and takes upon herself the obligation to abide by the decisions of the broader assembly. This is deliberately expressed in the credentials of the delegates. Such subordination is not the introduction of a hierarchy in the church, but a submission to the yoke of Christ, a recognition of the unity of the body of Christ, and the seeking of the maintenance of Christ's kingship. If the local church were to ignore the decisions of a broader assembly and not implement them, it would thereby break [the churches'] unity and order. And if it could not demonstrate that those decisions were contrary to God's Word and the order of the churches, it would be committing rebellion and making itself worthy of censure. The way in which Article 36 of the Church Order is formulated clearly shows that the Reformed desired to avoid any hierarchical element. In this connection, the Synod of Dordrecht (1893, Art. 234) declared, "that the consistories do not need any authorization from higher assemblies to perform civil acts, such as entering into loans, writing off capital on ledgers of the National Debt, etc., but have full authority to do so, as representing the congregation." This decision is closely related to the fact that the Reformed churches consider themselves a federation of local churches, but that they do not desire to be recognized as such, either as local churches or as the collective churches under the Law of April 25, 1855, "since by such an application they would act contrary to God's Word and consequently to their accepted Confession and Church Order."⁴¹

41 The Law of April 25, 1855, or the *Nederlands Recht van 1855*, required prior royal approval to establish an association of more than twenty people. This law was first introduced by the French under Napoleon in 1811 and was

The authority of the broader assembly is therefore fundamentally nothing more than brotherly help. And when decisions are made in a way that is consistent with God's Word and the Confession, then the right and freedom and equality of the churches are not affected either. However, if the broader assembly, in the opinion of a church, exceeds its authority, and the decisions are found to be contrary to God's Word, then such a church, says Voetius, "should rather leave the church fellowship than act against God's Word and the conscience."⁴² Conversely, however, if it turns out to be a pretense that one is declaring to have objections on the basis of God's Word and conscience, and it turns out that it is [actually] a matter of escaping the demands of the Word, the Confession, and the Church Order, then the broader assembly is obliged to take disciplinary action. If the entire congregation unites with the consistory, then the church fellowship is broken. But if objections arise within the congregation against the consistory, and the help of the broader assembly is invoked, then the latter is called to help these objectors and to bring them justice over against the apostatizing consistory. Such a case occurred in 1926 in the Geelkerken affair.⁴³ Objections have been raised against this from various quarters.

Dr. van Lonkhuyzen, a minister in Zierikzee, wrote several articles in the *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* [*Reformed Theological Journal*] in which he sharply criticized the decision of the Synod of Assen, which in 1926 dismissed Dr. Geelkerken and several consistory members from ecclesiastical ministry who refused to submit to the synod's decisions. He had these concerns already when he was still a minister in Chicago, and at that time not only raised his objections against an action of a classis that had dismissed a minister from his ministry because he did not wish to submit,⁴⁴ but

reissued under the Dutch monarchy. -Trans.

42 *Pol. Eccl.*, 4:123.

43 See especially pages 25-26 of that work.

44 Herman Hoeksema also refers to the fact that van Lonkhuyzen took a distinct church political position, that "the consistory is the sole ruling body in the church, and neither classis nor synod have judicatory power over the local church. They hold that a consistory is not subject to a classis and that the latter cannot depose the former." See Hoeksema, *Protestant Reformed Churches*, 144-45. In earlier editions the page number is 137. -Ed.

also against the decision of Assen. He also wrote a brochure: *Een ernstige fout* [*A serious mistake*],⁴⁵ in which he claimed that “the synod had made a fundamental mistake and had sinned against one of the basic foundational principles of our church polity.” That dismissal of a consistory by a higher assembly is, he writes, contrary to the nature of church federation as we know it from God’s Word, and to the foundational principles of Reformed church polity as taught by leading men throughout history.

Dr. van Lonkhuyzen sees the path followed by Assen as a turning away from the straight line. He says on page 26 of his brochure *In eigen rechte lijn*: I see “in Assen’s decision a step in the wrong direction of a *senatus ecclesiasticus* or collegialism. In any case, we are slowly but surely moving further away from home. The federation or the church, ‘The Reformed Churches,’ with a synod at the head (*supra*), which dismisses consistories and classes. A synod that sets aside the decisions of provincial synods.”⁴⁶ He sees a turning aside toward “the French line.” And we must remain and continue in “the original Dutch line,” as given by the Synod of Emden and the Conventicle of Wesel, and as defended by Voetius, Hoornbeek, and Rutgers.

Before we address this objection, we will make two remarks to orient ourselves correctly in this matter. First, many people do not correctly understand the intent of the work by Professor Dr. Rutgers and Mr. A. F. de Savornin Lohman, Esquire titled *De rechtsbevoegdheid onzer plaatselijke kerken* [*The Legal Jurisdiction of Our Local Churches*].⁴⁷ This essay has become the arsenal from which many have drawn their weapons to combat the decision of Assen; and Dr. van Lonkhuyzen also believes that Dr. Rutgers would never have expressed his agreement with this decision. But such forget that the purpose of this writing was to inform the courts in the days of the

45 Printed at the Christian Literature Publishing Co, Chicago, 1926.

46 Reprint from the *Reformed Theological Journal*, November 1931, Aalten: N.V. De Graafschap. (The brochure’s title in English is “In Its Own Straight Line.” -Trans.)

47 “This valuable work by de Savornin Lohman, Esquire and Dr. Rutgers should be read by every lawyer and every clergyman. Not to study the spiritual question of the dogma of the church, but to know where one stands legally.” Kuyper, *Heraut* [*The Herald*], 430.

Doleantie⁴⁸ in the struggle over the church's property and to dispute the right of intervention of the judicial power when a consistory, rightly or wrongly, believed that it should not conform to the decision of the broader assemblies. Rutgers and Lohman did not write an ecclesiastical brief but a legal one to advocate for the right of local churches to their property. The hierarchy having been abolished, the course of reasoning proceeds, no ecclesiastical authority remained, but merely cooperation and concord. The property belongs to the local church.

That the consistory, refusing submission to the decree of the broader assembly, must needs remain free in a juridical sense, lies so inherently in the nature of the matter that one cannot conceive of any proceeding by which to compel them to a contrary course. For who should institute such action? The local church alone possessed the property. No one had standing to dispossess her. The individual members of the local church had the right and even the obligation to leave it if they believed that the consistory was setting aside God's Word; but as individual members they had no right to any property of the corporation. The church was represented by the consistory. Thus, as long as there was no means to remove them, *the decision of the consistory*, both towards the members and towards the collective churches, had to be considered *in a legal sense as the highest law.* (27)

From this extensive quote, it is clear that this is a legal argument in connection with church property.

But secondly, in this same writing by Lohman and Rutgers, the right of the broader assemblies to dismiss consistory members is clearly stated. On pages 25-27, Lohman and Rutgers write: "The unity of those (Dutch) churches consisted first of all, indeed only, in the common confession. The church federation was based upon that confession. It was, as already stated in the second article of the Acts of the Emden assembly, the expression of the mutual relationship and

48 The 1886 Dutch Reformed Church split, also known as the Doleantie, was the name of a prominent schism in the Dutch Reformed Church that took place in 1886 and was led by a renowned minister, Abraham Kuyper. The Doleantie was not the first schism in the Dutch Reformed Church. Another schism, the Secession of 1834 (Afscheiding), had led to the formation of the Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands. -Trans.

unity of the churches.” Agreement with it [the common confession] was the condition that had to be continuously met if the harmony⁴⁹ was to remain in effect.

They did not say: the church fellowship lies in the common submission to the regulations, and the unity of confession is desirable, but it can also be done without. But on the contrary: common submission to the confession is the one indispensable thing for our entire church fellowship. The unity of church forms is therefore desirable, but it can also be done without.

That is why the Reformed churches did not allow anyone into any ministry without ensuring that he would exercise that ministry in accordance with that confession.

He who has once been admitted hath the right to lay bare his objections before the consistory, classis, and synod, and to request examination thereof in light of the Word. He who cannot reconcile himself with the decision rendered is *de facto* suspended from his office, a matter of course, and also, provided the ‘true church’ be not salaried by the authorities, not unjust. Such a one is likewise not admitted to the Lord’s Supper.

The same, it may be said, was applied in 1926 to Dr. Geelkerken.

Moreover, the book by Professor Rutgers and Mr. de Savornin Lohman also addresses a case similar to that of Dr. Geelkerken. In 1708, the preacher Leenhof was removed from office by the Synod of Overijssel due to doctrinal apostasy. However, the government of Zwolle supported him, and Leenhof remained the preacher of Zwolle because the consistory aligned itself with the government’s position. What do Professor Rutgers and Mr. Lohman say about this? “Based on the nature and authority of church government, the consistory of Zwolle should have *ecclesiastically implemented and maintained Leenhof’s removal*.” This shows that, according to Professor Rutgers, the synod has the right to remove a preacher from office (166).

Rutgers and Lohman speak even more clearly on page 179: “*The classis or synod may indeed remove consistory members from their*

⁴⁹ Again, the Dutch is *accoord*, referring to an ecclesiastical harmony. -Ed.

office as long as the church remains within the federation; but if the church does not recognize that judgment, the collective churches have no other recourse than to cut off this church from the federation.” In essence, they are saying the same thing as the Synod of Assen did.

It is clear that Dr. van Lonkhuyzen has no right to appeal to Professor Rutgers for his opinion. Now he does acknowledge that the broader assembly can also exercise power, but only in the sense that the consistory voluntarily grants that right to the higher assembly.⁵⁰ There is truth in these words in that the joining of the church federation is voluntary. But it is not true that in any particular case when a minister or consistory member deviates from the truth, the consistory is free to call on the denomination for help or not, for this is the requirement of the church federation. If a consistory in such a case did not call on the help of the neighboring churches, and complaints came from the congregation, the classis would be obliged to intervene. Voetius also speaks in this way,⁵¹ that the higher assemblies “usually do not exercise ecclesiastical power above and beyond the local church, and that they exercise nothing in and about it with authority, except in matters and affairs that they have in common, or in case of higher appeal, and of expected or actual mismanagement.” The classis and the synod can act not only against the minister, but also against the consistory and members of the consistory. This is stated in the Church Order (Art. 79). In particular cases, when a matter has been brought to the synod through organic channels, all the churches have placed their disciplinary power in the hands of the synod, not only to make a decisive pronouncement, but also to ensure that the decision is carried out. This follows from the nature of the broader assembly, as Voetius explains.⁵² First of all, Article 31 states that what is approved by the majority of votes will be considered settled and binding, unless it is found to be contrary to the Word of God or the articles of the Church Order. Secondly, the synod has the task of upholding the confession, which is the common accord of the bond of the churches; and it would be unfaithful in this if it did not take care that the officebearers in the churches adhered to this Confession. The broader assembly

⁵⁰ *In eigen rechte lijn*, 10.

⁵¹ *Pol. Eccl.*, 1:226.

⁵² *Pol. Eccl.*, 4:891-898.

must take disciplinary action against disobedient officebearers. It can entrust the execution of its decision to the consistory, but if the majority of the consistory members oppose it, it must act itself and help the congregation in the proper implementation, and in upholding the Confession.

Dr. van Lonkhuyzen believes that in this case the broader assembly behaves as a higher power. This is a misunderstanding. It would be so if the classis or the synod arbitrarily interfered in the rights of a consistory or a congregation. But it is something completely different when a consistory does not concern itself to make a decision regarding a conclusion that has come to it by means of the organic way [and] according to the Church Order. And the right of a broader assembly becomes even stronger when a portion of the consistory members and of the congregation also urgently appeal to the synod to do justice and to deliver them from the domination of a faction. In this case, the synod may not evade its calling; it must take measures to preserve the good and faithful portion of the congregation, for the well-being of all the churches within its organic union.

This is something completely different from undermining the autonomy of the local church. When the synod helped the oppressed party in the case just mentioned, and by pronouncing a judgment on unfaithful consistory members, it opened the way for the congregation to live in peace and quiet, in obedience to the King of the congregation. Then [the synod] is [acting as] a serving authority.

Dr. van Lonkhuyzen is completely wrong in calling this an encroachment onto the territory of hierarchy or collegialism. In a hierarchy, the clergy rule over the people, and thereby disregard the right and freedom of Christian people. But the Synod of Assen acted in obedience to Christ and freed the congregation of Amsterdam-South from a power that domineered over it. According to the collegial conception, the churches are parts of the great whole. According to the Assen Synod, the local church is and remains autonomous, but in a situation of great need must be helped to regain its freedom to act according to God's Word and to the Confession. And the involvement of the denomination in a particular case immediately recedes when the congregation is brought back to the right institution and to peace.

Dr. van Lonkhuyzen appeals for his opinion to the ruling of the

Conventicle of Wesel [1568] in which this [assembly] did not grant to the classis any right in the case of the “abandonment” or “rejection” or “dismissal” of a minister without the consent of the congregation (Chapter V Article 19).⁵³ But Dr. van Lonkhuyzen forgets that this is not about censure or deposition, but about the dismissal of ministers. The intention of the Wesel article is that neither the local churches nor the classes may act arbitrarily with their ministers. And it stated that if a minister could not serve in a place with edification, the consistory and the congregation should not act without the judgment and consent of the classis. And conversely that the classis should not decide in this matter “unless the local church consents to this of its own accord.” This case therefore has nothing to do with the issue in dispute. Even less relevant is when he appeals, on page 28 of his brochure *A Serious Mistake*, to a decision of the synod of 1586. He himself makes a serious mistake here and gives a misleading impression when he writes: “In its desperation to bring order to the chaotic conditions in the ecclesiastical situation in the Netherlands shortly after the Reformation, the particular synod of Rotterdam of 1586 decided to propose to or ask the national synod of The Hague of 1586 to establish a *senatus ecclesiasticus*. A kind of supreme consistory. This [body] would supervise and stand above the other consistories, and its ability to act would extend as far as suspension. But the national synod of The Hague was not willing to consider this request for a moment. It rejected the matter of such a special consistory.” This representation is completely incorrect, [and] contrary to what the *Acts* state. The issue was quite different. The Synod of Rotterdam had proposed to the National Synod of The Hague “that a *senatus ecclesiasticus* be elected, if it is deemed good, consisting of persons political and ecclesiastical, but who prefer the Reformed religion.”⁵⁴ It was obvious that the synod rejected the establishment of a supreme consistory which would consist of ecclesiastical and secular persons. In that, the government would receive power in ecclesiastical matters and the right and freedom of the churches would be affected. It seems that Dr. van Lonkhuyzen has not read the *Acts* of that particular synod of Rotterdam very well. In any case, that matter has nothing to do with the issue at hand.

⁵³ DeRidder, trans., 90. -Ed.

⁵⁴ Reitsma and Van Veen, *Acta*, 2:282.

However, Dr. van Lonkhuyzen builds on such weak foundations the theory that the broader assembly is absolutely not allowed to exercise censure on consistory members. When, so he says on page 28 of his brochure “A Serious Mistake,” if all admonitions do not help, then there is only one thing left, namely to terminate federation with such a consistory that does not desire to adhere to what is agreed upon by the federation. That is, to put it out of the denomination.

It is very peculiar that Dr. van Lonkhuyzen, who gladly appeals to the letter of the Church Order, does not appeal to the Church Order for this removal of the church from the denomination. By the way, the Church Order does not recognize such a status⁵⁵ of “removal from the denomination.” He does, however, appeal to a single word of Marnix, quoted by Prof. Rutgers on page 195 of *The Legal Jurisdiction of Our Local Churches*. But he misunderstands Marnix completely. Marnix does not say that *removal from the denomination* is the only disciplinary measure, but he says that one cannot always apply the general rule: “For it can happen that one church will so misbehave that the other churches will necessarily have to condemn it and make a separation from it, without waiting for a general council or synod regarding it.”

Now we also acknowledge that the situation can arise where the synod must remove an entire church with its consistory from the denomination, if this entire church has fallen away from the true faith and does not heed the admonitions of the church federation. But such cases will hardly ever occur in ordinary times. However, if a part of the church remains with the church federation, that denomination may and must use the best ways and means to help the congregation, if necessary by exercising discipline over the consistory members. What Dr. van Lonkhuyzen desires is in fact Independentist. And this teaching, that the synod does not have the right to discipline, must be rejected as un-Reformed, completely contrary to what our Reformed synods and our canonists,⁵⁶ Voetius and others, have taught.

55 The Dutch word translated status is *instituut*, generally translated “institution,” as in a college or other organization. That specific meaning does not seem to fit here. Bouwman is either saying that the church order simply does not refer to the matter of placing churches outside the denomination, or that the church order knows of no official status of “removed from the denomination.” -Ed.

56 The word *canonici* appears five times in Chapter 62 of Bouwman, and

The opinion that higher assemblies may not exercise censure on a consistory or on consistory members in the sense of excommunication, but only in the sense that they can terminate the association of a consistory that does not desire to adhere to the agreement of the federation, that is removing it from the federation, must be rejected as un-Reformed, completely contrary to what our Reformed synods and our canonists have taught.

Dr. van Lonkhuyzen appeals for this opinion to Hoornbeek, among others. He [Hoornbeek] deals in the tenth book of his work, *Summa controversiarum religionis*, with the Brownists, whose teachings were adopted, somewhat modified, by the Independentists, of whom several preachers and congregations resided in the Netherlands for a time. The Independents deny the disciplinary right of broader assemblies. The local congregations can come together in conferences, they teach; but they do not recognize submission to any spiritual authority except that of Christ and the Holy Scriptures. The conferences can give advice in any dispute, but as they declare in their confession, these conferences “do not possess ecclesiastical power in the proper sense or any jurisdiction to exercise any censure over any church or persons, or to impose their decisions on churches or officebearers.” A synod therefore has the right to admonish a church or officebearers who erred or did not desire to submit to the synod, but not the right to censure or excommunicate them.

Now, in the congregation of Rotterdam a dispute arose over the dismissal of a minister. Other congregations involved themselves in this case and asked the consistory of Rotterdam to submit the difficulties that had arisen there to the decision of the synod, with the threat that if they did not submit to the decision of this assembly, they would be cut off from the fellowship of the churches.

Hoornbeek, who wished to win over the Independents for the Reformed churches, told the Independents that their accusation that the church government of the Reformed was hierarchical was completely erroneous, and explained what the Reformed taught in this matter. How can they take offense at this authority that we attribute to the synods?

always appears in this translation as “canonists.” The term refers to a church order authority. -Ed.

Is the exercise of censure against a recalcitrant, such that one breaks fellowship with him, so far removed from excommunication, or from the usurped power (which you attribute to us)? What is the difference between that removal from the denomination passively undergone, and excommunication? Is not he who is placed outside the communion of the saints excommunicated? Or does not the church, thus condemned to be cut off from fellowship, experience that a certain authority has been exercised against it?

And if they say that these are powerful remedies, how do they come about without any authority? But if they say that they reject that power of the synod, which is exercised with authority, then they seem to have more aversion to the words than to the thing. For when the church submits to the judgment, the censure, and the sentence of exclusion from the fellowship, does it not submit to authority?⁵⁷

On page 670 of the same work, Hoornbeek says,

And the synod does not pronounce a judgment on other churches than its own, that is, those that come together there through their delegates and submit the common affairs to its judgment, and that entirely through voluntary and mutual submission, so that it does not swing its sickle in another's harvest. But the combined power of the churches is there collectively vigilant for the salvation of the same churches (which delegate them) and [of which churches it] jointly takes care.

Dr. H. H. Kuyper rightly says,

Regarding the intention of Hoornbeek, there can therefore be no doubt. What he says here is an *argumentum ad hominem*, as it is called. He desires to show here that the Independents, who deny the authority to exercise censure and to excommunicate, as well as the *authoritative potestas*, the power of the synods acting with authority, and even reproach our Reformed churches for it, actually do the same *with their cutting off from the church federation* and that this is indeed an exercise of power by the synods.⁵⁸

It is clear that Dr. van Lonkhuyzen draws an entirely wrong

⁵⁷ Hoornbeek, *S. Contr.*, ed. 1653, 669.

⁵⁸ *Heraut*, No. 2831, "Napleiten".

conclusion from Hoornbeek's argument when he says that Hoornbeek understands the term excommunication as "a breaking of the denomination or placing outside the denomination." The cutting off from the church federation can, as we wrote above, be necessary in a particular case, when a church is hopelessly corrupt, there is no means left to make a church live according to the law of God, and the church does not recognize the judgment of the synod. But this measure does not detract from the right of the churches assembled in synod to pronounce a judgment with authority, in the name of the Lord, on officebearers of a church and to depose them from their office. This is also recognized by Prof. Rutgers, to whom Dr. van Lonkhuyzen so gladly appeals. Dr. Rutgers, rather, states on page 179 of his work *The Legal Jurisdiction of Our Local Churches*:

Upon withdrawal from such a federation, the collective churches have no more coercive means against the individual church than the consistory has against the individual member. *The classis or synod may depose consistory members from their office as long as the church remains in the denomination*; but if the church does not recognize that judgment, the combined churches have no other recourse than to cut this church off from the denomination.

The judgment of Prof. Rutgers, therefore, is entirely consistent with the decision of the Synod of Assen. The majority of the members of the consistory did not wish to submit to the decision of the synod but still wished to remain in the church federation. At the same time a minority in the consistory, with a large part of the congregation, had turned to the synod for the enforcement of their rights. As also the matter had been brought to the synod through the organizational channels. Therefore, the Synod of Assen, making use of the right granted to it, had to act with authority and depose the consistory members who upheld the suspended and dismissed minister and who did not submit to the synod.

That the synod possesses the right of deposition is also expressed by Peter van Mastricht, professor at Utrecht,⁵⁹ "that the synod does not only possess a charitable, beneficent⁶⁰ authority by counseling

⁵⁹ *Beschouwende en Prakticale Godgeleerdheit*, 3:346.

⁶⁰ Bouwman uses the term *caritative macht*. -Ed.

and advising and excluding from communion, as the Independents desire, but truly has an actual (potestative)⁶¹ power and authority, as is evident in the Synod of Jerusalem, Acts 15:28, 29.” He teaches that the synod has not only dogmatic and teaching authority, but also “a critical, a judging power, insofar as it deals with spiritual punishments, admonitions, excommunications, etc. against heretics [and] troublesome and obstinate people according to the Word of God, Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 15:4, 5.”

The other dogmaticians from the best period of our church life speak in the same way, as Voetius also not unclearly testifies. The Remonstrants intended to diminish the authority of the synod and also appealed to Hommius for this, that the decisions of the councils should not be presented or imposed on the churches as mandates of the government and as Persian decrees. Rather, the acts of the councils should be sent to all the churches, so that they could be examined according to the rule of God’s Word to be willingly accepted, but not under force. But even if this had been in accordance with the sentiments of the Reformed, it does not take away from the fact that Hommius expressed his opinion at the Synod of Dort that the Remonstrants should be sent away from the synod and that they should be judged from their writings; and also that Hommius cooperated in the deposition of the Remonstrant consistories.

Voetius also recognizes, as we have seen, the authority of the synod to depose members of the consistory in special cases. Against this it is argued that Voetius taught that the broader assemblies, in particular disputes, can at most make a pronouncement, but that the congregation should perform the actual act of deposition. Dr. van Lonkhuyzen seeks his support from Prof. Rutgers, who wrote in a note on page 32 of his “Legal Jurisdiction of the Local Churches,” in refutation of Dr. Kleyn,

Voetius (page 226) most certainly says that ‘in case of mismanagement and incurable corruption even excommunication can be granted to the synodical assembly of the churches and exercised by it.’ Dr. Kleyn had defended the hierarchical action of the synodical government in 1886 in Amsterdam. But Dr. Kleyn, who quotes that literally without adding anything, also knows that a few more pages follow in Voetius’ work, which demonstrate that ‘the local church must retain its right

61 Bouwman writes *eigentlich (potestatief) macht*. -Ed.

and the exercise of ecclesiastical power.’ This means that if there is still a healthy part in the congregation, the actual excommunication is to be done by this part, and the synod gives only guidance. And if such a church is completely corrupted, the synodical excommunication ‘is not the formal excommunication, but an action taking its place, whereby the anathema is announced, with the renunciation of peace and of brotherhood and of the special synodical association.’

In connection with that argument, Voetius poses the question: whether, in case of necessity and of irreformable corruption, the governing power can be taken from the consistory and transferred to another? And his answer to that is affirmative, but, far from thinking of “an intervention by the classis on its own initiative” (as Dr. Kleyn makes it seem). He says, on the contrary, that only the church (or congregation) has the authority, in such a case, to permanently or temporarily deny to its ministers and elders the power to govern. If possible, such a church would use the help of the synodically related churches. And thus

the governing power that has been taken from its own ministers, or at least the exercise of which authority has been temporarily denied to them, can at least by this necessary act be transferred to the elders of one or more churches of the same synodical fellowship, whose vicarious help is then used only for so long until order is established and the congregation’s own consistory is restored.

This reasoning of Professor Rutgers seems to be the foundation for the theory built by Dr. van Lonkhuyzen,⁶² that only the members of a congregation have the right to dismiss ministers and elders; and that when this is done by the synod, it is an act of lordship, contrary to the federative character of the churches. However, it is forgotten that this view is Independentist and is not at all taught by Voetius. Voetius is dealing here with the question of whether every part of ecclesiastical authority, even the power to excommunicate, belongs to the synod. And he answers this in the affirmative. Voetius acknowledges that the power of the synod flows from the local churches, which bring their power together; and he declares that these churches assembled in synod “ordinarily do not exercise power over or outside the local church, so

⁶² *Een ernstige fout [A Serious Mistake]*, 26, 27.

that they do not exercise anything in or concerning it with authority,” but then he continues: “unless in common matters (*negotiis et causis communibus*) or in case of appeal and mismanagement, whether this [mismanagement] is expected or actually already present.”⁶³ This means, therefore, that in the latter case, the synod has the power to depose members of the consistory. However, it does not do this as a synodical government according to collegial church law, but by virtue of the church federation, not outside the congregation. And this was the reason why Prof. Rutgers pointed his opponent, Dr. H. G. Kleyn, to the recently cited quote from Voetius.

Regarding the question of whether a classis or a synod may depose a consistory or consistory members, the actions of the Synod of South Holland in 1619 are significant. Did the synod only pronounce its judgment that the Remonstrant elders and deacons should be deposed from their offices, so that the actual act of deposition was done by the congregation, or did the synod itself depose them? The Acts of the synods speak clearly in this matter. The Synod of Dordrecht (1618/19) deposed all of the summoned Remonstrants from their offices and instructed the respective particular synods to judge the other Remonstrants.⁶⁴ The deposition had to take effect immediately. And on the basis of this decision of the National Synod, the particular synods put out the Remonstrant consistories and ministers from their offices. The Synod of South Holland in Leiden, 1619, drew up a “copy of the form of deposition of the Remonstrant consistories to be read in church,” which also contained these words: “That the elders and deacons, who have so far served in the church government with the aforementioned dismissed minister, shall also be dismissed from their present offices, as they are also hereby dismissed and discharged from the same.”⁶⁵ The particular Synod of Edam stated in the “copy of the act of expulsion”⁶⁶ that the synod, “following the order and the charge given in the aforementioned national synod,” “as it declares hereby, that the aforementioned N.N. shall consider himself from now on dismissed and discharged from all ecclesiastical offices and

63 *Pol. Eccl.*, 1:226.

64 *Acta Syn.*, 1620, 281.

65 Reitsma and Van Veen, *Acta*, 3:406.

66 Reitsma and Van Veen, *Acta*, 2:88.

ministry, as he is also hereby presently dismissed and discharged.” The “hereby” has nothing to do with the reading of the judgment before the congregation, nor with the acceptance or implementation thereof by the congregation, but is a legal term indicating that the judgment takes effect immediately by decision of the synod.

In his series of articles “Napleiten”⁶⁷[or, “Further Pleadings”] Dr. H. H. Kuyper provides a “strong proof from the very lips of Voetius himself.” In Gouda, this deposition of the Remonstrant consistory caused great difficulty. Therefore, the synod sent Voetius and another deputy there to speak with the magistrate. Voetius and his fellow deputy declared to the magistrate, “that by order of this synod the present consistory of the Gasthuiskerk (i.e., the Reformed consistory there) was authorized in the office (i.e., legally recognized by the synod) and the other was deposed (i.e., the Remonstrant one), just as this must also be read from the pulpit.” So it is by order of the synod, which itself sent its deputies, that the Reformed consistory *was* recognized as the legitimate consistory and the Remonstrant consistory *was* deposed. What still remained to be done was that this judgment had then to be read from the pulpit. There is therefore no question of any consent from the congregation wherein that deposition had to take place. *The deposition itself, by order of the synod*, was already an accomplished fact. Besides, whoever reads the report that these deputies brought to the synod about what happened to them in Gouda will get a very different impression than that of a tacit consent of the Gouda congregation. When Sonneveld, [who was] also sent to Gouda by the synod, was to preach in the Great Church, the Remonstrants made a hellish noise to prevent this, threw stones at the portal, drew knives, overturned benches, took dogs by their tails and threw them among the people. And, when the preacher announced a psalm, sang indecent songs. The deputies of the synod even risked their lives when leaving the church building, for stones were thrown at them. And yet Dr. van Lonkhuyzen declares that Voetius teaches us that such a Remonstrant congregation alone should depose the Remonstrant consistory, because only the congregation has the right to do so! As if a Remonstrant congregation would ever lend its cooperation to that. One sees how the deputies of the synod were treated in Gouda

⁶⁷ *De Heraut* [*The Herald*], 2833.

who had to read the judgment of the synod by which the Remonstrant consistory was declared deposed.

The deposition of ministers and consistory members thus took place in 1619 without the consent of the people. As a rule and under normal circumstances, the exercise of discipline, such as excommunication, deposition of ministers, etc., should not take place without the tacit affirmation of the congregation, but there may also be cases in which the exercise of discipline must proceed, even if it takes place without the consent of the congregation, even in defiance of the opposition of the congregation. Voetius deals with this question in his fourth book (890-893), where he asks the question of how a consistory should act that wishes to excommunicate someone when almost all the members of the congregation oppose it. He gives this answer to this question, "I believe that in small congregations with one minister and a small number of elders, it is safest for the consistory to postpone the execution and announcement of the excommunication, and not to act without prior advice from the classis, or from the entire particular synod." In large churches, where the consistory consists of many ministers and elders who are more experienced in church matters, Voetius considers it safest to postpone the carrying out of the excommunication until deputies of the classis or synod have spoken with those who have objections, in order to persuade them to abandon their opposition. And if this has little success,

I believe that the consistory would do nothing wrong if it referred this whole matter to the classis so that it, according to its counsel and decision, either postponed or executed the excommunication, or rather that the consistory requested from the synod the judgment of excommunication and the execution thereof by deputies from its assembly or from that classis (under which the particular church resorts) to be carried out.

Voetius provides several examples of this, where synods have acted in this way, as in the cases of Coolhaes, Wiggerts, etc. In 1619, he says, the Synod of Delft deposed many ministers⁶⁸ without the consent of their congregation, or at least of the majority of their congregation. "In

68 Bouman inserts the Latin into the text: *absque consensu populi sui, aut saltem plerorumque ex populo suo*. —Ed.

extraordinary cases and when the church is agitated by sects, factions and divisions, the synods or classes cannot restore everything to order in such agitated churches with the consent of the people.”

The way in which Prof. Rutgers, in the book he co-authored with Prof. Lohman, cites Voetius in his argument against Dr. H. G. Kleyn, has led to misunderstanding with the result that the impression could easily be formed that the synod never acts independently with discipline against consistory members, even when a dispute has been organically brought to the broader assembly. As a result, it was long held as a general opinion in the Reformed churches that the synod did have authority, but not in the sense that it had the power in extraordinary cases to depose ministers and consistory members and also to execute that judgment. The synod could make a ruling in a matter, but it had to leave the execution of it to the local church or to the classis in connection with the congregation. I, too, like Prof. Dr. H. H. Kuyper, relying on the authority of Prof. Rutgers, have often advised in that spirit. But through further study of the canonists, especially Voetius, and of the Acts of the synods, I have come to the understanding that this view was not correct, somewhat colored toward Independentism, and did not sufficiently acknowledge the authority of the broader assemblies.

The Reformed canonists rightly recognized that the denomination must not infringe on the autonomy of the local church, so that the local congregation would retain its full freedom to manage its own affairs, and to provide for the ministry of the Word and sacraments, for the care of the members of the church, and for the maturing⁶⁹ of the congregation. But the church federation is also intended for churches to pay good attention to each other, to help each other, so that the royal law of Christ is maintained, and the assault on the Confession is countered with counsel and guidance, if necessary by acting with authority and according to the law of the denomination, admonishing and punishing the unfaithful. As a rule, and in normal circumstances, the exercise of discipline, excommunication, and the deposition of ministers and consistory members should not take place without the approval of the

69 The Dutch is *volmaking*, which has the idea of making fill or filling up. Here the idea is that of progressive spiritual growth with a view to full maturity. -Ed.

congregation. But in extraordinary cases, when revolutionary unrest prevails, when the state of the church is completely corrupted, when schism threatens or is present, and the minister and the elders and deacons no longer provide good leadership but lead the congregation away from the right way, the broader assembly must ultimately act with authority and carry out the exercise of discipline, even if this happens without the consent of the congregation.

The Independents, on the other hand, asserted that the synod can give advice, but may not exercise discipline. If necessary, the synod could pronounce an ecclesiastical judgment on the sin of another church and remove it from the fellowship. But Voetius repeatedly points out⁷⁰ that this manner of exercising discipline is very unmerciful, and much worse than what the Reformed churches do who desire to stop the corruption of the church by deposing officebearers. The discipline exercised by the synod must serve to promote the salvation of the church. The welfare of the church and the glory of God is the highest law here too. Certainly the case may also arise that an entire church has deviated, and that the synod is under the necessity of breaking fellowship with it; but this is almost unthinkable in ordinary times. But when corruption has crept into the church and the minister of the Word and the consistory or a part of the consistory, and a part of the congregation, is not obedient to the discipline of the confession, then the synod must heed the call of the faithful part and depose the apostates who, after the admonition of the churches, do not wish to listen.

Prof. Rutgers also said, “the classis or synod may indeed remove consistory members from their office as long as the church is in the denomination; but if that church does not recognize that judgment, the collective churches have no other recourse than to cut off this church from the federation.”⁷¹ Here, not only ministers are mentioned, but consistory members. As an objection to the right of suspension or deposition of elders and deacons, it has sometimes been argued that they are only officebearers in one place and do not, like ministers, also have the right to be invited to officiate in other churches. But this remark does not hold water because the elders also have the

⁷⁰ *Pol. Eccl.*, 4:129; 134; 153; 178; 218; 227; 838; 890.

⁷¹ *Rechtsbevoegdheid [Jurisdiction]*, 179.

right to be elected as members of church assemblies, because they have supervision over the congregation, over the minister, over the maintenance of order, discipline and confession, and because they, as members of the consistory, fall under the rule stated in Article 36 of the Church Order, that the classis has authority over the consistory. This was, of course, also wholeheartedly acknowledged by Dr. Rutgers. In his lectures, published by Dr. de Jong, we read on page 84, “The question has sometimes been asked how it should be done if someone is to be excommunicated and the consistory of the church to which he belongs refuses to cooperate.” After Rutgers had pointed to the Coolhaes case, he continues on page 85: “Now a consistory that did not cooperate would itself be in a state of blame. If the consistory were to resist, it would subsequently become a schismatic consistory and come under ecclesiastical proceedings. If it did not yield, this would lead to conflict, to its deposition, and to the appointment of a new consistory. And now there is no government (as in the Coolhaes case) that would oppose it.”

We conclude our series of testimonies from the Reformed canonists with a word from Voetius. He asks: “Whether the ecclesiastical, synodical power is a power of doctrine, government, and discipline?” And answers:

Yes, because this threefold power belongs to the local churches individually, also according to the opinion of the opponents. Therefore this power also belongs to the several churches which are united in correspondence and in a synod. The same can also be proven from necessity and natural law. Just as the political power belongs to the provinces individually, so it cannot be denied to the collective provinces, which are united into a republic.

And, we add to this, if, according to Article 79 of the Church Order, the local church is not free to suspend and depose an elder or deacon, but the neighboring church must also decide on this; and if a minister of the Word may only be suspended and deposed by the classis, and this exercise of discipline may only be performed by virtue of the church federation and the polity that the churches themselves have agreed upon, does it not also follow from the church federation that, when a matter is organically brought to the synod, the synod may

also act with authority in this matter, and, if necessary, proceed to deposition? This cannot be denied. In the defense of the Provincial Synod to the deputies of Leicester and to the Synod of The Hague, 1586, it was said to those who doubted the right of excommunication by the Synod (points 42 and 43): that according to the church order of Middelburg (Art. 62) it was indeed stated that no consistory may proceed to excommunication without the advice of the classis “to prevent abuse.” “But,” it then declared,

it is not meant nor ordained thereby that a national synod (when the knowledge of matters comes to it, as in this case for the reasons alleged above) should not be allowed to perform excommunication without first consulting the Classis under which the minister resides and having its consent, as the opponents seem to wish to maintain. Not at all. But instead it is to be said, since the Synod finds that a classis may perform excommunication, that so much more may many classes, indeed, many provincial synods do the same. Just as the provincial synod consists of many classes, and the national [synod] of many provinces.⁷²

⁷² Rutgers, *Acta van de Ned. Synoden (Acts of the Dutch Synods)*, 1889, 584.

Book Reviews

Reformed Ethics: Christian Life in Society, vol. 3, by Herman Bavinck, ed. John Bolt. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2025. Hardcover. Pp. xvi + 423. \$57.99. ISBN 9780801098239. Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.

With volume 3 of the *Reformed Ethics*, the Dutch Reformed Translation Society (DRTS), Baker Publishing, and John Bolt have completed a publishing project of great significance for Reformed theology in the English language. This consists of publishing the four volumes of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* and then three volumes of the Reformed theologian's semi-thorough study of Reformed ethics, "semi" because Bavinck died before he could finish his work on ethics.

In light of Bavinck's towering stature in the sphere of Reformed theology and of his gifts as a Reformed, Protestant theologian, this publishing project must rank as supreme in recent times and as outstanding in the history of the Reformation.

Concerning the series on Reformed ethics, discovery and publication of Bavinck's work are fascinating. A Dutch scholar stumbled upon the eleven hundred-page, hand-written, manuscript in the archives of the Free University in the Netherlands. It was Bavinck's own text of the course in ethics that he taught over the years in the Reformed seminary in Kampen. It had never been published, not even in the Dutch language, much less translated for publication in the English language.

News of the discovery came to the attention of John Bolt, retired Christian Reformed professor of theology and undoubtedly the leading Bavinck scholar in all of Christendom. The inevitable result was the undertaking of the huge project of translating the dusty, crumbling pages of handwritten Dutch into English and their publication in three volumes by Baker Publishing House with the financial support of the DRTS, the organization of Reformed scholars created to accomplish the publication of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*.

There is little in English on the nature and content of Reformed ethics. There is certainly nothing in English that compares with the magisterial study of Bavinck. Volumes 1 and 2 are devoted to the

history and nature of ethics as a reality in human life, both Christian and non-Christian. Erroneous theories of ethics are considered. Volume 2 includes an explanation of the Decalogue as the content of Christian ethics. In explaining the seventh commandment of God's law, Bavinck accounts for his brevity by noting that he will later treat fully of sex, marriage, and divorce. This promise, Bavinck fulfills in volume 3 of the now published set of *Reformed Ethics*.

For all intents and purposes, the content of volume 3 is Bavinck's treatment of what he considers to be the Reformed doctrine of marriage, although, as is his custom, he surveys also the thinking and practices of marriage of various elements of the unbelieving world.

Much as the content of volume 3 appeals to the Reformed Christian, there is also something disappointing about it. Bavinck had intended to consider other aspects of the ethics of Reformed, Christian life in the world, specifically, society; school; state; church; and kingdom of God and humanity. Before he could realize his purpose, he died. The work on Reformed ethics, therefore, is unfinished. Bolt and his associates plan to supply something of what is lacking by publishing a fourth volume of Bavinckian ethics consisting of other writings on the subject by the Dutch theologian.

In this treatment of marriage and family, Bavinck casts a wide net. Included are a sane description of the creational differences between the masculine and the feminine; celibacy, which allows Bavinck to quote Jerome's foolishness that a sane man will not take a wife (which has God, therefore, recommending insanity); betrothal, or engagement, and its implications; prostitution, and its prevalence in Bavinck's day and country; "mixed marriages"; the possibility of annulment; reflection on the divorce of King Henry VIII on the ground that his marriage to Catherine was incestuous; and frank recognition of "erotic love" in view of the power of the sexual.

The book bristles with learning, both on the part of Bavinck and on the part of editor Bolt. Bavinck was an incredibly well-read scholar. Every page contains instructive, authoritative footnotes. On occasion, the footnotes take up more of the page than does the regular text itself. Often, the footnote offers interesting information, for example, that Luther can be quoted as denying that premarital sex is fornication (101).

Bavinck wrestles with the question (really, not so easy to decide), what actually constitutes the marriage of the man and the woman. Is it the expressed commitment of those who are marrying; or the declaration of the church; or the authorization of the state; or some combination of the preceding?

The book is sprinkled with fascinating, sometimes humorous, aspects of the history of marriage. In the past, the Dutch government fined a couple whose full-term child was born too early after the marriage forty guilders. Calvin's Geneva forbade a man over sixty to marry a woman younger than thirty (evidently without stating which of the two it was protecting). In 1657, two Dutch provinces forbade the solemnizing of marriages in the evening worship services of the church "to prevent disorder" (114). Marriage ceremonies tended to be rowdy. The more things change, the more they remain the same. The Marriage Form of the Dutch Reformed churches (in use still today in the Protestant Reformed Churches of America, of course, in English translation) derives from Calvin through John à Lasco. To the surprise of no one, it is revealed that the Synod of Dordt had also to decide on knotty marriage matters. Calvin condemned the popular practice of his day, even in Reformed weddings, of dancing at the reception that followed the marriage ceremony.

Repulsive and, one would think, quite discouraging of the activity was the custom in bygone days of witnesses at the consummation of a marriage as, for instance, at the nuptials of Luther. Strangely, Bavinck thinks that custom "better" than the private honeymoon of our day (128).

In discussing past controversy over the question whether one may remarry after the death of a spouse—a lively issue in the early church—Bavinck notes (on the authority of Gisbertus Voetius) that a Dutch woman remarried eighteen times upon the death of her successive husbands. Surely, husbands 4-19 must have been overcome with her charms thus to have assured their death in her arms.

And who knew the reason, in the exchange of rings, for putting the ring on the fourth finger of the hand?

More importantly, despite strong statements by Bavinck himself on the lifelong nature of marriage, according to God's own will, decisions by early church councils on the impermissibility of remarriage after

divorce even on the ground of adultery, and the doctrine of Augustine that remarriage is forbidden so long as an original spouse lives, Bavinck contends that one divorced on the ground of adultery or of desertion may remarry while the original spouse is living. Bavinck bases this doctrine on misunderstandings of Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7. In light especially of the clear, indeed explicit, teaching of 1 Corinthians 7:39, Bavinck's erroneous interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:10-15 is inexcusable. And with the right explanation of 1 Corinthians 7 is exposed Bavinck's erroneous understanding of Matthew 19:9. This says nothing yet of Genesis 1 and 2, of Mark 10, of Luke 16, and of Romans 7.

Developed as the Reformed faith and life were in Bavinck's theological and ethical studies, the full development by the Holy Spirit in the church of the truth of marriage, in its intimate relationship to the unbreakable covenant of grace, would await the insight of a Reformed theologian some forty years after Bavinck. Not human sin, but only God Himself can dissolve the marriage bond that He establishes, and such is the oneness of the bond of marriage that God can break the bond only by the extremity of the death of one of the two. This reality of marriage ought not to be the cause of controversy in the church, but the revelation of the majesty and honor of marriage.

Volume 3 of *Reformed Ethics* concludes with two appendices consisting of Bavinck's writings on ethics from other sources. "Appendix A" is unintelligible. It is a short course on Greek, Roman, and contemporary philosophy, exceedingly deep and dark. Not one reader in a hundred, or fewer, will understand it. The one who can understand it will not exert the effort that is necessary to do so, unless he is a conscientious reviewer of the work—and even then...

"Appendix B" is better. It contains a gripping description of the grossly immoral life of Dutch society in Bavinck's day: "an abyss of wickedness, a world of immorality, lies, and deceit" (357). One would have thought that Bavinck was describing the Western world in AD 2025. In "Appendix B" is found Bavinck's positive doctrine of ethics in sum. The "good" is objective. Basic to ethics is the authority of God in His revealed will for ethical conduct: "Apart from God, right and duty in morality do not exist at all" (370). And "things have come so far today, alas, that one may no longer speak of God in public, that

one must exclude him everywhere, and that one had best pay as little attention to him as possible” (374).

A History of Christianity in America, by Mark A. Granquist. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2025. Hardcover. Pp xvi + 382. \$44.99. ISBN 9781540963314. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.

As a nation, the United States of America will soon observe its semiquincentennial birthday. But the history of Christianity in North America is over 400 years old: Protestant religions came to North America with the colonists, while Roman Catholicism came as early as 1526 (39-48). Mark Granquist, professor of the history of Christianity at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, chronicles this history of Christianity in North America.

Granquist is not the first to do so, nor the first to do so recently.¹ Each survey of American Christian history has a particular purpose and unique emphasis. Granquist makes clear that his focus is narrowed both by subject and geography: his concern is not religion broadly, but particularly *Christianity*, and that in the *United States*, not North America (xv-xvi).

This historical survey of Christianity in America covers eleven of the book’s twelve chapters. Granquist records the events of the colonial era in chapters two through four. Chapters five through eight bring the reader to the brink of World War I, and chapters nine through twelve cover the following century.

Chapter one contains the theme, and the epilogue restates key points: from the outset, American Christianity differed significantly from its roots in European Christianity. Granquist argues that American Christianity has tolerated various forms of Christianity within the same communities, something that European Christianity in the sixteenth

¹ Three recent publications include an updated edition of Mark Noll’s *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019; the original edition was published in 1992); Thomas S. Kidd, *America’s Religious History: Faith, Politics, and the Shaping of a Nation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019); and John D. Hannah, *Invitation to Church History: American* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2019).

and seventeenth centuries did not do. Also, American Christianity has been free and voluntary. In America one had much more freedom not to join a church (in 1776, less than 20% of the population had formal church membership), to decide which church to join, and regarding the responsibilities of church membership.

A third difference is that in Europe one found state-established churches, while in America this was not the case. True, the colonies originally had state-supported churches, but even this was more true on paper than in reality. The colonies had no money to support those churches or enforce organized religion. Consequently,

the rough pluralism that began and grew, the weakness of colonial governments and their inability to fund the establishments that existed on paper, the freedom of religion that many came to enjoy, and the voluntary nature of religious organizations in general—all these elements together composed the foundation of a distinctly new understanding of the nature and place of organized religion. Religion in the New World had to be different from religion in the Old World. (9)

Culturally, American Christianity was different, for it was integrated with *American* culture, which was different than European culture: “to be a good American was to hold to a certain grouping of religious practices and ideas” (13) not those of a particular Christian denomination, but based on the idea that a God existed and should be worshiped, that morality was good, and that the Bible was the foundation for morality. American religion is not *official* (mandated by either state or ecclesiastical organizations) but *popular*, serving the people’s felt need, but also dictated by the people according to what needs they feel. An unwritten creed of American religion was and is “belief in human free will and the autonomy of the individual” (16) and that America was the kingdom of God (18).

This kind of religion the American government supported for many years, not by making any one form of Christianity the preferred form, but by making laws and providing public education that promoted this kind of morality. And while the last half-century witnessed many changes in this regard, the basic foundation of American Christianity remains, so that studying religion in America is somewhat like observing people buying cars: if you cannot provide them with what

they specifically want, they will go elsewhere.

The chapter is a thought-provoking and worthwhile read. The rest of the book illustrates this basic premise, and chapters two through four show that this was true even during the colonial era. True, the New England colonies were predominately Congregational, some of the Middle Colonies Roman Catholic, and the southern Anglican, and that these appeared to have less toleration for other forms of Christianity. But “predominately” is the key word; Granquist argues the colonies did not as strongly endorse a certain form of Christianity as did European countries (79-81, 110).

Because of the book’s theme, Granquist does not (and cannot) sharply distinguish the history of Christianity in America from the history of America and American values. Fittingly, every chapter begins by setting the historical context of that era in political, social, and cultural history. But the book does not merely put Christian history in the context of American history; it practically identifies the two.

On the one hand, Christianity permeated American life, thought, and culture. Two instances in which Christianity did so regard the nation’s Constitution (both its content and its history) and the nation’s response to slavery. In the latter case, Christians on both sides of the political issue used religious thought to defend their position.

On the other hand, events in the country’s history affected the expression of Christianity. Cases in point are the American Revolution and every major war.

Then, many other phenomena were both effects of Christianity and affects of Christianity. Take the First and Second Great Awakenings: were these Christian phenomena that affected the nation’s history, or culturally religious phenomena that affected the expression of Christianity? Another example is the role of women in society, which gets an entire section in chapters 7 and 8 and paragraphs in later chapters: was this role influenced by Christianity, or did it influence Christianity? Or does the record of the role of women in society merely illustrate that Christianity and America have been practically synonymous?

In sum, it is difficult even in this book to know when the history being retold is really that of Christianity, or that of an America that

considered itself Christian.

The book recognizes that Christianity took many forms. Although Granquist is Lutheran, he does not (nor was he expected to) restrict Christianity to any one branch of Christianity. Roman Catholicism, Methodism, Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, various Anabaptist traditions—all get their mention. Granquist is Lutheran, so Lutherans also get their due. In passing, Granquist mentions the Reformed Church of America, and the birth of the Christian Reformed Church of America (188, 339).

The broad sweep of Christianity is no surprise, but the reader questions why Granquist includes paragraphs devoted to Unitarians (138, 156), Transcendentalists (157-58), Mormons (171-73), spiritualism (173, 212-13), Seventh-Day Adventism (211), Christian Science (212), and other groups that reject Christianity (250-52, 301-04). After all, in his introduction Granquist made clear that he was not writing about religion generally, but about *Christianity*.

This reviewer appreciated several features of the book, apart from its theme and content. First, being recent, it is historically up to date. It includes a brief analysis of the “Nones” (those who have no religious affiliation) and “Dones” (those who left organized religion) of the American generations alive today (342) and a brief treatment of the effects of COVID-19 on American Christianity (345). In this respect it surpasses the other books mentioned in the footnote—but of course, this very reality means that in time this book also will need updating.

Second, Granquist briefly introduces the theological issues at stake in the various branches of American Christianity. This reviewer appreciated the fair description of the difference between Calvinistic Puritan thought and the Arminian thought expressed in the First Great Awakening (95).

Third, Granquist relates developing Christian phenomena to each other and traces them to their source; for example, Christian contemporary music and contemporary worship (302).

In sum, the book is a good overall survey of the history of Christianity in America. The book’s theme is worth considering, and the book’s attention to recent events is beneficial. A person who knows

little of American Christianity will benefit from reading this book. One who knows much about American Christianity will benefit from a fresh perspective. And yet, to read only one book on a subject is still to have a narrow perspective. Try reading this one *and* the three listed in the footnote!

The Inner Story of the New International Version: Reflections of an Original NIV Translator, by Murray J. Harris. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2023. Softcover. 90pp. \$16.00. ISBN 9781666787849. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.

The King James Version (KJV) was virtually unchallenged as an English Bible translation until 1885, when the complete translation of the Revised Version (RV) was published. But only when the New International Version (NIV) appeared in 1978 did the KJV lose its status as the most widely used English version.

Most of the men involved in producing the NIV are now dead. This prompted Murray Harris, one of the translators who is now in his eighties, to tell his story of the creation of the NIV. Harris' book is both a history of the translation of the NIV and his personal reflections on the NIV. The book is short and easy to read.

Chapter one explains the project's origin. The impetus for the NIV came from within the Christian Reformed Church. Harris notes that "At every stage all the major Protestant denominations were represented in the committees. This ensured that the translation was free of sectarian bias and paved the way for its acceptance by a wide range of churches" (11). Chapter two regards Harris' personal involvement in the work, chapter three explains the principles that the translators used, and the next two chapters relate how the Committee on Bible Translation did its work.

The first five chapters demonstrate that translation work is difficult and time-consuming. The NIV translators worked in teams of two, three, or four, translating an average of three verses per hour. Their work involved asking many questions about word meanings and idioms in both the original and receptor language. Harris illustrates the difficulty of translation work by referring to different ways English versions translate John 1:1 (20-24).

Harris includes several case studies to illustrate what kinds of decisions the translators had to make (38-60). One case study regards the translation of the Greek *monogenes* (John 1:14 and elsewhere), which the NIV translates as “one and only” (the KJV has “only-begotten”). Harris explains that the committee understood the verses that contain the word to refer to Jesus’ divine *person*, in which sense He is indeed the “one and only son.” Yet, in the mind of this reviewer, the translation “one and only” is seriously deficient. It fails to convey the idea of being *begotten*, which the Greek *monogenes* specifically conveys. The NIV translators were content to translate the general idea of the verse, sometimes at the expense of the specific meaning of individual words.

In the second part of the book Harris evaluates the NIV. In chapter six he evaluates the NIV in four areas: the 2011 revision of the NIV regarding its use of gender-inclusive language; the NIV generally in relation to the KJV; and the NIV in two places in which he disagrees with the NIV’s translation (Heb. 12:2a and 2 Cor. 5:19a). In chapter seven he addresses the word most difficult to translate: the Greek *doulos*, often translated “servant,” but more properly “slave.” Harris is convinced that the word “servant” does not do justice to the Holy Spirit’s meaning in Romans 1:1, Philippians 2:7, and other verses; only “slave” can suffice. Chapter eight is brief, consisting of “concluding observations.”

While promoting the NIV, Harris evaluates the KJV. He acknowledges that the KJV sets a high bar in its “sheer literary beauty,” “memorable cadences,” purity of English, and influence on the English language (67). But Harris attacks the KJV regards its textual basis (68), and makes unwarranted and untrue statements about the KJV.

First, Harris chides scholars who say that the KJV New Testament “was based on the *textus receptus* (received text)” (68), because the term *textus receptus* refers to a 1633 Greek edition, while the KJV was published already in 1611. But these scholars are not abusing historical facts; rather, they are recognizing that the 1633 *Textus Receptus* is *essentially*, even though *not identically*, the same text as that which underlies the KJV New Testament. Harris would help the reader, if he wants to pursue his challenge to the KJV on this point, to show what significant differences exist between the 1633 *Textus Receptus*

and the KJV's Greek textual basis.¹

Second, Harris alleges with a broad brush that “where there are substantial (and not merely stylistic) differences between the KJV and the NKJV and modern English versions of the NT, it is not a case of modern translations *omitting* verses or passages but of the KJV *adding* these sections from certain late manuscripts” (55). This assertion is bold, aggressive, and wrong.

Harris' only support for his assertion is 1 John 5:7b-8. Many are of the view that the Reformation-era textual critic Desiderus Erasmus was going to leave these verses out of his Greek text because he could not find them in any Greek manuscript. When he was shown that they were in a Latin manuscript, he “backtranslated” them from Latin into Greek. But even if one grants Harris' point in the instance of 1 John 5:7b-8, this does not warrant such a broad and sweeping statement. It is like finding one bruised apple on a tree and using it to convince others that every apple on the tree is bruised.

This attack on the KJV is dangerous: laymen assume that scholars are right when scholars speak to matters that laymen do not understand. But when the scholars are wrong, the laymen have been deceived. And Harris is wrong. Textual critical observations, based on sound premises, can demonstrate that the KJV have not *added* anything. Again, the “late” manuscripts on which the KJV New Testament is based are consistent with the *vast majority* of manuscripts available today. And his statement ignores one more point that many textual critics ignore: at bottom, the date of the *manuscript* is less important than the date of the *reading* to which that manuscript bears witness. Many readings not found in Aleph and B, and therefore not in the “earliest and best manuscripts,” nonetheless have witness in the church fathers and in other Bible versions that predates Aleph and B.

A weakness of the NIV is that its translators adopted the flawed premises of the Westcott-Hort theory of textual criticism. The implicit acknowledgment of this point by one who was involved in the translation work is appreciated: candor is good.

¹ See Paul D. Wegener, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 270.

The Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 3rd ed., by Herman Hoeksema. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2025. Hardcover. Pp. 473. \$39.95. ISBN 9781959515456. Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.

Seldom does a reviewer of books have the chutzpah—and the solid reason—to declare that a book ought to be read by every adult member of a denomination of churches. This reviewer does, regarding *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, to be read by members of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA). In addition, the book will serve the Reformed faith well in that many in other Reformed, Presbyterian, and evangelical churches will read this work, in view of the fact that the second part of the book subjects the doctrine of a common grace of God—a sacred cow in many of these churches—to devastating critique.

The book consists of two parts. The first, and longer, part is a thorough, careful account of the formation of the PRCA out of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in 1924-1925. The issue of the controversy was doctrine, specifically the doctrine adopted by the CRC in 1924 in the “Three Points of Common Grace.” For refusing to express agreement with this doctrine of common grace, three consistories in the CRC were deposed from office and cast out of the CRC. They banded together to form an ecclesiastical organization that soon became a new church federation, the PRCA. Hence, the title of the book. Many other Christian Reformed members soon joined the new denomination, because of their conviction that the doctrine of common grace is heretical and that the truth of the gospel is that grace is particular.

Although the author of the book was at the center of the controversy and therefore reliable in his relating of the history, his account is amply buttressed and illumined by quotations of the historical records. Having adopted the “Three Points of Common Grace,” condemning Danhof and Hoeksema and assuring their deposition, the CRC synod of 1924 then added a decision confirming the biblical and creedal orthodoxy of the two ministers: “it cannot be denied that they are Reformed in respect to the fundamental truths as they are formulated in the Confessions, even though it be with an inclination to onesidedness” (90, 91). Surely,

this is the oddest verdict ever rendered upon condemned “heretics” in the history of Christianity: orthodox, but guilty of excessive praise of God! “Let them be damned for their overdoing of the glorification of God!”

Apart from the truth or falsity of the doctrine at issue, it is abundantly evident that the treatment of one of her prominent sons by the CRC was scandalous.

It is also evident that Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema, the leading opponents of the theory of common grace and the main objects of the fury of the prominent churchmen in the CRC at the time, had no intention, much less desire, of separating from the CRC: “It had not been their own desire to become separate churches and to form a separate denomination” (280). And, “[The PRC] neither desired nor sought the breach of 1924-25, but, on the contrary, did all they consciously could do to prevent the breach” (316). It was the conviction of Hoeksema that “all separation and division in the church of Christ is deplorable” (316).

Nevertheless, to the author, the formation of the PRCA is not to be regretted, because the nature of their forming was reformation. Demonstrating this is the burden of the second part of the book: the exposure of the doctrine of common grace adopted by the CRC in 1924 as heresy. In question-and-answer form, Hoeksema states, examines, and explains, in light of Scripture and the creeds, the doctrine of common grace adopted by the CRC in 1924.

Himself giving the explanation of the biblical and creedal passages to which the synod of the CRC merely referred without offering any explanation, Hoeksema demonstrates from Scripture and the Reformed confessions that the “Three Points of Common Grace” are unreformed, indeed, are the Arminian and Pelagian heresy: “they imply all the fundamental errors of Arminius and Pelagius” (432). The “First Point,” describing the preaching of the gospel as a well-meant offer to all in an expression of a common grace of God, is Arminianism: a would-be saving grace of God to all humans in an offer of salvation to all hearers. This doctrine is a universalism that makes salvation dependent upon the will of the sinner. The “Second and Third Points” of the CRC doctrine of common grace are the denial—the *explicit* denial—of the doctrine of total depravity in that they teach—teach

explicitly—that unregenerated sinners yet retain ethical goodness by an operation of the Holy Spirit so that they perform deeds that are truly good—inadequately good, perhaps, but truly good.

For defending the doctrine of particular grace—particular, *saving* grace, the grace of God in the proclamation of the gospel, expressing God’s will of salvation—and for confessing the doctrine of the total depravity of sinners outside of Christ, the founders of the PRCA were expelled from the CRC. “It is for this good confession that the Christian Reformed Churches in 1924 cast out their Protestant Reformed brethren. Theirs only is the blame for the breach that was caused!” (460)

Throughout his critique of the “Three Points,” Hoeksema charges the CRC with doing away with the antithesis—the spiritual separation and warfare of the church and the world, of the believer and the unbeliever. This charge falls also on the renowned, influential Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper, whose doctrine of a common grace that does away with the antithesis the CRC was promoting in 1924. Thus, the CRC doctrine of common grace promoted, and to this day promotes, in America, a mammoth, heretical, avowed movement in Europe, prominent in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, that was bent on destroying the antithesis between the church and the world. The names of Schleiermacher and von Harnach come readily to mind.

This reviewer is not aware of any statement by Hoeksema, whether in print or in speech, specifically in his seminary instruction, expressly identifying his opposition to common grace with the warfare of orthodoxy in Europe against the promotion of the Enlightenment and its breakdown of the antithesis between church and world. But this identification is doctrinal reality. The history of the PRCA and their repudiation of a common grace of God uniting church and world with a grace of God is not of merely parochial interest. In 1924-1925, God saw to it that there would be an ecclesiastical voice declaring the antithesis for 100 years: grace for the elect only; a church in the world, but not of the world; lives that are good, in distinction from lives that are wicked because they are ungodly; the calling of the true church to come out from among them and be separate. To most of the Reformed churches in North America, this voice is annoying, if not irrelevant. To the cause of Christ in the world, the voice of *the PRCA*

is of fundamental importance in a life-and-death struggle of the church over a basic issue: “they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” (John 17:16).

Hoeksema may not have viewed his struggle against common grace as an aspect of the massive, worldwide warfare of the church with the Enlightenment, but he clearly saw it as warfare on behalf of the antithesis, which antithesis is fundamental to the preservation of the church. Hoeksema quotes Herman Bavinck: “Liberal theology of the present time [early twentieth century, DJE] really obliterates the distinction between the church and the world. . . The consciousness of a spiritual-ethical antithesis becomes increasingly vague in the minds of many to make room for an indefinite notion of a general brotherhood” (96). The irony is that this passage of Bavinck was inserted into the minutes of the CRC Synod of 1924 by the proponents of common grace, as a salve to a bad conscience. The CRC knew what she was doing in the adoption of the doctrine of common grace. And did it anyway! And Bavinck knew what he was doing when he joined Kuyper in advocating common grace.

Adding to the interest of the book are numerous pictures of persons, of church bodies, and of buildings that played a role in the early history of the PRCA. Included is the picture of the barn in which the present Hudsonville PRC had her humble beginnings (65). The reader of this review will not take it ill of the present reviewer that he, a son of Hope PRC (and his wife, a daughter) calls particular attention to the picture of the patriarchs of Hope Church in her early days, one of whom was the redoubtable Richard Newhouse, “*klein maar dapper*” (“small but brave,” 57).

To every Reformed, Presbyterian, and evangelical Christian, and especially to every adult member of the PRCA: read *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*.

Synopsis of a Purer Theology, 2 volumes, by Antonius Thysius, Johannes Polyander, Andreas Rivetus, and Antonius Walaeus. Ed. William Den Boer and Riemer A. Faber. Landrum, SC: Davenant Press, 2023. Hardcover. Pp. xxi+797. \$89.95. ISBN 9781949716153. Reviewed by Marco Barone.

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the publication of the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* (*Synopsis of a Purer Theology*) which consists of the transcriptions of fifty-two disputations that took place between 1620 and 1625 by the theological faculty of Leiden University (which is why this work is also known as the *Leiden Synopsis*). Each disputation was written by one of these professors at Leiden University: Antonius Thysius (1565-1640), Johannes Polyander (1568-1646), Andreas Rivetus (1572-1651), and Antonius Walaeus (1573-1639). The chapters are in the form of a *disputation*, a method of academic theology and debate common in the scholastic theology of the Middle Ages up to the Early Modern period.

Such disputations were academic discussions about a particular theoretical or practical topic. The professor who was to preside over a disputation would first introduce the subject and his own understanding of it by means of a number of written statements, or theses, that were circulated beforehand. A graduate student was appointed to defend the theses. He would address also any questions or objections that might be raised by members of the audience. Following the event, the professor would weigh the discussion and present a definitive, fuller disputation in printed form. In the case of the *Synopsis*, some fifty-two disputations were collected into a single volume and published. (viii)

According to the editors of this edition, the qualifier *purior* “may be understood as indicating the authors’ desire to be perceived as promoting the orthodox Reformed teaching that had been confirmed at the recently held Synod of Dort” (x). This purer theology is communicated through the Scholastic methodology

marked by a consistent use of definitions, distinctions, and logical reasonings. It involved a brief expression of the topic under discussion, a detailed explanation of terms, and a comprehensive treatment of relevant aspects by means of a topical structure. There were explicit statements of proof, and argumentations that were accompanied by references to texts of Scripture or other authoritative sources. Counter-arguments were anticipated and refuted. The reader will find that traces of this format of oral presentation remain visible in the written, published disputations. (xi)

This background knowledge is necessary in order to appreciate the style of the work and to enjoy its reading as much as possible. Before being written down in their orderly but concise scholastic form, these disputations were conducted orally during lively discussions among professors and students of the theological faculty at Leiden.

The topics of the disputations arguably cover all the main headings of the six classical *loci* of Reformed dogmatics. The *Synopsis* starts with the definition of theology as

the knowledge or wisdom of the divine matters that God has revealed to people in this world through ministers of his word inspired by the prophetic Spirit, and that He has adapted to their capability, to lead them to knowledge of the truth which accords with godliness and renders them wise unto their own salvation and God's eternal glory. (3)

The *Synopsis* proceeds until it explains “everything that leads to mankind's final end” (744), and concludes with the treatment of that last end itself for man, and also the outermost consummation of the whole world” (744). It is interesting to see how the order of topics discussed by the disputations of the *Synopsis* generally follow a similar order of the topics that appear in the Belgic Confession. This should not come as a surprise: Thysius, Polyander, Rivetus, and Walaeus, besides being theology professors at Leiden, were all leaders of the Reformed churches and delegates to the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619), where the Belgic Confession was officially adopted as a creed. In fact, though the *Synopsis* has no creedal authority, it is not implausible to consider it as a commentary of the faith of the Reformed churches of that time as presented in the Belgic Confession.

The *Synopsis* combines theological depth with simplicity of exposition throughout. The usage of the scholastic methodology does not damage, but increases, the clarity and precision of the exposition. Scholastic methodology was common among the Reformed theologians of the first and second generations (which should give pause to those excessively wary towards scholasticism as a whole). The four authors successfully work together harmoniously to communicate a sense of the necessity and the beauty of sound doctrine, besides its coherence and unity. Herman Bavinck published a Latin edition of the *Synopsis* in 1881, and he came to the same conclusion when he said that the

“four professors...agreed with each other exceptionally well,”¹ and he confessed to be “especially filled with admiration and joy, while seeing the unanimity and consensus about every aspect of the holy religion, that was always found among these four professors.”²

This translation of the *Synopsis* previously appeared in a three-volume set by Brill Academic Publishers. Though that set is more academic and it contains a larger critical apparatus (including the original Latin text), it is highly overpriced. Now, thanks to the work of the Davenant Press and all those involved in producing this two-volume set, believers can acquire the *Synopsis* for a reasonable price. This is a seminal work in the history of Reformed theology. The theological quality of the *Synopsis*, coupled with the fact it is “a full yet compact summary of theology as it was understood in the years after the Synod of Dort” (vii), makes and will make the *Synopsis* a staple resource for Reformed systematic theology and a source for Reformed historical theology.

1 Quoted in Henk van den Belt and Mathilde de Vries-van Uden, “Herman Bavinck’s Preface to the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*,” *Bavinck Review* 8 (2017): 111.

2 Quoted in van den Belt and de Vries-van Uden, “Bavinck’s Preface to the *Synopsis*,” *Bavinck Review* 8 (2017): 102.

Trustworthy: Thirteen Arguments for the Reliability of the New Testament, by Benjamin C. F. Shaw. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2024. Softcover. 160 pp. \$22.00. ISBN 9781514007587. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.

A student at a Christian university, historically in the Reformed tradition, told me that his religion professor denied that the Bible is inerrant, accurate, and God’s Word. The professor also suggested that more books than the sixty-six (so, the New Testament apocrypha) could be considered authoritative Christian writings.

Later that day I found *Trustworthy* in my mailbox. Focusing on the New Testament, it defends the very points that the professor denied, and denies what he asserts. The book “is for people who want to dig

deeper into the New Testament and issues regarding its reliability, whether as a disciple or as a doubter” (4).

The book is an *apologetic*, or a defense, of the New Testament as being reliable. As an apologetic, *Trustworthy* does not develop a *doctrine* of Scripture (explaining inspiration and inerrancy, and demonstrating them from Scripture itself); rather, it presents arguments why a sound doctrine of Scripture is reasonable. Chapter eleven demonstrates this point: Shaw says that, when recognizing which books belong in Scripture, the early church used the criteria of who wrote the books, and when. While the early church did use these criteria, it used *more* than these. But Shaw’s work is an apologetic; for his purposes, these two criteria are enough to mention.

Believers believe that the Bible is God’s Word. Shaw’s goal is not to *prove* it. Rather, he demonstrates that many arguments which undermine Scripture are unreasonable arguments and, conversely, that Christ’s disciples were reasonable in receiving Scripture as God’s reliable Word. Apologetics is Benjamin Shaw’s specialty; he is president of Core Apologetics, an organization that aims to give sound answers to questions that undermine the Christian faith.

The first of Shaw’s thirteen evidences regards the textual evidence: today we have over 5000 New Testament manuscripts, some of which are dated only two or three hundred years after the New Testament was written. By contrast, far fewer manuscripts of Homer and Plato are available, and they are many centuries removed from the time that Homer and Plato lived. Shaw concludes that “The New Testament is the best textually attested work in the ancient world” (21).

The second argument regards the kind of literature (genre) in the New Testament. One takeaway is that the gospel accounts fit the style of a genre of Graeco-Roman writings known as biography—something that recent scholars have denied. Evaluating this, I would argue that the gospel accounts are *more* than biography, and *not merely* biography; but certainly they are biographical.

The writers of each New Testament book wrote while eyewitnesses to the events were still alive (chapter three) and could be expected to give a reliable account of these events (chapter four). Waiting longer to write what one saw or heard results in a less reliable record.

Chapter five argues that Paul was quoting statements of faith that

already existed in his day (Rom. 10:9, 1 Cor. 15:3-4, Phil. 2:6-11). This argument was the least convincing to me. My issue is not whether these take the form of a creedal statement, nor whether the *teachings* predate Paul. Clearly, they do. But is he quoting other's *words*? Had the statements become accepted formulas by Paul's day? Or is Paul putting previously understood *ideas* into *his own* words for the first time, not using creedal formulas. If so, the chapter still has a takeaway: every book in Scripture develops the same fundamental truths about Christ as Savior.

Chapter six notes that some principles which crime scene or crash scene investigators use in earthly investigations can also be used to investigate the reliability of the New Testament. Scholars who deny the assumptions and conclusions of a sound method of investigation when applied to the New Testament would probably grant those assumptions and conclusions in cases of earthly investigation of crimes and accidents.

Shaw also shows that multiple writers independently relate the same event (chapter seven); archaeological findings support the Bible's testimony (chapter eight); non-Christian writers confirm what is taught in the Bible (chapter nine); later Christian sources confirm what is taught in the Bible (chapter ten); the church included in the canon only first century writings of eyewitnesses, and excluded later writings of non-eyewitnesses (chapter eleven); the teachings of the New Testament have transformed lives (chapter twelve); and scholars, even sceptics, accept some of the events recorded in the New Testament because they are so widely attested (chapter thirteen).

No one argument, all by itself, proves that Scripture is God's trustworthy Word. One might, therefore, disagree with how Shaw presented the matter in a certain chapter. But the many arguments, used collectively, are weighty!

Shaw knows, and fairly represents, the arguments of doubters such as the agnostic Bart Ehrman and the New Perspectives on Paul scholar James Dunn. More than once Shaw quotes significant admissions from them, regarding the points he is making.

Disciples and doubters alike should read this book early and soon. It is a primer, a book to be read first. At the end of each chapter Shaw recommends books that more fully develop the points made in that

chapter. The university student mentioned at the beginning will read this book and glean from it resources for further reading. Having read the book, he may conclude that his professor is unreasonable. From a logical viewpoint, unbelief usually is.

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Books Reviewed

- 149 Bavinck, Herman and John Bolt, ed. *Reformed Ethics: Christian Life in Society*, vol. 3.
- 153 Granquist, Mark A. *A History of Christianity in America*.
- 157 Harris, Murray J. *The Inner Story of the New International Version: Reflections of an Original NIV Translator*.
- 160 Hoeksema, Herman. *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, 3rd ed.
- 163 Thysius, Antonius, Johannes Polyander, Andreas Rivetus, Antonius Walaeus, and ed. William Den Boer and Riemer A. Faber. *Synopsis of a Purer Theology*, 2 volumes.
- 166 Shaw, Benjamin C. F. *Trustworthy: Thirteen Arguments for the Reliability of the New Testament*.

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