Editor's Notes

Church doctrine, church history, and church polity often intersect. Church history is, in part, the record of discussions and controversies about church doctrine. Another subset of church history regards the development of church polity and related questions that arise. One such question is whether a broader assembly depose an officebearer or may only the consistory do so. Adding intrigue to history is the matter of *how* these discussions took place: Did one party in a doctrinal dispute try to outmaneuver another, using church political means?

The articles in this issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* recognize the intersection of the church's history, polity, and doctrine. The first article is a reprint of one published in the *Calvin Theological Journal* and republished with kind permission of the article's author and *CTJ*'s editor. John Bolt is emeritus systematic professor of theology at Calvin Theological Seminary. He has previously expressed sympathy for Herman Hoeksema's stand against the well-meant offer (the "little point" of the first point of common grace, 1924), and how Hoeksema was treated (see *PRTJ* 49, no. 1; *CTJ* 35, no. 1). More recently, he wrote two articles for *CTJ*, one of which appears here, and the other of which will be republished in the future. After the republishing of the second article, David Engelsma has agreed to provide a response in the *PRTJ*.

The second article is Peter Vander Schaaf's translation of Harm Bouwman's commentary on Articles 29-31 of the Church Order of Dordt. Preceding the translation is a fuller introduction to the work. Articles 29-31 treat the relation of consistories to classis, and classes to synod. Here the question whether a classis may depose an officebearer is raised, and Bouwman answers in the affirmative. The Protestant Reformed Churches of America (PRCA) stand contrary to Bouwman on this point. Yet Bouwman's rationale for his position is not pragmatic but principled. Perhaps the PRCA can further develop its position by responding to such arguments. Mr. Vander Schaaf is an elder in the PRCA, member of its Committee for Contact with Other Churches, and actively involved in our relationship with congregations in Germany.

The third article is the second installment of the undersigned on the history of Classis West of the PRCA. The thought prior to writing it was to include notable and distinctive decisions of the Classis that touch on the life of the churches in common. But the article grew long enough without those, so what was envisioned to be a three-part series will now be a four-part series.

Reviews of thirteen books round out this issue. What do you know about the Marrow Controversy in Scotland in the 1700s, or the history of England's cathedrals? Do you have a sound, biblical view of mental illness? Are you aware of the great threat that pornography poses to men and women, and are you responding to it correctly? What effect do critical theories have on our society and even on the church? And what is covered in the third volume of van Mastricht's Theoretical-Practical Theology? Read the reviews to get a condensed answer, and then consider reading the books themselves for a fuller answer.

Finally, our readers should be aware that the faculty of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary plan to give a conference on October 31-November 2, hosted by Grace PRC, on the doctrine of common grace as formulated by the CRC Synod of 1924. This year marks the centennial of that event.

The winter (such as it was in western Michigan this year) is over and past, and the time of singing of birds has come. God's faithfulness is seen again in the changing of seasons and giving of new life to creation. May we, having been spiritually and graciously renewed, continue to live for His praise. And may He be glorified in all.

DJK

The Christian Reformed Synod of 1924 Unfinished Business on Common Grace, Part 1

John Bolt

This article was first published in the November 2022 issue of the *Calvin Theological Journal* and is reprinted here with the kind permission of the *Calvin Theological Journal*. For this reason Scripture quotations are from the NIV. Bolt's second installment, printed in the November 2023 issue of the *Calvin Theological Journal,* will be reprinted in a future issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal.* Following the reprinting of the second article, the *PRTJ* will provide a response to these articles.

The Christian Reformed Church's Synod of 1924, held in Kalamazoo, Michigan, is one of the defining events in the denomination's history. Its formulation of the Three Points on common grace led to the ouster of the Revs. Herman Hoeksema and Henry Danhof and eventual formation of the Protestant Reformed Church, a breach that produced ripples of tension within families and communities that have not yet fully dissipated. Until more recently, voices that indicated concern about those three points had seldom been raised within the CRC itself.[1]

1 As the seventy-fifth anniversary of the synodical decision approached, the editors of the *Calvin Theological Journal* commissioned Raymond C. Blacketer to write an article for the occasion, "The Three Points in Most Parts Reformed: A Re-examination of the So-Called Well-Meant Offer of Salvation," *CTJ* 35, no. 1 (2000): 37-65; an intended introductory editorial became an accompanying essay: John Bolt, "Common Grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo (1924): A Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Retrospective," *CTJ* 35, no. 1 (2000): 7-36. Subsequently, I wrote three more articles on the topic: idem, "Common Grace, Theonomy, and Civic Good: The Temptations of Calvinist Politics (Reflections on the Third Point of

Having previously investigated some procedural issues accompanying synod's decision,[2] in this two-part article I want to look more closely at the *content* of the synodical decision itself, setting forth a case that the Christian Reformed Church in North America should revisit its 1924 decision. In the first part I intend to demonstrate the contradictory nature of the decision, show that it was hastily put together, and that it provided unconvincing grounds for the three points. In the second part I will argue that synod failed to engage the confessional, theological, and pastoral concerns legitimately raised by Hoeksema and Danhof and that this failure led to confusion in the CRC about its mission to the world.[3] To keep this examination at a reasonable length, my focus

the CRC Kalamazoo Synod, 1924," *CTJ* 35, no. 2 (2000): 205-37; idem, "Herman Hoeksema Was Right (On the Three Points That Really Matter)," in *Biblical Interpretation and Doctrinal Formulation in the Reformed Tradition: Essays in Honor of James De Jong*, ed. Arie C. Leder and Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 295-318; idem, "The Unfinished Business of 1924," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 49, no. 1 (2015): 3-31. An exception to the CRC silence on common grace is Rev. Edward Heerema's *Letter to My Mother: Reflections on the Christian Reformed Church in North America* (Freeman, SD: Pine Hill Press, 1990); the second chapter of this booklet (5-22) is "1924—Unfinished Business."

2 Cf. my "Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Retrospective" for some of the procedural problems. I stand by that article but need to correct one error. On page 18 I said that Rev. Jan Karel Van Baalen, minister of the Munster, Indiana CRC, had submitted protests against the views of the Revs. Hoeksema and Danhof to their respective consistories and classes, Grand Rapids East and Grand Rapids West. That is correct but my following sentence was not: "Van Baalen was not a member of either classis and had submitted his protest to the respective consistories and classes without first submitting [them] to the pastors in question." The second clause in the sentence is correct; the first clause is only half correct. Van Baalen was not a member of Classis Grand Rapids East but he *was* a member of Classis Grand Rapids West in 1924 because at that time the Munster CRC was in Classis Grand Rapids West.

3 This failure to engage was thoroughly and eloquently expressed by Rev. Danhof (himself a delegate to the Synod of 1924 from Classis Grand Rapids West) in his own protest; see *1924 CRC Acts of Synod,* 194-99. I will be drawing from this protest in the second part of this article (section 6) in which I will consider: (a) the controversy in the CRC about Calvin Theological Seminary Professor Harold Dekker's provocative claims regarding God's

will be on the First Point of 1924—common grace and the well-meant offer of the gospel—because it most clearly demonstrates the failures just mentioned. My reasons for writing this article are primarily historical; I believe it is important to set the record straight. Secondarily, there are lessons to be learned from the church's past decisions that are relevant for the church today. Applying those lessons is a task I leave to others.

1. Kalamazoo's Contradictions[4]

The public face of a CRCNA synod is the general assembly of the whole body where issues are discussed, debated, and voted on. But before matters come before the whole body they are thoroughly discussed by "Committees of Pre-Advice," and the conclusions/recommendations of these committees become the actual agenda of synod. In 1924 the "Pre-Advisory Committee in re Common Grace" (here after *PACCG*) reported to synod that it had received twenty-four documents and instructions on the matter (114-16). These communications involved procedural matters, mostly protests against Hoeksema, the council of his church, the Eastern Avenue CRC, and the classis of which it was a member, Classis Grand Rapids East, along with responses by all three. The *PACCG* recommended that some of the protests be sent back to the appropriate council or classis for resolution but called for synodical action on others because "the matter has now reached such a state that, with concern for the profit of the churches, synodical attention is required" (118). The *PACCG* also recommended that synod accept as legally before it, six "instructions" (*instructies*) from the following classes: Hackensack, Sioux Center, Hudson, Muskegon, Grand Rapids East, and Grand Rapids West (120-21).[5] These

universal love, and (b) current missiological discussions about the *missio Dei* and "participating in God's mission."

4 In what follows, material from the *1924 CRC Acts of Synod* will be referenced in the text with page numbers in parentheses.

5 Nothing should be made from use of the term "instruction" rather than the usual CRC ecclesiastical term "overture." From the *1924 CRC Agenda for Synod* it is apparent that the word "overture" was also used, even by Classis Hackensack in its request that the *Acts of Synod* be printed in the English language (xxv). In its request concerning common grace, Classis Hackensack " *asks* Synod to declare that such denial is contrary to Scripture

instructions took note of the "agitation" (Hackensack) and "bitter conflict" (Hudson) in the churches about the doctrine of common grace, even specifically naming Danhof and Hoeksema's book *Van Zonde en Genade* [Of Sin and Grace] and, out of concern for the spiritual well-being of the church, called for synod to address the question. Three of the six instructions went beyond general statements asking for synod to "investigate the matter" (Sioux Center) or "take such measures" (Hudson), to specific requests to appoint a study committee (Hackensack, Muskegon, Grand Rapids West). The instruction from Classis Muskegon captures this succinctly: "That Synod appoint a committee for the purpose of researching the subject of Common Grace in a careful, scriptural, historical and dogmatic manner and thus to come to a definite formulation of this doctrine" (120).

Some classes already had made up their mind and their instructions reflected set judgments on the matter. Classis Hackensack asked synod "to declare that such denial [of common grace] is contrary to Scripture and to our Reformed Doctrine," but then added: "Further, that Synod appoint a committee to make a thorough study of this matter and enlighten the church" (120). Classis Sioux Center: "Since according to our judgment, the subject of Common Grace as it is set forth in the book *Van Zonde en Genade* [Of Sin and Grace] is in conflict with our Forms of Unity, we feel ourselves burdened; therefore we request that Synod investigate the matter" (120). Clearly, "investigating the matter" did not include a careful examination whether the teachings found in Hoeksema and Danhof's book were in fact in conflict with Scripture and the Reformed confessions *or* whether their case against the doctrine of common grace might indeed have some merit. Appointing a committee "to make a thorough study of this matter and enlighten the church" was apparently presumed to lead to a condemnation of those who denied the doctrine of common

and to our Reformed doctrine" (xxvi, emphasis added). My thanks to Henry De Moor and Kathy Smith for assistance on this question. According to De Moor, the term "instruction" *(instructie)* was used by the Reformed churches in the Netherlands and was undoubtedly brought over to the CRC by immigrants. At the time of the 1924 Synod, it was one of several terms used by classes to indicate proposals or requests to synod. Eventually the CRC chose for "overture" (Henry De Moor, email to John Bolt and Kathy Smith, April 7, 2021).

grace. It is, however, noteworthy that the instruction from Classis Grand Rapids West is much more open, notwithstanding the fact that the most vocal public critic of Hoeksema and Danhof, the Rev. Jan Karel Van Baalen, was himself a minister in that classis. The *Acts of Synod* note: "A document from Classis Grand Rapids West with the following content":[6]

> That Synod take under earnest consideration, and make a declaration or appoint a committee to investigate the doctrinal question presently pending in our churches, namely, the doctrine concerning Common Grace.
>
> Grounds:
> (1) inasmuch as the doctrine of Common Grace is proclaimed in our churches, and is denied by others, and in such a way that the one position absolutely excludes the other;
> (2) because this question has caused unrest in our churches. (121)

What did the *synod* do with this significant amount of material? The *PACCG* set forth eleven "doctrines and points [of difference]" that had been "brought to the attention of your committee" (121):

> (1) The favorable disposition of God toward the reprobates.
> (2) The restraint of sin or the restraint of the sinner.
> (3) The doing of civil good by the unregenerate.
> (4) The double working of God's will in election and rejection.
> (5) The placing of election and reprobation on one line.
> (6) The responsibility of man.
> (7) The providence of God and His sovereignty over all things.
> (8) Rev. H. Hoeksema's view of God.
> (9) The emphasis which is placed on the eternal decree and in general on the divine factor.

6 This is the wording of the English translation, and its addition of the word "document" is *potentially* misleading. The original Dutch minute speaks of "two late arriving instructions." One was from Classis Grand Rapids East and then the Dutch has "een van Classis G.R. West" [one from Classis G.R. West], with the content following. Again, we should not make too much of this; it is only when we desire precision about the ecclesiastical status of "instructions" and "documents" that even a slight insertion could make a difference. We want to know the ecclesiastical legal status of this "document."

(10) The insufficient Gospel-preaching of the above-mentioned pastor.
(11) The making powerless [of] the second table of the law.
Also the complaint is voiced in these documents that rash accusations are made against office bearers. (121-22)

The *PACCG* recommended that synod consider issues 1-3 but not 4-11. Before we examine why the Synod of Kalamazoo took up issues 1-3 and what it did with them, I want to highlight some important points from the reasons given by the *PACCG* for not considering 4-11.[7] There is substantive material in these reasons that, in my judgment, was subsequently not adequately taken into account by the synod in its deliberations and decisions.

1. The *PACCG* judged that some of the conflicts in the debate about common grace were rooted in legitimate alternative theological positions and accents, namely, the difference between the supralapsarian and infralapsarian accounts of God's decrees. This difference also affects accents and emphases in preaching; furthermore, "This phenomenon is nothing new in Reformed circles and has always been tolerated" (123). Nonetheless, apparently, in synod's judgment, there were definite boundaries to this tolerance of diverse accents; Hoeksema and Danhof 's challenge to the doctrine of common grace was beyond the pale.

2. In its response to issue 11 (making the Second Table of the Law powerless), the *PACCG* not only looked at Hoeksema and Danhof's *Of Sin and Grace*, but also engaged the "single expression" used in the protest in a charitable way, stating that the phrase in question "can be interpreted in a positive way" (123). This is a singular moment of charity at the synod; *Of Sin and Grace* would be cited regularly but never again engaged at all, much less charitably.

3. The *PACCG* is similarly charitable with the charge of "rash accusations" against fellow office bearers. It accepted Hoeksema and Danhof's declaration "that they did not intend to say that those who believe in Common Grace are in conflict with the confession, while still saying that according to their view this theory is just extra-confessional. They simply intended to say that this theory is not in line

7 These are found in the *1924 CRC Agenda for Synod,* 122-24.

with Reformed thinking" (124). And with only gentle admonition the committee observed: "In the heat of debate expressions are used by both sides, expressions which would not be used in calmer moments, or at least in each instance would have been expressed with greater clarity" (124). Synod did not apply this judgment of charity—namely, acknowledging and allowing for less than full clarity in the heat of debate—to its own discussions of the matter more generally.

Having set aside most of the points raised in the communications to synod, the *PACCG* said:

> There are however [T]hree [P]oints on which, in the judgment of the committee, Synod should declare itself specifically, namely
>
> (1) The favorable disposition of God toward all men, and not alone toward the elect. Your committee judges that this point is of central importance in this question which at present has caused so much unrest in the church. The two following points are intimately interwoven with the first point and are more or less comprehended in it.
> (2) The restraint of sin in the individual person and in society.
> (3) The doing of so-called righteousness by the unregenerate.
>
> Your committee judges that it is necessary for Synod to declare itself on these points.
>
> (a) Because we are dealing here with points in which the Brothers Danhof and Hoeksema have chosen to take positions with thesis [*sic*] for which they have taken responsibility and which they have defended.
> (b) Because the confessions make clear declarations concerning these points.
> (c) Because it is imperatively necessary that for the rest in the churches Synod take a firm standpoint. (124)

We will examine the case made for the first of these three points later in this article but here I want to highlight the committee's contradictory conclusion. After setting forth a ten-page collection of quotes from Scripture and Reformed authorities in favor of the three points, the committee gave the following recommendations:

> (a) That Synod make no declaration at present concerning the position of the Church regarding the doctrine of Common Grace and all its

ramifications. Such a declaration would assume that this matter has been thought through in detail and has [fully] developed, which certainly is not the case. A required preliminary study is entirely lacking. As a result, there is no *communis opinio* [common opinion] in the Reformed churches on this matter.

(b) Similarly, not to appoint a committee with the mandate to study this doctrine for the purpose of formulating a dogma concerning this matter which in due course can be incorporated in the confession. (Instructions Muskegon):

(1) Because dogmas are not made, but are born out of the conflict of many opinions, and therefore it is desirable that before a dogma is firmly established, a long period of exchange of thought precede [such acceptance]. Participation in such an exchange of thought should be as broad as possible and should not be limited to one church group.

(2) Because a truth must first live clearly in the consciousness of the church in general, or in a specific church group in particular, before the church can incorporate such a truth in its confessions. It cannot be said that such a necessary condition presently exists, or will be present within a two- or four-year time span.

(c) However, we urge the leaders of our people, ministers as well as professors, to make a further study of the doctrine of Common Grace, and to give careful thought in considering the issues which will surface, and present them to our people by way of lectures and in writings. We also urge that this be done, not [just] by a few, but that many may participate.

Grounds:

(a) This will lead in the most natural way to a fruitful discussion about this matter, Common Grace. Such an exchange of thoughts is an indispensable precondition for the development of this truth;

(b) This will draw attention of our people to this doctrine, will clarify their insight, and will get them to feel the importance of this matter so that they become increasingly aware of this part of the content of their faith.

(c) This will lead after the passing of several years to a *communis opinio* [common opinion] in this matter and also will ripen the condition in our church for a united confession concerning Common Grace.[8] (134-35)

8 The actual decision of synod can be found on 145-50.

This is a remarkable conclusion. On the one hand, there is no "common opinion" on the matter of common grace and even a study committee of CRC theologians cannot prepare a clear statement because "a long period of exchange of thought" should take place before such a common opinion could be achieved. Consciousness of such a common opinion must live clearly in the church "before the church can incorporate such a truth in its confessions." Furthermore, "It cannot be said that such a necessary condition presently exists, or will be present within a two- or four-year time span" (135). If one grants the premise just stated,[9] then surely some cautionary modesty and tolerance ought to have been in order. It is difficult to square the appeal to a lack of common opinion with the insistence on synod making a definite pronouncement on the three points. Remarkably, the synodical approval of the *PACCG* recommendation—"That Synod make no declaration at present concerning the position of the Church regarding the doctrine of Common Grace and all its ramifications" (134)—came *after* synod had done that very thing by adopting the three points. This contradiction was pointed out by a couple of the delegates who filed written protests about the decision;[10] why did not more delegates sense this?

Two additional "contradictions" can be observed in the synodical record.

1. After accepting the three points, synod nonetheless gave Hoeksema and Danhof a general confessional seal of approval. Synod pointed out "that there are various expressions in the writings of the Revs. H. Danhof and H. Hoeksema which do not harmonize well with what the Scriptures and the confessions teach us regarding the three points mentioned above." Then follows a statement that seems to call the preceding judgment into question:

> On the other hand, Synod declares that the above-mentioned ministers, according to their own repeated declarations made in their writings, have no intent or desire other than to teach the Reformed teaching,

9 How different this is from the practice of the Synod of Dordt. Facing divided and contradictory opinion in the Dutch Reformed Church, the Synod needed to come to clarity on the matter before it. And, of course, notwithstanding its claims to the contrary, the 1924 Synod *did* come to a definite conclusion about common grace.

10 See next section of this article.

> the teaching of the Holy Scripture, and that of our confessions, and also to defend it. Also, it cannot be denied that, in the basic truths of the Reformed faith as set forth in our confessions, they are Reformed, albeit with a tendency to be one-sided. (147)

But the *PACCG* had earlier dismissed complaints against Hoeksema and Danhof's "one-sidedness" on the ground that the Reformed tradition allowed for and tolerated divergent views on this matter, notably the differences between supra- and infralapsarians. Though the synod never said so explicitly, it could legitimately be inferred that the doctrine of common grace was not among "the basic truths of the Reformed faith as set forth in our confessions." In other words, it is a *secondary* doctrine about which differences should be allowed. And if Hoeksema and Danhof, by the synod's own judgment, are said to be "Reformed, albeit with a tendency to be one-sided," why should their views on common grace be condemned? Why was the posture of charitable tolerance so summarily discarded?

2. In its advice on the matter of common grace, synod admonished Hoeksema and Danhof to abide by the three points in their preaching and writing and to avoid one-sidedness. But then, turning 180 degrees in the opposite direction, even praising Hoeksema and Danhof, synod also warned the churches against potential misuse of the doctrine:

> On the other hand Synod deems that insofar as the ministers H. Danhof and H. Hoeksema warn against world conformity in their writing, there is reason for such a warning in view of the possible misrepresentation of the doctrine of Common Grace. For this reason Synod feels itself called to send out the following WITNESS to the churches:
>
> Now that Synod has made a declaration about three points, which because of the denial of Common Grace have become jeopardized, and the full appreciation of [their] truth misjudged,it feels compelled to warn our churches and especially its [*sic*] leaders earnestly against all one-sided expounding and thus misuse [*misbruiken*] the doctrine of Common Grace. There is a danger here which ought not [to] be ignored. (147-48)

The synodical warning included an undocumented reference to Abraham Kuyper's "monumental work dealing with this subject"[11] to the

11 The reference is to Kuyper's three-volume *De Gemeene Gratie* [The

effect that "he was aware of this danger that some might be misled by this [subject] and thus be led astray in the world. And history has already proven that this danger is more than imaginary. Also Dr. Bavinck has reminded us of this danger in his *Dogmatics*" (148).[12] Then followed two remarkable paragraphs:

> As we survey the spiritual currents of our present day, it certainly cannot be denied that the danger of becoming conformed to this present world is much greater than fleeing from the world. The liberal theology of our day virtually erases the boundaries between the Church and the world. For many the major importance of the Church is increasingly sought in social issues. The awareness of a spiritual-moral antithesis is weakened increasingly in the conscience of many, replaced by a vague feeling of a universal brotherhood. Preaching mainly deals with the periphery of life and does not probe its spiritual core. The doctrine of special grace in Christ is crowded more and more to the background. There is a strong desire to bring theology in harmony with science which stands in the service of unbelief. By way of the press and all kinds of discoveries and inventions, which by themselves are to be appreciated as gifts of God, a great deal of this sinful world makes inroads into our Christian families.
>
> Because of these and similar influences which press upon us from all sides, it is urgently necessary that the Church take its stand and set up its watch based on principle; and that as it holds fast the above mentioned positions, it also, with tooth and nail, maintain its spiritual-moral antithesis. It must never allow its preaching to degenerate into social dissertations or literary contemplation. The Church must always be watchful that Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead remain at the core of its preaching. Without ceasing she must hold fast to the principle that God's people are a special people, living out of their own root, the root of faith. And with a holy passion she must call out to our people and especially to our youth through preaching and writing: Be not conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will. This the blessing of the Lord, this will protect our churches from world conformity, which

Common Grace] (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, 1902-1904).

12 No specific reference is given; we are citing the final paragraphs of the "Witness" here in full; the second paragraph in particular will become an important part of our conclusion.

> extinguishes all spiritual glow, and robs the church of her strength and beauty. (148-49)

Is this not a curious statement? Synod's determination to push through adopting the three points would seem to indicate a high level of confidence in the doctrine. And now it adds a Surgeon General's Warning that use of the doctrine is potentially toxic and even injurious to the health of the church and the salvation of one's soul. Specifically, synod warned against "liberal theology" that "virtually erases the boundaries between the Church and the world," insisting that the church must "with tooth and nail, maintain its spiritual-moral antithesis. It must never allow its preaching to degenerate into social dissertations or literary contemplation." One is led to wonder: Could it be that the synod was less than fully confident of its position? Were there other (unstated) reasons for its haste? Perhaps more to the point: If the warning sought to do justice to the concerns raised by Danhof and Hoeksema, would it not have been wiser—and clearly more in the spirit of Christian brotherly love—to pursue some kind of resolution by appointing a study committee to investigate the matter further? Synod had the opportunity to help the church come to a fuller statement on common grace that would incorporate these concerns and not as a mere afterthought. For some reason it did not desire such a statement. Its own conclusion, it would be fair to say, was also "one-sided."

2. A Hasty Decision?

In spite of the *PACCG* recommendation that no study committee be appointed to examine the doctrine of common grace, synod was presented with a substitute proposal during its twenty-fourth session on the evening of Thursday, July 3:

> That Synod, having considered the advice of the Pre-Advisory Committee with regard to the protests against the views of the Brothers Danhof and Hoeksema, which have been submitted to Synod, it now be decided to table the matter of Common Grace, with the earnest admonition that a thorough study be made of this matter, and that this be done in a spirit of brotherly love and mutual appreciation of contrary views.
>
> In order that this thorough study be carried out, it be decided by Synod to appoint a committee representing all sides, in which Revs.

> Danhof and Hoeksema will have a voice and that this committee will serve the next synod with clarification and enlightenment concerning this very important question.
>
> In conclusion, that Synod declare that the protesters (whose good intentions in submitting their protests are appreciated) be satisfied with this decision and should abide by this decision, in light of the fact that it is the judgment of Synod that the time is not yet ripe to make a precise declaration about this issue which the protesters placed before Synod.[13] (143-44)

This substitute motion was debated until it was time to adjourn for the evening and synod recessed until the following Monday afternoon, July 7.[14] On that day, after Dr. Clarence Bouma, the reporter for the pre-advisory committee addressed synod for "most of the afternoon" for "the purpose of clarification and enlightenment regarding the report," synod voted and rejected the substitute proposal (145). As we look back now, with the obvious benefit of historical awareness, we should ask why this pastorally wise proposal to look for a resolution

13 The implied critique of Hoeksema and Danhof's detractors is striking here and may have played an important role in its eventual defeat. The official minutes of the synod do not reveal the source of the substitute proposal, indicating its presentation in the passive voice: "A substitute proposal with the following content is submitted" (143). Apparently, there were delegates at synod who sensed that it might be possible to infer some animus behind the efforts to set Danhof and Hoeksema straight on the matter. As a gesture of pastoral mollification, it sought synodical approval of a statement that honored the "good intentions" of their protesting detractors. While we must be cautious in our inferences here, the need to underscore the honorable motives of parties in a dispute is noteworthy, not to mention praiseworthy. Nonetheless, there is also an iron fist inside the velvet glove: Synod is called on to tell the protesters that they need to "be satisfied and abide by synod's decision." From our privileged position of historical distance and hindsight, we cannot help wondering: Did those who presented the substitute motion sense that there would be trouble in the church if synod was unwilling to condemn the denial of common grace? Would the "establishment" of the CRC then be very unhappy?

14 In fairness it must be observed that the following day, July 4, was America's national holiday. Synod allowed itself a "common grace" break by acknowledging the day.

to the tensions and conflicts that had arisen was not a slam dunk win-win solution for synod.

From the time the substitute motion was placed before synod on Thursday evening and the vote in late afternoon the following Monday, the opposition to establishing a synodical study committee that was to work "in a spirit of brotherly love and mutual appreciation of contrary views" had consolidated and eventually prevailed. The church would not be served with a study report that also gave a voice to Danhof and Hoeksema. The majority of delegates at the Kalamazoo Synod had already made up their mind: The CRC must not allow space for views that deny the doctrine of common grace. That this would mean that the CRC was also declaring that it had no room for Hoeksema and Danhof did not deter synod. Whatever the reason for the unwillingness by leaders in the CRC to seriously engage Hoeksema and Danhof, the unwillingness is obvious from the synodical record itself. The failure to engage will also become apparent when we examine the grounds synod provided for the first point in section 3 of this article. But before we do that, let us take a look at the statements of five synodical delegates who filed written protests against the common grace decisions.[15] They serve as thoughtful eyewitnesses—giving unanimous testimony!—to the haste in which synod adopted the Three Points.

The first three protests recorded in the *Acts* came from delegates in one classis, Classis Holland.[16]

Elder A. Peters objected to the decision "because it is his conviction":

(a) no need exists at the present time for these decisions;

15 We will consider them in the order they appear in the *1924 CRC Acts of Synod, 192-94*; there were a total of seven protests; Rev. Albert Wassink of Worthington, MN (Classis Orange City) objected to the phrase "general operation of the Holy Spirit" in Point 2; we will consider the protest of Rev. Henry Danhof, a minister delegate from Classis Grand Rapids West, in part 2 (section 4) of this article.

16 Apart from those of Rev. Danhof and Rev. Wassink, four of the five protests against the decision as such came from Classis Holland and the remaining one from Classis Muskegon. Both classes were outside the active fray in Classis Grand Rapids East and Grand Rapids West, the ecclesiastical homes of Rev. Hoeksema and Rev. Danhof, respectively.

(b) these decisions do not benefit the churches at the present time, and
(c) in the substitute proposal to appoint a committee (following Art. 124), an excellent way was suggested which would benefit the churches.

Minister delegate Rev. Jacob L. Heeres, pastor of Graafschap CRC, gave as grounds for his protest:

(a) Not because he doesn't agree with the content of these points, but because he is convinced that there is no need to make these declarations at this time;
(b) because it is his judgment that these decisions do not benefit the welfare of the churches.

Elder A. Rosbach sounded a similar note in his second reason for objecting:

(b) because, in his humble opinion, with concern for the welfare and peace of the church, the time is not ripe to make a declaration at this time.

But Rosbach also highlighted the contradictory character of the refusal to appoint a study committee because "there is no 'common opinion' . . . on this matter," and the insistence on the three points, nonetheless. His first ground reads: "because according to his understanding, by declaring the three points, the doctrine of Common Grace has been indirectly accepted [or ratified; *aanvaard*].

The fourth recorded protest came from a minister in Classis Muskegon, Rev. John H. Mokma, pastor of Second Fremont CRC. Here is his full statement:

The undersigned feels compelled to declare that he has objections to going along with Synod because of the way this matter was handled, while

(a) according to his view, insight is lacking, and as a result there is failure in understanding each other; and therefore the time for this action is not yet ripe;
(b) according to his view, the nature of this conflict and the state of the matter are such that the [recommended] action does not

sufficiently reckon with the need for brotherly cooperation while prayerfully seeking the Lord's [guidance];

(c) according to his view, the Word of God and the welfare of the churches does not mandate the way [we] have chosen.

The final protest we will consider came from Rev. Daniel Zwier, also a delegate from Classis Holland, pastor of Maple Ave. CRC, Holland. He indicates that he is not objecting to the "content of these synodical declarations, with which the undersigned is in total agreement. Rather this protest is directed against the fact that Synod took this action at this time in making these declarations, an action which the undersigned is convinced is both unnecessary and hasty." Zwier provided four grounds:

(1) the doctrine of Common Grace, according to his judgment, has not been sufficiently thought through, and the related dispute which has arisen in our churches concerning the above mentioned positions have not come to sufficient fruition to entice [us] in making a decision which, in principle, condemns the standpoint of the Brothers Danhof and Hoeksema;

(2) the points, with which it is concerned, do not belong to the fundamental truths which are formulated in our confessions, and as Synod itself has acknowledged, in these fundamental truths the Brothers Danhof and Hoeksema are Reformed, even though there is a tendency to be one-sided;[17]

(3) these too hastily made declarations, according to the conviction of the undersigned, will not be conducive to advance the peace and well-being of our churches. Experience has taught us that undue haste in such weighty matters, when emotions run high because of the battle being waged are seldom good;[18]

17 From an ecclesiastical perspective Zwier's first two grounds are the substantial judgment on the error of the 1924 Synod. Synod's adoption of the Three Points "in principle" condemned two CRC ministers who *at the same time* were declared to be fully Reformed in the fundamentals, although slightly one-sided. That contradiction flew in the face of the very practice of tolerating one-sidedness that synod itself also affirmed.

18 We can add this to the list of ironies discussed in section 5 of this article. The *PACCG* urged synod to act on the three points because "the matter has now reached such a state that, with concern for the profit of the churches,

(4) according to the judgment of the undersigned there would have been a better way, namely, that a committee be appointed to investigate the dispute which has arisen, and further study the truths which are now in jeopardy. However, Synod has not been willing to move in this direction.

With the benefit of historical hindsight, the refusal of synod to take these four reasonable and pastorally wise statements from Rev. Zwier more seriously remains a troubling puzzle. We will never be able to recover with certainty the motives behind the insistence that the Three Points be adopted by synod. What we need to do now is examine the strength of the evidence provided as proof for the statements. Our detailed examination focuses on Point 1, "The favorable disposition of God toward all men, and not alone toward the elect" (124). We will put the statement up front and then look at the scriptural, confessional, and theological statements given to prove the doctrine articulated.

3. Where's the Proof?

Point 1: God's Favorable Disposition to All People

> Concerning the first point, with regard to the favorable disposition of God toward mankind in general, and not only to the elect, Synod declares that according to the Scripture and the confessions it is determined that besides the saving grace of God, shown only to the elect unto eternal life, there is a certain kind of favor, or grace of God which He shows to His creatures in general. This is evidenced by the quoted Scripture passages and from the Canons of Dort II, 5 and III and IV, 8 and 9, which deals with the general offer of the Gospel; whereas the quoted declarations of Reformed writers from the golden age of Reformed theology, also give evidence that our Reformed fathers from of old have advocated these opinions. (145-46)

As the pre-advisory committee dealt with each point, it followed a strict template: (a) Statements from Danhof and Hoeksema that

synodical attention is required" *(1924 CRC Acts of Synod,* 118). Instead of appointing a study committee to do a thorough examination of both sides of the issue, a decision that could have brought peace to the churches, synod made a declaration that created the ultimate "unrest," a division of the church and separation of a significant body of members.

in their judgment contradict the point; (b) evidence from Scripture that supports it; (c) statements from the Reformed confessions and Reformed theologians such as Calvin and Van Mastricht that support it. For each point, after the statements from Danhof and Hoeksema, synod declares they are "in conflict with the Holy Scriptures and the confessions." What is striking, however, is the failure *categorically* to distinguish the confessional statements from those of the theologians. Thus, the Canons of Dort and the Belgic Confession are placed alongside Calvin, Van Mastricht, and Ursinus, all under the category of "The Confessions."[19] In what follows we will be selective; readers are encouraged to examine the *1924 CRC Acts of Synod* for themselves to get the full story.[20]

The *PACCG* picked three passages to dispute from Hoeksema and Danhof's book, *Van Zonde en Genade* [Of Sin and Grace], which follow:

> Grace does not reside in things, but purely in the good favor of God. And no more are gold and silver, rain and sunshine, gifts and talents, grace in and by themselves. It is possible for grace to work in all these things, but it always remains particular and is given only to His people. (244)
>
> . . . the outward gifts which God in His grace grants to His people also fall upon the unrighteous, however, to them simply without grace. (252)
>
> Unless the grace of regeneration is wrought in the heart, a person may receive ever so many outward gifts, but he is not receptive to grace . . . Outside of regeneration, to state the matter even more clearly, there is no grace which makes a person receptive and without this grace which makes a person receptive, there is no possibility that anything can be a matter of grace for us. (253-54)

And a final quotation from one of Hoeksema's articles in *The Banner*: "Hence, we deny that in any way or to any extent, for time

19 This is another indication that the report was cobbled together in haste.

20 See *1924 CRC Acts of Synod,* 124-34; available online at https://www.calvin.edu/library/database/crcnasynod/1924acts_et.pdf.

or eternity, God assumes an attitude of positive favor or grace over-against the reprobate."[21]
Here is the *PACCG's* conclusion:

> The Committee deems these declarations to be in conflict with the Holy Scriptures and the confessions, inasmuch as according to the Scriptures and the confessions firmly state that God is graciously inclined and that He shows grace to those whom Scripture designates as "godless" and "unrighteous," which naturally includes those who are reprobate. (126)

Really? Is it so obvious that the statements of Hoeksema and Danhof are "in conflict with the Holy Scriptures and the confessions"? Did the *PACCG* want to imply that "Grace does . . . reside in things . . . [like] gold and silver, rain and sunshine, gifts and talents . . . in and by themselves"? Is it self-evident that God is *gracious* to the reprobate? Could Hoeksema and Danhof be correct in saying that God's providential "outward gifts" are, strictly speaking not "grace" to unregenerate persons? Clearly, greater precision in definition is called for here. A sympathetic reading would have suggested a pause with respect to the word "grace." Hoeksema and Danhof, in full agreement with Abraham Kuyper, incidentally, are reserving the word for *soteriological* favor to the elect.[22] Kuyper was able to insist that grace is particular while also affirming a notion of *common grace* and accomplished this by reserving the Dutch word "*genade*" for particular grace and using the term "*gratie*" (favor) for common grace. Kalamazoo's first point also distinguishes a "favorable disposition (*gunstige gezindheid*) of God toward mankind in general" from "the saving grace of God, shown only to the elect unto eternal life."[23]

Here there is no substantial disagreement between the *PACCG* and the Hoeksema/Danhof position; the latter fully affirmed such *provi-*

21 Herman Hoeksema, "Our Doctrine (section XXIX): The Fallen King and His Kingdom," *The Banner* 53 (April 17, 1919): 249.

22 See Abraham Kuyper, *Particular Grace: A Defense of God's Sovereignty in Salvation* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing, 2001); the original Dutch title is even more pointed: idem, *Dat de genade particulier is* [That Grace Is Particular] (Kampen: Kok, 1909).

23 Obviously, they were aware of Kuyper's subtle but crucial distinction.

dential favor.[24] The conflict comes about when one gives a *theological* explanation for this providential favor of God to all people. For our purposes, let us consider two possible explanations:

(a) Hoeksema and Danhof: What is called "common grace" is better described as God's providential goodness in upholding and sustaining his creation in general. When we speak of this favor and goodness with respect to human beings, it is in the final analysis a grace to the elect that providentially "spills over" to the reprobate; strictly speaking, this is not a blessing to them but only renders them even more inexcusable before God and more liable for their own judgment. (Rom. 1)

(b) Kalamazoo, Point 1: "God is graciously inclined and . . . He shows grace to those whom Scripture designates as 'godless' and 'unrighteous,' which naturally includes those who are reprobate."[25]

At this stage of the argument, is it so obvious that (b) is true to Scripture and the Reformed confessions and that (a) is contrary to them? Do the scriptural passages, confessional texts and quotations from Reformed theologians provide clear proof for (b)? We will list the passages used in the order given and provide brief commentary on each, asking whether the cited passage supports either (a) or (b).

A. Scripture

> The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. (Ps. 145:9)

The context of this verse suggests some nuance to the idea that God shows "grace" even to the reprobate. Verse 10: "All your works praise you, Lord; / your faithful people extol you." The purpose of God's goodness to "all" is that his faithful "people" bear witness of that goodness "so that all people may know of your mighty acts /and the glorious splendor of your kingdom" (v. 12). The concluding stanza has a decidedly antithetical note:

24 I chose the term "providential" here deliberately to clearly distinguish this general favor from *saving* grace.

25 Whereas (a) is my own restatement of Hoeksema and Danhof's views, (b) is taken directly from synod's own decision *(1924 CRC Acts of Synod*, 126).

The Lord is righteous in all his ways
and faithful in all he does.
The Lord is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.
He fulfills the desires of those who fear him;
he hears their cry and saves them.
The Lord watches over all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.

Verses 19 and 20 clearly differentiate between the grace of God to "those who fear him . . . who love him" and the wicked or reprobate whom he "will destroy." Psalm 145 is the confession of a believer who recognizes God's "mighty acts" (v. 4), his "wonderful / awesome works" (vv. 5, 6), his "great deeds" (v. 6), and wants to shout it out to the world: "My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord. / Let every creature praise his holy name / for ever and ever" (v. 21). Psalm 145, in other words, supports position (a) at least as strongly, if not more, than position (b). The statement in verse 9 must be seen in light of the whole psalm; lifting it up out of context is bad exegesis and bad theology. It does not warrant the notion of a general "grace" extended even to the reprobate; instead, the psalm points to God's wrath upon the "wicked" and validates position (a).

> But I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matt. 5:44, 45)
>
> But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to receive anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. (Luke 6:35, 36)

Our Lord's instruction to love your enemies is the final "you have heard it said . . . but I say to you . . . " contrast in the Sermon on the Mount. Does the command to love your enemies rule out position (a)? Not according to Calvin who finds in these verses a command against taking *personal* vengeance. We must love our neighbor as ourselves, and this requires self-denial and valuing others "for their God-given unity with himself to the extent of actually loving those also who have

hate for him."[26] What Calvin concludes from this is noteworthy: "We learn from these words how the faithful should have no dealings with vengeance, of any kind, for they may not at all seek it from God, but are to let it go and be swept from their minds, that they may pray good things for their enemies." But the next sentence is the kicker: "At the same time, they do not cease to commend their own cause to God, *until* He *takes vengeance on the reprobate.*"[27] Calvin elaborates when he comments on the call to imitate God as "sons of your Father":

> Now we should realize that the example of God is set for us to follow, not as though we would be right to do anything that He does: for He punishes the ungrateful, and frequently drives the wicked from the face of the earth, and in this area we do not have Him before us as an example to follow, for the judgment of the world does not rest upon us, but is His property. He wishes us to be imitators of His fatherly goodness and kindness.[28]

It is, therefore, necessary to interpret these two passages from Matthew and Luke in a far more nuanced manner than suggested by the synod. For us to love our enemies is to acknowledge that they are fellow image bearers of God, sinners like us, and that all vengeance belongs to God.[29] Does a reference to "be imitators of [God]" mean that God loves his enemies in an indiscriminate manner? Not at all. All sinners, ourselves included, are enemies of God and the apostle Paul tells his Roman readers and us that: "Christ died for the ungodly"; "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us"; and "while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:6, 8, 10). But this is a divine love shown to the elect! It is not an indiscriminate, general love to all human beings, including the reprobate. Once again, a proper understanding of these passages in light of Scripture as a whole, strongly favors position (a). It is a

26 John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke,* trans. A. W. Morrison, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 1:198.

27 Calvin*, A Harmony of the Gospels,* 1:198 (emphasis added).

28 Calvin*, A Harmony of the Gospels,* 1:199.

29 This does not of course disallow appropriate just vengeance administered by God's servant, the magistrate.

pity that the *PACCG*, which cited Calvin for each of the three points, did not consult his interpretation of these texts.[30]

> In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony; he has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy. (Acts 14:16, 17)

The Greek word, translated as "kindness" in the NIV, is ἀγαθουργῶν which is more literally translated as "doing good" (NRSV) or "for he did good" (ESV). This translation seems initially to strengthen the warrant for position (b); God's sending "rain from heaven" and "crops in their seasons" is an act of his "goodness," a stronger term than "kindness." However, the apostle's comment that God "in the past . . . let all nations go their own way" while at the same time "not [leaving] himself without witness," naturally turns our minds to Acts 17 and Romans 1. Paul makes a similar claim in his address to people in the Areopagus but adds the important point that God's goodness in creating and providentially sustaining all people had the singular purpose "that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us" (Acts 17:27). Then comes the evangelistic call:

> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31)

In Romans 1 Paul speaks unambiguously of God's wrath against those who have received this divine witness but "suppress the truth by their wickedness" (v. 18). The testimony of God's favor to people becomes the occasion for their judgment:

> What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly

30 On this point the *PACCG*'s work is negligent because it did cite Calvin extensively elsewhere in the report. Arriving at this conclusion is both surprising and difficult with respect to venerable leaders in the CRC's past.

> seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (Rom. 1:19-20)

Reading Acts 14:16 and 17 in context, therefore, favors position (a).

> And for this we labor and strive, that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe. (1 Tim. 4:10)

At first glance, this seems like a curious choice for warranting a general, non-saving favor of God to all people because it looks for all the world like a *soteriological* passage, referring to God as "Savior." How could it have been used to defend *common* or non-saving grace?

When we take a closer look, however, and try to figure out what Paul had in mind with his qualification, "especially of those who believe," we can begin to see the logic of using this text. What is shared by "all people," including believers, but is a special blessing to believers? The answer seems obvious: God's good gifts of creation and providence that are *enjoyed* by all humanity but recognized as gifts from God by those who trust in him. In that case, 1 Timothy 4:10 *could* legitimately be used to ground a certain link between the work of Christ and common grace, though it should be noted that the subject of the saving work in this text is not Christ, but "the living God" or, to be more theologically precise, either the triune God or the Father.[31] This suggests that "Savior" (σωτὴρ) might not have a narrow, particularist, soteriological meaning.

Had the *PACCG* invoked Calvin at this point it would have strengthened its case and clarified matters for the church. Here is

31 The ambiguity in the use of 1 Tim. 4:10 by the Kalamazoo Synod comes from its failure to supply an exegetical narrative and argument for each of its scriptural texts; they are simply listed and *how* they fit is either assumed to be known (from the exegetical tradition) or as self-evident. The most gracious interpretation here is that the *PACCG's* theologically trained members simply *assumed* the Reformed exegetical tradition when they formed their list. Nevertheless, by failing to provide a narrative and argument, the *PACCG* and synod left the church in the dark about how to understand the crucial texts and did not serve the church as well as it could have.

Calvin's treatment of the verse in his commentary on 1 Timothy.[32] In the first five verses of chapter 4, the apostle vigorously affirms the goodness of God's creation; all of it—including marriage and food—is to be "received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth" (v. 3). About this, Calvin rhetorically asks: "But how so? Is it not true that God makes His sun to rise daily on the good and the evil (Matt. 5:45), and if the earth at His command brings forth bread for the godly, are not the worst of men also fed by His beneficence?" (240). True, but while the benefits of God's creation gifts and providential goodness are enjoyed by all human beings, Calvin observes that Paul "has good reason to connect rightful enjoyment to the Word by which alone we regain what was lost to us in Adam. For we must acknowledge God as our Father before we can be His heirs, and Christ as our Head before the things that are His can become ours." Calvin infers from this "that the use of God's gifts is unclean unless it is accompanied by true knowledge and supplication of God's name" (241). In other words: Pray before and after you eat!

Before we turn to verse 10, a couple of observations:

1. The case for a "general favor of God," also to the reprobate, would have been strengthened if the *PACCG* had explained 1 Timothy 4:10 (and the other texts it listed!) within a narrative frame and argument that included an examination of verse 10's context in the entire fourth chapter of 1 Timothy.
2. Furthermore, if the PACCG had carefully examined and included the exegetical fruits "of Reformed writers from the golden age of Reformed theology" such as Calvin, their argument for a "general favor" of God to the reprobate would have been stronger.[33]

32 John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 10: *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon,* ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T. A. Smail (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); the fourth chapter of 1 Timothy covers pp. 235-49; page references to specific quotes will be provided in parentheses in the text.

33 It would be appropriate to add this to the list of "ironies" provided in section 5.

3. At the same time, however, such a consideration would also have necessitated taking seriously Hoeksema and Danhof's point that the benefits of creation and providence are, strictly speaking, not *grace* to the reprobate. That too was an essential doctrine of the Reformed tradition.

When we now consider 1 Timothy 4:10 in light of our preceding examination of the earlier verses, its meaning becomes more transparent. To see this let us once again make use of Calvin's commentary on the verse.[34] Calvin considers this verse as an answer to an anticipated objection why Christians who, "pressed hard as they are by every affliction, are not the most miserable of all men."[35] In the face of these circumstances, according to Calvin, Paul provides two "comforts" for believers: (1) Hope in the "living God"; suffering "for the sake of righteousness" is not loss but gain. (2) In an argument "from the lesser to the greater" Paul points to the universality of God's beneficence to assure believers of their Father's greater and sure mercy toward them:

> And if there is no one without the experience of sharing in God's kindness, how much more of that kindness shall the godly know, who hope in Him. Will he not take special care of them? Will he not pour out of His bounty much more freely upon them? In short, will He not keep them in all things safe to the end?

From this, it is fair to conclude that 1 Timothy 4:10 might not be a soteriological text if the word "Savior" here is not a reference to the saving work of our Lord but to God's goodness to his creation in providence.[36] The text affirms a "general favor" that is universal but

34 Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries,* 10:245; all quotations from Calvin that follow are from this page.

35 Calvin lists these "afflictions" in the next paragraph: "all kinds of discomforts and troubles, such as poverty, cold, nakedness, hunger, exile, plundering, imprisonment, flogging, and other persecutions."

36 In the New Testament, the term Σωτήρ ordinarily refers to Christ and, like the cognate term σωτηρία, is "used only in a sense peculiar to the economy of grace"; translated therefore respectively as "Savior," "salvation, redemption" (Hermann Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek,* trans. William Urwick [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895], 535). The term is uniquely used of God in the pastoral epistles. Calvin's interpretation

provides no warrant for the *PACCG*'s summary conclusion: "That God is graciously inclined and that He shows grace to those whom Scripture designates as 'godless' and 'unrighteous,' which naturally includes those who are reprobate."[37] By linking common grace to the "general offer of the Gospel" Synod opened the door to confusion in the church about the nature and extent of Christ's saving work on the cross. Did the *PACCG* want to imply that the Atonement was also universal in some sense?[38]

> Or do you share contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you towards repentance. (Rom. 2:4)

The crucial question here is: To whom is the apostle Paul writing? To believing Christians or to unbelievers? If the former then God's "kindness, tolerance and patience" here do not refer to a general indiscriminate benevolence but as a warning to judgmental Christians. Even if Paul has in mind ethnic Jews in chapter 2 (see esp. v. 17), he is addressing those who have experienced God's covenant mercies. And we cannot overlook the fact that God's kindness here has repentance and conversion in view. This verse does not support position (b).

The final scriptural appeal is to two passages in Ezekiel that are said to "point out that God comes with a well intended offer of salvation to all men."

> Say to them, "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezek. 33:11)

> Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? (Ezek. 18:23)

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is contestable but not unreasonable. The subjunctive mood of this sentence and earlier ones reflects my extended email conversation with Dr. Andrew Tempelman (Calvin Theological Seminary, Class of 1963) in August 2021. My thanks to Dr. Tempelman for taking the time to engage me on this verse.

37 *1924 CRC Acts of Synod,* 126.

38 This is the issue that Professor Harold Dekker raised in the 1960s; see section 6 in part 2.

Here we raise the same question we did initially with respect to 1 Timothy 4:10: What are difficult texts that speak of *repentance* and *salvation* doing as grounds for defending a *non-saving* favor of God to all people, including the reprobate? Does this not risk opening a door to calling into question definite atonement and particular salvation? Once more, ascribe this to haste and carelessness.

Here, too, it is regrettable that the *PACCG*, which loved to quote Calvin to buttress its points, did not consult Calvin's commentary on Ezekiel 18:23.[39] Calvin says "that God wills not the death of a sinner, because he meets him of his own accord, and is not only prepared to receive all who fly to his pity, but he calls them towards him with a loud voice, when he sees how they are alienated from all hope of safety." But this desire for all to experience salvation is not a general good will, it is conditional: "But the manner must be noticed in which God wishes all to be saved, namely, *when they turn themselves from their ways*. God thus does not so wish all men to be saved as to renounce the difference between good and evil; but repentance, as we have said, must precede pardon." Calvin then asks: "How, then, does God wish all men to be saved?" His answer comes nowhere near a so-called "well-meant offer of the gospel." According to Calvin, God wishes all to be saved "by the Spirit's condemning the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment, at this day, by the Gospel, as he did formerly by the law and the prophets" (John 16:8). "God makes manifest to mankind their great misery, that they may betake themselves to him: he wounds that he may cure, and slays that he may give life. We hold, then, that God wills not the death of a sinner, since he calls all

39 For this reference to Calvin, I am indebted to Blacketer, "The Three Points in Most Parts Reformed," 52-53; for more on this issue of two wills and the use of Calvin's exegesis in later Protestant orthodoxy, notably Moise Amyraut, see Richard A. Muller, "A Tale of Two Wills? Calvin, Amyraut, and Du Molin on Ezekiel 18:23," in idem, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 107-25. Quotations from Calvin's Lectures on the Book of Ezekiel are taken from John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel,* trans. Thomas Myers, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849-50; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948; Baker Books, 1999), 1:239-49 (Lecture 56). All passages quoted are from pp. 247-49; all emphases original.

equally to repentance, and promises himself prepared to receive them if they only seriously repent." Calvin anticipates the objection that this doctrine challenges the "election of God, by which he has predestined a fixed number to salvation." He responds by making an important distinction—though he does not name it as such[40]—between God's eternal decree of will and his revealed or preceptive will. Calvin insists that God is not double-dealing here; he is not acting with duplicity:

> God always wishes the same thing, though by different ways, and in a manner inscrutable to us. Although, therefore, God's will is simple, yet great variety is involved in it, as far as our senses are concerned. Besides, it is not surprising that our eyes should be blinded by intense light, so that we cannot certainly judge how God wishes all to be saved, and yet has devoted all the reprobate to eternal destruction, and wishes them to perish. While we look now through a glass darkly, we should be content with the measure of our own intelligence. (1 Cor. 13:12)

The distinction that Calvin only hints at here between God's secret decree and his revealed or preceptive will was known to the members of the pre-advisory committee; one of its members, Professor Louis Berkhof, uses it in his own systematic theology.[41]

But Calvin's discussion of Ezekiel 18:23 goes further. Here is how he frames the question: "God is said *not to wish the death of a sinner*. How so? since he wishes all to be converted." His answer is an affirmation of election:

> Now we must see how God wishes all to be converted; for repentance is surely his peculiar gift: as it is his office to create men, so it is his province to renew them, and restore his image within them. For this reason we are said to be his workmanship, that is, his fashioning (Eph. 2:10). Since, therefore, repentance is a kind of second creation, it follows that it is not in man's power; and if it is equally in God's power to convert men as well as to create them, it follows that the reprobate are

40 Calvin does speak of God's "secret counsel" and distinguishes from God calling "miserable men from despair, that they may apprehend the hope of pardon, and repent and embrace the offered salvation."

41 Berkhof speaks approvingly of the distinction within the will of God between the *decretive* and *preceptive* will. The former is hidden to us; the latter is revealed; see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology,* new cmb. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 77.

> not converted, because God does not wish their conversion; for if he wished it he could do it: and hence it appears that he does not wish it.

Calvin then again raises—only to dismiss—the objection that God is acting duplicitously because he speaks out of both sides of his mouth: He wishes to save all; he does not wish to save the reprobate. Which is it? God, says Calvin, "wishes to be taken at his word"; "The Prophet [Ezekiel] does not here dispute with subtlety about his incomprehensible plans, but wishes to keep our attention close to God's word. Now, what are the contents of this word? The law, the prophets, and the gospel. Now all are called to repentance, and the hope of salvation is promised them when they repent: this is true, since God rejects no returning sinner; he pardons all without exception." This is what has been revealed to us: we are sinners in need of redemption and are summoned to repent.

Calvin insists that this universal call to repentance with the promise of salvation is not at all at odds with the doctrine of election and reprobation. Repentance is God's "peculiar gift"; we are dead in our sins and can only repent after we are born again by the Holy Spirit. This *preceptive* will of God—repent and believe the good news—does not set aside God's *decretive* will: "Meanwhile, this will of God which he sets forth in his word does not prevent him from decreeing before the world was created what he would do with every individual: and as I have now said, the Prophet only shows here, that when we have been converted we need not doubt that God immediately meets us and shows himself propitious."[42] If we consider only Ezekiel 18:23 as interpreted by the "Reformed writers from the time when Reformed

42 The prayer with which Calvin closed this lecture on Ezek. 18:23 wonderfully captures the complete dependence of believers on the grace of God:

> Grant, Almighty God, since we are all lost in ourselves, that we may desire to obtain life where it is laid up for us, and where thou dost manifest it, namely, in thy Son: and grant that we may so embrace the grace which has been exhibited to us in the sacrifice of his death, that we may be regenerated by his Spirit; and thus being born again, may we devote ourselves wholly to thee, and so glorify thy name in this world, that we may at length be partakers of that glory which the same, thine only-begotten Son, has acquired for us.—Amen.

theology was in full bloom,"[43] the evidence points to (a) instead of (b) as the faithful representation of the Reformed tradition.

The scriptural evidence on which synod adopted the first point is disappointing given the theological credentials of its pre-advisory committee.[44] It is never a good idea for a major ecclesiastical assembly to do study committee tasks in the short space of two weeks. It is hard to avoid the impression that in this instance, even those who were among the most competent theologians, historians, and exegetes in the Christian Reformed Church at that time, produced a statement that was done in haste and without the thoughtful exegetical care that is required in a weighty ecclesiastical matter. Was the appeal to the Reformed confessions and theologians more persuasive?

43 This is the stock phrase with which the *PACCG* three times introduces their quotations from Calvin, Van Mastricht, and Ursinus.

44 Members of the pre-advisory committee were: Dr. Y. P. De Jong, Dr. C. Bouma, Rev. E. Van Halsema, Rev. T. Vander Ark, Rev. A. Bliek; and elders S. Dekker, J. Verbrugge, and J. T. Brandsma; Prof. Louis Berkhof served as the faculty advisor. Dr. Ymen Peter De Jong received a doctorate in 1913 from the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam; Dr. Clarence Bouma, who taught apologetics at Calvin Theological Seminary from 1924-1952, had additional degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary (BD, 1918), Princeton University (AM, 1919), Harvard Divinity School (ThD, 1921), and the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam (1923); Rev. Emo Van Halsema went on to receive a ThM from Union Theological Seminary in 1933. Notable gifted theological minds at the 1924 Synod were Dietrich H. Kromminga, Professor of Church History at Calvin Seminary from 1924 to 1947, and Herman Kuiper who did graduate work at Princeton Seminary (1915) and received a ThD from the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, in 1923; his dissertation topic: *Calvin on Common Grace* (Goes, The Netherlands: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1928). One cannot help wondering why Kuiper was not appointed to the preadvisory committee. Surely, no one at the 1924 Synod was more qualified than he? Does anyone know more about a topic than someone who has just completed and defended a doctoral dissertation on it? One wonders: Had the *PACCG*'s work already been completed even before synod met? A closer look at documents used by key classes such as Grand Rapids East and Grand Rapids West in their deliberations *before* synod met might be revealing and raise important church order questions.

B. Reformed Confessions

The only confessional documents appealed to by the *PACCG* were the Canons of Dort, II.5 and III/IV.8 and 9. These statements are said to "deal with the universal offer of the Gospel" and are simply stated without any further explanation or commentary.

> Moreover, it is the promise of the Gospel that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be announced and declared without differentiation or discrimination to all nations and all people, to whom God in His good pleasure sends the Gospel. (II, 5)

> Nevertheless, all who are called through the Gospel are called seriously. For seriously and most genuinely God makes known in His Word what is pleasing to Him: that those who are called should come to Him. Seriously He also promises rest for their souls and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe.… The fact that many who are called through the ministry of the Gospel do not come and are not brought to conversion must not be blamed on the Gospel, nor on Christ, who is offered through the Gospel, nor on God who calls them through the Gospel and even bestows various gifts on them. (III and IV, 8 and 9)

Do these passages from the Canons really teach what Point 1 claims they teach, namely, "that God comes with a well intended offer of salvation to all men"?[45]

We must be clear at the outset about the real issue here. If *PACCG* was only interested in providing confessional grounds for the broad idea "that besides the saving grace of God, shown only to the elect unto eternal life, there is a certain kind of favor, or grace of God which He shows to His creatures in general," a claim which could have legitimately appealed to Matthew 5:45 and Acts 14:17, then a confessional appeal *could* have been made to Canons III/IV.4: "There is, to be sure, a certain light of nature remaining in all people after the fall, by virtue of which they retain some notions about God, natural things, and the difference between what is moral and immoral, and

45 In what follows I rely on the analysis given by Blacketer, "The Three Points in Most Parts Reformed." Page references to his article will be provided in parentheses within the text.

demonstrate a certain eagerness for virtue and for good outward behavior." Honesty here would also have required adding the rest of this article and admitting "in fact, that they [human beings] do not use [the light of nature] rightly even in matters of nature and society. Instead, in various ways they completely distort this light, whatever its precise character, and suppress it in unrighteousness. In doing so all people render themselves without excuse before God." Recognizing the *limits* of natural revelation and common grace would have been appropriate in Point 1, but synod chose to go in a different direction by appealing to a "well-meant offer of the gospel" as a ground for the doctrine of common grace and making only an incomplete affirmative declaration.

With understated, gentle critique, Blacketer calls this link "problematic," noting that "Reformed theology has generally been reticent to connect any common or universal grace with the process of salvation, particularly since the Remonstrant party, the Arminians, conceived of common grace as a factor that made all individuals capable of responding to the gospel call" (39). It is more than "problematic"; it is confused and misleading. Linking the two "graces" mixes soteriological doctrine with the doctrine of creation and providence. But what about the idea of a well-meant offer itself; can it be justified as consistent with classic Reformed soteriology? Not according to Blacketer: "A historical examination of the issue will demonstrate that at this point the synod introduced a quite debatable doctrine into the church, and in doing so misinterpreted the confessions and prominent Reformed theologians. The result was that the ministers Hoeksema and Danhof were condemned, in part, for defending the proper interpretation of the Reformed confessions" (39). Blacketer does not defend the wholesale rejection of the doctrine of common grace, only that Hoeksema and Danhof's "repudiation of the well-meant offer is much more defensible from a historical and confessional perspective." The Christian Reformed Church, he concludes, "was left with a doctrine that is of doubtful logical coherence, given the soteriological framework confessed in the Canons of Dort, and . . . does not find support among leading theological figures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (39).

Canons II.5, cited by the *PACCG,* clearly state that the gospel should be preached to all "without differentiation or discrimination"

(*promiscue et indiscriminatim annunciari*). But this universal *missionary mandate to call* all nations to repent and believe the gospel is not a universal divine *offer* and, according to Blacketer, using the terms "call" and "offer" synonymously as the synod did is a historical as well as logical error (40). The word "offer" does not appear in Canons II.5 but in Canons III/IV.9 where we encounter a distinction between "call" and "offer": "The fact that many who are *called* through the ministry of the gospel do not come and are not brought to conversion must not be blamed on the gospel, nor on Christ, who is *offered* through the gospel [*in Christo per evangelium oblato*], nor on God, who *calls* them through the gospel and even bestows various gifts on them, but on the people themselves who are *called* . . . " (emphasis added). Blacketer points out that the Latin term *oblato*, "a participial form of the Latin word *offero*, [is] frequently translated with its English cognate, *offer*. But this is not the primary meaning of the Latin verb" (44). "Rather, its most basic meanings include: to put in a person's path, to cause to be encountered; to show, reveal, exhibit; to present as something to be taken note of, to bring or force to someone's attention" (44-45).[46]

Blacketer's conclusion is careful and modest: "Thus, to interpret this article as teaching that all persons who hear the gospel are *confronted* with Christ, or that they encounter Christ in the gospel, is at least as plausible as the assertion that such people are *offered* Christ and salvation through Christ in the preaching of the gospel" (45, emphasis original). Why is this subtle distinction between *confront* or *encounter* on the one hand, and *offer* on the other, of importance?

To answer this question, we need to look at Canons III/IV.8, cited by the *PACCG*, and the notion of a "serious call": "Nevertheless, all who are called through the Gospel are called seriously (*serio vocantur*). For seriously and most genuinely (*Serio enim et verissime*) God makes known in His Word what is pleasing to Him: that those who are called should come to Him and believe . . ." Once again, Point 1 seems to suggest that *call* and *offer* are synonymous and that the Canons here teach that "God genuinely offers salvation to all who hear

46 Blacketer cites the following as his source: P. G. W. Glare, ed., *Oxford Latin Dictionary,* corrected ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), s.v. "offero." Blacketer adds: "It is not until the eighth through tenth definitions that the sense of the modern English word *offer* comes through" (45n29).

the gospel, including the reprobate" (41). The reason for dwelling on the precise meaning of the term "offer" and the expression "called seriously" is that this is exactly the language of the Remonstrants! The Remonstrants taught that "whomever God calls to salvation, he calls seriously (*serio vocat*), that is, with a sincere and completely unhypocritical intention and will to save; . . . " (41). Canons III/IV.8, 9 use Remonstrant language but without sharing the Remonstrant understanding and definition of terms (42). That the Dortian fathers intentionally distanced themselves from the Arminian position is clear from III/IV.9 where they utilize the very distinction we introduced above in our discussion of Ezekiel 18:23 between God's *decretive* and *preceptive* will, to say that "many who are called through the ministry of the Gospel do not come and are not brought to conversion." Although the language of *decretive* and *preceptive* will is not found in Canons III/IV.8, 9, it is accurate to say that III/IV.8, like II.5, is speaking of God's *preceptive* will; God calls the followers of Christ to preach the gospel to all people, with urgency and seriousness. And then, although III/IV.9 avoids any reference to the decree of election and reprobation because its concern is to absolve God and the gospel of blame in the failure of people to repent and believe, it cannot be used to say something contrary to its own defining statement in Canons I.6: "That some receive the gift of faith from God, and others do not receive it proceeds from God's eternal decree." What is most striking about the synod's use of Canons III/IV.9 and the appeal to the word *offero* there, is that the article itself is a repudiation of the notion of a "well-meant offer." I am in full agreement with Blacketer when he concludes his discussion of a universal, a general well-meant offer of the gospel, even to the reprobate: "But in fact, these passages speak of no such thing" (40). If we are keeping score, after considering the scriptural evidence and now the confessional evidence produced by the *PACCG*, position (a) rather than position (b) is vindicated by the scriptural and confessional texts given in support of (b).

C. Reformed Theologians

After its appeal to eight texts from Scripture and two from the Canons of Dort, the *PACCG* turns to two passages from Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian* Religion and one from Petrus van Mastricht's

Theoretica-practica theologica.[47] The Calvin quotations properly support the first part of Point 1, namely, "that besides the saving grace of God, shown only to the elect unto eternal life, there is a certain kind

47 The passages are:

> And no one need ask at this point what relationship the Spirit has with the wicked who are estranged from God. Because when it is said that the Spirit of God dwells only in the heart of the believer, that must be understood as the Spirit of sanctification, through which we are dedicated as temples to God. Notwithstanding of this, He fills, moves, and invigorates all things by virtue of the Spirit, and that according to the peculiar nature which each class of beings has received by the law of creation. But if the Lord has been pleased to assist us by the work and ministry of the ungodly in physics, dialectics, mathematics, and other similar sciences, let us avail ourselves of it, lest by neglecting the gifts of God spontaneously offered to us, we be justly punished for our sloth. (*Institutes*, I.ii.16)

> For we see how He visits those who cultivate virtue with many temporal blessings. Not that that external image of virtue in the least merits His favor, but He is pleased thus to show how much He delights in true righteousness, since He does not leave even the outward semblance of it to go unrewarded. Hence it follows, as we lately observed, that those virtues, or rather images of virtues, of whatever kind, are divine gifts, since there is nothing in any degree praiseworthy which proceeds not from Him. (*Institutes*, III.xiv.2)

> From this there arises a three-fold kind of love of God toward the creatures: one general, Psalm 104:31 and 145:9, through which He created, upholds and directs, Psalm 36:7 and 147:9. A common, which indeed reaches out to men in particular, not to all and each in particular; but even so to all kinds, without distinction, reprobates and the elect, regardless of what sort or race they may be. To all these He distributes His gifts which are recorded for us in Hebrews 6:4,5; 1 Corinthians 13:1,2. (Van Mastricht, *Theoretica-practica theologica,* 1.2.17.ix)

Quotations, including references, are taken from the English translation of the 1924 CRC *Acts of Synod*, 127-28. It needs to be noted that the first Calvin reference is incorrect in the English translation of the *Acts*; the original Dutch has it correct: it is *Institutes*, II.ii.16.

of favor, or grace of God which He shows to His creatures in general." But they say nothing about a "well-meant offer of the gos- pel." Furthermore, the focus on the well-meant offer of the gospel deflects attention away from Calvin's chief point: "Neglecting the gifts of God spontaneously offered to us," gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit "according to the peculiar nature which each class of beings has received by the law of creation" is an affront to God[48] and makes us guilty of the sin of sloth and deserving to be "justly punished." The *PACCG* did not serve the church well when it failed to even mention Calvin's important qualifications later in this same paragraph of the *Institutes.* Do not make too much of "great power to comprehend truth under the elements of this world," he warns, because "all this capacity to understand, with the understanding that follows upon it, is an unstable and transitory thing in God's sight, when a solid founda- tion of truth does not underlie it." All human capacities and gifts are corrupted. "Not that the gifts could become defiled by themselves, seeing that they came from God. But to defiled man these gifts were no longer pure, and from them he could derive no praise at all." Calvin's intention is hardly to highlight the wonders of these universal gifts for their own sake or to dwell on the persons to whom they are given, but to challenge *believers* to fully honor the *Giver* of the gifts. The link between God's general favor and the grace of sanctification is directed toward *believers* and not toward the reprobate. Ultimately, it has *saving* grace and the elect in view. Let's call the use of the Calvin passages a draw. Perspective (a) has the advantage with respect to the first passage; perspective (b) has Calvin on its side when the Reformer speaks of "external" righteousness and even the "images of virtues" as divine gifts and therefore "praiseworthy."

The Van Mastricht quotation is more complicated. First, the new English translation of Van Mastricht includes some differences in translation compared with the translation of the 1924 *Acts* given in note 33.[49] The Dutch translation of Van Mastricht used by the *PACCG*

48 Earlier, in *Institutes* II.ii.15, Calvin stated that despising God's gift in all human knowledge, "wherever it shall appear" is to "dishonor the Spirit of God," even to "contemn and reproach the Spirit himself" (Battles translation). Additional quotations from the *Institutes* are from the Battles version.

49 Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology,* trans. Todd M.

translated the Latin *universalis as algemeene*, which the ET of the 1924 *Acts* then translated as "general"; the new ET translates it better as "universal." By contrast, the Dutch translation turned *communis* into *gemeene*; the ET of the 1924 *Acts* rendered this as "common" as did the new ET.

But, it should be noted, this article in Van Mastricht is not about *grace*: it is about a threefold *love* of God. By citing it the *PACCG* confuses the church about the very matter that was at issue in the conflict with Hoeksema and Danhof: Is it correct to use the language of *grace* in speaking of the providential blessings of God that all people experience? The confusion is compounded here when the *PACCG* and synod quote Van Mastricht only in part, failing to include his important *third love*: "A love proper to the elect, by which he dispenses saving benefits to them, benefits that accompany salvation (Heb. 6:9), *which accordingly are different from nature and natural benefits. For it is most terrible to confuse nature and grace.*"[50] Confusing nature and grace is exactly what Point 1 does when it uses the soteriological notion of an offer of grace to provide grounds for the natural, providential provision of God for his creation.[51] It is not hard to see why the emphasized words in this quotation were not incorporated in the *PACCG* grounds for Point 1; but it could also be considered a withholding of exculpatory evidence and therefore unworthy of a major ecclesiastical assembly.

In addition, the use of 1.2.17.ix is curious since Van Mastricht explicitly deals with universal and common grace in 1.2.17.xv and xvi respectively.[52] Perhaps this makes little difference in the end because Van Mastricht employs the same threefold distinction for grace that

Rester, ed. Joel Beeke, vol. 2, *Faith in the Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 351 (1.2.17.ix).

50 Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology,* 2:351(emphasis added).

51 The Dutch Reformed theologian Klaas Schilder once argued that the term "common grace" *(algemeene genade)* was scientifically irresponsible. "It is," he noted, "a catastrophic misjudgment to conclude from the preserving activity of God's love, or the limitation of his wrath, a general love and thus, in a culturally optimistic myopia, to exclude the reality of God's wrath" (Klaas Schilder, *Is de Term "Algemeene Genade" Wetenschappelijk Verantwoord?* [Kampen: Zalsman, 1947], 68-69).

52 Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology,* 2:353-54.

he did earlier for love: universal grace, common grace, grace for the elect. Nonetheless, a close look at Van Mastricht's discussion of grace would have helped the *PACCG* and synod be more careful and precise in their terminology. Van Mastricht describes universal grace as that "by which God dispenses natural things to each and every creature and is thus named the Savior of all (1 Tim. 4:10), the one who saves beasts and men (Ps. 36:6) and takes care that his sun rises over the field of the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45)." Included here are human "free choice and whatever sort of strength he has for natural good, and also encourages that strength by its influence."[53] Van Mastricht distinguished universal grace from "common grace, by which he dispenses moral goods, particularly to men, but indiscriminately, to the elect and the reprobate." Included here are "the virtues of the intellect, such as ingenuity, wisdom and prudence (Ex. 31:3), as well as the virtues of the will, the ethical virtues (Luke 18:11), of which kind are all the virtues of pagans and unbelievers."[54] Van Mastricht also includes here "external calling to participation in Christ through the proclamation of the Word (Ps. 147:19-20; Matt. 20:16), and also internal calling through some sort of illumination, and all those good things which are conspicuous in temporary believers."[55] The *PACCG* was correct in appealing to Van Mastricht, even with respect to linking common grace to the preaching of the gospel, but lost the accuracy and usefulness of this appeal by failing to follow through and utilizing his careful distinctions. The *PACCG* also could have strengthened its case with respect to Point 3 by referring to this passage, but it did not.[56] Most telling, however, is the *PACCG's* inattention to Van Mastricht's crucial point in the final two sentences of his paragraph on "universal grace": "And all these things, although they come forth from the gratuitous love of God, and thus from grace, yet in the use of Scripture, and also of all ancient orthodoxy, *rarely and less properly are they called grace.* For the latter tradition cautiously distinguished nature

53 Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology,* 2:353-54.

54 Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology,* 2:353-54; careful attention to Van Mastricht could have cautioned the *PACCG* from appealing to 1 Tim.4:10 as they did. That Van Mastricht uses the words "Savior" and "save" in an extraordinary way here should have slowed down the *PACCG.*

55 Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology,* 2:354.

56 Another irony.

from grace against the Pelagians."[57] This statement alone vindicates Hoeksema and Danhof; this was exactly the point of their protest.

When the *PACCG* brought Van Mastricht into the controversy as a co-belligerent against Danhof and Hoeksema, they did the two brothers and the church an injustice. This was a tragic missed opportunity. Van Mastricht's caution against using the word "grace" to describe God's loving providential care of his creation was the precise point at issue for Hoeksema and Danhof: "Don't diminish God's free sovereign grace to the elect by speaking of it in universal and non-redemptive language!" The Synod of Kalamazoo failed to faithfully represent the Reformed tradition to the Christian Reformed Church. This failure is even more painful, in my view, because Van Mastricht's views could also have served as an open door for nuancing Hoeksema and Danhof's views. It could have been pointed out to them that there is an appropriate way of speaking about grace with respect to God's universal, providential care of creation.

The cosmos is contingent, not necessary. After the Fall, God's providential upholding of all things is therefore *gracious*, that is, it is a *gift.* Creation's continued existence is not *necessary.* That which *is* need not *be.* In addition, there is a gracious *mercy* in God's maintaining creation when it would have been perfectly just for God in his wrath against sin to destroy it. When Hoeksema and Danhof correctly challenged the term "grace" for this work of divine providence, they still needed to find the language to underscore this contingency, this gratuitousness of existence itself, this mercy in God's maintaining his creation. An open conversation between brothers in the Reformed faith who affirmed common grace and those who challenged it, carefully examining the great Reformed thinkers of the past, could have borne fruit for both by developing a carefully constructed statement on common grace. Such a statement could have made sure to distinguish nature and grace, providence and election, and affirm the gratuitous contingency of creation.[58]

Scoring the *PACCG*'s use of writings from the pens of two "Reformed writers from the time when Reformed theology was in full

57 Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology,* 2:354 (emphasis added).

58 See the appendix to this article (forthcoming in part 2) where I suggest such a revision of Point 1.

bloom" is, to be most generous, at best a draw for the (b) position of the Kalamazoo Synod. Once again, it is especially the failure to do justice to the passages cited *in their fuller context* that gives weight in favor of position (a).

We must conclude that the evidence provided by the *PACCG* does not support the statement of Point 1. It is abundantly clear that Hoeksema and Danhof's views did not deserve the derisive dismissal given by the *PACCG* when it referred to the writings they had cited as "twisted expressions" (*gewraakte utidrukkingen*).[59] Such a judgment is scandalously unjust and unworthy of an ecclesiastical assembly.

On Points 2 and 3—God's restraint of sin and the performance of "civic righteousness" by the non-elect—the *PACCG* and synod, in my judgment, are on firmer ground. The issues raised by Danhof and Hoeksema deserve further attention, and a further examination of the scriptural, confessional, and theological texts used to support the conclusions of Kalamazoo would be useful but beyond the scope of this article. We will review some of the issues that could be covered in such an additional study in section 4 where we consider Rev. Henry Danhof's protest to the 1924 Synod.

In part 2 we will also examine the legacy of 1924's unfinished agenda, notably in the "case" of Calvin Theological Seminary missions professor Harold Dekker in the 1960s and the controversy about the "love of God."

59 *1924 CRC Acts of Synod,* 127.

Introduction to the Translation of H. Bouwman Regarding Major Ecclesiastical Assemblies

Barrett Gritters and Douglas Kuiper

Mr. Peter Vander Schaaf offers the *PRTJ* another valuable translation from the Dutch church order expert Harm Bouwman (1863-1933). Readers may recall two other significant translations of Bouwman published in *PRTJ*; one on the Sabbath (November 2020) and another on ecclesiastical holidays (April 2021). Mr. Vander Schaaf not only translated these sections of Bouwman, but also gave a brief biographical sketch of Bouwman and some of his own analysis of the works. Officebearers who have not read these will be well served in their work to go back to them (www.prcts.org/journal).

The present translation is Bouwman's treatment of the major assemblies. Those familiar with the Church Order of Dordrecht will find this to be a treatment of Articles 29-31. Bouwman explains the historical development of major assemblies (classes and synods), the nature and necessity of the denomination, and more. Especially important is Bouwman's treatment of the jurisdiction of the broader assemblies. The reader will find his explanation of "ecclesiastical matters" (at length), the "ecclesiastical manner" (more briefly), and the right of protest and appeal. These are some of the most important questions of Reformed church government.

The translation of this main section of Bouwman stops where one could wish it began: The binding nature of the decisions of the broader assemblies. Brother VanderSchaaf hopes to provide the translation of this next section (paragraph 62) in the future.

Bouwman offers many interesting, even surprising, conclusions. To whet your appetite:

1. Officebearers derive their authority to rule from Christ (not from the congregation).
2. Along with the power to preach, administer the sacraments,

and discipline, the power to choose officebearers is one of the three main powers Christ grants to the church. These powers are given directly by Christ to the church (there are implications regarding whether females may participate in this exercise of ecclesiastical *rule*).

3. There is the surprising assertion that non-officeholders may be delegated to the broader assemblies.
4. It was common for synodical assemblies to celebrate the Lord's Supper, but always in and under the supervision of the host church and on the Lord's Day.
5. Bouwman encouraged the assemblies to communicate with the government, but claimed that this was better done by the church members who have been well taught by the church.
6. Bouwman could not be clearer in his conviction that decisions of major assemblies are binding, which forbids anyone from resisting them in a revolutionary manner. If this rule is not followed, an appellant can bring the entire ecclesiastical life to a standstill. There is a great deal that will interest every member of the church, especially officebearers.

A few notes about translation:

1. Bouwman used long sentences and paragraphs, as was the Dutch custom. This translation has divided long sentences and paragraphs into shorter ones.
2. Anything in italics, quotes, or parenthesis in this translation, were in italics, quotes, or parenthesis also in the original. Anything in brackets is not Bouwman's but has been added by the translator or editors. This includes Dutch words or expansions of the footnotes.
3. Regarding footnotes:
   a. Bouwman's footnotes are not translated into English, because they refer to specific Dutch sources available to him when he wrote. For the reader's benefit, the English translation of the titles is included in brackets. The footnote style has been changed to conform to modern convention

(that is, titles are put in italics, and volume and page numbers presented in the style 2:111).

b. Bouwman, in keeping with the conventions of his day, put the footnote number in the body of the work prior to the quotation, rather than after it; we retain this distinctive feature.

c. Footnotes that were not found in Bouwman's work, but were inserted by the translator or editors are so noted.

4. Three Dutch words should be specially noted: *ambstdragers* has been translated "officebearers." *Zelfstandige* (and related forms) is usually translated "autonomous." *Meerdere* and *mindere* present a greater problem. There are perhaps three options. They could be translated "higher" and "lower," or "major" and "minor," or "broader" and "narrower." We have avoided the first and used the latter two—usually "broader" and "narrower." Reformed church polity does not posit an authority in the classis and synod that is higher or greater than the consistory.

The Polity of the Church as It Must Exist according to God's Word and Be Put into Practice

from *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht*

by H. Bouwman
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Second Book.
Second Part: The Church and Her Government

Chapter I. The Church Gatherings in General. The Church Federation.

§ 58. The organization of the church develops.

The church has need of leadership and care. So not only are the service of the Word and sacraments necessary, but also bodies who watch in Christ's name over the maintenance of order and discipline. According to the rules given by the apostles in the Lord's name, men must be appointed in every church as overseers whose task is to hold spiritual oversight over the congregation and to see to her edification.

But because the churches are one in Christ, it is vital that an interrelationship be maintained to ensure unity and purity of teaching and the maintaining of the Lord's ordinances. In particular the Reformed, who do not depend on earthly powers for the life of the church but who look for their strength to Christ their exalted King, have correctly understood the need for an organization that has authority, by which the freedom of the Christian, the autonomy of the local church, and the solidarity and cooperation of the churches come to realization.

Already before Calvin, Oecolampadius, Capito, and others taught the necessity of an organization of congregations to maintain order

and discipline in the congregation. However, their attempts to arrive at a pure church institution were not realized. Zwingli had completed the organization of his church by introducing a synod, made up of the ministers and representatives of the government, to which the people of the congregation could bring their concerns. But Calvin was the first correctly to think through and sketch in what Scripture taught regarding the church, church offices, and church government; and from the beginning, as time and opportunity permitted, put his thoughts into practice.

He judged that, according to Scripture, the church's authority rests with the church herself, that is, with the believers who make up the church. However, that authority is not exercised by all the people of the congregation, but by the overseers of the congregation who work in the name of Christ and by His appointment. For the spiritual oversight of the congregation Calvin not only wanted preachers who served for life, but also overseers who were taken from among the people of the congregation, who served for specific times, and who watched over the spiritual wellbeing of the congregation with the shepherds and teachers, maintaining oversight and discipline over her.

So, the consistory of Geneva came into being. Next to the meeting of the consistory, the company of preachers was maintained, but no classis or synod. For that Geneva was too small. However, every week a meeting was held in Geneva to explain Scripture with an eye to purity and unity in teaching. In Emden an assembly was organized, a gathering of ministers in emulation of Geneva, that oversaw the lives of the ministers and the condition of the congregations. This assembly examined candidates for the ministry of the Word, held disputations, and took decisions regarding questions and disputes that were brought to it.

In the refugee congregation of London, beginning in 1550, monthly meetings of the teachers were held. In 1570 the assembly constituted itself into a monthly meeting of the preachers and elders of the Dutch, French, and Italian congregations which decided matters that the congregations themselves were not able to finish.[1]

1 *Werken der Marnix Vereen.* [*Works of Marnix Vereeniging*] 1:105, 127, 132, 135, 184; Von Hoffmann, *Das Kirchenverfassungsrecht* [*The Church Constitutional Polity*] S. 64, 126.

In France the Reformation could develop without the obstructing influence of the government. Early on, preachers of neighboring churches met to care for the interests of the church, although without delegation as that is now understood. However, because of the great expansion of church life, the need for a synodical federation was soon felt. According to the statistics that were compiled by the gathering of the Reformed at Poissy in 1561, no fewer than 2150 congregations existed for whose wellbeing a synodical organization was decidedly necessary.

Beza recounts[2] that in 1558 the congregation of Paris sent Antoine de Chandieu to the church of Poitiers for a special occasion. There he took part in the celebration of the Lord's Supper that was being held at that time in which not only the congregation took part, but also various preachers who were there from neighboring congregations. When the ministers gathered after the Lord's Supper and dealt together with subjects regarding doctrine, discipline, and order, the thought arose: What a blessing it would be if all the French churches in unity could adopt a confession of faith and a church order, and what a great evil it would be for the church, and how much division and trouble would arise if the churches could not agree on a common confession and a church order. This small conference of preachers instructed Chandieu to ask the church of Paris to take steps toward calling a synod. Consequently, the congregation of Paris sent a letter to the churches of France seeking agreement with the plan and asking that they send delegates to Paris.

So, in the middle of a terrible persecution, the delegates of the churches came together on May 26, 1559, in France's capital, in the suburb of St. Germain, to settle matters of the French churches and to draw up a confession and church order. The *Discipline Ecclésiastique* set forth the independence of the local church and dealt with synodical gatherings in which delegates of local churches come together to look after the wellbeing of all the churches together. Thus, independentism was avoided and the unity of the churches was maintained without falling into hierarchy. The provincial and national synods were introduced at the same time, but the ordering into classes took place only

2 Beza, *Histoire Ecclésiastique des églises réformée* [*Ecclesiastical History of the Reformed Churches*], Anvers, 1580, 1:49.

at the Synod of Nimes (1572, Art. 11), after this had already been accomplished by the Dutch churches in 1571 at the Synod of Emden.

The Dutch churches understood the need to organize the churches from the beginning. The Churches Under the Cross in the southern Netherlands met repeatedly from 1561 onwards. They borrowed the important concepts contained in the church orders of Geneva and France.

The refugee congregations in England and Germany extended organization further, while the Conventicle of Wesel developed general rules for the life of the churches. In Emden (1571) the church federation was more precisely defined. The summons letter of van Marnix was introduced as the primary initiative for holding a synod so that the churches would strive for unity "to the glory of God Almighty and the building up of His beloved congregation." In agreeing with the summons letter and in appointing delegates, the churches had already expressed agreement to forming a united federation. Because they had sent their delegates with the agreement that they were to deliberate in conformity with the matters stated in the letter of summons, it was as if they themselves had met in Emden. In the unity of this arrangement the rights of the local church regarding government and discipline were to be limited somewhat. Also, means were to be put in place to protect the liberty of the people of the church, to limit arbitrariness, and to protect the communion of the churches—the latter by examining candidates, by approving the work of the consistories in calling and censuring ministers, and of maintaining the confession and the order of the churches. The Synod of Emden did not impose this organization upon the churches, but the churches agreed on it in common accord. As the Reformed were one in confession, their unity rested on that unity and everything regarding church government that had been derived from God's Word had already been accepted.

There was unity on these principles: All authority rests with the churches themselves under Christ the only head and is exercised by the consistory. All the churches and all the ministers are equal in authority and position and must exercise their offices according to the royal law of the Lord of the congregations. Each local church is independent within the boundaries of her jurisdiction and has the right to establish order and practice for her own congregation. But because the churches

are one in Christ and in confession and are called to put that unity into practice outside of themselves as much as possible, they also have the authority to make rules that, in conformity with God's Word and with the common confession, apply for the life and the wellbeing of all the churches together. For these reasons the Synod of Emden had the authority to make a common church order for the Dutch Reformed churches. The purpose was that all the Dutch churches would combine their authority with an eye to organic cooperation. The churches were bound to live faithfully to their church order because they had written and adopted it themselves.

Because, as Dr. F. L. Rutgers has correctly shown,[3] the later church orders were essentially the same as that of Emden, and because we thus have the same church order, even if revised according to the needs of later times by common agreement, the current church order binds all the churches that have adopted it. This was easy for the Reformed because, according to the conviction of all who had drawn them up, this rule conformed with God's Word and the [Belgic] Confession and promoted the wellbeing of the churches and of her people.

§ 59. The Organization of the Church is Necessary

Thus the organization of the church developed. This is completely in accord with the essence of the church. She is a holy gathering of true believers in Jesus Christ. She consists of people whom Christ gathered and brought there by His Word and Spirit. Christ himself builds the congregation on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Matt. 16:19; 1 Cor. 3:11; Eph. 2:20). Christ is the head; the congregation is His body which lives out of Him, and by Him is brought together and receives His washing (Eph. 4:16; Col. 2:19).

Each local church is an autonomous,[4] complete church, but no local church is, in the power of her birth out of Christ, *the* church. Rather, she is a manifestation of Christ's church in a certain place. For that reason she is spiritually one with the entire church over the whole world, as the Belgic Confession declares, "Furthermore, this

3 Dr. Rutgers, *De geldigheid van de oude Kerkenoreninge* [*The Validity of the Old Church Order*], 17ff.

4 The Dutch words *zelfstandige* and *zelfstandigheid* have been consistently translated with "autonomous" or "autonomy." -Ed.

holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed over the whole world; and yet is joined and united with heart and will, by the power of faith, in one and the same spirit" (Art. 27).

This obligation is binding especially whenever the church comes to manifestation in other places in such a way that she is recognized as the church of Christ and confesses the same faith. Unity of confession is thus the necessary basis on which all ecclesiastical fellowship and all ecclesiastical correspondence must stand. Where unity is found, ecclesiastical correspondence should also extend as broadly as possible.

Practically, however, all the churches in the entire world cannot live together in a close federation because the circumstances in which they operate, the great distances that separate them, and differences in language do not always allow that. But correspondence among churches that have the same confession is certainly possible. With churches of the same confession in the same country or otherwise near to each other, working together in a classical or synodical federation is possible. With churches that are far removed from each other, correspondence is only possible by means of reciprocal agreement in weighty matters, by written exchange of ideas, sending representatives, and so forth. Ecclesiastical correspondence normally means that churches hold each other in high regard in the weightiest matters, occasionally discuss varying interests with each other, seek each other's opinion on important points of doctrine and life, and to that end send representatives to each other. With churches of the same language which live close to each other, however, a closer union is possible.

The Reformed have defended the necessity of the church federation especially over against the Romish church and the Independents. The Romish church holds the church to be a means of salvation through which Christ distributes His grace to the world. The church as institute is before the church as organism and stands above the people; salvation is entirely dependent on the church. That visible church institute with the clerical hierarchy forms the mystical, intermediary link by which the person comes into fellowship with God. The entire priesthood is one. Where the pope is, there is the church. The clergy in each locality represent the greater unity that is made up of the pope and the bishops. The Romish church teaches that the pope is "the successor of Peter, the

prince of the apostles, and the true vicar of Christ, the head of the whole church and father and teacher of all Christians, and to the pope in Saint Peter and by our Lord Jesus Christ all authority is given to shepherd, to lead, and to govern the entire church."[5] "According to the ordaining of the Lord the Romish church has, above all others, primacy over the normal offices (ordinary power). This true episcopal jurisdiction of the Roman pope is an immediate authority, to which the shepherds and the believers of every order and rank, as well as each individually, all together are obligated to hierarchical submission (subordination) and true obedience, not only in matters of faith and morals, but also in matters of discipline and governance of the church over the entire world, so that, while the unity of the fellowship and the confession remains, the church of Christ is one flock under one shepherd."[6] The prelacy continuously renews itself through apostolic succession, and apostolic authority is communicated to the priests by ordination. The councils or the general gatherings derive their authority from the bishops who meet therein, because the leadership of the councils and the final judgment over their decisions rests with the pope.[7]

Over against this conception, which places the essence of the church in the office of priest, the Reformers taught that the essence of the visible church lies in the believers, the members of the body of Christ. Christ is the head of the body, from whom the entire body receives its growth. Christ rules His people by His Word and Spirit. And He has given His congregation offices and ministries for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ, so that the congregation is organically united and led, living according to the law of her King who is in heaven.

Holy Scripture knows nothing of a hierarchical power of the pope and of a transfer Peter's authority to bishops, and from bishops to councils.[8] That Peter was bishop of Rome for twenty-five years, designated his own successor, and conferred his authority upon this person

5 Conc. *Vatic. Const. Pastor aeternus*, c. 3. [This refers to the constitution of the Vatican Council -Ed.]

6 L.c. [Location cited; see previous footnote].

7 Hinschius, *Kirchenrecht* [*Church Polity*] III, S. 333-482; 603-654; Dr. Fr. Heiner, *Kathol. Kirchenrecht* [*Catholic Church Polity*], 1912, 1:374.

8 See Part I of that [the previous] work, 336ff.

is nothing but legend that appeared only later, to give the authority of the pope the appearance of a legal title.[9] During the apostolic period there was no mention whatever of bishops like that. Certainly, the apostles installed elders in every congregation (Acts 14:23) who were called both "presbyters" and also "bishops." These bishops were not bishops in the Romish sense, with an all-encompassing authority over all churches. Rather, they were leaders of the congregation who, in the name of Christ and according to His Word, cared for souls; taught the congregation's members; and admonished, comforted, and exercised oversight over the congregation's worship, teaching, and life. Moreover, the functions of the presbyters and the bishops were the same everywhere (Acts 20:28, Tit. 1:7, 1 Tim. 3:1, 2:4, 5:17-19).[10]

Over against Rome, and later also over against the Collegialist, the Reformed maintained that the church does not merely hold her existence as a member or a part of the larger whole. Rather, the local congregation is autonomous; she freely chooses and calls her ministers. Although she is in the church federation, she keeps her essential freedom and is in a completely equal position to the other churches.

The collegial system conflicts with that fundamental principle. According to collegialism, the national church is a large organization, and local congregations, classes, and provincial synods are subdivisions. At the head of the institute stands the synod. It governs according to the will of most of the members who agree to transfer some of their rights to the national government. That system, in which the sovereignty of the people applies also to the church, is in direct opposition to the scriptural nature of the church and of the church office.

From the beginning the Reformed were so apprehensive of the danger of the lordship of people in the church, that already at the Synod of Emden (1571, Article 1), they declared; "No church shall exercise lordship over another church, no minister of the Word, no elder or deacon shall exercise lordship over the others; but each shall beware of any suspicion or attempt to lord it over the others."

9 Dr. H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* [*Reformed Dogmatics]*, 4:396; Sehling, R.E. Art. Papst, and the literature cited there. [This source refers to articles of the papacy].

10 See Part I of that [the previous] work, 99ff.

On the other hand, this autonomy of the local church may not be understood in the sense of the Independents who believe that each group of believers is independent or on its own and who deny all binding authority to the synodical federation. To be sure, they acknowledge in their Savoy Declaration[11] that the local congregations can come together into conferences or synods "when there are cases of difficulties or division with respect to teaching or church governing which concern the churches in common, or which have to do with the peace, unity, and stability of a church, or when a member or members of a church suffered injustice by a disorderly censure. The delegates of the synod can then give their *advice,* which will be distributed to all the churches concerned. But this synod does not have ecclesiastical authority in a proper sense, or any jurisdiction to exercise any censure over any church or person, or to impose her decisions on churches or officebearers." The Independents agreed with the Westminster Confession as a whole, but had different thoughts regarding church government, and wanted nothing of a binding authority for the major assemblies.

Over against this, the Reformed argued that according to the New Testament each local congregation possess the marks of an autonomous and complete church, with its own service of the Word, sacraments, and discipline. Further, all the people of the church in each locality need to be united in one congregation, and violation of local unity stands in the way of good order, concord, and the proper working of discipline. But also, as Voetius says,[12] "the confederation, more or less complete, as to the essence and the matter considered in itself, must not lack churches well organized in themselves." In very special cases church federation may not be possible: when there is only one church in a specific country, when there is a church on a remote island, or if circumstances of great distress from persecution prevent the formation of a confederation.

But when no overwhelming difficulties stand in the way, it is in accordance with divine order that the local churches unite in a classical or synodical association. This association does not make her into one church but is necessary for her continued existence and well-be-

11 Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* 3:728.

12 *Pol. Eccl*. [*Polity of the Church*] 1:61.

ing. Also, aside from the ecclesiastical community, the gathering of believers in one place is a true and complete church. For the church federation belongs not to the being of the church, but to its wellbeing. Whenever a church is far removed from other churches, or by persecution or government coercion is unable to enter a church federation, that church still has the full right to install officebearers and to conduct the ministry of the Word and sacraments without the help or agreement of other churches. She remains free from any lawful objection to her doing so. For, according to Voetius,[13] the local church is essentially and completely a true church without the corresponding relationship. The congregation would be able to prosper even more when it stood by itself than when in an association which hindered her life. But when there are no overwhelming difficulties, it is in accordance with divine order that the churches unite in a classical and synodical federation.

The foundation of the federation was thus, as Voetius said,[14] first, the divine polity revealed in Scripture, and second, the agreement of the local church. That applies also to a church that was established through different synodical federations of churches. For a church becomes autonomous and complete at the moment that a group of believers organize with the help of and under the leadership of the church federation, and officebearers are installed. Instituting a congregation is not possible without the voluntary agreement of believers; even less is a church federation possible without a congregation joining voluntarily.

That must not be misunderstood. Entering a church federation is voluntary in the sense that no one, no church or state authority, can compel a state to enter a denomination. According to God's Word, the church must decide for herself whether she belongs in a specific denomination and whether that would be to her hurt or advantage. But this freedom is not arbitrariness. Only very significant reasons could legitimize the freedom by which a congregation chooses to remain by herself. It is rightly said "that an autonomous church is an abnormal phenomenon."[15] The Reformed did not derive the denomination from the freedom of the person, but rather considered federation necessary

13 *Pol. Eccl.* 4:127.

14 *Pol. Eccl.* 4:119, 169.

15 Dr. H. G. Kleyn, *Algeme Kerk en plaatselijke gemeente* [*The General Church and Local Congregations],* 19.

because of unity in Christ. No individual church and no individual member can attribute his origin or existence to his own will or to the work of men, but only to Christ's work, who by His Word and Spirit calls to conversion and life, who Himself has implanted the need for the fellowship of the saints, and who Himself has prescribed the rule of life. For that reason, a church may not arbitrarily stand apart by itself but must seek fellowship for its own support, enriching, and edification, as well as that of all churches. Just as believers, having once been incorporated into the church, may not arbitrarily break their band, so also the fellowship of churches may not be broken in other than cases of great necessity.[16]

Following van Gwalter and Erastus, the Remonstrants wanted nothing to do with a denomination in the actual sense. They believed it is good for ministers to come together to discuss ecclesiastical matters, but they rejected an ecclesiastical assembly that can make binding decisions. Attributing ecclesiastical authority to the government, they concluded that synods are permitted but are neither required nor necessary for the church's wellbeing. Whenever a synod needs to convene, the right to call and to lead lies with the government. And if the synod is called to deal with differences of doctrine, she must, with a view toward truth and love, do no violence against or bring into danger those who have other feelings, or those who do not yet know or are able to understand that teaching.[17]

Over against this, the Reformed defended the necessity of the denomination on the following grounds:

a. *The inner unity of the church of Christ.* There is but one church, the mystical body of Christ, whereof all believers, wherever they may find themselves, are members. In their description of the essence of the church, they begin with the one universal Christian church and proceed to the local congregations.[18] The

16 *Voetius, Pol. Eccl. 4:128, 168.*

17 Trigland, *Kerckelijcke Geschiedenissen* [*Church Histories*], 173f; Rogge, *Coolhaes* 1:80; Utenbogaert, *Tractaet van 't Ampt ende Authoriteyt eener H. Christ. Overheydt in Kerckelicke Saeken* [*Treatise on the Office and Authority of A Higher Christian Authority in Ecclesiastical Cases*]. 's Gravenhage, 1610.

18 Belgic Confession, Articles 27-32.

local congregations are local manifestations of the one, mystical body of Christ. Ruardus Acronius writes in his refutation of the Remonstrants, "The parts of the invisible congregation are the individual, invisible churches; but the parts of the visible church are the individual, visible congregations."[19] Just as it is God who changes the times and determines the abode of men, so it is Christ who calls the believers, living in a specific country or place, to His fellowship, and places into them the desire to manifest themselves as church. From the spiritual point of view, the unity is first, and after that the multiplicity. Dr. H. Bavinck says rightly, "Because the congregation is an organism, the head comes before the members. The church as a whole does not come into existence by the atomistic[20] convergence of the various parts. No individual, local congregation emerges autochthonically out of unconsciousness, but is planted by the seed of the word which a church has strewn there. Each local church is thereby, at the same time, an autonomous manifestation of the body of Christ and a part of the great whole."[21]

b. Scripture teaches that *the different churches must help and serve one another*, and that they make decisions at their assemblies that must be followed by the churches that are represented. In the days of the New Testament there was no classical or synodical assembly because no need had come up; being still alive, the apostles could themselves instruct the congregation and serve the churches with counsel through their representatives. Nevertheless, assemblies were held—among others the conventicle at Jerusalem (Acts 15)—where the Spirit led, and which, according to Calvin, was a living

19 *Nootvendich Vertooch*, 2. [This title is so abbreviated that no translation will be given.]

20 The words "atomistic" and "autochthonically" are essentially the same as the Dutch word, and difficult to translate into English. The recent translation of Bavinck presents the words as we do here; see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 373. Possibly "autochthonically" has the idea of "indigenously." -Ed.

21 *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* [*Reformed Dogmatics*] 4:114.

picture of a lawful synod where God's truth alone made an end to all opposition and served for the resolution of all disputes. Paul refers the quarrelsome brothers to the unity of opinion that holds sway in other churches (1 Cor. 11:16). Churches in a specific country worked together for mutual aid (1 Cor. 12:26; 2 Cor. 8:1), for the care of the poor in Jerusalem, and for the purpose of missions. That was impossible apart from the churches understanding their unity in Christ and their calling to be bound together and work together and knowing themselves to be called to unity in doctrine, discipline, and worship. Paul speaks of the mutual faith of the churches and of the calling to encourage and support each other (Rom. 1:8, 11, 12; 15:14: Heb. 3:14; 1 Thess. 5:11; Phil. 1:27). This applies not only to individual believers but also to churches. A local congregation needs neighboring churches for her preservation, expansion, and purity in doctrine and walk. History teaches that an independent church can flourish for a time if there is a minister there who is blessed with exceptional gifts. But when the special circumstances cease, such a church will decline and dissolve into every kind of heresy and sectarianism. Unity in doctrine, discipline, and worship that the congregation must practice; the love and peace that she must maintain; the common interests of the churches regarding missions, training for the ministry, calling and sending of ministers—all require the denomination.

c. The denomination is necessary to *protect the freedom of the congregation and of her members* over against the lording and arbitrariness of officebearers. By the right of appeal to broader gatherings, the individual members can lay their concerns before the judgment of competent and impartial brothers, to obtain justice or to be instructed and admonished in case they are in the wrong. Through working together with other churches, the leaders of a local congregation can be supported and instructed in the proper conduct of their office. In specific cases, when difficulties arise that cannot be resolved locally, broader assemblies can decide what must be done with more impartiality and with more light than the officebearers of the

> local congregation. Whenever the classes and the synod fulfill their purpose and act according to Scripture, they are excellent means for the perfecting of the saints and the building up of the body of Christ.

Thus, we must maintain that each local congregation is an essential, autonomous, and complete church according to God's ordinance, and that when a classical or synodical federation is formed, the congregation remains in possession of all that is necessary to carry out her calling, and is in sole possession of her ecclesiastical estate. That does not detract from the calling of each congregation to seek unity and cooperation with other churches. In the denomination the churches support each other, practice mutual oversight, and do all that is necessary for the good order of the churches, for the freedom of the congregation, and for the maintaining of the confessions, order, and discipline in the churches.

§ 60. The Nature of the Denomination

The principal basis for the denomination is the unity of the churches in Christ. Since the church has a history and has manifested herself in different ways in the various countries of the world, this historical manifestation, in particular her confession, has exerted influence on the nature of the church federation. Practically, then, unity is only possible with churches of a common confession. As Article 2 of the Emden Church Order declared, this common confession is the expression of the churches' mutual commitment and unity. Assent to that confession was a prerequisite to enter and maintain that federation. The confession was properly grounded upon God's Word, expounded the truth that is taught in God's Word, clearly set forward the marks of the true and of the false church, and bound all the churches to God's Word.[22] The Reformed churches in this country [the Netherlands] have from the beginning professed, as Rutgers rightly says,[23] that mutual submission to the confession is "the one indispensable thing" for the entire denomination: "The unity in *ecclesiastical forms* is certainly desirable, but unity *is possible* if that unity in those forms is absent. No

22 Belgic Confession, Article 5, 7, 8, 29, 30; French Confession, Article 25, 29; Scottish Confession, Article 18.

23 F. L. Rutgers, *Het kerkverband* [The Denomination], 55.

one is permitted to enter any ministry unless it has been determined that he will carry out his ministry in agreement with the confession. No broader assembly will be held, without first asking its members regarding their agreement with the confessions. The ministers are obligated to subscribe to the creed, and those who decline, or those who cannot subject themselves in a case of objection against the decision of a broader assembly, are thereby suspended from their office. The members of the church cannot be permitted to the Lord's Supper until after they have made confession of the Reformed faith or, in case of moving from one place to another, have received an attestation of doctrine and life that is sufficient for their being accepted as members of other churches."[24] The unity in confession was thus the agreement of ecclesiastical fellowship.

How does the denomination come into existence? Will the local congregation first appear and be constituted, and then proceed as the generating force of the federation of churches into classes and synods? These questions can generally be answered in the affirmative. Voetius says[25] that just as the absolute precedes the relative and a part precedes the whole, so also a congregation must first exist and her life be ordered before she can enter fellowship with others by an inner unity. There must first be a church before it can enter a relationship with other churches.

But when a congregation in one place is formed with the help of a church or fellowship of churches, then this constituted church is just as autonomous as the other churches who help in her formation. She derives the right and authority to preach the Word, conduct the sacraments, and practice discipline not from the federation of churches, but from Christ, the head of the church. By entering a denomination, the freedom and autonomy of a congregation may not be affected. After all, the federation does not create a new church. The various local congregations are not dissolved and melted together into a classical church. The local congregations are not subdivisions of a larger church such that they are deprived of their freedom and autonomy.

24 *Acta Middelburg 1581*, Art. 43; Dordrecht 1619, Art. 61; Lohman and Rutgers, *De Rechtsbevoegdheid* [*The Jurisdiction*], 1887), 27, 41.

25 *Pol. Eccl*. 4:166.

This is actually the case according to the Collegialistic church polity such as that which was introduced into the Dutch Reformed Church in 1816. There every local congregation is a subdivision of the one whole of the church. The synodical organization appropriated an administrative authority that affected the autonomy of the local congregation. Beyond that, it requires officebearers to promise to comply with the provisions of the regulations, with the exception that an appeal to God's Word is left open, and so asks for an absolute subjection to ecclesiastical decisions.[26]

This contradicts that church polity which is according to God's Word. The denomination must properly serve the advancement and maintenance of the congregation's freedom and autonomy. Ecclesiastical authority that pertains to the individual congregation (namely, the preaching of the Word and administration of the sacraments, discipline, the management of its own household, and financial matters), may not be taken away from her and given to the church in general. No administrative authority, to which the local congregation is subjugated, may creep in. The concept, meaning, and task of the church always comes into its full right in the local congregation. She alone can exercise fellowship in its fullest sense, in the service of the Word and sacraments. She alone has preachers, elders, and deacons.

However, the local congregation's freedom and autonomy may not thereby be understood to mean that she does not concern herself with the sister churches and with the decisions of the broader assemblies. On the contrary, the local church may not treat several matters by herself—things that concern the communal life of the churches with each other; that touch on general rules of doctrine, order, and discipline; and the resolution of cases of discipline of ministers. Further, the broader assemblies must watch over the rights and freedom of the believer and set limits on the self-will and the lording of officebearers.

That is why the right of appeal to the broader assemblies is given, so that each member can make his complaint known to the broader assemblies in an orderly way and obtain justice. When the churches came together, they also committed themselves to follow the decisions of the broader assembly, as per Article 31 of the Church Order, unless it should appear that these decisions are contrary to God's Word

26 *Reglement op het examen* [Regulations for the Examinations], Art. 27.

and the accepted order. Liberty and bondage cannot contend in this matter, because God's Word is the only rule of faith and life, binding both individual church members and the local church and assemblies. All churches are equal because they all recognize Christ as King, are gathered by the operation of the Spirit, directly and absolutely depend on Christ, and are bound by His Word. But the theory of the absolute sovereignty of the individual churches has always been contested by the Reformed.

The French Church Order laid down this rule (ch. VI, art. 2): "No church shall be able to do anything of great importance, which might relate to the welfare or harm of other churches, without the advice of the Provincial Synod, if it is possible to summon her. And if the matter is urgent, she will communicate it to the other churches of the province, and she will receive her advice by letter." And the Synod of Westminster[27] emphasizes "that the ministers of a particular church should not exercise this power independently, but with subordination to the greater presbyteries and synods, which, as they represent the particular churches, pool their authority." For this reason, it is not desirable to speak of the local church's sovereignty or independence, "since the Lord himself is its own lawgiver, and the Church never legislates, but declares from God's Word what is law in the Church government of the Lord."[28]

The Reformed churches in the Netherlands formed a federation of churches, each of which was independent in its own sphere. Yet, once incorporated into the church federation, each was known by the name Reformed Church in the Netherlands because of their unity in Christ and because of their unity in history, confession, and church organization. The dogmaticians spoke not only of the church's government, doctrine, and discipline, but also of the church as a unity in the sense in which the term was used in canon law. Trigland[29] spoke of "the divine law which comes to the church of God," and of "the judgment" and "the faith of the church." Bogerman spoke in the 154th

27 *Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 1638-1842*, 51.

28 Dr. F. L. Rutgers, *Adviezen* [*Ecclesiastical Advice*] 1:263.

29 *Kerckel. Gesch*. 1650, 1001-1002 [See footnote 17].

session of the Synod of Dordt of "the Dutch Church," which was "not a bad member of the Reformed Church, [but] so dangerously ill," [and] had been restored to its "former health" by the help of foreign princes and churches. This is also consistent with the language of the New Testament, which uses the word *ecclesia* in the singular to denote the one universal church represented in the local church (1 Cor. 10:32; 11:22; 12:28; Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:5, 15), the one universal Christian church (Eph. 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:22-32; Col. 1:18, 21), and the church of Jerusalem and Judea, when there was no other church yet (Acts 5:11; 8:1, 3; Gal. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:9; Phil. 3:16). In Acts 9:31, the term should be understood, according to the reading of Tischendorf, Westcott and Hort, Tregelles, and Nestle, as, "Then *the church* (*ecclesia*) throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace." From this it appears that in the New Testament the word "church" is used in the singular for *the whole church* in a specific country.

The classical and synodical assemblies can also be called a church[30] not, as Voetius[31] remarks, in a proper sense, "but metaphorically, because they represent the churches, and are assembled and act in that assembly as a single church." In a literal sense, the churches as a unit would be present at the synod, when all the members of all the churches gathered in assembly; but this is practically impossible. Specifically, in the somewhat broader church life it would not be possible for all the elders of the local churches to meet in general synod, because such an assembly would be too numerous to deal with matters.

It is precisely for this reason that representation of all the churches by one or two delegates has become accepted, as is the case with the Reformed churches in South Africa. A tiered representation is practiced in Scotland and some American churches, in which different presbyteries or classes send their delegates; in the Dutch Reformed churches, the particular synods (not the classes) send delegates to the general synod, representing all the churches there. These deputies do not act according to their own right, or according to the custom of the fathers, or according to the order of the magistrates, but only according to the rule of the denomination, which is rooted in God's commandments.

30 *Synopsis Pur. Theol*. [*Synopsis of a Purer Theology*] Disp. XL, Th. 33.

31 *Pol. Eccl*. 4:167, 168.

God's Word does not directly prescribe the mode of operation of the church federation. Rather, it indicates that the church, as Christ's body and being one in practice, must show that unity as much as possible. It also indicates that the churches, having voluntarily united on the basis of the common confession and church order, must faithfully maintain the unity and order of the churches.

This representative system corresponds to what happens in ordinary life; a government sends envoys in its place, or various groups and people send their representatives on special occasions. So, the church of Antioch (Acts 15) sent Paul and Barnabas and some others to speak with the apostles and elders at Jerusalem about Christian liberty. We read here not of credentials, but only of oral instructions. Yet in this example the rule of the representative system in the ecclesiastical is clearly founded.

The jurisdiction of the several assemblies derives from this delegation. They derive their authority from the credentials that are given to them. They are bound by the commission given to them. The credentials are the official certificates of the legal delegation by the churches. As a matter of principle, the churches properly possess ecclesiastical authority. Through their delegates, to address certain matters and in particular cases, they bring together that authority.

§ 61. The Jurisdiction of the Broader Assemblies

What do we mean by major assemblies? Major assemblies are meetings of multiple churches. Each church has its own consistory that represents its congregation and that usually meets at fixed times. The consistory is the only ecclesiastical assembly that is elected by the congregation, represents it, exercises oversight and discipline over it according to Christ's commission, and as a permanent body (though the consistory members alternate) maintains the authority of Christ over the congregation. The classes and synods, however, do not constitute a fixed body, but have derived power. Convened at certain times or for certain cases, they are made up of delegates from local churches. These delegates have a right to appear and sit at these assemblies, having a mandate from the churches who delegate them. The consistory meets as often as necessary, but the broader assemblies meet only once. The consistory deals with all matters that are necessary for the well-being

of the congregation. The major assembly deals only with those matters that have been brought according to the established order.

The consistory has its own power, while broader assemblies have derived power. The consistory can exist without the broader assembly, but broader assemblies cannot exist without the consistory. That does not mean, of course, that the unity of the churches comes about through broader assemblies. This unity exists even though there is no classis or synod because the churches are one in Christ and in their common confession.

The terms used to denote the broader assemblies are various and have changed. The National Synod of 1578, Article 18, spoke of greater and lesser "gatherings," but in Article 19 of "major and minor gatherings." The National Synod of 1581 determined in Article 22: "In major assemblies (*majoribus conventibus*) one shall not act on what has not been dealt with in minor assemblies (*minoribus*)," and in Article 23: "If one should complain of having been wronged by the decision of the minor assembly, (*minoris conventus*), he will therefore be able to appeal to a superior (*ad superiorem*)." The word "major" (larger or broader) indicates that the ecclesiastical assembly has both a greater number of members and has broader authority, because more churches, represented by their delegates, bring together their authority to decide on a particular point. The word "superior" (higher) does not mean that a superior assembly is a higher government that governs the inferior, but that it, as an assembly of several churches, gives a decision in a broader level of authority, as also appears in Article 31 of the Church Order. Article 31 says: "that which is approved by the majority of votes shall be held settled and binding, unless it be proved contrary to God's Word or the articles contained in this general synod." So, the expression "major assembly" means that more churches in number meet in such an assembly than in a minor assembly. Local consistories are minor assemblies in relation to classes, and classes are minor assemblies in relation to particular synods, and particular synods represent fewer churches than the general synod. So, more churches are represented in a major assembly than in a minor one.

Major assemblies do not have higher authority or administrative power, just as in civil life lower government is subject to higher. Even during the session of a classis or a synod, the power of the churches

remains the same. But for cases that belong to or have been brought to the major assembly according to the Church Order, minor assemblies leave the judgment and decision to the major assemblies, in which they themselves are represented by their delegates.

In major assemblies the churches bring together their power through their delegates. One can therefore speak of a higher degree of power, because in and through the decisions of such a major assembly all the churches that are gathered there pronounce their judgment.

Major assemblies derive their power and authority to act and make decisions from the churches that compose these assemblies through their delegates. The churches derive the calling and right to meet in major assemblies from God's Word (Matt. 18:15-17; Acts 15; 2 Cor. 8:1, 4, 19; Rom. 15:26). When churches come together through their delegates, they bring together the authority of the individual churches to deal with the matters entrusted to them. "And this power," says Voetius, "which according to the Church Order must be attributed to each local church, is not depriving (privative) but accumulating (cumulative). It is no different from the power of all the apostles in comparison to the power of each individual apostle, and the power of the ministers in one consistory compared with the power of an individual minister. It is no different from the power of the members in one ecclesiastical body compared with the power and freedom of each member alone, and the power of ten people together compared to the power of each of the ten on his own. Hence, they usually do not exercise ecclesiastical power above and beyond the local church, and *that they do not exercise authority in and regarding it except in matters and affairs that they have in common, or in a case of an appeal and in the event of suspected or actual mismanagement*."[32]

The authority of the synod, gathered in lawful assembly, is in certain cases also greater than that of a single church. Specifically, as Voetius explains,[33] if a local church and its consistory are poorly governed, or in the event of an appeal to synod, or if the matter is referred to classis or synod, the excommunication may belong to the classis or the synod. In particular cases, when the decision has been handed over to it organically, classis or synod can leave the implementation

32 *Pol. Eccl*. 1:226.

33 *Pol. Eccl*. 1:227, 228; 4:891.

of its decision to the local church or to the minor assembly. If this is not possible or is undesirable, classis or synod can even proceed itself to implement its decision. Just as Paul had determined (1 Cor. 5:3-5, 13) to deliver the fornicator to Satan in the name of Jesus Christ, and commanded the church of Corinth to put away the wicked one from among them, so also can the churches, having deliberated in synod, decide on excommunication and proceed itself with the execution of its decision when it is foreseen that, due to improper conduct or unreformed or revolutionary turmoil, the decision would not be properly carried out. In a more favorable case, it may also delegate the execution to a minor assembly.

That broader assemblies possess this authority is clear from holy Scripture. At the apostles' council, after prolonged deliberation, a decision was made that had binding authority not only for Antioch but also for all the churches in Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:28; 16:4).

The assembly in Jerusalem was convinced that its decision was in accordance with the will of the Holy Spirit. This apostolic example provides guidance for what the church is to do in its assemblies. [Voetius said], "Where there is a fixed rule of combination and unity of the churches, and thus a regulated church connection, there is a church power proportionate to that unity. And where there is this power, it is necessarily decisive, otherwise there would be no power, no order, and no unity." [Again]: "Authority to decide belongs to the local churches, each acting on its own (Matt. 18:17, 18; 1 Cor. 5:3, 4, 5, 13). Therefore, that authority remains with each of them even when they unite and act together; indeed, what is more, when one adds good to another good, it becomes a greater good."[34]

The Reformed generally agree, and included in Article 31 of the Church Order, that what is decided in the broader assemblies shall be considered settled and binding unless it is proven to contradict God's Word. Our Church Order decisively rejects the opinion of the Independents that classes and synods have no ecclesiastical power, that they can only provide advice, and that churches are free to follow or reject such advice. An organized church life would not be possible if the freedom and autonomy of the local churches were understood in such a way. Article 36 of the Church Order states that classis has the

34 Voetius, *Pol. Eccl*. 4:179.

same authority over the consistory as the particular synod has over classis, and the general synod over the particular synod. This authority does not rest on an independent power inherent in these assemblies or directly granted to them by God, but rather on the fact that the churches have voluntarily entered a church federation, specifying that they will carry out the decisions of the broader assemblies. However, they have bound this submission to God's Word. If a decision conflicts with God's Word, the churches are not allowed to obey. God's Word is the supreme law for the church, standing far above all regulations and decisions of a church assembly. However, when a matter is brought to synod through proper channels and is duly considered, the churches, having participated in the assembly, are obligated to accept and to implement synod's decisions. This is a requirement of church federation.

Broader assemblies, therefore, do not possess an autonomous, inherent, ecclesiastical power. All ecclesiastical power given by Christ to His church resides in the local church. The keys of the kingdom of heaven, bestowed by Christ upon the apostles and, in turn, upon the church through them, were exercised by the officebearers chosen in the local congregation and under their guidance once the apostles withdrew. This ecclesiastical power consists of three things: power to administer the Word and the sacraments, power to choose church officebearers, and power to exercise church discipline. There is no other power in the church's life, and this threefold authority belongs not to the broader assembly but to the officebearers of the local church.

This does not mean that major assemblies lack power to make decisions. However, this power resides not in the officebearers themselves who gather there, but rather in the fact that their churches lawfully delegated them and invested them with authority to act on behalf of the delegating churches. According to Rome, power resides primarily in the officebearers, the bishops, who are vested with power over the church by virtue of their ordination. But according to the Reformed confession, all officebearers are servants of a local church and have no authority outside of the church they serve. They derive this authority from Jesus Christ, the only universal bishop and the sole head of the church.[35]

35 French Confession, Art. 30; Belgic Confession, Art. 31; Second Helvetic Confession, XVII, 5,6; Westminster Confession XXV. 6; XXX.1; Col.

Likewise, they do not enter a church assembly, be it a classis or synod, with an inherent authority of their own, but rather as authorized by the church that they serve. A broader assembly is, therefore, not so much a gathering of officebearers but rather of churches. For this reason, it is not an absolute requirement, although it is a common practice, to choose officebearers to represent the churches based on their experience in ecclesiastical matters. In special cases, non-officebearers have also been delegated to synods. For example, the province of Overijssel sent to the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618-19,[36] where Latin was the official language, alongside of four ministers "two qualified individuals professing the faith, namely, Squire Willem van Brouckhuysen and the Honorable Jan van der Lauwic, the mayor of Kampen."[37] While such instances may be exceptions, this example illustrates that the right to sit in a synod is not based on the office but on ecclesiastical delegation.[38]

So fundamental differences exist between the authority of the local consistory and that of major assemblies: 1. In *origin*, because synods and classes possess no authority except that which has been delegated to them by local churches according to established order; 2. in *essence*,

1:18; Eph. 5:23; 1:22,23; 4:15,16.

36 Bouwman refers to a Dutch source (see next footnote) to support his contention that the Provincial Synod of Overijssel delegated two non-officebearers to the Synod of Dordt. The credentials of the Provincial Synod of Overijssel to the National Synod of Dordt indeed identify these two men as squire and as mayor of Kampen, respectively. However, every provincial synod was expected to delegate four ministers and two elders to the Synod of Dordt. The credentials do *not* say that these two men were not officebearers; rather, the credentials identify them by their civil occupations. The most recent critical work regarding the Synod of Dordrecht indicates that van Brouckhuysen was an elder in the church in Zwolle, and Lauwic was an elder in the church of Kampen, in addition to being the city's mayor. See Donald Sinnema, Christian Moser, and Herman J. Selderhuis, eds, *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae (1618-1619*) Vol. 1: *Acta of the Synod of Dordt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2015), C; and Vol 2.2, *Early Sessions of the Synod of Dordt* (2018), 51f. -Ed.

37 Reitsma and Van Veen, *Acta* 5:310.

38 Beza, *Bekentenisse des Christ. Gheloofts* [Confession of the Christian Faith], c. 5,14.

because the local church holds its own intrinsic and essential authority, whereas classes and synods have derived and incidental authority; 3. in *duration*, as the consistory is permanent and continues to exist during and after the meetings of major assemblies, while classes and synods convene only temporarily and cease to exist thereafter; 4. in *purpose*, as the consistory is tasked with the ongoing leadership of the local church and does not exist for the sake of major assemblies. Major assemblies exist for the well-being of the churches, to serve them with advice and guidance.[39]

Closely related to this is the fact that the authority of major assemblies is *limited*. The authority of a classis or a synod is not greater or more extensive than that of the local church, but rather less and more restricted, both in its nature and its scope. The authority given by Christ to a local church can never be fully transferred to a classis or a synod. While major assemblies are gatherings of churches, these churches are represented in the classes and synods by their delegates. The task of these delegates is not to handle everything that lies within the domain of local churches, but only what has been assigned to them according to the Church Order—specifically, matters that could not be addressed in minor assemblies or that pertain to the major assemblies in general. Only a small portion of ecclesiastical authority can be delegated to major assemblies.

Christ granted complete ecclesiastical authority to the local church—namely, the ministry of the Word and sacraments, governing authority, and the exercise of church discipline. The first aspect, the ministry of the Word and sacraments, cannot be transferred to classes and synods. It was customary in the early days after the Reformation that a brief sermon be preached at classis, but this was not the regular ministry of the Word. This served to oversee the pastors and to provide an opportunity for inexperienced preachers to practice. The Synod of Emden[40] also decided that at the end of synod, the members would partake of the Lord's Supper, not during synodical meetings but in the congregations where synods gathered. This practice was also followed later, including by the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618-19, but always in a meeting of the congregation. This tradition is still observed

39 Voetius, *Pol. Eccl.* 1:122; 4:166, 226.

40 c. [Voetius] 3:15.

in the Reformed churches in South Africa, where synods are opened on Saturday evening, and the delegates join the congregation for the communion service on the following Sunday.

Governing authority cannot be fully transferred. The leadership of the local church and the care of its members always remain in the hands of the consistory. Election of officebearers is an inalienable possession of a local congregation. The churches, gathered in classis, have the right to examine and approve a minister of the Word by virtue of the church federation, because the office of minister has significance for all the churches in common. But the local congregations are called to oversee a minister's suitability and purity of doctrine, so the local congregation must elect to office according to God's Word. In places where no church has been instituted yet and a consistory must be established, classis provides guidance, but the call to the office comes from the local congregation. No major assembly has the authority to send a minister to a congregation, as the Roman bishop designates a priest for a specific parish.

The same applies to the exercise of church discipline. Our Church Order certainly grants some co-determination to major assemblies in certain cases of disciplinary action. No member may be excommunicated without the advice of classis. No elder or deacon may be suspended or deposed without the cooperation of a neighboring church. No minister of the Word can be deposed without the judgment of classis and the advice of delegates of the particular synod. However, the broader assemblies do not exercise these powers based on an inherent authority, but because these powers have been delegated to them. As previously demonstrated, it is proper for synod to decide to excommunicate someone, but it typically entrusts the execution of its decision to the local church, which then acts according to the rules established in the Church Order.

Only in very exceptional cases, when the consistory of the concerned church opposes the synod's decision and refuses to implement it, can the synod itself proceed with the execution of its decisions. This is also the opinion of Voetius. In response to the question of whether "a synod or a classis has the power of excommunication," he answers as follows: "Yes, in a case where a local church and its consistory are poorly governed, or in the case of an appeal to the synod, or if the

matter is brought before the classis or the synod. For if the key of discipline is given to the particular and local church or its consistory, why would it not be given to a union of churches and consistories that are in federation with each other, in which the consistory of the particular and local church is incorporated?"[41]

Voetius then refers to the example of Caspar Coolhaes. Coolhaes, who became a preacher in Leiden in 1574, had taken the side of the government in a dispute between the magistrates and the consistory of Leiden regarding the appointment of elders and deacons in 1579. After much effort, the ecclesiastical matter in Leiden was settled amicably, but the divergent teachings were submitted to church assemblies for resolution. The National Synod of Middelburg (1581) summoned him and, after extensive examination and cross-examination, declared his writings to be a stumbling block and a slander against the church. It decided, therefore, that Coolhaes ought to be suspended from his ministry but did not carry it out, expecting Coolhaes to submit to the judgment of the synod and promise to teach in accordance with Scripture. Coolhaes refused to recognize the Synod of Middelburg as his "judge" and appealed to the nearest lawful synod.[42] However, he was subsequently suspended by the States, who also permitted the churches to proceed against him. The Synod of Middelburg had requested the Classis of Leiden to attempt to persuade Coolhaes to change his views and, if this attempt failed, had assigned the classes of The Hague, Leiden, Delft, and Haarlem the task of proceeding to excommunication. In line with this decision of the Synod of Middelburg, Coolhaes was deposed by the decision of the Synod of Haarlem on March 23, 1582. The consistory of Leiden, which supported Coolhaes, refused to excommunicate him. For this reason, the Synod decided that Coolhaes "shall be excommunicated from the congregation of Christ," and that "the action itself would be carried out by Martino Lydio," a preacher in Amsterdam, on Sunday, March 25, 1582.[43]

Similarly, the Synod of Assen, by decision on March 12, 1926, suspended Dr. Geelkerken for a period of three months "because of his refusal to sign the declaration requested by the synod and because

41 *Pol. Eccl*. 4:898.

42 Trigland, *Kerckel. Gesch.,* 182. [See footnote 17].

43 Reitsma and Van Veen, *Acta* 1:113-116.

of his continuous resistance to church assemblies whose authority he would not acknowledge." Subsequently, on March 17, "because Dr. Geelkerken did not submit to this suspension, thereby demonstrating his persistence in his error, his unwillingness to submit to the lawful decisions of the General Synod, and his resorting to open schism," he was removed from his office as a minister of the Word in the Reformed Churches (Article 234). However, this course of action was necessary only in a very exceptional case. What was the case?

As is known, the issue that had troubled the church of Amsterdam-South for a long time and that could not be resolved by the usual means indicated by the Church Order, was brought to the General Synod. After prolonged discussions between the Synod and Dr. Geelkerken, the Synod decided on March 12, 1926, to suspend the minister for a period of three months "because of his refusal to sign the declaration requested by the Synod and because of his continuous resistance to church assemblies whose authority he would not acknowledge." Subsequently, because Dr. Geelkerken refused to submit to this suspension and instead persisted in his error, he was removed from his office as a minister of the Word in the Reformed Churches. He was not excommunicated as a member of the church but deposed as a minister of the Word.

Because most of the consistory members supported their pastor in his resistance to Synod and declared that they would not execute Synod's decisions, a conflict arose between Synod and the consistory. The consistory, by a majority vote, declared that under its leadership, Amsterdam-South desired to remain in the church fellowship and set itself against the Synod. The Synod could have decided to place the congregation outside the church fellowship, as Dr. Van Lonkhuyzen suggests.[44] However, aside from the question of whether this course of action is correct according to church law, it should be noted that such a decision would have been a great injustice to the faithful part of the congregation and of the consistory. These brothers and sisters had turned to the Synod for help, seeking to be delivered from leadership that they deemed harmful to the congregation. They had urgently pleaded with Synod to do her justice. If the church of Amsterdam-South had been placed outside the church fellowship, the faithful portion would

44 *Een Ernstige fout* [*A Serious Mistake*], 28.

have received, as a reward, the status of being outside the Reformed Churches. They would have also lost the right to the name and assets of the church, and later, they would have had to establish themselves as a newly formed church.

One could argue against this by saying that the faithful members of the consistory and the congregation should have withdrawn from the fellowship of that part of the church that differed. However, it should not be forgotten that members of the congregation must obediently submit to the leadership of the consistory as long as a judgment has not been pronounced by the church federation concerning the consistory. Thus, the members cannot be called upon to establish the offices until the unfaithful members of the consistory have been deprived of the right to exercise their authority in the congregation.

For this reason, the Synod could not sever ties with the Reformed Church of Amsterdam-South. It was necessary for the Synod to pass judgment on all consistory members who resisted the Synod's decision and supported their pastor in his resistance to the Synod. Only then, after the Synod had made a judgment, could it assist through its delegates the faithful remaining congregation in establishing the proper institution of the church.

Some have argued that the application of the decision of suspension and deposition should have been carried out by the consistory along with the neighboring church, as Article 79 states. However, it must be remembered that Article 79 of the Church Order could not be applied because the consistory of Amsterdam-South was a party to the matter. For this reason, the church federation had to act alone, paving the way so that the congregation could be preserved and brought to the proper institution.

And if, as some argue, classis could have intervened in this matter, then one may ask: Why is the classis allowed to decide in a dispute that is not based on the church federation? And if classis, representing a small number of churches, is allowed to intervene in a difficult dispute, why should general synod, where all the churches are represented, not be allowed to proceed with the execution of its decisions?

This is entirely in line with the teachings of our eminent canonist from the seventeenth century, as we can find in Voetius, Part III, p. 891. Here he discusses the question of how a consistory should act

when almost the entire congregation opposes the excommunication of a member, a matter that, under normal circumstances, falls entirely within the authority of the consistory, usually after consulting with classis. Voetius advises that the consistory should not proceed without the advice and consent of classis or the particular synod. Even in large congregations, when delegates from the broader assemblies have tried to address concerns within the congregation and persuade them to agree with the decisions of the consistory, Voetius sees nothing wrong with the consistory bringing the whole matter to synod. The consistory may seek synod's advice or decision, or delay or complete the excommunication, or preferably request synod to carry out the pronouncement of excommunication and its execution through delegates from its assembly or from the classis in which the local church is incorporated.

A few pages later,[45] Voetius poses the question: "Whether a synod or classis, that is, a meeting of several churches in correspondence with each other, has the power of excommunication?" And he answers: "Yes, in a case where a local church and its consistory are poorly governed, or in the case of an appeal to the synod, or if the matter is brought before the classis or the synod. For if the key of discipline is given to the particular, local church or its consistory, why would it not be given to a union of churches and consistories that are in federation with each other, in which the consistory of the particular and local church is incorporated?"[46] He refers to what he previously said about the nature of church federation and cites the example of Caspar Coolhaes who was excommunicated by the Synod of Haarlem in 1582.

So, if a consistory or a large part of the consistory refuses to acknowledge the decision of a synod and opposes it, then the synod has the right, if the consistory remains within the church federation, to deprive the consistory of the exercise of the office. All of the churches, including the concerned church, have placed their disciplinary power in a specific case in the hands of the synod, and therefore, in that specific case, the synod can not only make a decision but also ensure

45 *Pol. Eccl*. 4:898.

46 *Pol. Eccl.* 4:898.

that the decision is carried out. This follows from the character of the major assemblies.[47]

The power of broader assemblies is, therefore, the same in nature and essence as that of the narrower assembly but limited in its scope and extent. Ecclesiastical assemblies are not fundamentally different from each other; "the nature and the kind and the power of ecclesiastical assemblies are one and the same."[48] "There is a concentration of the consistory in the delegates to classis, a concentration of the classis in the delegates to the provincial synod, and a concentration of the provincial synod in the delegates to the general synod."[49] The churches come together in the broader assemblies. They could assemble with all their members or with all the members of the consistory, but this is practically impossible, and therefore, they send their delegates. These delegates act in their office but not by virtue of their office. Those who stay at home hold the same office but do not go. Those who go are authorized as delegates with a letter of credentials to represent the churches and act according to the Church Order in matters assigned to them.

From this, it follows: 1) that the several churches do not transfer all their power but only as much power as is necessary to represent the interests of the churches, and 2) that not all matters can be dealt with at a broader assembly. The Dutch Reformed Church Order has wisely and cautiously established this general rule, stating that "in these meetings, only church matters shall be discussed and handled in an ecclesiastical manner. In broader assemblies, one shall not deal with anything other than what could not be resolved in narrower assemblies or what pertains to the churches of the broader assembly in

47 See also *De Bazuin*, Years 1926 and 1932, and *De Heraut*, Years 1926 and 1932, on this subject, and *Acta Buitengewone Generale Synode van de Geref. Kerken in Nederland [Acts of the Extraordinary General Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands*], 1926; *Memorieboek der Buitengewone Generale Synode [Memorial Book of the Extraordinary General Synod*] 1926.

48 Van Mastricht, *Gotgeleerdheit* 3:543. [The full title of this work is *Beschouwende en praktikale godgeleerdheit,* now being translated as *Theoretical-Practical Theology,* transl. Todd Rester, ed. Joel Beeke, published by Reformation Heritage Books.]

49 Dr. A. Kuyper, *De Heraut*, No. 1055.

general." Furthermore, Article 31 mentions that if someone believes himself to have been wronged by a decision of a narrower assembly, which naturally implies that if someone is of the opinion that a decision conflicts with God's Word or not in the interest of the church, he can appeal to the broader assembly.

This jurisdiction of ecclesiastical assemblies was generally taught in the old church orders from 1578 onward. And by Dordrecht (1618-19, Art. 30) this jurisdiction was defined as follows: "In these meetings, only church matters shall be discussed and handled in an ecclesiastical manner. In major assemblies, one shall not deal with anything other than what could not be resolved in minor assemblies or what pertains to the churches of the major assembly in general." This specifies 1) which matters can be discussed in ecclesiastical assemblies and 2) how they should be handled.

1. *Only church matters* should be addressed in ecclesiastical assemblies. A church assembly should not discuss secular, economic, or political matters, nor strictly scientific questions. Under the Roman Catholic hierarchy, decisions on various non-ecclesiastical matters were made at synods. The Synod of Clermont (1095) established the Truce of God as a general church law and decided on a crusade to the Holy Land. In 1312, at the Fifteenth General Council in Vienne, the order of the Templars was dissolved, and discussions were held about the war against the Saracens, the reconquest of the Holy Land, and various matters that entered the rights of secular authority. Gregory XIII, in the bull of February 24, 1582, introduced a new calendar, the so-called Gregorian calendar, as instructed by the Council of Trent. The Roman Catholic Councils could do this because they operated on the principle that the church had authority over all areas of life and that the various areas of life—art and science, state and society—all stood in the service of the church.

As a result, a contrast arose between the world, which was under demonic power, and the church, which consecrated and sanctified all of life within its sphere. However, since this consecration was deemed to be sufficient in an external sense, the world, once absorbed into this holy sphere, corrupted the church entirely, and the church also stood in the way of the free development of life.

The Reformation, especially the Calvinistic reform, reestablished the honor of humanity as the image of God and recognized the world as God's world. It also emphasized that God's common grace,[50] still at work in the world in preserving and enlightening ways, must be distinguished from the transforming and salvific operation of God's special grace. Social, domestic, and political life each has each its own sphere, given to it by God. According to Calvin therefore, the church had to cease being the guardian of natural life and be nothing other than the assembly of believers. From this principle it logically followed for the practice of church life that only church matters should be addressed in ecclesiastical assemblies.

However, especially in times of persecution of the church, there were occasions when ecclesiastical assemblies discussed matters other than church-related issues. This could hardly be otherwise during the time because the political circumstances were closely tied to the life of the church. Therefore, at consistory meetings the Reformed had to discuss measures to counteract Romish violence and secure religious freedom. In 1561, the consistory of Nieukercke discussed questions such as whether one may defend oneself by force against the papists, whether a papal dean should be considered a government official, and whether it is permissible to break open prisons and liberate prisoners who were imprisoned for their faith. Prince William urged the churches under the cross to address national matters at their meetings. He even attempted, through the mediation of Marnix, to influence the Synod of Emden (1571) to support the common cause against Spain by recruiting soldiers for the army, collecting money, and aiding in the transmission of military information. However, the Synod remained silent on that matter.

In France, discussions on political matters, including military service, were a regular occurrence at church gatherings. The mixing of church and secular matters had unfortunate consequences in France.

In our land [the Netherlands], however, once freedom had been attained, the Reformed churches promptly asserted that only ecclesiastical matters should be addressed at church assemblies. That they did not always faithfully adhere to this principle cannot be denied. Especially during times when church and state were closely intertwined, all

50 Literally, *algemeene genade*. -Transl.

sorts of matters were discussed at church assemblies that were closely related to the politics of the day. But the fundamental idea established in 1574 in Dordrecht (Article 4) was upheld: first, that church meetings "do not treat anything that is not an ecclesiastical matter," and, second, that in mixed matters, which are partly ecclesiastical and partly political (as is often the case with marriage matters), the churches should submit to the decision of the civil authorities. The Synod of Dordrecht somewhat limited the influence of the government and determined that in mixed matters, the decision "shall be made jointly by the civil authority and consistory" (1578, Art. 17). The intention of the Reformed was that matters outside the church's jurisdiction should not be handled at church assemblies. The church lacks the jurisdiction to pass judgment on societal, political, scientific, artistic, and other matters. The church's task lies in the realm of the sacred. While it has the responsibility to shed the light of God's Word on natural life and encourage its members to conduct themselves according to God's Word in their respective roles and callings, the church should not assume a ruling role in the realm of natural life. Both church and state have their own God-given domains. There should be no state church where the church governs all aspects of natural life and dictates to the government what it should do. Similarly, the government should not rule in the church. This, however, does not imply a separation between religion and the state. The government is God's servant, called to His honor and bound by His ordinances. Therefore, it cannot remain aloof from the religious life of the nation. Since religious life typically manifests itself in the form of a church, the government must inevitably come into contact with the life of the church. However, the government may not take sides for a particular church and overtly favor it. Furthermore, both church and state are given by God, institutions established by God that must mutually respect each other's rights. The church is called to do this unless it conflicts with the rights of its King.

Now, the church may not address political matters at its meetings, but it is still called to exert influence on social and political life. It can do so by directly pointing out to the government what it is called to do according to divine order and making a request that the government uphold that order. However, since the church is to work like leaven, its task is to shine the light of the Word and thereby work on the public

conscience, so that the desire to compel the government better to fulfill its duty arises from the people.

Through this means, the church has already accomplished much good, such as the abolition of slavery, the recognition of Christian schools in the Netherlands, the fight against immorality, etc. The government in the Netherlands, in addition to the school struggle, has also considered the desires of the church regarding freedom from military duty for ministers, etc.

However, even though the church has the right and God-given calling to shed light on public life and to influence the government in fulfilling its duty, including with respect to the church, it should not step into the realm of political and social life.

The church's jurisdiction is linked to its mission to be a pillar and ground of the truth; to confess and uphold the truth it believes; obediently to proclaim God's Word as commanded by its King; to care for the well-being of the church, the training of ministers, the maintenance of God's ordinances, to care for the preservation of the holiness of congregation and upbuilding of the life of faith; and, accordingly, to employ all good means that can lead to these ends.

Is the church not called to make pronouncements in legal disputes among its members? Some people appeal to 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 for this, but wrongly so. First, the apostle is not talking here about offenses punishable by law, but about civil disputes that can be resolved among the members of the church themselves. It is not fitting for believers to seek their own advantage in this manner. While they are allowed and even obligated to uphold their rights, if believers have a dispute among themselves and cannot come to an agreement, the appropriate way for resolution is to submit their case to fellow believers, not to secular judges. However, if the parties involved refuse this route and ask the consistory to decide, the consistory must refuse. This is because the decision of a church assembly does not have the character of an arbitration or a judicial ruling like that of a secular court, and God has entrusted legal judgment to the authorities. Church assemblies must be careful not to overstep their jurisdiction. Going beyond these limits harms the cause of God's kingdom, leads to misconceptions about the church's role, and diminishes its influence.

2. *The manner of handling* ecclesiastical matters *must be ecclesiastical.* In connection with the preceding Article 30, these words mean that the character of a church assembly is entirely different from that of secular authority. The government holds coercive authority. God has instituted the government to exercise His authority on earth, to restrain unrighteousness, and to enable an orderly coexistence of people on earth. For this purpose, "God has placed the sword in the hands of the government for the punishment of evildoers and the protection of the righteous" (Article 36). He has vested the government with the power, right, and authority to punish, and to enforce its authority with force. This is not the case with ecclesiastical officebearers. A church assembly does not possess the right of punitive justice and cannot, as Rome does, impose a fine, imprisonment, or prohibit ecclesiastical burial, or pronounce a death sentence on someone, and then have that sentence carried out by the government. In a similar way, the Lutheran church through its close connection with the government has punished ecclesiastical offenses with fines, flogging, or imprisonment (subsequently prohibited by later legislation in Germany: Prussia, May 13, 1873; Baden, Feb 19, 1874; Hesse, April 23, 1875).

The manner of handling ecclesiastical matters must be ecclesiastical, meaning it must adhere to the rules governing church life, within the bounds of ecclesiastical authority, and using no means other than those appropriate to the church. As the Belgic Confession of Faith (Arts. 5, 7) states, God's Word is the rule of faith and life, and "no human writings, however holy they may be, should be placed on an equal footing with the divine Scriptures, nor should custom be regarded as equal to the truth of God, nor the great multitude, nor antiquity, nor the succession of times or persons, nor councils, decrees, or decisions." Church assemblies, as representatives of the church, are to conduct themselves according to the Word of the King of the church. When they act contrary to the Word and refuse to abandon such wrongful conduct, they cease to be obedient to Christ, and they forfeit the right of the church members to follow them.

Officebearers are bound, along with the members of the church, to the Word of the Lord. The office must serve Christ for the benefit of the congregation, and its task is to lead the congregation into the knowledge of God, guide them to walk according to God's Word, and

work toward the perfection of the saints and the upbuilding of the body of Christ. For this reason, those in office should not act as lords and masters but should conduct themselves as brothers and servants of Christ. The rule and the love of Christ should inspire and guide them in all their work. Even admonition and rebuke should aim at upholding the rule of the Lord and the salvation of the sinner. When church assemblies are called to make a pronouncement, they do not impose their decision as a government order with compelling force but seek through persuasion to have their decisions accepted as in accordance with God's Word and as necessary for the well-being of the congregation. The church can maintain its authority only through spiritual means. While it may be necessary at times for the church to act with firmness in its assemblies to discipline stubborn and rebellious members, ministers, or churches, even in such serious and grievous actions, it is not human judgment but God's Word that should guide and decide.

3. The scope of matters which may be dealt with in broader assemblies is limited. Article 30 of the Church Order of Dordrecht states: "In the major assemblies, nothing shall be treated other than that which could not be finished in the minor assemblies or that which pertains to the churches of the major assemblies in common."

This ensures the autonomy and freedom of a local church while delineating the scope of authority of the broader assemblies.

a. First, within the authority of major assemblies is the power to address matters that *could not be resolved* in minor assemblies. This could happen when a local church seeks the assistance of broader assemblies, or in particular cases where the church does not request such assistance, but its members appeal to a major assembly, and the consistory is unable to rectify the situation.

For the first scenario, we have an example in holy Scripture. The dispute that arose in Antioch regarding whether circumcision and adherence to the Mosaic law were necessary could not be resolved within the local congregation. Therefore, they decided to appoint delegates to go to Jerusalem to seek the judgment of the apostles and elders (Acts 15). The matter about which they sought advice concerned not only the church in Antioch but also all churches where converts from the Gentiles were found. Consequently, the decision made at the council

in Jerusalem applied not only to the brethren in Antioch but also to the Christians from out of the heathen residing in Antioch, Syria, Cilicia (Acts 16:4) and, effectively, to the churches in general.

This principle was established by the earliest Dutch synods. The Synod of Emden determined for the classes:[51] "If something occurs in any church of the classis that cannot be resolved in the consistory, it shall be discussed and judged in the classis, from which an appeal may be made to the provincial synod." In the chapter on the provincial synod, it is stated:[52] "They shall not introduce any other points than those that could not be carried out in the consistories and classis meetings." Referring to synods, the Synod of Emden wrote: "The same that is prescribed [for the provincial synod] shall also be observed in the general synod regarding doctrine, church government, and specific matters that could not be executed or concluded in the provincial meetings." The Synod of Dordrecht in 1578 summarized all these provisions in one article: "No matters shall be brought to broader assemblies than those that could not have been handled in the narrower ones, or that concern the churches in general." In 1581, Article 22, this provision was formulated in its current form.

The Reformed rightly proclaimed this as a principle, primarily to prevent the rights and autonomy of the local church and narrower assemblies from being compromised. Secondly, it aimed to prevent an oligarchy, a government of a few individuals in the church, or a monarchy, as seen in the Roman Catholic Church, while avoiding overburdening the larger assemblies with unnecessary work by bringing all matters from smaller assemblies to them.[53]

Voetius wrote rightly about this:[54] "Our church orders are very careful to ensure that nothing is dealt with in the synod except what could not be handled and concluded in the consistories and classes. For if it were done otherwise, disorder would arise, and the activity of synods would be extended to infinity. It would lead to an oligarchy and, finally, to a church monarchy, as happened in popery, where, after

51 Cap. [Head] II. 3.
52 Cap. [Head] III. 1.
53 *Acta Emden*, c. III. 1.
54 *Pol. Eccl*. 4:204; cf. 4:210.

the suppression of the legal authority and freedom of the churches, everything was forcibly drawn into a certain imitation of the consistory, namely, a kind of Romish consistory of cardinals or a bishop's chapter or a meeting of voting bishops with their archbishop, and even to the pope and bishops themselves, as virtual churches. Let the Reformed be carefully guarded against this malignant disease, so that what those assert who claim that independency must be placed above the presbyterial government does not come true, namely, that the major and minor synods rob the freedom and authority that rightfully belong to individual local churches. Thus, they argue that ecclesiastical power would be a usurping power, not a cumulative (uniting) power, against which the Reformed churches also declare themselves in their church orders."

In the second case, a matter can come to a broader assembly when there is disagreement in a church, when the consistory itself is unable to resolve the dispute, and when members of the church complain to the major assembly about the injustice done to them or request the broader assembly to put an end to disorder and the bad situation. No church has the right to deny the authority of a broader assembly to investigate such complaints and to endeavor to remove wrongs in a local church. These complaints, when they concern doctrine or the orderly institution of the churches, are related to matters that pertain to the churches of the broader assemblies or, in any case, fall under the right of appeal treated in Article 31 of the Church Order.

b. The second limitation on the scope of matters that can be dealt with in a broader assembly is indicated in Article 30 with the words: *or that which pertains to the churches of the major assembly*. We have previously shown that, according to the demands of God's Word and based on the unity of the church of Christ, church federation is necessary. When churches live in fellowship with each other, the churches collectively must deal with various matters concerning doctrine, order, and discipline that concern the churches in common. Otherwise, no church fellowship would be possible, and a single, domineering church or group could impose its will on other churches. The Wesel Convention (1568) declared that "the various Dutch provinces are divided into definite and fixed classes or parishes so that each church may know with whom it has to deal and consult on all more important matters that,

in their opinion, concern the common interest."[55] Not only all difficult matters that could not be settled by individual churches but also those that concern common welfare or the general interest of the churches must be dealt with as soon as possible by all the churches or synods. Regarding the synod, the Wesel Convention stipulated:[56] "Everything concerning colleges, salaries, office, authority of the teachers, practices in the schools, theological studies, the provisions for the meditations and prophecies,[57] and all else related to this matter, and likewise the fixed and just division of provinces into classes or parishes, the fixed meetings both of each classis individually and of all classes in common, their order, arrangement, authority or censorship; then also marital cases, grounds for divorces, in short, all possible matters that generally concern all churches and common service must be presented to it for decision.[58] For it is neither consistent with the authority of Scripture nor with the fairness of the laws that those things which concern all equally should be determined by one or another church alone without the other churches being heard, to which they equally pertain." Regarding elders, the Convention stipulated, among other things, "that they shall not introduce new laws at their own discretion

55 c. I. 2. Bouwman includes the original Latin wording of the Wesel Convention in the body of the text. We move it to the footnote: *quo cuique ecclesiae constare possit, cum quibus graniora quaeque negocia quae ad publicam utilitatem spectare videbuntur ei sunt conferenda consultandaque*. -Ed.

56 c. I. 4-6.

57 The phrase translated "the provisions for the meditations and prophesies" reads in the Dutch original *de onderhouding van de propositiën en profetiën*. The translator struggled to interpret the phrase well, so the editors used the translation provided in Richard De Ridder's translation of P. Biesterveld and Dr. H. H. Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual including the decisions of the Netherlands Synods and other significant matters relating to the government of the churche*s (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1982), 21. The words *propositiën en profetiën* refer to specific aspects of training for the ministry, somewhat akin to preparing an essay on a topic, and practice preaching. -Ed.

58 Bouwman included this Latin original in the body of his work: *denique de omnibus omnino rebus, quae ad omnes ecclesias et commune ministerium generatim spectant*. -Ed.

but shall adhere to the ordinances of the churches and synods. And if something new should occur that requires a more careful investigation, they shall bring it to the meeting of the classis or the provincial parish, so that there, with the votes of all, what is in the interest of the churches may be determined."[59] The following synods of Emden and Dordrecht (1578) adopted these decisions, while the Synod of Middelburg (Article 22) decided the same, which provision was also adopted by the Synod of Dordrecht (1618/19): "In major assemblies, one shall not deal with anything other than what could not be settled in minor ones or what concerns the churches of the major assembly in general" or, as better translated in the Latin text,[60] "or those that concern the churches as a whole of the major assembly."

Voetius addresses this point as follows:[61] "The object of this ecclesiastical correspondence and communion is twofold, namely: common matters that concern all churches and particular matters that affect one or some churches. Common matters are subject absolutely and in every way to classical or synodical authority, for things that concern the edification of all churches in common must also be cared for and dealt with by all churches together. However, particular matters can and should not be cared for and necessarily handled by all churches together, but only in certain cases: such as 1. in case of incapacity, namely when a local church is not able to manage its own affairs; 2. in case of illegal and irregular administration, or in a time of a widespread pandemic when all the churches with which it lives in federation and correspondence must come to its aid; 3. in case of assumed bad administration, that is, in the case of an appeal, either from an individual or from a group, complaining that they are burdened [with an offense]."

What, then, are *the matters that belong to the churches of the major assemblies in common*? In general, one can answer that these are matters that the churches have decided in communion with each other and that concern the communion of the churches and the upholding of

59 c. IV. 7. Bouwman included this Latin original in the body of his work *ut ibi quod ex re ecclesiarum erit communibus suffragiis statuatur*. -Ed.

60 Bouwman includes this Latin in the body of his work: *vel ad ecclesias universas majoris conventus pertinent*. -Ed.

61 *Pol. Eccl*. 4:119, 120.

the principles of God's Word, the Confession, and the Church Order. This includes rules regarding the doctrine, offices, and discipline of the churches, training for the ministry of the Word, missions, liturgy, etc. The churches gathered in Synod should not try to regulate everything down to the smallest details but leave a great deal to the freedom of individual churches, so that in their autonomy they can fulfill their calling as churches according to God's Word. However, local churches should not use that freedom in a self-willed way and should not act in contradiction to the general rules set by the churches in communion with each other.

In accordance with Calvin's *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, the Reformed churches have established a set of provisions that also concern the life of the local church. The Church Order of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands specifies which offices must be present in the local church (Art. 2), that no one may enter the service of the church without a lawful calling (Art. 3), how a lawful calling takes place, and what process should be followed when a minister is called to another congregation (Arts. 4, 5), how the service in almshouses should be regulated (Art. 6), how the support of a minister of the Word and of an emeritus minister should be carried out (Arts. 11, 13), how the election of elders and deacons will take place, how long they are to serve, and what the offices of elders and deacons will encompass (Arts. 22-27).

In the second chapter on church assemblies, the Church Order determines when consistory meetings should be held and how they should be conducted. It also determines that in small churches, deacons can be taken into the consistory, and that this must be done when the number of elders is less than three (Arts. 37, 38). A rule is also established for the meeting of deacons (Art. 40).

In the third chapter, it prescribes that elders and deacons, like ministers, must subscribe to the confession (Art. 54), that children must be baptized as soon as possible in the public gathering of the congregation where God's Word is preached (Art. 56), and that parents must present their children for baptism (Art. 57). It specifies who may be admitted to the Lord's Supper, where, how, and how often the administration of the Lord's Supper will take place (Arts. 61-64), which psalms and hymns will be sung in the worship service (Art. 69), and

that marriage should be solemnized for the congregation according to the prescribed form (Art. 70).

Regarding church discipline, a series of provisions prescribes how the exercise of discipline should take place and which sins warrant the suspension or removal from office of the minister of the Word. Various provisions are found in the Church Order that also regulate the inner life of the congregation. From this, we see that in their Church Order, the churches do not interpret the words "that belongs to the churches of the major assembly in common" as meaning that only those matters that concern all churches collectively may be dealt with at the broader assemblies. Rather, matters that pertain to the spiritual well-being of all churches, that is, the maintenance of the rule of Christ and His Word in the church and the order of a local church, as well as the good cohesion and harmony among the churches, also fall under the things that belong to the major assemblies in general. The Synod of Wesel declared: "The apostle Paul prescribes that in the church of God all things must be done decently and in order, so that not only in doctrine but also in the order itself and the ecclesiastical government of the offices, an undivided agreement of the churches is established and maintained." For this reason, a church cannot introduce novelties that in some way affect the churches in the federation. While every local congregation may and should strive to elevate its own church life to a high level, if it wishes to establish rules that are significant for the entire church or make substantial changes to those things regulated in the Church Order, it must, according to the rule that has always been followed in the Reformed churches, seek and follow the judgment of the churches in common.

To this also, the term *advice* in our Church Order refers.

When our Church Order states that the local congregation is to act in certain cases with the advice of the broader assembly, it does not mean that the congregation is entirely free to follow or not follow the advice. On the contrary. The word "advice" means counsel or judgment, and the Church Order intends that when seeking advice is prescribed, namely in articles 4, 5, 14, 38, 47, 50, 75, 76, 79, the consistory should indeed act in accordance with that advice. In many cases, it is clear that in these articles the term "advice" means approval or consent. This cannot be otherwise. The provisions stating

that the consistory may not act "without the advice of the broader assemblies" have been inserted to prevent abuse and arbitrariness by local congregations. In matters of discipline, the consistory may not excommunicate a member without prior advice from the classis. This provision is not made to infringe upon the autonomy of the local church but to maintain unity and good order in ecclesiastical life, ensuring that discipline is not abused and the rights of the members of the church are safeguarded. Only when the classis provides affirmative advice can the consistory proceed to the second admonition according to article 77 and to excommunication according to Article 76.

This lies at the heart of the matter. When a local church enters the federation of churches, it receives guidance and support from sister churches, but it also submits itself to the leadership of the broader assemblies and takes upon itself the obligation to conduct itself according to the decisions of these broader assemblies. This is not the establishment of a hierarchy in the church but rather a submission to the yoke of Christ and the pursuit of upholding the rule of God. If a local congregation were to disregard and refuse to implement the decisions of a broader assembly, it would thereby disrupt the unity and the order [of the churches]. In such a case, if the local church cannot demonstrate that the decisions of the broader assemblies are in contradiction to God's Word and the Church Order, it engages in rebellion and makes itself deserving of censure.

It was in this sense that the General Synod of Utrecht (1923, Art. 127) also spoke. Regarding women's right to vote [in the church], it declared "that the introduction of women's right to vote is a matter that concerns not one church but the churches in general, and therefore should be decided by the General Synod," based on the following grounds:

1. "Because the issue of women's right to vote is not of minor importance, such as, for example, at what age a church member should be granted the right to vote, which can be left to the freedom of each local church but is of profound significance for *the entire church*. Therefore, as has always been the rule in our churches, it must be decided by the churches collectively.
2. "Because opinions on this issue diverge so much, whether women's right to vote is desirable or not, whether it is permis-

sible according to God's Word or not, it is prudent and wise that a local church does not proceed with its introduction without having sought the judgment of the churches in common, which is also its duty in view of 1 Corinthians 14:32.

3. "Because, if it were true, as asserted, for example, by the church of Zandvoort, that granting voting rights to women 'was entirely in line with the position which God's Word assigns to women in the church,' and that women were called to it by Christ, then this could not be left to the discretion of each congregation as an indifferent matter. Rather, all churches should obey the divine command, and the General Synod should decide that all churches must introduce women's right to vote. Conversely, if it were contrary to God's Word, the churches that had introduced it should be admonished and corrected.
4. "Because if the decision on this matter were left to each congregation, not only practical difficulties but also great church political uncertainty could arise. When a woman who had this voting right in one church moved to another where this right was not granted, this would not only be hurtful to her but also unjust, as, according to God's ordinance, she is entitled to that right." Conversely, if a brother who considered women's voting to be contrary to God's Word came to a church where this right had been introduced, he could challenge the decision of the elected officebearers, and the matter would have to be submitted to the major assemblies for decision.

The same applies to the singing of hymns in the church. The Advisory Committee reported on this at the Synod of Utrecht (1923, p. 230): "If a consistory decided to introduce a hymnal in worship, this decision would be valid only for its own congregation but would indeed conflict with the requirements of the church federation. The question of whether, and if so, which hymns should be sung in the churches is a matter that concerns an interest of the churches in common and therefore should be decided by the churches in common."

c. The right of appeal. The third limitation to the range of matters that can be addressed at the major assemblies is mentioned in Article 31: "If anyone complains of having been wronged by the decision of

the minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to a major ecclesiastical assembly." On the one hand, these words uphold the right and freedom of the churches and their members, while on the other hand, they also express the broader authority of the broader assemblies.

The right of appeal is indispensable in ecclesiastical life. The Synod of Wesel already [in 1568] affirmed the freedom to appeal, especially in matters of discipline, from the decision of the consistory to the judgment of the classis, and from the decision of the classis to the assistance of the synod. However, it added a cautionary note that such an appeal could easily arise from resistance and refusal to acknowledge guilt and, in such cases, must be considered a sign of rebellion. This provision was removed from the articles of discipline by the Synod of Emden (1571, II.3) and transferred to the general articles that regulate the understanding of and rules for the major assemblies. The Synod of Dordrecht (1578, Art. 19) added a provision, which has been incorporated into our Church Order almost word for word.

Now, this article could be read in such a way that the right of appeal is granted only in cases where someone has been personally wronged by the decision of a major assembly. Undoubtedly, this was not the intention, as indicated by the broad wording of the Synod of Emden, stating that one "may appeal to the Provincial Synod" from the classis. In any case, the right of appeal has never been restricted by the churches to cases of personal injustice or grievance. At the Synod of Veere in 1610, the minister, Daniel Glatius, complained about an ordinance "whereby was imposed on him the restriction of not baptizing or conducting weddings on Sabbaths in the morning, but only in the afternoon." He believed such a decision by the classes was neither edifying nor practical. The Synod decided that the time restriction in this matter "shall be left to the freedom of the churches, although baptisms and weddings may be performed in the afternoon where it can be conveniently done."

At the Synod of South Holland in 1725, Rev. Herman Probsting appealed against the expulsion imposed on him by the classis of Den Briel. A committee of inquiry reported that all the accusations against him were not of such a nature, and not so serious, that he could be expelled, and that after a reprimand before the synod, he should be readmitted. At the Synod of Den Briel in 1726 § 5, three consistory

members appealed, complaining that their minister pretended to have two voices,[62] contrary to the existing practice. The Synod judged "that the minister may have that right, but he must use it with caution." Members of the congregation or even consistories often appealed to the major assemblies on matters related to the doctrine or conduct of the ministers. The right of appeal was so frequently used that synods sometimes decided not to address matters in which no attempt at resolution through negotiation had been made (*Acta*, Rotterdam 1605, Art. 12; Gorcum 1622, Art. 41; Den Briel 1643, Art. 14).

The legal basis on which an appeal can rest extends further than in cases where someone has been personally wronged. It also applies when someone is of the opinion that a decision taken by the consistory goes against God's Word and is dangerous for the congregation. In such cases, that there must be the possibility of obtaining justice at a broader level lies at the heart of the matter. The consistory against which the objection is raised cannot, of course, adjudicate on the dispute because it has become a party to it. Therefore, not only is a major assembly competent to address the objection, but it is also duty-bound to do so.

An example from recent times may illustrate this. In 1923, the Classis Dordrecht appealed to the General Synod of Utrecht regarding a decision of the Particular Synod of South Holland regarding the temporary dismissal granted to Rev. Vonkenberg under Article 14. Rev. Vonkenberg, appointed as the Director of the Union of Reformed Youth Associations, had asked the Classis Dordrecht to grant him emeritation under Article 13. However, the classis declared that he had moved into a different vocation[63] under Article 12. Rev. Vonkenberg appealed this decision of the classis to the Particular Synod of South Holland, stating that he did not want to transition to a different vocation, but only serve temporarily as the director of the youth associations. The synod then decided, after seeking advice from the professors of church polity and considering his further intention, "that the church

62 The Dutch original is *stemmen*, which is often translated "voices," but at times is translated "votes." Here the idea seems to be that Probsting was heard by two different assemblies, which the consistory members unconvincingly alleged to be wrong of him.

63 Literally, "a different state of life." In some later Church Orders this is translated as "a secular vocation." -Transl.

of Zwijndrecht should grant Rev. Vonkenberg the temporary leave of absence according to Article 14 of the Church Order." The Classis Dordrecht then appealed this decision to the General Synod of Utrecht, believing that it conflicted with "the spirit and intention of Article 14 of the Church Order." The Synod, however, stated that in Article 14 of the Church Order, the word "advice" should be understood as "approval." Still, to address the objection of the classis, it stipulated that in the case of temporary dismissal under Article 14, to prevent abuse, such a leave of long duration should not be granted without the approval of classis. As in this case, it has repeatedly occurred in our churches that a broader interpretation than personal injustice should be applied to this part of Article 31.

The Reformed have always allowed for the right of appeal. Not, of course, from the consistory to the congregation, as the Independents teach, who consider the congregational meeting as sovereign. Instead, the right of appeal is permitted from the consistory to the classis, from the classis to the particular synod, and from the particular synod to the general synod.

The Synod of Delft (1618, Article 59) granted this right even to the Remonstrants. It appointed deputies to investigate in the classes and in the churches which ministers had entered the office unlawfully, or who had behaved in an unedifying manner in doctrine and life, or who had refused to appear before the Synod. The deputies were given such power "as if the synod itself were present," provided that those who felt aggrieved by the decision of the deputies could appeal to the national synod.

The question has been raised as to whether it is desirable to sort out the matters of appeal and allow appeals only to the particular synod for certain cases and to the general synod for others. This suggestion arises from the fact that the general synod meets only every three years and might easily be burdened with all kinds of appeals. However, such a sorting is not desirable because it could lead to different judgments in different provinces. Furthermore, the right of those with grievances must remain open to present their case to the assembly of all the churches. It has occurred repeatedly that the general synod vindicated someone against whom the consistory, classis, and particular synod ruled. For example, Jitske Gerbertsma of Oppenhuizen had been ex-

communicated by the consistory of Oppenhuizen. This decision was affirmed by Classis Sneek and the Particular Synod of Friesland, and appealed to the General Synod of Middelburg (1896, Article 120). As a result, the deputies of this Synod investigated her case and found "no grounds for that censure and excommunication." "Subsequently, with the full agreement of the consistory, the excommunication and censure were lifted, and Sister J. Gerbertsma was readmitted as a full member" (*Acta* 1899, Article 92).

Equality must exist in both the right to appeal and the right to request cassation.[64] Cassation does not mean that a new judgment is issued but that the rendered verdict is annulled due to formal errors committed during the examination or in delivering a judgment. If this is the case, the [secular] court that annuls the verdict sends the entire case back to the lower court with instructions to reexamine it and pronounce a new judgment. In ecclesiastical matters, the process is somewhat different. The major assembly, if necessary, declares that the decision was incorrect, provides the grounds for it, and requests the minor assembly to reconsider the matter. In such a case, the major assembly supports its decision by means of deputies who explain the decision of the major assembly to the minor assembly and support the minor assembly in making a new decision.

A significant question is *whether, during the appeal, the decision being appealed can be implemented.* This depends on whether the matter is of a very serious nature, whether significant matters would be harmed by the delay, or not. If the implementation of a decision poses significant difficulties or dangers to the church and the well-being of the congregation, it is not advisable to carry out the decision. However, conversely, if not implementing a decision of the church would cause harm, it is not advisable to wait too long to execute a decision.

For example, if objections are raised against the appointment of elders and deacons or against the call of a minister, the ordination cannot proceed until the classis has made a ruling on the objection. Professor Rutgers comments on this as follows:[65] "If the classis upholds the appointment, it should also specify that the ordination can proceed even if there is an appeal to the Provincial and General Synod. Indeed,

64 The idea of cassation is annulling or abrogation. -Transl. and ed.

65 *Kerkel. Adviezen* 1:172. See footnote 28.

it has always been assumed that a single church member cannot delay the matter for three years with a complaint, and therefore, the major assembly, by its decision, can prevent this. If there is an appeal and the synod still declares the appointment invalid, the legality of [the decision of] the acting consistory is covered by the decision of the classis."

A case like this occurred in 1644. The deacons of Rotterdam complained to the Synod of The Hague that the consistory of Rotterdam had refused to expand the number of elders. For that reason the deacons, who had been summoned by the consistory for this purpose, had refused to cooperate in the nomination because they should then have been recognized by the consistory as taking part in that decision. The synod rejected their objection, stating that the deacons "are to advise on such matters primarily when they are called by the consistory to do so." When the deacons responded that they appealed to the national synod, the synod declared that this was "at their discretion, but that in the meantime, the resolution of this Synod will take effect and be executed" (Art. 39).

Even when a congregation is aggrieved by the decision of a classis or synod, it also has the right to appeal. However, it is not allowed arbitrarily to ignore the decision of the classis or synod. Doing so would mean withdrawing from the church federation. If a part of the consistory refuses to comply with the decision of the broader assembly and resists in a revolutionary manner, going against the wishes of another part of the consistory and of the congregation, which then complains to the broader assembly, it would be subject to the discipline of the broader assemblies. The principle must be upheld here that a church, like individual members of the congregation, must begin by submitting to and complying with the decision made.

The major assembly can later determine whether the appellants were correct or not. If a different approach were followed, an appellant could bring the entire ecclesiastical life to a standstill.

May an accused person use assistance or an advocate for broader assemblies? The Reformed have answered this question in the affirmative. The accused or aggrieved party may use assistance, provided that this person is a church member. In some cases, such as when a person is shy, nervous, or has difficulty expressing themselves, it may

even be desirable to allow them the opportunity to be supported [in this way]. The church must see to it that justice is done. In the past, a person who assisted was called the mond [mouth] or the help of the aggrieved party. The Synod of Utrecht followed the rule:[66] "Anyone may also request a mouthpiece from the members of the classis and synod for the defense of their case before that classis and synod; or, if refused, may bring an advocate or other mouthpiece to defend their case there, just as an advocate, authorized by the Edelheer [the Noble Lord] of Hoven, appeared at the synod of 1716. And on this occasion, also subsequently, an advocate was admitted to the Classis of Utrecht, Aug. and Oct. 1731 § 6." At the Synod of Harlingen (1617, art. 10), in response to the question of whether political lawyers or notaries could be used in ecclesiastical matters and meetings, it was answered: "ecclesiastical matters ecclesiastically, that is, that ecclesiastical matters should be handled in an ecclesiastical manner in all simplicity. Nevertheless, it is permitted for those who cannot speak for themselves to involve a minister or another church member for this purpose." In 1816, this rule was abolished, which sometimes resulted in the rights of church members or of a minister being curtailed. In our churches, it is rare for someone to act as a defender of the rights of an individual, but in special cases, this right can be exercised. However, it should be understood that the aggrieved party and their helper must adhere to the rules set by the church assembly.

When should the appeal be made? The Synod of Dordrecht (1578, Part. vr. 4) specified a certain time for this, namely, halfway between the time of the meeting where he was condemned and the next larger assembly where his case will be addressed. And if he does not appeal at the specified time, the right to appeal will lapse. Later, following the practice of secular courts, the churches set a specific time, ten days, three or six weeks. The Christian Reformed Synod of 1877[67] stated that an appeal must be made "within fourteen days after the pronouncement" of a church assembly (Art. 151). Certainly, order in church life is necessary, but it is not desirable to be too bound by a

66 Chr. de Kruyff, *Utr. Syn. Handboekje* [*Handbook of the Utrecht Synod*], 11.

67 This refers to the Dutch denomination, the *Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerken,* the later name of the *Afscheiding* churches. -Transl.

specific time, because a church assembly should watch over the rights of its members and the well-being of the churches. For this reason, the decision of the Synod of Dordrecht (1893, Art. 185) is better: "An appeal against any decision of a church assembly must be made to the next meeting of the major assembly to which one appeals, with notification to the clerk of the assembly whose decision one finds objectionable. Notice of each appeal must be given to the parties concerned." As with all church decisions, the rule is followed here as well: a copy of the decision is given to the persons concerned so that they can consider the decision and, if desired, bring their objection to the major assembly. The aggrieved party is, in turn, obliged to define and communicate their case in a clear manner and to provide grounds, whether the decision that troubles them was incorrectly made because the complainant believes that the assembly did not have sufficient data, or that it conflicts with God's Word or church law.

History of Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America
2. Meetings

Douglas Kuiper

This article continues the history of Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA) as an ecclesiastical body. The previous article (April 2023) followed the Classis through different eras, treating its origin and growth (1939-1953), controversy and decimation (the schism of 1953), recovery and stability (1954-1969), and incorporation (1970-1985). That article began by noting the boundaries of Classis and the churches that have been included in it over the years, and ended by noting which ministers have served in its member churches.

This article focuses on Classis as an organized body. As an organized body it holds regular *meetings* at which it does official *work*; that is the primary purpose of its existence, (see Appendix for a list of the meetings of Classis West). This article contributes to Classis' history by referencing decisions that Classis made, but the reader will certainly notice that the article is a church-political history. The first section of this article sketches the main components of a classis meeting, and significant decisions Classis has made regarding how it does its work. The second section explains the various functionaries of Classis, including decisions regulating their work. The third surveys routine aspects of Classis' work, facing issues that pertain to the churches in common.

In addition to facing routine matters, Classis also treats matters brought by overture, protest, or appeal. The next article (a year from now, God willing) will survey this aspect of Classis' work.

In this series of articles I am not arguing any particular thesis or taking any particular position regarding Classis and its work. My goal

is simply to bring to light some of the history that is buried in minutes, press releases, and other documents.

Meetings: Main Divisions

Opening

Twice a year, and more often if necessary, Classis West convenes.[1] Currently it does so at 8:30 a.m. on the first Wednesday of March and the last Wednesday of September.[2] Classis opens with the president of the last meeting functioning as president "pro-tem" ("for the time being") until the body is constituted.

As president pro-tem, he selects a Psalter number for Classis to sing, reads a passage of Scripture, gives a meditation on a passage,[3] and offers prayer. He then reads the credentials of each consistory (see picture on p. 101). A credential is a form letter from each consistory designating whom that consistory has delegated to the meeting of Classis, and indicating whether the consistory has any matters for Classis to treat (matters that did not need to be in the published agenda, such as pulpit supply requests, subsidy requests, or discipline matters). The president pro-tem reads one of the credentials in full, then takes roll

1 As indicated in footnote 23 of the previous article, at its first meeting Classis West defeated a request to meet three times a year; MCW September 20, 1939, Art. 19.

2 The last article noted that Classis West faced the question of when to meet. In practice, the delegates to the March Classis fix the date and location of the next two meetings (September and March). Article one of the "Rules of Order with Rules of Parliamentary Procedure for Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches" (hereafter "Rules of Order," or "ROO") reads: "1. The Classis shall meet at regular intervals at the time and place designated in compliance with Article 41 of the Church Order. 3. Each Classis shall designate the time and place of its next meeting. 4. The sessions of Classis shall extend from 8:30 a.m. to 12:00 noon and from 1:30 to 5:00 p.m., unless otherwise determined by Classis." I am using the March 2021 revision of the Rules of Order, but unless noted it will always be the same as the original Rules of Order, March 1960. In the 1960 ROO the start time was set at 9:00 a.m.; see next footnote.

3 That he give a brief exegesis of an appropriate passage, Classis specified when it changed the start time; Minutes of Classis West (MCW) September 3, 1969, Art. 22.

call of the delegates. Having done that, he asks for a motion to accept the credentials. When that motion passes, he declares Classis legally constituted, and turns the chair over to the president for that meeting.

Credentials of the delegates from Edgerton PRC to the first meeting of Classis West after the 1953 schism. Note the Instruction.

Classical Credentials.

To the Classis.....West.....

of the Protestant Reformed Churches,

to convene....Jan. 20.....19.54..;

at...Doon, Iowa.....

The Consistory of the.Edgerton....Protestant Reformed Church, has appointed the brethren

.Rev. H. Veldman...and elder..John Doster.....

as delegates to represent said church at the meeting of classis above referred to. The alternate delegates are: elder.Henry. .Huisken..and elder..Ray..Brummeling.....

We hereby instruct and authorize them to take part in all the deliberations and transactions of classis regarding all matters legally coming before the meeting and transacted in agreement with the Word of God according to the conception of it embodied in the doctrinal standards of the Protestant Reformed Churches, as well as in harmony with our church order.

By order of the consistory

...Rev. H. Veldman...President;

..Ray. T. Brummeling..Clerk.

Done in consistory.....Jan. 5., 1954.....

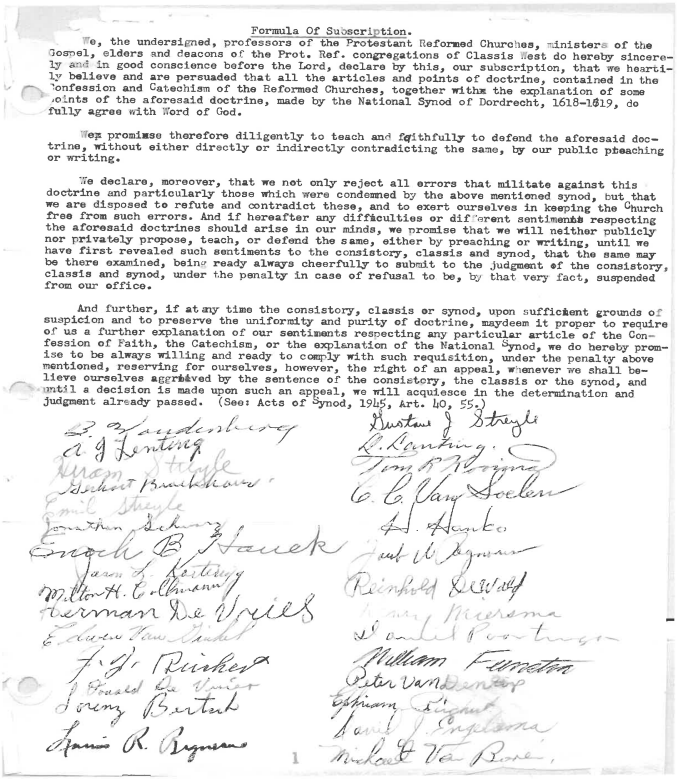
Instructions:

1/."Whereas the Rev. De Wolf and his apostate elders because of their refusal to submit to discipline under protest, have schismatically withdrawn themselves from the communion of the Protestant Reformed Churches; And whereas Classis West, in its meeting last Sept. 2, 1953, because it recognized the Rev. De Wolf and his apostate elders as the legal consistory of the Fuller Ave. First Protestant Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan, has also withdrawn itself from the communion of the Protestant Reformed Churches; Therefore we, representing the Protestant Reformed Churches, residing in Classis West, who refuse to recognize this schismatic action and therefore constitute the faithful churches belonging to the communion of Protestant Reformed Churches in Classis West, declare ourselves, in classical gathering here in Doon, Iowa, Jan. 20, 1954, to be the proper continuation of the Protestant Reformed Classis West."- the consistory of the Edgerton Protestant Reformed Church proposes this to Classis West in its gathering of Jan. 20, 1954, at Doon, Iowa.

Initial routine matters

The early part of every Classis meeting involves treating routine matters. The word "routine" does not suggest that the matters are frivolous or unnecessary. Rather, it means that the matters can be quickly dispatched but are necessary to treat before Classis can proceed with its main work. Those delegates who have not signed the Formula of Subscription are called forward to sign it.

First page of the Formula of Subscription of Classis West



Formula Of Subscription.

We, the undersigned, professors of the Protestant Reformed Churches, ministers of the Gospel, elders and deacons of the Prot. Ref. congregations of Classis West do hereby sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord, declare by this, our subscription, that we heartily believe and are persuaded that all the articles and points of doctrine, contained in the Confession and Catechism of the Reformed Churches, together with the explanation of some points of the aforesaid doctrine, made by the National Synod of Dordrecht, 1618-1619, do fully agree with Word of God.

We promise therefore diligently to teach and faithfully to defend the aforesaid doctrine, without either directly or indirectly contradicting the same, by our public preaching or writing.

We declare, moreover, that we not only reject all errors that militate against this doctrine and particularly those which were condemned by the above mentioned synod, but that we are disposed to refute and contradict these, and to exert ourselves in keeping the Church free from such errors. And if hereafter any difficulties or different sentiments respecting the aforesaid doctrines should arise in our minds, we promise that we will neither publicly nor privately propose, teach, or defend the same, either by preaching or writing, until we have first revealed such sentiments to the consistory, classis and synod, that the same may be there examined, being ready always cheerfully to submit to the judgment of the consistory, classis and synod, under the penalty in case of refusal to be, by that very fact, suspended from our office.

And further, if at any time the consistory, classis or synod, upon sufficient grounds of suspicion and to preserve the uniformity and purity of doctrine, maydeem it proper to require of us a further explanation of our sentiments respecting any particular article of the Confession of Faith, the Catechism, or the explanation of the National Synod, we do hereby promise to be always willing and ready to comply with such requisition, under the penalty above mentioned, reserving for ourselves, however, the right of an appeal, whenever we shall believe ourselves aggrieved by the sentence of the consistory, the classis or the synod, and until a decision is made upon such an appeal, we will acquiesce in the determination and judgment already passed. (See: Acts of Synod, 1916, art. 40, 55.)

The president then asks Classis to approve the published version of the minutes of its previous meeting, or offer any corrections to them if necessary. Also at this point the questions of article 41 of the Church Order are asked and answered.

Article 41 of the Church Order requires the president to ask four questions of each consistory's delegation: "1. Are the consistory meetings held in your church? 2. Is church discipline exercised? 3. Are the poor and the Christian schools cared for? 4. Do you need the judgment and help of the classis for the proper government of your church?"[4] Each delegation usually gives the expected answers (Yes, Yes, Yes, No), but four "Yes" answers indicate either a routine matter on the credentials, or a more pressing need for Classis' help. Delegates are expected to be truthful, and if they give an answer that does not satisfy Classis, are expected to cooperate with Classis as it investigates the matter.

Presently the article will note some of the questions that consistories have brought to Classis by way of the fourth question; see *Proper Government* below. For the moment, note the weight that these questions have, and the point during the Classis' meeting at which they are asked.

These questions are weighty because they represent one way in which the churches care for each other. In a denomination, the member churches are ready to assist each other. These questions, and Classis' response when necessary, shows genuine care for the spiritual well-being of each congregation. This benefit is minimized, if one considers the questions to be a mere formality or check-list.

Classis West's practice for many years had been to ask these questions late in its meetings. Having treated the main items on its agenda, Classis heard the answers to these questions. Adjournment would be delayed if a question was not be answered to Classis' satisfaction. As recently as 1996, in response to an overture, Classis decided to ask the questions early in the meeting, immediately after reading and approving the minutes of the previous meeting. It did so for the following reasons:

> 1. This follows historical precedent [referring to the practice of the Dutch Reformed in the 1500s, DJK].
> 2. This is proper when one takes into account one of the funda-

4 *The Confessions and Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2023), 393.

mental reasons for the questions of Article 41, namely, to insure the unity of faith and walk within the federation of churches.

3. The placement of the questions of Article 41 early in the agenda will allow the Classis to appoint committees of pre-advice, if necessary, and to give early consideration to any matter that a consistory may bring under the fourth question: "Do you need the judgment and help of the classis for the proper government of your church?"[5]

Other formal matters that Classis treats early in the meeting are the reports of its stated clerk, classical committee, church visitors, reading sermon library committee, and any other standing committees.

Either before or after hearing these routine reports, the president appoints committees of pre-advice to study and bring recommendations regarding the material on the agenda. Classis has faced the question, especially when weighty matters appear on the agenda, whether the president may appoint the committees several weeks early so that they may begin their work before Classis meets. Some delegates to Classis West spend most of a day traveling to Classis, and will spend most of another day returning home. And the elder delegates are usually taking time off work to attend the meetings. The question is understandable.

Classis answered no, for two reasons: "1. Committees cannot be appointed to function for a body which has not yet been constituted. (Please note art. 31, page 30, 1984 Acts of Synod). 2. The overture does not allow for possible legitimate objections to be raised by delegates of the Classis regarding appointments to pre-advice committees."[6] These reasons were principled, taking into account the fact that Classis is not a perpetual body, and that every decision of a president of Classis is implemented only if not legitimately challenged. Not mentioned is another consideration: The possibility that the anticipated president is unable to attend, in which case the man who actually presides is and must be free to appoint his own committees.

5 MCW March 6, 1996, Art. 22.

6 MCW March 4, 1987, Art. 31 and Supplement 11.

After appointing committees of preadvice, Classis recesses so that the committees can do their work. If the agenda contains weighty items, Classis likely does not reconvene until early or mid-afternoon.

Legality, majority and minority reports, and voting

Lunch is finished, committees are ready to report, the afternoon session is opened with prayer and singing, and Classis begins its deliberations. If the agenda includes appeals, protests, or overtures, the committees first bring recommendations regarding legality: Has the appeal, protest, or overture properly come before Classis, or does more work need to be done at the consistory or individual level before Classis can treat it? The question must be faced, and "Decision as to the legality of any matter treated by Classis shall be taken by majority vote."[7]

At times a committee is split regarding what advice to bring, so it brings two reports. If the committee is split evenly, it cannot bring a majority report. If it is not split evenly, Classis receives two reports, a majority report and a minority report.

Receiving a majority and minority report, Classis was once unsure how to proceed. Although it was not the first time Classis had a majority and minority report, it did not take time to study precedent. It read the majority report; moved to adopt it; tabled the motion; read the minority report; then moved and adopted the minority report.[8] Then it appointed a committee to bring advice to the next meeting, citing as a reason "the on-going indecision and disagreement on this matter."[9]

At its next meeting, Classis adopted the advice of this committee, and incorporated that advice into its Rules of Order for posterity's sake. The advice was: "In treating committee reports where both a majority and minority report are submitted, the report of the majority shall be considered the report of the committee. After the committee's report has been read and the motion to adopt has been made, the minority report shall be read for information."[10]

7 ROO, V. 2. d.

8 MCW September 6, 1989, Supplement 4; that this is the practice the Classis followed in this instance is indicated in the information section of the "Committee on Procedure-Majority and Minority Reports."

9 MCW March 1, 1989, Art. 42.

10 ROO VI. 2; MCW September 6, 1989, Art. 22.

The delegates vote by voice, saying "aye" or "nay" when the president calls for the vote. When the voice vote is inconclusive, the president asks the delegates to raise their hands. Only when the vote regards a person (such as the approving of a candidate's exam, or approving the deposition of a minister), does Classis vote by ballot.[11]

Closing

When all matters appearing on the agenda and credentials have been treated, Classis closes its meeting. This involves reading and approving the script minutes recorded by the clerk of that meeting. Later the stated clerk puts those minutes into a more permanent form. The stated clerk might make obvious editorial changes to the wording of the minutes, but is not free to make substantive changes.

Closing also involves the president, and if need be the Classis, applying the matter set forth in Article 43 of the Church Order. That Article reads: "At the close of the classical and other major assemblies, censure shall be exercised over those who in the meeting have done something worthy of punishment, or who have scorned the admonition of the minor assemblies."[12] Usually the minutes contain no mention of this being done, because no necessity has arisen. Yet presidents and classes must not simply ignore matters that require such censure, and delegates are free to initiate the matter. The minutes of one meeting of Classis include this note: "At the close of the meeting one of the delegates expresses himself as having taken offence to a remark that was made on the floor of the Classis today. Whereupon the chair applies classical censure according to article 43 D.K.O."[13] The fact that this is recorded is significant: Classis took the matter seriously.

Article 43 specifies that this censure must be implemented at that meeting of Classis at which something worthy of censure was said or done. One delegate once alleged on the floor that some misconduct happened at a previous meeting of Classis. Classis informed him "that

11 In such matters, Classis follows the same procedure as Synod. In fact, Classis' Rules of Order, Art. VI. 1, specifically states that it adheres to the synodical Rules of Order. Classis' Rules of Order do not supercede those of Synod, but apply them more particularly to the Classis.

12 *The Confessions and Church Order of the PRC*, 394.

13 MCW September 25, 1946, Art. 47. The chairman was Rev. Peter Vis.

all misconduct on classical meetings are censurable by the chair. This Classis moreover cannot be held responsible for a supposed misconduct of a member at some previous Classis."[14] This is correct. Decisions of a previous Classis can be protested to a later Classis, and the later Classis can declare them in error; but a later body cannot address misconduct on the part of a delegate at a previous meeting. Classis must deal with that misconduct at the same meeting at which it happened. Partly this is because misconduct and sin must be addressed promptly. Also, those who witnessed the misconduct can then witness the censure. A later Classis consists of delegates who did not witness the misconduct. If Classis fails to address the matter at the body at which the misconduct happened, an aggrieved person is free to follow the procedure for dealing with private or public sins (Church Order Articles 72, 74), but that Classis has lost its opportunity to implement Article 43.

Finally, the meeting of Classis closes with singing and prayer, and the delegates giving each other their farewells.

Meetings: Functionaries

Classis is not a perpetual body; every meeting of Classis is a body in its own right. The meeting can be recessed to continue at a later date and time, but at some point it must adjourn and cease existence. The same is true of synod. Of all the ecclesiastical bodies in the Reformed system of church government, only the consistory is a continuing body. This is why Article 35 of our Church Order, treating the office of the president of the broader assemblies (not including the consistory), concludes: "Furthermore, his office shall cease when the assembly arises."[15]

In this respect the classis in Reformed denominations is different from the Presbyterian presbytery. Presbyterians consider their presbytery to be a perpetual body. It has a moderator, or president, who is elected for an entire year, or term. The moderator has the right to convene the body, that is, to call it together to do its business. In the Reformed system of church government, classis meetings are held at regular intervals, and are not called at the request of one man. The previous Classis determines the date and place of its next meeting.

14 MCW September 9, 1942, Art. 19.

15 *The Confessions and Church Order of the PRC*, 391.

All of this bears on the functionaries of Classis, the men whom Classis appoints to facilitate its work. Some serve during the meeting of Classis, after which their service ends. Others serve between meetings of Classis, attending to matters that require Classis' attention and perhaps cannot wait until the next meeting of Classis. We will examine these in order.

During the meetings

During the meetings of Classis, men serve in three positions: president, vice-president, and secretary. The most visible functionary is the *president*; he sits up front facing the assembly and directs the discussion. According to the Church Order, his is the calling "to state and explain the business to be transacted, to see to it that everyone observe due order in speaking, to silence the captious and those who are vehement in speaking; and properly to discipline them if they refuse to listen."[16] In its Rules of Order, Classis West stated more fully what it expects of its president:

1. PRESIDENT.
    a. He shall call the meeting to order at the proper time, and shall see that each session is properly opened and closed.
    b. He shall enforce the Rules of Order, must rule at once on any point of order presented, and shall see to it that business is transacted in the proper order and expedited as much as possible.
    c. He shall place before Classis every motion properly made, may make suggestions as to the proper formulation of motions, and shall clearly state every motion before a vote is taken.
    d. He shall appoint a Classical Expense Committee.
    e. Being a duly chosen delegate to Classis, he retains all the rights and privileges of a delegate. As such he has:
        i. The right to take part in the deliberation of Classis. In case, however, he wishes to express himself on the pending question, he shall relinquish the chair to the Vice-president, and not resume it until the question has

16 *The Confessions and Church Order of the PRC*, 391.

been disposed of. This does not apply when the President speaks to elucidate a motion, to present matters of fact, or to inform Classis regarding points of order

ii. The right to vote on any question before the gathering. He invariably votes when the vote is taken by ballot, in case of a tie, or in cases where a voice vote is so close that a raising of hands is called for.[17]

The Rules of Order also require him, or the vice-president in his stead, to be the president pro-tem at the opening of the next Classis, calling the delegates to order, opening with prayer and Scripture reading, and presiding over the acceptance of the credentials.[18] As noted in the last article, Classis decided at its first meeting that its presidents will serve in alphabetical rotation, rather than being elected at every meeting.[19]

Assisting the president is the *vice-president*. The Church Order does not specifically require a vice-president, but any body with a president must have a way to determine who will serve in the president's place, if he cannot. Classis West decided that the vice-president will "function in the absence of the President, whether the absence be temporary or permanent," and "assist the President in enforcing the rules of debate,"[20] when he is not serving as president.

Prior to adopting these Rules of Order in March 1960, Classis' minutes did not indicate who was the vice-president of that meeting. Following the adoption of the Rules of Order, the minutes always indicate this. And the Rules of Order specify that the vice-president is that one who follows the president in alphabetical order, and therefore will be president of the following meeting.[21] Not until 1998 did the sister classis, Classis East, formally decide to designate a vice-president for each meeting.[22]

17 ROO III. 1.
18 ROO II. 2.
19 MCW September 20, 1939, Art. 6.
20 ROO III. 2.
21 ROO II. 3.
22 Minutes of Classis East (MCE), January 14, 1998, Arts. 12-14.

Third, Classis meetings have a *clerk*. Article 34 of the Church Order requires one to fill the position, and mandates him "to keep a faithful record of all important matters."[23] Classis decided further that he should attend to the following:

3. SECRETARY (Clerk).
   a. The clerk shall count roll-call at the opening of each session.
   b. The clerk shall keep an exact record of the proceedings of Classis. This record shall contain:
      i. Opening and closing of sessions, and roll-call.
      ii. All main motions, whether carried or lost, as well as all points of order, and appeals, whether sustained or lost.
      iii. All reports by committees, duly marked and supplements, with supplement numbers appended to the pertinent motions.
      iv. All committee appointments, whether by the chair or by vote of the Classis.
      v. All documents treated by the Classis, and any part of debate or address which the Classis by a majority vote decides to insert in the minutes.
   c. At the close of each day's session, the clerk shall read the script minutes for Classis.[24]

The Rules of Order specified that the clerk would also be arranged alphabetically; he would be the man who had been the president at the previous meeting.[25] In other words, when a minister's turn comes up in alphabetical rotation, he is vice-president of one meeting, president of the following, and clerk of the meeting after that. Although the Rules of Order were not adopted until 1960, this practice of selecting a clerk was used as soon as Classis began meeting in September 1939.[26]

23 *The Confessions and Church Order of the PRC*, 391.

24 ROO III. 3.

25 ROO II. 3.

26 Perhaps this was how things had been done by the Classis of the Protestant Reformed Churches, before the denomination divided into two classes and a Synod. A perusal of the index of the Classis of the PRCA, the broadest assembly from 1927-1939, did not reveal any relevant decisions.

Like the position of president, those of vice-president and clerk end when the body adjourns. These men serve Classis in these functions only while it is in session.

Between the meetings

Classis also needs men to work on its behalf between meetings. These include the stated clerk, the classical committee, and the church visitors. Unique to Classis West is the need to have a registered agent. In its earlier history, Classis also had a treasurer. In order, we note each of these positions.[27]

Every broader assembly has a *stated clerk* whose primary task is not to take the minutes of individual meetings, but to attend to correspondence and clerical work between meetings. Classis West stipulated these as his ongoing duties:

a. To prepare and publish the agenda.
b. To notify special committees appointed by Classis of their appointment and their mandate. This shall be done within four weeks after Classis adjourns.
c. To inform Classis concerning any committee that has been negligent in reporting.
d. To receive and acknowledge all correspondence addressed to Classis, without entering into its contents.
e. To carry out all correspondence specifically charged to him by Classis.
f. To maintain the archives of Classis.
g. To be present at all classical meetings in order to furnish Classis, upon request, with any needed information from the archives.
h. To forward to the synodical stated clerk all materials for the synodical agenda.
i. To update the electronic copy of the index of decisions of Clas-

27 Special committees that were appointed to study a matter and to report to a later meeting of Classis also fall into this category. No further attention is given to these because Classis has no written regulations governing their work. One special committee that existed for several years, Classis' Board of Trustees, received attention in the previous article.

sis West annually, and the printed copy every ten years, but annually distributing a looseleaf sheet of cumulative updates.[28]

In addition, Classis periodically gave its stated clerk additional mandates, usually regarding sending specific correspondence on Classis' behalf.

To date thirteen different men have served as stated clerk of Classis West. The stated clerks have all been ministers, although the Rules of Order permit elders or ex-elders to serve in that capacity. Because any human can be suddenly incapacitated, and because ministers take calls between meetings of Classis, the original Rules of Order required Classis to appoint an alternate stated clerk also. He has no mandate, but is to take over the functions of the stated clerk if the stated clerk is unable to do so.

Stated Clerks of Classis West

Martin Gritters, 1939-1945
Cornelius Hanko, 1945-1948
John Blankespoor, 1948-1949
Martin Gritters, 1949-1953
Herman Veldman, 1954-1963
Gise Van Baren, 1963-1965
David Engelsma, 1965-1988
Ronald Hanko, 1988-1993
Ronald Van Overloop, 1993-1994
Steven Key, 1994-2000
Daniel Kleyn, 2000-2005
Richard Smit, 2005-2009
Douglas Kuiper, 2009-2017
Joshua Engelsma, 2017-present

28 ROO IV. 2. The last item, "i," was added in March 2015; its addition, in fact, was the primary reason for the 2015 update to the Rules, because the first "Index of the Minutes of Classis West of the PRCA" had just been published.

Each was initially appointed either for a three-year term, or to finish out his predecessor's three-year term; and each served repeated terms until he took a call outside Classis West, or other circumstances made continued serving impossible. The first stated clerk, Rev. Martin Gritters, served an initial stint from 1939-1945, took a call to a church in Classis East, and then returned to Classis West to serve a second term from 1949-1953. Classis West's stated clerk is the only functionary to be paid an annual stipend for his work; this was the practice already when Classis began in 1939.

As noted above, one of the stated clerk's duties was to maintain and update the classical archives. At one time this meant keeping up to four file cabinets of classical records in his home. Today the clerks prepare and keep a digital archives, with hard copies being housed in the denominational archive room at the PRC seminary.

The stated clerk is responsible for all clerical matters and other mandates assigned him, but may not make any decisions between meetings of Classis that are binding. Yet such decisions must sometimes be made between meetings of Classis. The *classical committee,* generally consisting of three ministers in the Iowa/Minnesota/South Dakota region, is authorized to make some of these decisions. In this respect its responsibilities are weighty. Every decision the committee makes is subject to final approval by Classis, and yet the decisions may be implemented when the committee makes them.

The Constitution of the Classical Committee specifies that

> The duties of the Committee are as follows:
>
> 1. To execute those charges given them by the Classis in conformity with the Church Order.
> 2. To examine and act upon the credentials of ministers transferring from one charge to another in the interim between the meetings of Classis. If a minister transfers from one Classis to another, the credentials shall be examined and approved by the classical committee of the Classis in which he is residing, and are by them forwarded to the classical committee of the Classis to which he is going.
> 3. To appoint a moderator and arrange classical appointments for the churches which become vacant during the interim between

the meetings of Classis and churches which may join us in the interim between meetings of Classis.

4. To prepare a schedule for the peremptoir examination of candidates who have received a call within the Classis. In such cases it shall be the duty of the Classical Committee to notify the deputies *ad examina* of the other Classis.
5. To call a special or early meeting of Classis, or change the date of a regular session of Classis, in case of emergency, upon the request of not less than two churches within the Classis.
6. The Classical Committee is empowered to act upon subsidy requests and requests for adjustment of assessments which are of an emergency nature in accordance with the decision of Synod of 1966 (Articles 147-149, "Acts of Synod of 1966").
7. In the instance of a request for the examination of a candidate, this Committee is empowered to convene Classis at 7:00 a.m. on the evening prior to the scheduled meeting of Classis.
8. To approve expenses incurred on behalf of Classis West, in the interim of Classis, and to forward the bills to the synodical treasurer for payment.[29]

In facing these matters, the committee acts as a deliberative body; in other words, it may grant a request, or may refuse to grant it. The minutes show several instances in which the committee denied a church's request for additional subsidy, and rejected a request to change the date of Classis. Such denials required grounds, and were also subject to the approval of Classis.

In cases of emergency, the committee has acted on matters beyond what its constitution allows. For instance, immediately after the schism of 1953, Classis West was left with only one minister, though it soon gained two more. Consequently it had no synodical deputies *ad examina*. Although these men function under synod's authority, each Classis elects men to the position, and synod ratifies the appointments of the classes. Classis West had not submitted any names to Synod 1954 for these positions; the classical committee, all of whom were delegates to the Synod 1954, held a meeting at Synod and appointed

29 Constitution for the Classical Committee, Art. IV, as adopted by Classis West in March 1955, Arts. 19-28, with later amendments.

men, and Synod temporarily ratified them. The next Classis approved this action.[30] That was, again, an emergency.

But what can wait for the full body of Classis to treat, must wait. At times brothers or sisters, aggrieved by a decision, appealed or protested a matter to the classical committee. The committee's response was always predictable, from the viewpoint of one well versed in church polity: it would not enter into the matter.[31]

As a committee of Classis, the committee reports to Classis. Once a consistory in Classis West asked the classical committee for permission to ask the churches in Classis West to take collections for its building fund. It also asked permission to bring to synod a request to ask churches in Classis East to take collections also. The classical committee treated this request after the March meeting of Classis, and wanted the matter to go to that year's synod, so it came directly to synod with its request. Synod rejected the request, not because it was opposed to the request itself, but because it came from the classical committee rather than the Classis itself. Synod was insisting that matters that must go to synod must come through Classis as a body, not its committee.[32]

While the stated clerk cares for the clerical aspects of Classis, and the classical committee attends to matters that cannot wait for the next meeting, the *church visitors* are tasked with doing what is necessary to promote peace and unity in the churches of the Classis. Article 44 of the Church Order prescribes that

> The classis shall authorize at least two of her oldest, most experienced, and most competent ministers to visit all the churches once a year and to take heed whether the minister and the consistory faithfully perform the duties of their office, adhere to sound doctrine, observe in all things the adopted order, and properly promote as much as lies in them, through word and deed, the upbuilding of the congregation, in particular of the youth, to the end that they may in time fraternally admonish those who have in anything been negligent, and may

30 MCW September 8, 1954, Art. 51.

31 I do not have the minutes of the classical committee at my disposal. I am relying on my memory as a minister in Classis West and as one who served very brief stints on the committee.

32 *Acts of Synod 1975*, Arts. 108-109.

> by their advice and assistance help direct all things unto the peace, upbuilding, and greatest profit of the churches. And each classis may continue these visitors in service as long as it sees fit, except where the visitors themselves request to be released for reasons of which the classis shall judge.[33]

The geographical size of Classis means that the work of church visitation takes many hours. Assuming that the church visitors wanted to "hit it hard," they might travel to the Chicagoland churches on Monday and visit Crete and Peace on Monday evening; travel to Wisconsin to visit Randolph on Tuesday evening; then visit the five churches of Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota on Wednesday and Thursday. The church visitors will then return home for the weekend and, if possible, have a pulpit exchange with an area minister. The next Monday they will be in Loveland, CO; Tuesday in Redlands, CA; Wednesday in Lynden, WA; and Thursday in Edmonton and Lacombe, AB. Then they fly home again for the weekend. Two men would have invested two full weeks of travel to carry out the work. In practice, it seldom works this way; but in theory it could.

Since 2000, Classis elects four men and two alternates to do church visitation. Appointing four men allows each man to be involved in about half of the visits. Appointing alternates is wise in case a church visitor becomes ill, is needed in his own congregation because of an illness or death, takes a call outside the Classis, or is part of the consistory being visited. Prior to 2000, and especially in its earlier years, Classis would appoint certain men to be church visitors to the churches in Illinois and Wisconsin, others to visit Iowa and Minnesota, and yet others to visit the far western churches.

At times the church visitors, whether in an emergency or an attempt to be good stewards of time and resources, interpreted loosely the mandate that two appointed church visitors, or one and an appointed alternate, visit the churches. When one church visitor conducted church visitation alone, and again when the church visitors asked one whom Classis had not designated as an alternate to fill in, Classis expressed its disapproval.[34] Once it specifically mandated that the church visi-

33 *The Confessions and Church Order of the PRC*, 394.

34 MCW March 5, 1969, Art. 14; September 1, 1976, Art. 16.

tors were not to ask any minister other than a designated alternate to assist them in church visiting.[35] Nor did Classis permit the classical committee to appoint church visitors.[36] And twice Classis turned down overtures to conduct church visitation in some way other than a personal meeting every year, such as by filling out a questionnaire.[37]

While Article 44 of the Church Order spelled out the basic mandate of the church visitors, Classis has given additional mandates as it saw fit. One year the church visitors were mandated to investigate whether the ministers were paid enough; the concern arose when some churches that requested subsidy appeared to be paying their minister too little.[38] And the church visitors, in their reports to Classis, were free to recommend action on the part of Classis. One year the church visitors recommended that Classis admonish certain consistories who did not admonish parents who used the public schools, or who did not visit catechism classes regularly.[39]

The last article noted that Classis West incorporated in the State of Minnesota in 1976. Accordingly it has had to designate a *registered agent* for the corporation. The pastor of the Edgerton, MN PRC is usually appointed as the registered agent. His sole responsibility is to file a form with the state of Minnesota once a year.

Finally, until 1953 Classis had a classical *treasurer* who was paid a stipend equal to that of the stated clerk. His was the task of attending to all financial matters and paying bills. Currently the synodical treasurer or bookkeeper pays the bills. Classis West appoints a committee on finances at each meeting, and this committee brings recommendations regarding subsidy requests, expenses of the functionaries who serve between meetings, and expenses of the meeting itself.

Meetings: Routine Matters Regarding Congregations

Calling ministers

Vacant churches may call another minister without seeking Classis' permission to do so. At one time, the PRCA required vacant churches

35 MCW March 5, 1997, Art. 22.
36 MCW September 14, 1955, Art. 59.
37 MCW March 20, 1963, Arts. 15-20; September 2, 1981, Art. 17.
38 MCW March 2, 1983, Art. 101.
39 MCW March 19, 1958, Art. 20.

to seek this permission, but by 1937, before Classis West was formed, this practice was discontinued.[40]

However, the PRCA has decided, in accordance with Article 5 of our Church Order, that a vacant church may not call a minister who has been in his present charge less than two years, nor may a vacant church call a minister who has declined its call within the last year.[41] Consequently, when the denomination had many vacancies, consistories have asked permission to call again a man who had been called within the last year. Of the ten instances in which churches in Classis West sought such permission, Classis granted five[42] and denied five. In two of the five instances in which Classis denied the request, it did so because the church brought no concrete case, and brought no compelling reasons.[43] Regarding the "concrete case," Classis explicitly interpreted the decision pertaining to Article 5 to mean that a church must request permission to call a specific man again; it may not simply seek permission to call any who have been called in the last year. This explains a third denial, in which the consistory sought a general waiving of the decision of Article 5 of the Church Order for the next six months.[44] In two other instances, Classis was not compelled by the consistory's reasons for desiring to call a home-missionary.[45]

Only once since 1968 did a consistory's request for Classis' permission to call a minister appear on Classis' agenda. That was when a small congregation that received subsidy had a strained relationship with its pastor, decided to release him, promised him support for one year, and needed additional subsidy to call another pastor.[46] Although

40 For more on this, see Russell J. Dykstra, "Handopening," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 42, no. 1 (November 2008): 57-78.

41 *The Confessions and Church Order of the PRC,* 381.

42 MCW September 8, 1954, Art. 44; March 18, 1964, Arts. 21-22; September 21, 1966, Art. 21; March 15, 1967, Art. 81; and March 6, 1968, Art. 25. In the last instance, Classis granted the request specifically because the minister who had been called within the past year had been ill, and so could not consider the call the first time.

43 MCW September 27, 1944, Art. 22; September 1, 1948, Art. 12.

44 MCW March 7, 1956, Art. 34.

45 MCW March 2, 1949, Art. 12; September 3, 1952, Arts. 11-13.

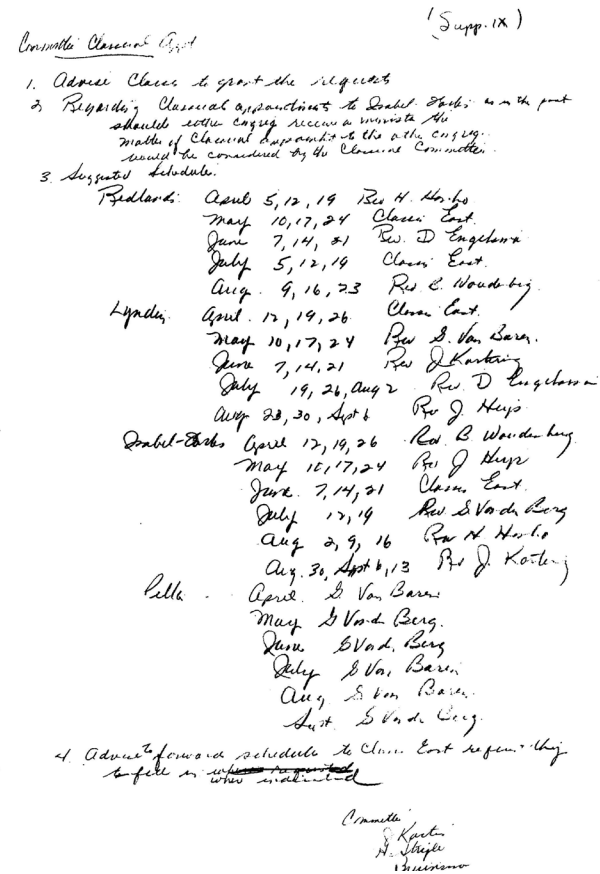
46 MCW September 1, 2009, Arts. 30, 32.

these requests rarely come up, they could again, especially if a consistory wants to call a minister twice within a year.

Classical appointments

Vacant churches in Classis West ask Classis for classical appointments, that is, preaching supply. In response, Classis draws up a list of which ministers of Classis are to supply that vacant church on which Sunday.

Classical appointment schedule, March, 1964.



(Supp. IX)

Committee Classical Appt

1. Advise Classis to grant the requests
2. Regarding Classical appointments to Isabel Forbes as in the past should either congreg receive a minister the matter of Classical appointment to the other congreg would be considered by the Classical Committee.
3. Suggested Schedule.

Redlands: April 5, 12, 19 Rev H. Hoeks
May 10, 17, 24 Classis East
June 7, 14, 21 Rev. D Engelsma
July 5, 12, 19 Classis East
Aug. 9, 16, 23 Rev C. Wonderberg

Lynden: April 12, 19, 26 Classis East
May 10, 17, 24 Rev G. Van Baren
June 7, 14, 21 Rev J Kortering
July 19, 26, Aug 2 Rev. D Engelsma
Aug 23, 30, Sept 6 Rev J. Heys

Isabel-Forbes April 12, 19, 26 Rev. B. Wonderberg
May 10, 17, 24 Rev J Heys
June 7, 14, 21 Classis East
July 12, 19 Rev G Vonden Berg
Aug 2, 9, 16 Rev H Hoeks
Aug. 30, Sept 6, 13 Rev J. Kortering

Pella: April G Van Baren
May G Vonden Berg
June G Vonden Berg
July G Van Baren
Aug G Van Baren
Sept G Vonden Berg

4. Advise to forward schedule to Classis East requesting to fill in ~~where requested~~ when indicated

Committee
J. Kortering
H. Stiegle
Brummond

If a church becomes vacant between the meetings of Classis, and needs supply before the next meeting of Classis, it asks the classical committee, and the classical committee draws up a schedule. Classis has decided that the schedule is to be made not just up to the next meeting of Classis, but through the end of the month at which the next Classis meets.[47] To be at Classis and suddenly be assigned a classical appointment that begins in two weeks is disruptive to both pastor's life and church life; Classis' decision made it possible to plan better.

The practice of Classis making such appointments is older than the PRCA. One might wonder what right Classis has to tell the pastor of a certain church, which church has called him to be its pastor, that he will fill the pulpit of another church on certain days. Classis West (and the Classis of the PRCA before it), never defended the practice; it simply assumed it was legitimate. For one thing, the practice of helping vacant churches belongs to the life of a federation; we help each other. One church willingly gives up its preacher for two Sundays, to avoid the alternative of another church not having any preaching until a man accepts its call. This willingness of the church that is not vacant is reciprocated when the church becomes vacant; then it will receive preaching from other pastors. For another thing, the authority of Classis to make these decisions is derived from the authority that the various consistories give it, when they send their delegates.

Early in its history, keeping in mind the great distances between churches, Classis often appointed one man to supply a church for three consecutive weeks with a week or two between appointments.[48] Later in it history, when travel was easier, Classis often supplied a vacant church for three Sundays a month, by giving a two-week classical appointment, one Sunday without appointments, and another two-week appointment. One can find decisions in the minutes about how Classis will schedule its classical appointments, but these decisions do not appear to commit future Classis meetings to a certain method.

47 MCW September 7, 1988, Art. 26.

48 Classis West specifically stipulated three-week appointments in the case of Edmonton; MCW September 3, 1975, Arts. 67-68. However, the practice had been followed in other instances before, and would be in other instances afterwards.

In addition to supplying vacant pulpits, Classis has also granted classical appointments to congregations that were not members of the PRCA but were looking to the PRCA for help,[49] as well as to potential daughter churches of congregations[50] and churches in Classis East, when Classis East asked for help.[51] More often, Classis West asked Classis East to cover some of the pulpits in the West.

Not infrequently the minister who is scheduled to go on a classical appointment finds that this appointment creates a conflict—Lord's Supper, or a baptism, in his church on a Sunday he is scheduled to be gone; a wedding during the week; or some other conflict. If such a conflict arises, the minister may work with the vacant church to accommodate them on different Sundays.

Rescheduling a classical appointment is one thing; simply not keeping the appointment at all is another. Even before Classis West was formed, a consistory asked the Classis of the PRCA, "In how far are the ministers bound to fill their classical appointments?" Classis answer was "not to ask for the obvious."[52] The ministers are bound, that is, classical appointments are an obligation. If that question was asked merely for information, Synod 1983 found reason to "advise the ministers and churches of Classis West to honor their own classical appointments."[53] One church on subsidy noted to Synod's Finance Committee that some ministers and churches were ignoring part or all of their three-week classical appointments. Consequently, the church asked Synod for even more subsidy to help supply its pulpit more regularly.[54] Synod accommodated the church's request, with admonitions to Classis West.

Collections

Another area in which a church might seem free to act as it wish-

49 Loveland Reformed Church, MCW March 19, 1958, Art. 35; Sovereign Redeemer Fellowship of Boise, ID, MCW September 2, 1992, Arts. 33-34.

50 "Hull's potential daughter congregation," later known as Calvary; MCW March 7, 2007, Art. 30.

51 Wingham, MCW September 3, 2003, Art. 11; March 3, 2004, Art. 18.

52 Minutes of the Classis of the PRCA, December 2, 1931, Art. 37 and Supplement 12.

53 *Acts of Synod 1983*, Art. 43.

54 *Acts of Synod 1983*, Supplement XXIV.

es is that of asking other churches for collections. Nonetheless, the expectation and practice of Classis was that the churches ask it for permission to ask the other churches. Classis' minutes record at least thirty instances of Classis approving (and occasionally not approving) requests of churches in Classis West for permission to ask other churches to take collections for their building funds or mortgages. No reasons for denying requests are given in the minutes, but the fact that Classis would deny a request suggests the benefit of the churches asking Classis for permission. Rather than each council deciding individually whether to help a sister church, the councils that receive letters asking help know that Classis has already approved the cause.

In other instances, Classis once approved,[55] and once disapproved,[56] requests for permission to ask other churches to take collections for conferences. A request for collections to help a church finance a radio ministry was approved,[57] as were requests to help churches with expenses related to litigation after the 1953 schism.[58]

At times Classis approved and forwarded to Classis East requests that the churches in the East also help with the cause; other times Classis approved requests from Classis East that the western churches take collections for the help of small, struggling eastern churches.

While Classis judged the matter of church collections to be an ecclesiastical matter, it did not view school funding in the same way. Twice school societies asked Classis to encourage the churches to take collections for them, and Classis told them to ask local consistories directly.[59]

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55 MCW September 7, 1994, Art. 41. The request was from Trinity, Houston, TX, and the conference was on evangelism.

56 MCW September 4, 1996, Art. 25. Edgerton PRC requested help financing a marriage conference. A motion to approve the request failed. The discussion on the floor must have been interesting, but the minutes do not record why the motion failed.

57 MCW September 9, 1942, Art. 22. The request was from Hope, Redlands. This regarded a special radio broadcast that they sponsored, not the Reformed Witness Hour.

58 Edgerton, MCW March 16, 1955, Arts. 15-16; Hope, Redlands, MCW September 19, 1956, Arts. 39-40; Pella, MCW September 20, 1961, Art. 39.

59 MCW September 27, 1944, Art. 34 (this was Western Christian High in Hull, IA, whom Classis instructed to ask the PRC churches in its area);

Subsidy

Subsidy is financial support from the denomination for its smaller churches. This financial support is raised through synodical assessments; each family contributes a certain amount per year. In 2024, the total amount of subsidy requested by eight churches in Classis East and Classis West is about US $391,100,[60] assuming each of them has a pastor. In 2024 each Protestant Reformed family contributes $145 through synodical assessments to the support of subsidized churches.

Even though Synod determines how much subsidy each church will receive for the coming year, the churches must come with their request to Classis first. They fill out a subsidy request form (see next page), and bring it with supporting paperwork and financial statements to the last regular Classis meeting before the deadline for the synodical agenda (the January meeting in Classis East, and the March meeting in Classis West). This is a request for support for the *following* calendar year.[61]

Classis and Synod usually approve subsidy requests. This is partly because the PRCA have always viewed subsidy as a way to help smaller congregations. And partly this is because the requests are usually reasonable.

Yet Classis' approval of a church's subsidy request is not merely a formality, and does not happen without deliberation. For one thing, although Classis does not micro-manage a church's finances, it does review the church's financial situation and general fund budget. In the 1940s and 1960s, Classis advised churches on subsidy to raise their pastor's salary; efforts to keep subsidy low should not come at the expense of the pastor being able to support his family.[62]

February 6, 1974, Art. 48 (Hope, Redlands).

60 *Acts of Synod 2023*, 91, 111, 113. As of March 2024, three of the churches requesting subsidy are vacant, so the actual figure will be less. My figure of $391,100 includes requests from US churches totaling US $305,100, and Canadian churches totaling CN $116,000 (US $87,000). Synod then assessed the families $291,100, covering the other $100,000 with surplus funds.

61 To anticipate so far in advance can be tricky. Most church councils prepare their budgets in the fall of the year, for the following year. Churches on subsidy must plan their budgets almost another twelve months in advance.

62 MCW March 3, 1943, Art. 40; March 1, 1944, Art. 29; March 16,

Subsidy Request Form of Trinity (Houston, TX) PRC, submitted to Classis in March 1994.

SUBSUDY REQUEST FORM
PROTESTANT REFORMED CHRUCHES
(Adopted by Synod - 1960)

I. This request must be at the Classical Meeting preceeding Synod. In Classis East all matters for Synod must be brought to the January Classis.
II. Fill out two copies - one for Classis and one for Synod.
III. This form is to be accompanied with a financial report covering the last fiscal year of the congregation and to include only the income and disbursements which are involved in the operation of the church.

The Consistory of the Protestant Reformed Church at Trinity PRC, Houston, TX. requests for the year 1995 subsidy in the amount of $34,000.00 based on the following anticipated expenses:

Pastor's Salary			$___30,000.00
Pastor's Medical Insurance			$____6,360.00
Church Building Expense (Specify) - Rent	$_____.00		
Interest	_____.00		
Payments	_____.00		_____.00
Parsonage Expenses (Specify) Rent	_____.00		
Interest	_____.00		
Payments	_____.00		_____.00
Utilities (Light, Gas, Water, Telephone, etc.)			____5,800.00
Fuel (Coal, Gas, Oil)			_____.00
Janitor			_____.00
Insurance			_____950.00
Miscellaneous Expenses (Specify)			
Repair and Maintenance of Property	$____2,200.00		
Synodical Assessments	____2,324.00		
Pulpit Supply	_____.00		
Other items not listed above	_____500.00		
Total Miscellaneous Expenses			$____5,024.00
Total Anticipated Expenses			$___48,134.00

IV. ___4____ Number of families (See Article 37, point 4, of the Church Order)
V.$3,224.00 Amount actually brought up per family during the past fiscal year for the operational expenses of the church.
$___62.00 Amount actually brought up per family per week during the past fiscal year for the operational expenses of the church.
VI.$2,860.00 Amount to be brought up per family during the fiscal year for which subsidy is now requested if the subsidy requested is granted
$___55.00 weekly budget per family during the fiscal year for which subsidy is now requested, if the subsidy requested is granted.

2/20/94
(Done in Consistory)

THE CONSISTORY OF THE __Trinity_____
PROTESTANT REFORMED CHURCH

_____President
_____Clerk

VII.$5,642.00 Amount brought up by the congregation for other causes.

Remarks and Explanations: Building Fund $3,315.71, Christian Education $284.25 Mission Fund $299.09, Outreach Fund $443.95, Benevolence Fund $924.90, Special Collections $375.00

Once Classis advised consistories receiving subsidy "to raise the salaries to the $1400 minimum standard, because of the present economic situation."[63] In 1983 Classis directed its church visitors to address the matter of pastors' salaries, because some of them "were quite low."[64] These references to pastors' low salaries in the past

1960, Art. 47.

63 MCW March 1, 1944, Art. 24.

64 MCW March 2, 1983, Art. 101.

indicate that Classis carefully reviews the subsidy requests. Having served in Classis West, and having been involved in treating many subsidy requests, I attest that our pastors today are paid better than they were forty and more years ago.

References to pastors' salaries indicates that Classis, in deliberating subsidy requests, has been willing to give *more* subsidy than requested. Its practice then is to advise the consistory to come with a revised subsidy request, or implement its advice the following year; Classis does not simply grant a church more subsidy than it requested.

In other instances Classis advised consistories to do more to *lower* their subsidy. Classis pointed consistories to the relatively low amount that the congregation's families were expected to contribute to the general fund, suggesting that the consistories ask more of their families and thus cover more of their costs.[65] It encouraged specific churches to become self-supporting,[66] and specified that a church of at least thirty families should not need subsidy.[67] At times it denied subsidy requests, in whole or in part, with grounds.[68] Complying with a mandate from Synod, it encourages churches to make efforts to reduce their subsidy and to report annually on those efforts.[69] And several times it directed churches to supply the upcoming synod with additional information that Classis did not have, so that the synod could make an informed decision.[70]

To assist Classis in making its decisions, churches requesting subsidy are to use an approved subsidy request form. This requires the churches to supply financial details regarding their past fiscal year, with supplements, as well as their future fiscal year for which subsidy is requested. For the future fiscal year, it requires them to detail their anticipated expenses and weekly general fund budget. For the past

65 MCW March 16, 1960, Art. 47; March 1, 1989, Art. 54.

66 MCW March 3, 1948, Art. 35; March 20, 1963, Art. 53; March 18, 1964, Art. 45.

67 MCW March 20, 1963, Art. 53.

68 MCW March 7, 1945, Art. 31; February 6, 1974, Arts. 39-41; March 5, 1975, Art. 38; March 7, 1979, Art. 95; November 19, 1986, Arts. 22-24.

69 MCW March 2, 2011, Art. 21.

70 MCW March 3, 1976, Art. 31; March 3, 1999, Art. 32; March 2, 2011, Art. 21; March 7, 2012, Art. 16; March 6, 2013, Art. 18; March 5, 2014, Art. 17; March 7, 2018, Art. 15; March 2, 2022, Art. 25.

fiscal year, the consistories must state both how much the congregation actually contributed to the general fund, and how much it contributed to all other causes. In addition, the consistory must provide written explanations 1) for what they have done to reduce subsidy, and 2) if applicable, why their general fund balance at the end of the previous year was more than 25% of the subsidy amount they ask for the following year.

Classis has also treated special requests from churches for financial help. These churches did not need annual subsidy, but had a pressing and immediate need. In the past it was understood that mortgage payments for parsonages or church buildings were *not* expenses that could be factored into a subsidy request. Twice Classis granted a church's request for one-time help with mortgage expenses, and once it rejected such a request.[71] Several times it approved, and once did not approve, one-time help for expenses involved in moving a minister.[72]

Synodical assessments

The term "synodical assessments" refers to the amount each family is asked to contribute to the denomination's support in a given year. Every synod makes a budget for the following year, and informs the churches of the amount it needs per family for that year. When councils make their general fund budgets for the following year, they include synodical assessments as a line item.

Because these synodical assessments are based on a family count, churches who lose families can find themselves in a hardship. Suppose that a church, in June of 1980, had forty families, so that Synod 1980 expected that church to pay assessments for forty families during 1981. And suppose that six of those forty families left the congregation in late 1980 or early 1981. The church now must meet its general fund budget with 15% fewer families, and pay synodical assessments for families

71 Granted: MCW September 27, 1944, Art. 24; March 5, 1986, Art. 53. Rejected: MCW February 6, 1974, Arts. 39-40.

72 At least nine times it granted such a request. The refusal to grant is noted in MCW September 21, 1982, Arts. 110-111; the reason for not granting the request was that, although the consistory supplied a specific figure, the actual figure was not yet known, nor had it been determined how much the congregation could contribute.

who are no longer part of the church. In larger churches, a loss of 15% families might mean that a daughter church was organized, or some internal issue led people to leave the congregation. Larger churches, in prosperous times, often have the surplus funds to survive financially in such situations. But smaller churches find it more difficult.

Churches in such a situation may ask synod to reduce their synodical assessments. This request, like that for subsidy, must first come to the Classis. The church must demonstrate to the Classis both that it has lost at least 10% of its families,[73] and that this has created a financial hardship for the congregation.

The minutes indicate that when churches demonstrated that the need was real and immediate, Classis has always granted their request. When churches made their request because they anticipated a future possibility of hardship, however real that possibility may have been, Classis denied their request.[74]

Discipline

Article 77 of the Church Order requires consistories to get Classis' advice before announcing to the congregation the name of a confessing member who is under discipline. Our Church Order does not specify a procedure to be followed when a consistory intends to erase a baptized member, although Synod 2008 reminded our consistories of the procedure adopted by the CRC synods in 1896, 1918, and 1926; this procedure also involves seeking the advice of Classis.[75] Apart from this reminder, our consistories have historically understood the need to seek Classis' advice regarding both increase of censure and erasure.

Consistories have also understood that the word "advice," when used in a church political context, means something more than in its common use. Commonly used, "advice" is a suggestion. In church political parlance, it is binding and authoritative advice, which must either be adopted or protested. In other words, consistories must act

73 This is part of the Rules for Synodical Procedure, in "The Church Order of the Protestatn Reformed Churches and Constitutions of Standing Synodical Committees, Rules and Regulatoins, By-laws, Forms, Declaration of Principles," 2020 edition, 102.

74 MCW March 3, 1982, Art. 35; March 6, 1985, Art. 38.

75 Acts of Synod 2008, Art. 68 B. 3.

according to the advice of Classis regarding increasing censure or erasing members. Advice to proceed with discipline must be followed; advice not to proceed with discipline is essentially a prohibition to proceed at that time.

Again the point might be raised that the churches are autonomous, making them free to proceed in these situations as they think best. It might also be said that the requirement to seek Classis' advice or permission is hierarchical. But the issue is not, in fact, hierarchy; the issue is that the various churches in a federation serve as a check and balance to each other. And to charge the Reformed churches with hierarchy in this regard is to ignore that the Reformed churches from their beginning opposed hierarchy, and yet included the requirement of Article 77 of the Church Order in the Church Order of 1619.

Classis regularly receives requests to proceed with discipline or erasure, and it grants most requests. Note some reasons for the discipline: Several times Classis approved requests of consistories to erase or excommunicate members who were divorced for unbiblical reasons.[76] Classis delayed giving a consistory advice in the case of a member who would not terminate his membership in a "godless labor union"; it appointed a committee to study the matter and report to the next meeting.[77] At the next meeting, Classis adopted the committee's advice and advised the consistory to proceed with erasure.[78] Twice the Classis approved erasing baptized children whose parents had been excommunicated.[79] Once it approved excommunicating individuals who refused to comply with civil income tax laws.[80]

When Classis did not grant particular requests to proceed with discipline or erasure, the minutes indicate why it did not. Sometimes the consistories did not make formal, grounded motions to increase censure. Other times the consistories did not inform the person under censure that they would be seeking Classis' advice on the matter, and that the person had the right to appear at Classis. Yet other times,

76 MCW September 1, 1943, Art. 18; September 3, 1947, Art. 16; September 21, 1960, Art. 67-69. In the second instance, not only was the divorce unbiblical, but the individual had remarried before the divorce was finalized.

77 MCW September 3, 1969, Arts. 46-47.

78 MCW March 4, 1970, Arts. 63-66.

79 MCW March 1, 1972, Arts. 22-23; March 5, 1997, Art. 10.

80 MCW September 4, 1985, Arts. 87-89.

Classis considered the work of the consistory to that point to be insufficient or improper.

To give a little flavor to the deliberations of Classis in this regard, let us visit the Classis meeting of September 1, 1943, in Rock Valley, IA. A consistory came to Classis seeking advice about two different members. The first was a fifty-six year old woman who was a baptized, but not confessing, member. The consistory assured Classis that she "has often and in much patience been instructed and admonished but she refuses to understand that she neglects the sacraments and has notified us that she will continue to refuse."[81] The second was a nineteen year old male "who for the past three years has neglected catechism, and for about as long has neglected the Sabbath services. He too has often been admonished, until of late admonition has become impossible since he refuses to have anything to do with us anymore."[82] Two cases, very different in nature, but the same in the end: the consistory sought advice to erase both.

One wishes he could have visited this Classis and heard the discussion. That there was discussion is certain: the delegates do not act quickly when treating such requests, but ask questions of the consistory and deliberate the matter. Furthermore, the minutes indicate some degree of discussion regarding the first case; a motion was made and discussed but tabled while Classis turned to other matters. When it resumed discussion of the request, it revised the motion and advised the consistory to continue its labors with her, and "specifically demand that she allow herself to be instructed."[83] In the case of the young man, Classis readily advised the consistory to proceed to erasure.

So what was going on? Why the difference? We have no further information. One obvious difference between the two was that the fifty-six year old was regular in her church attendance, while the nineteen-year old had not attended for about three years. Another difference is that the fifty-six year old received the consistory's committee, even though making clear to them that she would not make confession of faith, while the nineteen-year old would not receive the consistory's committee. I will hazard a guess—but it is only a possibility that

81 MCW September 1, 1943, Supplement VI.

82 MCW September 1, 1943, Supplement VIII.

83 MCW September 1, 1943, Art. 23.

crosses my mind—that the woman was of Netherlands Reformed background, and that the delegates understood, even though did not condone, her own obstacle to coming to the Lord's table.[84] She must submit to further instruction.

The real points to take away are two: First, we do not always know why Classis gave the advice it did. The consistories only state the matter generally in writing, and most of their supporting evidence is given orally. And Classis does not always ground its motions in response to such requests; it approves a consistory's request on the basis of the consistory's grounds. Second, Classis has been able, and ought always be able, to discriminate in a good sense, that is, to treat a matter on a case by case basis and be guided by the facts of the individual case.

Proper government

Consistories that are facing a particular issue and are unable to resolve that issue may ask Classis to appoint a committee to help them. Even apart from a formal request, Classis at times appointed a committee and encouraged a consistory to work with that committee. The minutes record at least eleven instances of committees, sometimes consisting of a neighboring consistory, being appointed to assist in the proper government of a church. The specific churches, and the specific issues that made the help of Classis necessary, will not be recounted here in detail. Generally the reasons were the loss of officebearers to the point that a consistory needed to be reconstituted; the breakdown in relationship between a pastor and consistory/congregation; sins of which the minister was guilty, but for which some in the consistory/congregation were defending him; or an inability to work through a weighty issue it was facing.

In connection with the proper government of a church, consistories have come to Classis with questions on their credentials, or asked during *rondvraag*. In the past, *rondvraag* (literally, "round questions") referred to asking the questions of Article 41 of the Church Order. In connection with the fourth question, "Do you need the judgment

84 The consistory requesting advice was from one of the churches in Northwest Iowa, which churches have dealt with similar situations more often throughout the years.

and help of the classis for the proper government of your church," consistories have asked Classis various questions.

Classis did not always answer such questions. At times, it declared the questions not legally before it; in one such case, the "instruction" was that Classis ask Synod to take concrete action. In essence the question was an overture, and should have been presented in that form.[85] Other times Classis said the questions were ambiguous, but recognized the real need to help a consistory, and appointed a committee to help.[86] Other times, Classis said it would deal only with concrete cases; questions were not to be asked simply for information.[87] Again, sometimes it did not answer a consistory that had not studied the matter itself or made its own decision.[88] A general principle is that when a consistory asks for help or advice via Article 41 of the Church Order, it give the delegates enough information about why it is asking the question and how Classis' answer might help or affect the consistory.

But at times Classis answered these questions. May we, when sending a certificate of dismissal, attach a document specifying the work we have done with this individual? Yes, said Classis.[89] When a consistory requests to meet with a neighboring consistory, to which consistory do the minutes belong? To both consistories, said Classis.[90] If synod made a decision, and a consistory is protesting that decision, may the minister of that congregation preach a sermon that is in harmony with the synodical decision? This is not improper, said Classis; Article 31 of the Church Order views the synodical decision as settled and binding.[91] Is neglect of the means of grace censurable? Yes, said Classis, but each consistory must understand how to apply this in a particular instance.[92] What did Classis mean by this? Perhaps the point is that a consistory must be sure the person is truly *neglecting* the means of grace, rather than being providentially *prevented* from coming to church. Perhaps.

85 MCW March 4, 1987, Art. 49.
86 MCW March 7, 1979, Arts. 87-89.
87 MCW September 17, 1958, Art. 35; September 21, 1982, Arts. 51-53.
88 MCW September 16, 1964, Arts. 41-42; March 3, 1993, Art. 75.
89 MCW September 10, 1941, Art. 26.
90 MCW March 5, 1941, Art. 34.
91 MCW March 4, 1981, Art. 40.
92 MCW September 6, 1950, Art. 20.

At times the answers are surprising. May we use money from the benevolent fund to pay down the church mortgage, or to help our pastor pay down old debts? Yes, and yes, said Classis.[93] To be clear, in the first instance the consistory asked whether it could "use" benevolent funds to that end, and the answer of Classis was that the funds could be "borrowed providing it does not endanger the poor fund as such." The switch of verb from "use" to "borrow" appears intentional, and indicates that the benevolent funds are not to be put to a different use than benevolence. A short term loan from the benevolent fund, Classis judged, did not violate that principle. In the case of the second, the consistory asking the question specified that its minister was "well-paid." When Classis said that it was "a legitimate use of benevolence to help their minister with his debt," it had, if not in writing, a clearer idea than do we of the facts of the case.

Meetings: Non-Routine Matters Regarding Congregations

All of the matters included in the previous section appear on the agenda regularly. They also all pertain to the *congregations* of the Classis, rather than to ministers (examining candidates, receiving ministers from other denominations, approving their release from office or deposition) or to individuals (appeals, protests, overtures).

This article concludes by noting that sometimes Classis treats matters regarding congregations that do not come regularly. This includes approving the *organization* of congregations as fruit on mission work[94] or as daughter congregations.[95] In the three instances

93 MCW March 4, 1942, Art. 25; September 7, 1983, Art. 126.

94 First Edmonton, AB, MCW September 3, 1975, Art. 32; Trinity (Houston, TX), MCW March 2, 1977, Art. 7; Bethel (Roselle, IL), MCW March 1, 1989, Art. 24; Covenant of Grace (Spokane, WA), MCW March 4, 2009, Article 20; Heritage (Sioux Falls, SD), MCW March 3, 2010, Art. 36. First Edmonton is the first church whose request Classis treated; past practice had been that the Synod through its Domestic Mission Committee arranged for the organization of congregations. So for the organization of Manhattan, MT, see Acts of Synod 1940, Art. 37; and Lynden, WA, see Acts of Synod 1952, Art. 48.

95 Immanuel (Lacombe, AB), MCW March 4, 1987, Arts. 37-38; Peace (Lansing, IL), MCW September 7, 1988, Art. 30; Cornerstone (Dyer, IN), MCW March 3, 1999, Art. 19; Calvary (Hull, IA), MCW September 5, 2007,

in which *existing* congregations were received into the PRCA, synod made the decision, rather than Classis.[96] But Classis has approved the *reorganization* of congregations that had previous existed but lost a significant number of members and officebearers.[97] All these matters require Classis to face various questions, particularly those appended to Article 38 of the Church Order.

More involved are matters regarding the withdrawal or disbanding of congregations. Five have disbanded;[98] a sixth was declared to be a fellowship, placed under the oversight of a neighboring consistory, and advised to disband;[99] another was declared entirely to be outside the PRCA;[100] a segment of another that sent delegates to Classis was also declared to be outside the PRCA;[101] and several withdrew. In the matter of withdrawal, Classis can do little more than take cognizance of the congregation's withdrawal and send a letter expressing grief and giving advice. For instance, Classis sent letters to those churches that withdrew after the schism of 1953.[102]

In the case of the disbanding of a congregation, Classis must both approve the reasons for disbanding as well as give advice regarding the church's property and funds and the spiritual welfare of the members. It is worth noting that the PRCA does not own the funds and property of individual congregations, as other denominations do. But because most churches that have disbanded had received subsidy, Classis has encouraged some of them to consider giving their remaining funds

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Art. 18.

96 Classis referred the matter of Loveland, CO to Synod, MCW March 19, 1958, Art. 34. Synod also received Isabel, SD and Forbes, ND as congregations; see Acts of Synod 1960, Arts. 65, 67.

97 Pella, IA, MCW September 14, 1955, Art. 41; First Edmonton, AB, September 29, 2021, Art. 19.

98 Oak Lawn, IL, MCW March 1, 1972, Art. 21; Forbes, ND, MCW March 2, 1977, Art. 59; Trinity (Houston, TX), MCW March 4, 1998, Art. 23; Pella, IA, September 5, 2001, Art. 30; Bethel (Roselle, IL), MCW March 3, 2021, Art. 20.

99 Covenant of Grace (Spokane, WA), MCW March 6-7, 2024, Art. 21.

100 Isabel, SD, MCW March 2, 1994, Art. 19.

101 First, Edmonton, AB, MCW September 29, 2021, Art. 12.

102 MCW January 21, 1954, Arts. 35-37; the next three meetings of Classis also allude to these letters.

to the denominational fund for churches on subsidy.[103] Classis also encouraged members of one disbanding PRC to move to another PRC.[104] And Classis regularly encourages consistories of disbanding churches to bring their minutes, supplements, and other records to the denominational archives.[105]

Not treated in this article is the work of Classis facing significant issues that were raised by appeals, protests, or overtures. God willing, an article in the April 2025 issue of the *PRTJ* will cover those issues.

Appendix

Meetings of Classis West, 1939-present

Date	Host Church	President
1939, Sept. 20	Hull, IA	A. Cammenga
1940, March 6-7	Rock Valley, IA	G. Lubbers
1940, Sept. 11	Hull, IA	A. Petter
1941, March 5	Hull, IA	J. Vander Breggen
1941, Sept. 10	Pella, IA	W. Verhil
1942, March 4-5	Hull, IA	P. Vis
1942, Sept. 9	Edgerton, MN	G. Vos
1943, March 3	Sioux Center, IA	J. Blankespoor
1943, Sept. 1	Rock Valley, IA	A. Cammenga
1944, March 1	Hull, IA	S. Cammenga
1944, Sept. 27	Edgerton, MN	P. De Boer
1945, March 7	Sioux Center, IA	L. Doezema
1945, Sept. 5	Rock Valley, IA	J. Van Weelden
1946, March 6	Sioux Center, IA	L. Vermeer
1946, Sept. 25	Oskaloosa, IA	P. Vis
1947, March 5	Rock Valley, IA	G. Vos
1947, Sept. 3	Doon, IA	J. Blankespoor
1948, March 3	Hull, IA	A. Cammenga
1948, Sept. 1	Pella, IA	P. De Boer
1949, March 2	Edgerton, MN	L. Doezema
1949, Sept. 7	Sioux Center, IA	J. Howerzyl

103 MCW March 4, 1998, Art. 29.

104 MCW September 5, 2001, Art. 31.

105 MCW March 4, 1998, Art. 30; September 5, 2001, Art. 31; March 3, 2021, Art. 20.

1949, Sept. 27	Doon, IA	A. Petter
1950, March 1	Hull, IA	J. Van Weelden
1950, Sept. 6	Oskaloosa, IA	L. Vermeer
1951, March 7-8	Hull, IA	P. Vis
1951, Sept. 5	Edgerton, MN	S. Cammenga
1952, March 5	Rock Valley, IA	J. De Jong
1952, Sept. 3	Doon, IA	P. De Boer
1953, March 4-7	Sioux Center, IA	L. Doezema
1953, Sept. 2-4	Oskaloosa, IA	M. Gritters
1954, Jan. 21	Doon, IA	H. C. Hoeksema
1954, April 7	Doon, IA	H. Kuiper
1954, Sept. 8	Doon, IA	H. Veldman
1955, March 16	Edgerton, MN	J. Heys
1955, Sept. 14	Doon, IA	H. C. Hoeksema
1956, March 7	Edgerton, MN	H. Kuiper
1956, Sept. 19	Oak Lawn, IL	G. Van den Berg
1957, March 20	Doon, IA	H. Veldman
1957, Sept. 18	South Holland, IL	E. Emanuel
1958, March 19	Doon, IA	R. Harbach
1958, Sept. 17	Oak Lawn, IL	J. Heys
1959, March 18	South Holland, IL	H. C. Hoeksema
1959, Sept. 16	Edgerton, MN	H. Kuiper
1960, March 16	Oak Lawn, IL	G. Van Baren
1960, Sept. 21	Doon, IA	G. Vanden Berg
1961, March 15-16	South Holland, IL	H. Veldman
1961, Sept. 20	Doon, IA	B. Woudenberg
1962, March 21	Randolph, WI	R. Harbach
1962, Sept. 19	Edgerton, MN	J. Heys
1963, March 20	Doon, IA	J. Kortering
1963, Sept. 25-26	South Holland, IL	G. Van Baren
1964, March 18	Edgerton, MN	G. Vanden Berg
1964, Sept. 16	South Holland, IL	B. Woudenberg
1965, March 17-19	Hull, IA	D. Engelsma
1965, Sept. 15	South Holland, IL	C. Hanko
1966, March 16-17	South Holland, IL	J. Heys
1966, Sept. 21	Edgerton, MN	J. Kortering
1967, March 15-16	South Holland, IL	G. Vanden Berg
1967, Sept. 20-21	Loveland, CO	B. Woudenberg
1968, March 6	South Holland, IL	R. Decker
1968, Sept. 4	Edgerton, MN	D. Engelsma
1969, March 5	South Holland, IL	C. Hanko
1969, Sept. 3	Randolph, WI	D. H. Kuiper
1970, March 4-6	South Holland, IL	G. Lanting
1970, Sept. 2	Hull, IA	R. Moore

1971, March 3	Doon, IA	B. Woudenberg
1971, Sept. 1	Isabel, SD	R. Decker
1972, March 1	Pella, IA	J. Kortering
1972, Oct. 11	Hull, IA	D. H. Kuiper
1973, March 7	South Holland, IL	G. Lanting
1973, Sept. 5	Loveland, CO	R. Miersma
1974, Feb. 6	Doon, IA	R. Moore
1974, Sept. 4	Randolph, WI	B. Woudenberg
1975, March 5-6	South Holland, IL	W. Bekkering
1975, Sept. 3-5	Isabel, SD	D. Engelsma
1976, March 3	Edgerton, MN	M. Hoeksema
1976, Sept. 1-2	Loveland, CO	M. Kamps
1977, March 2-3	Hull, IA	J. Kortering
1977, Sept. 7	Pella, IA	D. H. Kuiper
1977, Dec. 13	Randolph, WI	G. Lanting
1978, March 1	South Holland, IL	D. H. Kuiper
1978, Oct. 18	Doon, IA	R. Miersma
1979, March 7-9	Edgerton, MN	R. Moore
1979, May 2	Loveland, CO	J. Slopsema
1979, Sept. 5-7	Isabel, SD	W. Bekkering
1980, March 4	South Holland, IL	R. Cammenga
1980, Sept. 3	Pella, IA	D. Engelsma
1981, March 4	Loveland, CO	M. Kamps
1981, Sept. 2-4	Hull, IA	K. Koole
1982, March 3	Randolph, WI	G. Lanting
1982, Sept. 21-23	Doon, IA	R. Moore
1983, March 2-3	South Holland, IL	J. Slopsema
1983, Sept. 7-10	Edgerton, MN	J. Smith
1984, March 7-8	Loveland, CO	W. Bekkering
1984, June 6	Loveland, CO	R. Cammenga
1984, Sept. 5-6	Doon, IA	D. Engelsma
1985, March 6	Randolph, WI	M. Kamps
1985, Sept. 4-6	Loveland, CO	K. Koole
1986, March 5-6	South Holland, IL	D. H. Kuiper
1986, Sept. 3-5	Houston, TX	G. Lanting
1986, Nov. 19	South Holland, IL	T. Miersma
1987, March 4	Hull, IA	R. Moore
1987, Sept. 2	Pella, IA	C. Terpstra
1988, March 2	Redlands, CA	R. Cammenga
1988, Sept. 7	Loveland, CO	A. den Hartog
1989, March 1	South Holland, IL	M. De Vries
1989, Sept. 6	Doon, IA	R. Dykstra
1990, March 7	South Holland, IL	C. Haak
1990, Sept. 5	South Holland, IL	R. Hanko

1991, March 6	Randolph, WI	S. Houck
1991, Sept. 18	Edgerton, MN	S. Key
1992, March 4	Doon, IA	D. H. Kuiper
1992, June 17-18	South Holland, IL	T. Miersma
1992, Sept. 2	Loveland, CO	R. Moore
1993, March 3	South Holland, IL	C. Terpstra
1993, April 4	Randolph, WI	R. Van Overloop
1993, Sept. 1	Lynden, WA	W. Bekkering
1994, March 2	Redlands, CA	A. den Hartog
1994, Sept. 7	Hull, IA	M. De Vries
1995, March 1	Loveland, CO	M. Dick
1995, Sept. 20	South Holland, IL	R. Dykstra
1995, Nov. 9	Edgerton, MN	C. Haak
1996, March 6	Pella, IA	S. Houck
1996, Sept. 4	Randolph, WI	M. Joostens
1997, March 5	Doon, IA	S. Key
1997, Sept. 3-4	Lansing, IL	J. Mahtani
1998, March 4	Houston, TX	R. Miersma
1998, Sept. 2-3	Loveland, CO	R. Moore
1999, March 3	Redlands, CA	R. Smit
1999, Sept. 1-4	South Holland, IL	W. Bekkering
2000, March 1-3	Roselle, IL	A. Brummel
2000, Sept. 6-8	Randolph, WI	A. den Hartog
2000, Oct. 10-11	South Holland, IL	M. De Vries
2001, March 7-9	Doon, IA	G. Eriks
2001, Sept. 5-6	Hull, IA	C. Haak
2002, March 6	Loveland, CO	S. Houck
2002, Sept. 4	Edgerton, MN	S. Key
2003, March 5	Lynden, WA	D. Kleyn
2003, Sept. 3	South Holland, IL	D. J. Kuiper
2004, March 3	Redlands, CA	R. Smit
2004, Sept. 1	Randolph, WI	M. VanderWal
2005, March 2	Roselle, IL	A. Brummel
2005, Sept. 7	South Holland, IL	R. Hanko
2005, Nov. 16	Randolph, WI	S. Key
2006, March 1	Loveland, CO	D. J. Kuiper
2006, Sept. 6	Hull, IA	D. Lee
2007, March 7-8	Doon, IA	J. Mahtani
2007, Sept. 5	Lynden, WA	J. Marcus
2007, Dec. 5	South Holland, IL	R. Miersma
2008, March 5	Redlands, CA	R. Smit
2008, Sept. 3	Lansing, IL	C. Spronk
2009, March 4	Edgerton, MN	M. VanderWal
2009, May 6-7	South Holland, IL	R. Hanko

2009, Sept. 1-2	Randolph, WI	S. Key
2009, Oct. 21	Hull, IA (Calvary)	R. Kleyn
2010, March 3-4	Loveland, CO	D. J. Kuiper
2010, Sept. 1	Hull, IA	N. Langerak
2011, March 2	Crete, IL	J. Laning
2011, Sept. 7	Lansing, IL	D. Lee
2012, March 7	Redlands, CA	J. Marcus
2012, Sept. 5	Hull, IA (Calvary)	T. Miersma
2013, March 6	Lynden, WA	C. Spronk
2013, Oct. 9	Loveland, CO	A. Brummel
2014, March 5	Sioux Falls, SD	C. Griess
2014, Sept. 24	Lansing, IL	E. Guichelaar
2015, March 5	Doon, IA	R. Hanko
2015, Sept. 30	Edgerton, MN	B. Huizinga
2016, March 2	Crete, IL	S. Key
2016, Sept. 28	Randolph, WI	R. Kleyn
2017, March 1	Redlands, CA	D. J. Kuiper
2017, Sept. 27	Hull, IA	N. Langerak
2017, Nov. 29	Lynden, WA	J. Laning
2018, March 7	Loveland, CO	D. Lee
2018, Aug. 29-30	Lansing, IL	J. Marcus
2019, March 6-7	Sioux Falls, SD	S. Regnerus
2019, Sept. 25-27	Hull, IA (Calvary)	R. Barnhill
Nov. 5		
2020, March 4-5	Dyer, IN	A. Brummel
2020, Sept. 23	Edgerton, MN	M. De Boer
2021, March 3-4	Dyer, IN	J. Engelsma
2021, Sept. 29	Crete, IL	E. Guichelaar
2022, March 2-3	Redlands, CA	S. Key
2022, Sept. 28	Doon, IA	M. Kortus
2023, March 1-2	Lynden, WA	J. Langerak
2023, Sept. 27	Crete, IL	J. Marcus
2024, March 6-7	Randolph, WI	S. Regnerus

Book Reviews

Offering and Embracing Christ, by John C. Biegel. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2023. Pp xvi + 287. $25.00. Softcover. ISBN 9798886860412.

A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel, by John Colquhoun. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, repr. 2022. Pp xxvii + 320. $20.99. Hardcover. ISBN 9798886860146.

From the Marrow Men to the Moderates: Scottish Theology 1700–1800, by Donald Macleod. Fearn, Rosshire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2023. Pp xv + 355. $32.90. Hardcover. ISBN 9781527110489. Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.

These three substantial theological works give the reader a grasp both of the history and of the doctrinal issues of what is known as the "Marrow Controversy" in the Church of Scotland in the eighteenth century. The Dutch Reformed in North America should be more familiar with the controversy and its theological issues than many of us are. The name derives from the book, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, which was written in 1645 by a Scottish divine named Edward Fisher. Soon thereafter it dropped into obscurity until about 1700, when it was discovered by Thomas Boston in a friend's library and then republished. The Kirk of Scotland condemned the book as heretical—a virtual guarantee of its coming popularity, soon becoming the most popular book in Scotland, if not in all of the British Isles, with its popularity extending to America. The book was republished in 1726 with "notes" by Thomas Boston. These "notes" contributed mightily to the book's influence.

The theology of the book became known as the "Marrow theology" and the proponents of its theology as the "Marrow Men."

From the Marrow Men examines the theology of the Marrow Men, but also relates the history of Presbyterianism in Scotland in the eighteenth century, all with a fetching style of writing.

A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel is a thorough examination of the relation of law and gospel according to Presbyterian creedal

orthodoxy by a later Scottish theologian, John Colquhoun (1748-1827). In spite of the Kirk's (Church of Scotland) condemnation of the book, *The Marrow*, and of its doctrine, Colquhoun taught the Marrow theology. Thus, Colquhoun sheds light on the theology of the Marrow.

Offering and Embracing is a close, revealing, definitive study of the theology of Colquhoun and, thus, of the Marrow Men themselves.

The issues of the Marrow controversy make these thorough, careful studies of the controversy in Scotland rewarding for Reformed and Presbyterian theologians today. By all accounts, the main issue was the legitimacy, indeed alleged necessity, of the "free offer of the gospel" in the preaching: "The Marrow Controversy was fundamentally a debate about the nature of gospel preaching, and so questions of the offer of the gospel and the response to the gospel clearly mark the theological distinctives of Marrow theology" (*Offering and Embracing*, 8). This issue cannot but command the attention of the Reformed theologian today.

What soon strikes the reader is that all the Marrow Men, as well as their contemporary disciples—the authors and editor of these volumes—are reluctant forthrightly to describe the "offer" of the Marrow Men as the expression of the love of God for all who hear the gospel in a desire for the salvation of all, which understanding of the "offer" implies the heresy of salvation by the will (acceptance of the offer) of the sinner, and the denial of predestination. This hesitancy is understandable since the Marrow Men and their contemporary disciples are Presbyterians or Reformed, who are bound by the Westminster Standards and by the Canons of Dordt, which confess particular grace. It is not honorable, however, for the Marrow Men and their supporters today delicately to tiptoe around the fundamental issue of the "offer," that is, whether the "offer" is grace to all.

Not only are the men of the Marrow and their defenders guilty of hesitancy plainly to express their doctrine of universal atonement as demanded by their doctrine of the "offer," but they are guilty also of duplicity. Playing a game with English grammar that would be silly were the stakes not so high, they hold that the preacher may say to every man, "Christ is dead for you," as though this differs from saying, "Christ died for you."

The hesitancy of the Marrow Men openly to confess, or perhaps even to recognize, that their doctrine of the offer necessarily corrupts the doctrine of limited atonement results in the fact that much of the books' explanation and defense of the "offer" could be understood, by a sleepy reader with one eye closed, as a serious, external call of the gospel to all hearers with the announcement of an unconditional promise that all who repent and believe shall be saved. This is the orthodox "offer" of Canons 3-4.9. This is the orthodox view of preaching of Canons 2.5, where the general call of the gospel is significantly referred to as the "*command* to repent and believe."

Yet, a fundamental statement of the Marrow Men explaining their doctrine of the "offer" made plain their understanding of the "offer" as grace toward all in a desire of God for the salvation of all:

> God the Father, moved by nothing, but his free Love to Mankind lost, hath made a Deed of Gift and Grant, of his Son Jesus Christ, unto Mankind, in the Word, that whosoever of them shall receive this Gift by a true and lively faith, shall not perish, but have everlasting Life: Or, which is the same Thing, That there is a Revelation of the Divine Will in the Word, affording a Warrant to offer Christ unto all Mankind without Exception, and a Warrant to *all* freely to receive him, however great Sinners they are, and that this Gift is made to Mankind only, and not to fallen Angels, according to the Doctrine held forth from the Scriptures and our Confession [*Offering and Embracing*, 62; eccentric capitalization in the original].

Despite the heroic efforts of the Marrow Men and their contemporary disciples to deliver this statement from the charge of teaching an offer of universal grace, the statement teaches, and was intended to teach, the "offer" of universal (ineffectual) grace, with a desire to save all. Disregarding the erroneous, but still arguable, matter of the offer as "gift and grant unto Mankind of … Jesus Christ," the statement begins by locating the source of the "offer" in God's "free love to Mankind lost." "Mankind lost" in the statement is definitely all humans without exception, those who perish as well as those who are saved. For the Marrow Men, God's offer is "well-meant," that is, a gracious desire to save all, to all who hear, the Westminster Standards and the Canons of Dordt to the contrary notwithstanding.

The nature of a book review notwithstanding, this reviewer cannot refrain from exclaiming, "Why will Reformed and Presbyterian theologians not allow the gracious call of the gospel to be governed by God's predestination?" Why do they—confessing Reformed and Presbyterian theologians all—permit the doctrine of a gracious offer of Christ to all to corrupt the doctrine of a limited (or, particular), *efficacious* atonement and, thus, all the gospel of the doctrines of grace at its heart? If Christ died for all, salvation depends upon the will of sinners. Salvation then is man's achievement, and is a very chancy thing. And the cross of the Son of God in human flesh was a failure. The *cross*—a failure! But still today, the Marrow has its defenders, among professing Reformed and Presbyterian theologians and churches, as the volumes under review prove.

The Marrow Men grounded their offer in a love for all humans without exception *as supposedly taught in John 3:16*. For the Marrow, the preacher extends an "offer" of salvation to all in his audience and, if it were possible, to all humans without exception, because John 3:16 supposedly teaches that God loves all humans with the love that gave the only begotten Son. This explanation of John 3:16 describes the "offer" of the Marrow theology as universal grace, as also the theology of those who today defend the "offer" of the Marrow Men (cf. *Offering and Embracing*, 73, 74).

As if this were not enough to establish the "offer" of the Marrow as universal grace in the gospel, Colquhoun, with appeal to the book of Ruth, described Jesus as the "kinsman–redeemer" of the entire human race, and made this a ground of the Marrow's "offer."

As has invariably been the case in the Presbyterian and Reformed churches, the notion of the "offer" in the sense of the Marrow theology has corrupted the truth of limited, or particular, atonement (and with this gospel-truth all the doctrines of grace). Macleod devotes an entire chapter to the development of the offer into various forms of universal atonement in the Scottish churches, especially, hypothetical universalism. Macleod recognizes that the "offer" as the Marrow Men and most theologians today conceive it stands in irreconcilable conflict with limited atonement. Familiar to Reformed churches in North America is the tactic of churches that are departing from the gospel

of salvation by grace alone of changing the Formula of Subscription. Macleod's own solution is to consign the problem to "mystery."

To do justice to the doctrinal and practical concerns of the men of the Marrow, they contended in the Church of Scotland for the preaching of the gospel to all and for its urgent call to all to believe on Jesus for salvation. They detected in the Kirk a hyper-Calvinism that restricted the call of the gospel to those who gave evidence of being elect. They called their opponents in the Church of Scotland "legalists"; the theologians of the Church of Scotland, on their part, called the Marrow Men "antinomians."

Unsavory as the name-calling of the dispute in the Church of Scotland was, it indicated two things. First, the dispute was not the first and would not be the last heated dispute over the same issue. Second, Reformed and Presbyterian churches need a theology of preaching that avoids the two ditches: on the one side, a hyper-Calvinistic restriction on preaching, particularly on issuing the call of the gospel; on the other side, the Arminian offer of universal grace dependent upon the will of the sinner.

The call of the gospel, or "offer" in the terminology of the Marrow Men, was not the only important issue in the controversy of the Marrow. Assurance of salvation also became a matter of debate. The theologians of the Church of Scotland burdened assurance of salvation with many requirements. Faith in Christ itself is not enough. For assurance, serious and often life-long self-scrutiny regarding the presence of many spiritual qualities is required. Inevitably, many lived for many years in doubt of their salvation. Indeed, many died in sinful, agonizing doubt. The Marrow Men tended toward the truth that faith *is* assurance. Boston used the apt illustration of our knowing that the sun is shining. We do not know this from various evidences, but from the shining itself. In its own strength, the sun convinces man that it is shining. We do not arise every morning asking, "Is the sun shining today?" But even the men of the Marrow weakened their doctrine by the distinction between a direct act of faith and a reflex act of faith. This reflex act opened the way to doubt: I believe with a direct, assured faith, but I can only *know* that I believe by the reflex of faith, that is, by my faith examining itself and its fruits in me. Colquhoun distinguished "the assurance of faith" and "the assurance of sense."

One can have the former, but lack the latter. Doubt wins in the end. The Westminster Confession of Faith is not helpful in this debate; the Heidelberg Catechism is helpful.

Also playing a role in the controversy was the Auchterarder Creed, having to do with the necessity of repenting in coming to Christ for salvation (*From the Marrow Men*, 70). In fact, the Marrow doctrine and controversy began over the doctrine of repentance. The awkwardness of the Creed and its name is more than compensated for by hearing a full-blooded Scot pronounce the name of the creed, from deep in his throat.

A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel is the thorough and generally sound study, positive and negative, on the relation of law and gospel in all of Scripture.

Offering and Embracing Christ is the fullest and clearest account of the "offer" in Marrow theology. If the "offer" is understood as the unfettered preaching of Christ to all and sundry, including the call to all to repent and believe, it is a defense of biblical and Reformed preaching against hyper-Calvinism.

And *From the Marrow Men to the Moderates* clearly explains the "offer" in conservative Scottish Presbyterianism. It is also a fascinating history of the falling away of the Church of Scotland into what the author calls "moderatism," and what is or soon becomes theological "liberalism." Macleod quotes a satirical poem to describe the thinking of the typical "Moderate clergy":

> I do believe in stone and lime, a manse of large dimensions;
> Broad acres for a glebe and farm, *that is* my church extension;
> My folk may perish if they like, Christ's name I never mention;
> I take the stipend due by right, to men of good intention. (321)

In connection with his account of the splitting of the Church of Scotland, then the splitting of the splinters, and further the splintering of the splitting, Macleod makes the astute observation that schismatics rather attack the orthodox church than the ungodly. The reason, according to Macleod: schismatics are "self-appointed prophets," looking to advance "the progress of their own party."

New to this reviewer is the derogatory name for the orthodox Calvinists by the moderates (liberals) during the struggles over the

Reformed faith in Scotland during the eighteenth century. This reviewer had thought that he had heard, and even been the object of, the entire stock of such epithets. But, no. There is, to him, a new one: "high fliers." In reality, upon reflection, the name is not such a bad one. Perhaps, with the spreading of Macleod's book, Protestant Reformed ministers will be privileged to hear it: "high fliers."

Regardless of the intention of the "moderates" ("low fliers"?), it can have a noble meaning; repeated, it comes to have a fine ring.

The Canons of Dort: God's Freedom, Justice, and Persistence, by Eugene P. Heideman, edited by Donald J. Bruggink. Holland, MI: Van Raalte Press, 2023. Pp xii + 382. $30.00. Softcover. ISBN 9781956060027. Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.

How desperately weak is the Reformed Church in America (RCA)!

How rare is the theologian who loves the Canons of Dordt and defends it vigorously and without equivocation!

This book's explanation of their own former creed by two prominent RCA theologians is fairly sound as regards the explanation itself. (I say "two" theologians, because the editor acknowledges a role in the writing of the book.) But in its defense of the doctrine of Dordt it is woefully weak. Indeed, again and again it is fatally concessive to the Arminian heresy that the Synod of Dordt combatted. Thus, it compromises, if it does not surrender altogether, the gospel of saving grace that the Canons of Dordt confesses and defends.

Acknowledging that the Canons of Dordt teaches double predestination as an eternal decree, the book denies that the Bible, Romans 9-11 in particular, in fact teaches the divine decree: "the doctrines of the double decree (I:6) and the definite number of elect (II:8) were called into question in previous chapters [of this book]" (319). Especially does the author of *The Canons of Dort* (hereafter *CD*) reject the Canons' doctrine of reprobation. God did not reject Esau in eternity, as the Canons teach. He only rejected Esau in time and history in response to Esau's disobedience. Even then, He rejected Esau with such a reprobation as left the way open for Esau's subsequent election.

The doctrine of reprobation, it should be recalled, was the main engine employed by the Arminians against Dordtian orthodoxy.

The Canons does teach particular, or limited, atonement, but this is a mistake in light of a sounder interpretation [by Roman Catholic commentator, Raymond Brown] of the biblical passages appealed to by the Canons in support of its doctrine, in particular John 10 and 17. These passages do not teach limited atonement as Dordt affirmed. On the contrary, one may say to every person, "Jesus Christ died for you" (264).

With respect to the Canons' doctrine of irresistible grace, the book is less emphatic and definite in its rejection of the truth confessed by the Canons. This is understandable. The heresy of resistible grace lies at the very heart of Arminianism, and Scripture is clear and emphatic that the grace that saves the sinner is and must be irresistible. But in the end, freely admitting that Dordt teaches irresistible grace, the author challenges Dordt's biblical basis of its doctrine.

The fault of the Canons throughout, and the explanation of its erroneous theology, is that Dordt was "scholastic." By this time, so often is the charge of being "scholastic" freely used to dismiss orthodox doctrine that the orthodox must now make an issue of the charge. They must demand that those who thus use the charge explain what is meant by it. If, as is likely, those who lightly throw the charge around do not, and cannot, explain and justify the charge, the orthodox ought to accept the charge as a badge of their orthodoxy and themselves charge that those who are not scholastic are by virtue of this fact heretical.

According to the author and editor of *CD*, the Synod of Dordt failed miserably in all its interpretation of the Bible. In fact, the explanation of Heideman and Bruggink's criticism of the exegesis of Scripture by the theologians of Dordt is Heideman and Bruggink's reliance upon the universalistic theology of Berkouwer, Moltmann, and Barth and upon the Roman Catholic exegesis of Raymond Brown. These contemporary heretics call the shots exegetically in *CD*. To the surprise of no one, they cannot see double predestination in Romans 9-11, limited atonement in John 10 and 17, or the irresistibility of grace everywhere in the Bible.

According to *CD*, the Synod of Dordt was made up of exegetical nincompoops: "…if the synod had paid more attention to the structure

and flow of the book of Romans rather than just quoting a number of verses without giving attention to their context" (345). Never mind that by all accounts, doctrinal foes as well as doctrinal friends, the theologians and ministers who were delegates to the Dordt synod were among the most brilliant, best educated, and able clergy in all the world.

Partially redeeming the book from its doctrinal weakness is its detailed and fascinating account of the historical developments leading up to, surrounding, and following the synod. King James I of England was supportive of the synod, although more for political than for spiritual reasons. He sent delegates to Dordt on an impressive ship of the British admiralty. The synod favored the English delegates in their seating at the assembly. The synod cost the Dutch government some 500,000 guilders. As has been the case at Reformed synods of Dutch extraction ever since, the food was exceptionally good: "The foreign delegations wrote home that they enjoyed excellent accommodations, food, and hospitality" (45).

In the course of their basically sound explanation of the Canons itself, author Heidman and editor Bruggink make some significant observations concerning the doctrine of the Canons and its implications for Reformed churches. Abraham Kuyper deliberately proposed a common grace of God in order to "correct" the particularistic theology of grace of the Canons of Dordt. Kuyper's common grace modifies, and was intended by Kuyper to modify, the particular grace of the Canons. The Canons rejects a preparatory common grace of God. Dordt disliked all expressions of a "conditional" salvation. Dordt would not have liked the use of the phrase, "the condition of faith." Weakening the truth of the irresistibility of the grace of God to the elect is the theory of the "well-meant offer" of the gospel. All of these significant doctrinal declarations and admissions are those of Heideman and Bruggink.

In view of this purported defense of Dordt by the best that the RCA can offer, it is no surprise that only a very small percentage of RCA ministers and laity consider the Canons of Dordt to be important. According to *CD*, only 30% of the ministers in the RCA and merely 38% of the laity "consider the Canons of Dort important" (4). In light of these appalling statistics, the remnant in the RCA ought to be beseeching God for the gift of an Elijah, or at least for another Gordon Girod, in fact for a phalanx of Girods. Instead, the RCA has relieved

its officebearers of subscription to the Canons.

Neither is it surprising that the RCA has stripped the Canons of binding, creedal authority in its fellowship. Now the Canons is (weakly) advisory in the RCA.

The battle of true churches of Jesus Christ on behalf of salvation by (sovereign) grace is over in the RCA. Arminius wins. Dordt loses. And the same is true in the majority, if not all, of the large Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America. In the end, Dordt goes down to dismaying ecclesiastical defeat.

But Arminius is not victorious decisively. There are still denominations of Reformed and Presbyterian churches that confess Dordt's doctrines from the heart, and defend them, though these churches are small. There are still a few theologians who proclaim and defend salvation by particular, sovereign grace, and who publicly condemn the heresy of universalistic, ineffectual, conditional grace as the resurrection of the false doctrine of Pelagius out of hell (so, Dordt), though these theologians are of no reputation. As long as there are these churches, these ministers, and saints who believe and make this confession, Dordt continues to have the victory.

And the compromisers and enemies within the gates cannot rest easy, regardless of their victory in such books as *CD*. For Dordt has mighty power—the power of its content: the confession of salvation by grace.

And the power of the Spirit of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ!

A Christian's Guide to Mental Illness: Answers to 30 Common Questions, by David Murray and Tom Karel, Jr. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023. Pp 238. $15.99. Paperback. ISBN 9781433587276. Reviewed by Barrett L. Gritters.

David Murray and Tom Karel have done the people of God a great service by producing a book that is one of the most helpful books on "mental illness" that I have read. As professor of practical theology, I am required to teach students how to minister to the saints who have mental illness (I will address the use of the term *mental illness* later),

and have read many books, some good, many not good. For the general audience of Christian readers, and for elders and pastors, this is the best book that I have found.

A Christian's Guide is not a scholarly book. But it could be read by scholars as a good example of how to communicate difficult and complex truths in a way that even the simplest believer can understand. The subject of mental illness is complex, but scholars Murray (Ph.D.) and Karel (M.A. psychologist), who understand the subject inside and out, make the subject plain enough that even a group of young people could profitably use it for a discussion. Pastors, elders, family members, and sufferers all will find the book a great help.

As the subtitle indicates, the book is made up of 30 chapters, each answering a straightforward question. "What is Mental Illness?" is chapter 1. "Is 'Mental Illness' a Helpful Label?" is the second. That it is called "A Christian's Guide" indicates that it is useful for all Christians, and for almost all the questions one would face: from what mental illness is, to how one can prepare to face it; from dealing with fear of suicide, to how to help caregivers themselves; from reducing the stigma attached to mental illness, to practical advice for things to avoid when ministering to the sufferers.

Each chapter follows a simple template. First, the question is answered clearly and carefully in three or four pages, with sub-sections outlined clearly. In answer to the twenty-fifth question, "What Should We Do When a Sufferer Falls into Temptation?" the chapter divides easily into "Remember your own weakness," "Remember the sufferer's weakness," "Remember God's strength," and "Remember Jesus's salvation." Then, after a brief synopsis of the chapter, the authors offer "Insights" and "Action" points—practical ways to implement the teaching of the chapter. Finally, either Murray or Karel relates a personal story, illustrating the truth of the chapter from their own life or from the life of one whom they counselled: "David's Story," (David Murray) or "Tom's Story about Cheryl," (Tom Karel, Jr., about an anonymous patient), for example. The personal anecdotes take the book out of the abstract and theoretical into the practical and real life of God's people.

Rev. Murray and Mr. Karel are well suited, in God's good providence, to author such a book. They are both professionally trained.

Karel is university trained and state licensed. Murray is university and seminary trained. Both are experienced in counseling. Karel has been employed at Pine Rest ("a Christian mental health center in Grand Rapids, Michigan," the book's back cover says) for many years. Murray has been a pastor and seminary professor of practical theology. That both Murray and Karel are *Reformed Christians* and officebearers in Reformed churches will commend them to the readers of this journal and to Reformed or Presbyterian Christians. Their instruction is biblical, Reformed, and wise. What uniquely fits these brothers to write is that both have suffered mental illness themselves and are open about it. This makes the book especially appealing; the authors have a sympathy and understanding that others may not. And, although some books on depression written by those who have suffered depression betray an author's bias, or too-narrow experience—"my experience must be everyone else's experience"—that is not true for *A Christian's Guide.*

Among many points of appreciation, I mention two.

Much appreciated by this reviewer is the authors' *balance*. Where one is tempted to react and over-react to errors, Murray and Karel maintain an even keel. For example, when the *causes* of mental illness are discussed, the authors take neither the "all physical" nor "all spiritual" approach. Mental illness is "rarely only a spiritual problem that can be fixed simply with repentance and faith" (5). At the same time, when addressing the physical component of mental illness, the warning is given that "when mental illness is even *partly* caused by personal sin but is blamed on sickness alone" it is damaging and turns "a sinner into a sufferer" (47; emphasis added). When asking who the best helpers for a sufferer are, chapters 12 through 18 show the place that pastors, professionals, fellow church members, family and friends, and 'biblical counselors' have. Each has an important place. The authors address the use of medication (chapter 16) and give counsel that is wise: Do not go to meds *first*; do not rule out meds *altogether*; do not rely on meds *alone*. Even when discussing the label "mental illness," balance shows in their admission that the term has weakness ("mental" may imply that only the mind is involved and not the emotions, and "illness" may imply that nothing can ever be done to avoid it); may

be overused, underused, or abused; and may be too broad. But in the end, it is useful if used with wisdom.

Second, the authors do some justice to "sinful thought patterns" as contributing to or causing mental illness (84ff). This is a significant point that pastors and elders must recognize: where sin is a cause, but not one that can be labeled as a gross or willful, and probably not even recognizable until a patient pastor or counselor points it out. A child, for example, who learned to think and react wrongly from the sinful example of his parents, but is not walking in willful sin, will be helped to see that although he is not intentionally sinning, he is sinning nevertheless.

Criticisms are minor. First, with regard to helpers of the mentally ill, in the end, too many cooks are allowed in the kitchen: pastors, professionals, biblical counselors, family members, church members. Although our loved ones with mental illness need more than one to help them—even a team—having so many helpers risks overwhelming the sufferer with too much advice, some of which may be conflicting. Those in charge of helping the mentally ill will want to limit the number of helpers and coordinate their efforts.

Second, at times the brevity of each chapter can leave a wrong impression because it does not allow the nuance and qualifications to be given. For example, early in the book, the impression is left that the kinds of sins that cause depression are only the gross sins of defiance of God's law, of long-term bitterness and anger, of addictions; see chapter 6 and the relation between mental illness and spiritual life. Later, in chapter 10, this is corrected somewhat. And chapter 10's explanation of the "causes" of mental illness is disappointingly simple until chapter 11 asks, "Can a Christian Have Mental Illness?" Perhaps the publisher's requirement of chapter length and brevity caused this issue. Thus, before the reader reaches conclusions that the book is simplistic (and it is, at times) the entire book must be seen as a whole. On my first reading of the book, I jotted down a number of criticisms, only to elide them after the book progressed. Because of this, I read the entire book a second time before writing this review.

Third, the chapter on 'biblical counselors' suffers from a lack of definition for this role, although it does bring some balance to the view of early 'biblical counselors' who rejected medical treatment or professional help.

In conclusion, to our great shame, most people of God must admit that they either run away from those who suffer with mental illness or criticize out of ignorance (108). Too many of God's people suffer without the help they need. Their families are burdened and overwhelmed, not only by their loved one's suffering, but by the lack of help or understanding from their broader family or church family.

The book ought to be read by all—elders who want to understand and aid their sheep; family members whose loved one is suffering; friends, who want to be strong to bear their friend's burden; really any Christian who wants to show the love of Christ to someone whose suffering cannot be examined with an x-ray or diagnosed with a blood test. As Spurgeon (who himself suffered from depression) once said about the reality of depression: It is in the imagination, but it is certainly not imaginary.

Going to Church in Medieval England, by Nicholas Orme. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022. Pp xi + 483. $25.00. Softcover. ISBN 9780300266436. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.

The history of the English church in the medieval era (600-1500) is a sufficiently broad topic that a book devoted to it, numbering four hundred pages with small font, might still be a general overview. This book, however, is no overview, and its topic is narrower: It regards the history of the church's *worship* in that era. The book is a well-researched, detailed account that refers to many historical instances. Nicholas Orme gives us a clear and thorough look into worship in medieval England.

Orme is emeritus professor of history at the University of Exeter, in Devon, England. Specializing in the history of the Middle Ages and Tudor era, he has written extensively about education, social history, and church history during this era. To mention only those writings published by Yale, Orme's book *Medieval Children* appeared in 2001, *Medieval Schools* in 2006, and *Tudor Children* in 2023. But Orme's real interest is *social* history, that is, the history of people. *Going to Church in Medieval England* is a *social* history of the English church's worship in the Middle Ages.

A history of the church's worship

Particularly, the book is about worship. Chapter one, "Origins and the Parish," sets the stage by surveying the history of the English church from 300-1000. It regards how the English were converted so that they could worship, and how their centers of worship developed. These centers included minsters (monastery churches), parish churches, and chapels.

"The Staff of the Church," referring to those who facilitated the worship, is the title of chapter two. The chapter explains the various kinds of clergy, the process of ordination, and their income and status. The third chapter, "The Church Building," explains every aspect of a church's structure, architecture, and grounds. The design and architecture of these buildings were intended to facilitate worship. Orme includes a section on the pulpit, an elevated platform found in every church, from which the Scriptures were read, announcements made, and sermons were preached. Regarding the sermons, see the summary of chapter five.

Chapter four, "The Congregation," is a detailed treatment of the worshipers. People of all all ages and strata of society attended church. But not all did: Orme includes a section on "those absent," giving reasons why some were absent, and how the church responded to them.

Worship in the Middle Ages was not limited to what happened at church; religion pervaded all of life. Chapters five and six, "The Day and the Week" and "The Seasons and the Year," describe what worship involved in the details. Chapter five treats all the details of a worship service, including the mass, and contains a section on sermons. Not every priest preached (an understatement; most did not), and many who did, preached sermons that were woefully deficient. Yet the priests were expected to provide some very basic instruction to the people, perhaps a ten or fifteen-minute explanation of the Scripture reading for the day, as well as an explanation of the Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, and ten commandments, at least four times a year.

Chapter six treats the church calendar, with its feasts and fasts and saint days. The Romish sacrament of confession (penance) is treated here because, if one confessed only once a year, it was to be during the Lent season. Orme's treatment of penance includes in detail the

procedure a priest would follow in hearing a confession, and the various consequences he might prescribe.

Chapter seven ("The Life Cycle") treats the life of the worshiper from birth (baptism) to death (last rites), including also the Romish sacraments of confirmation and marriage. While not a sacrament, "churching" was also common; this refers to the ceremony of receiving back into the worship services a mother who had recently given birth, similar to that of an Old Testament Jewish mother being considered unclean for forty days after giving birth to a son and eighty after birthing a daughter.

Chapter eight explains how the English Reformation, particularly under Kings Henry VIII and Edward VI, affected the church's worship. Chapter nine, "Reflections," is a brief conclusion that restates the broad themes of the book and explains how Orme evaluated the sources that he used to present his data.

Orme presents history objectively. Several aspects of the church's worship could bear critique: the multiplication of church offices, Rome's doctrine of the sacraments including both their nature and their number, and the lack of substantive preaching. Because Orme presents historical facts, he does not evaluate these. Rather, he tells the reader much about what the church's ministry and life in the church was like in the Middle Ages. The extensive research and in-depth treatment of the topic makes this book valuable. Adding to its value are many visual illustrations, and a seven-page list and explanation of technical terms.

A *social* history

Orme goes further in presenting a *social* church history; the book's main point is to explain the role of the *people* in worship. Although the book argues no specific thesis, its focus "is on people in church" (3). Those people certainly include the clergy (chapter three), but they also include the laity. Every chapter in the book relates its topic to the laity, the worshipers. Orme presents the people as being involved: not every person, to be sure, but many lay people nonetheless. He conveys "how much initiative a congregation or its individual members possessed in the functioning of a church" (195).

Chapter two, for instance, includes a survey of the non-ordained church staff. Non-clerical church positions include singers, churchwar-

dens (lay persons who oversaw the building) and sextons (wardens' assistants who rang the church bells and dug graves in the churchyard). Guilds arose—groups of men or women committed to raising funds for and caring for the church's buildings and property. Patrons (influential laypeople, often nobles) provided the funds to build the parish churches or chapels, and had say in choosing the ministers. Chapter three includes a section on the social uses of the church building and grounds. Outbuildings were erected so that people could come to church for secular and social functions, but not desecrate the sanctuary.

Chapters five through seven regard the church's sacraments, rites, and calendar from the viewpoint of how they affected the people's lives. Orme presents the people with their warts and all. While many contributed to the church in tangible ways, others detracted from a healthy church life by their poor behavior in church (168-172) or dissent (191-194).

In presenting the people, Orme debunks at least two ideas that some might have about worship in the medieval church, particularly in England. First, without question, the church regulated and controlled the lives of the people in the medieval era; chapter seven makes that clear. But Orme demonstrates that the people were not to have been docile and silent in this regulation. Rather, the church adapted to them in several ways: seating, times of services, and even "the use of the English language in ways that are not apparent in the standard liturgical books" (195-96; see also 235ff).

Second, one who knows that the cup was not given to the laity at the mass might have concluded that the laity, at least from about 1300 onward, did not drink wine in church at all. To the contrary, each parishioner was to receive communion at least once and up to four times a year. In receiving communion, the people would drink wine, albeit not the consecrated wine, and not given sacramentally (285).

Orme's chapter on the Reformation not only explains liturgical changes in worship, but how these affected the worshiper. Worship became more intimate, as the preacher (formerly priest) led the service facing the congregation and in the same room, rather than turning his back to them and going to a more remote part of the building to consecrate the host in the mass. In addition, every element of worship was now in English, and more and deeper biblical instruction was given.

In sum, the book is a valuable contribution to church history, and gives fresh or deeper insights into what worship was like for the average person. For anyone who specializes in or teaches medieval church history, this is a must read. Laymen also will find the book interesting,

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The History of England's Cathedrals, by Nicholas Orme. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024 (revised edition). Pp 306. $30.00. Softcover. ISBN 9780300275483. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.

Reading Orme's book *Going to Church in Medieval England* whetted my appetite for another like it, and this volume caught my eye. I envisioned a book that contained short histories of England's cathedrals. The book is not that, but is *more* than that: It recounts the history of cathedrals as a phenomenon. The publisher's website claims that this is "the first such book to provide" a "complete history of their life and activities," "stretching from Roman times to the present day." It was more than I imagined, and I was pleased.

Overview

The book consists of ten chapters. The first briefly introduces the subject, while the last briefly surveys and concludes the subjects. The other eight chapters treat the history of these grand edifices chronologically: Chapter 2 treats the years 314-1066, chapter 3 1066-1250, and so on. The dates are not arbitrary; they mark either political or religious changes in England that affected cathedrals.

In each chapter Orme returns to the same themes: Which cathedrals were founded or closed during that era (with accompanying maps); their outward architecture and inward furnishings (those interested in architecture will appreciate noting the developments); the worship that was performed in them, and staff required to maintain them; other uses to which cathedrals were put; the learning and education that they fostered; the land that they owned, and income from those lands; and the like.

Each chapter also notes unique aspects of the history of cathedrals during that era. This includes the murder of Thomas Becket (51-55); the effect of the plague (61-62); the effect of the reigns and religious

sympathies of Henry VIII and Edward VI (101-114); the effect of Arminianism (133-136); and the effects of wars (137-139, 233-238) and fires (154-160). Orme also informs the reader of other cathedral historians (170-174) and of the inclusion of cathedrals in literature and plays (214-219). That cathedrals were tourist attractions gave rise to guidebooks as early as 1792, the requiring of fees to enter a cathedral, and later the dropping of those fees in favor of asking for donations.

Cathedrals: More than Buildings

So what, really, is a cathedral? Today most would answer: a grand building in a Gothic style, used for worship. But York's cathedral was at first a plain wood building (13); soon cathedrals were made of stone. Around 1100, every existing cathedral had been rebuilt and enlarged in an impressive early English Gothic style (46-51). This style evolved during the later Middle Ages (73-74), and changed more during the Romantic era (174-179). Cathedrals built in the last hundred years look modern; Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral, for instance, is circular. With the passage of time, the inward design of cathedrals has also evolved.

Fundamentally, a cathedral is the place that houses the chair on which a bishop sits (7, 12), regardless of how impressive the building is. For this reason, England (including Wales) has had well over a hundred cathedrals in her history, and has sixty-two of them today. When the Anglican or Romish churches needed more bishops, either more cathedrals were built or currently existing buildings became called cathedrals. When a bishop's seat permanently moved from one city to another, the former cathedral building remained, but was declassified, no longer called a cathedral.

Being the seat of a bishop, cathedrals became the center of community. For one thing, the land on which they were built was spacious enough that some of it could be rented out; this neighboring land was called the cathedral's "close." For another, people donated lands to the church, so that cathedrals and their bishops governed land farther away. Throughout the book, these topics get attention (13, 36-39, and more).

Cathedrals were also community centers in that they became gathering places for the public (90-94; 210-214). In addition, the cathedrals became tourist destinations, especially after they began to be associated with patron saints, and house relics.

Finally, cathedrals were burial places. They are no longer; but any visitor to cathedrals will see where notable religious and political persons are buried.

Because cathedrals are more than buildings, their history is rich. Of special interest to this reviewer was the note of five crisis points in the history of cathedrals: England's reversion to paganism after Rome fell (8), the Viking invasion (16), the early Reformation (117), the era of Presbyterian control in the 1640s (137-139), and the unrest and cathedral reform movements of the 1800s (186). As an institution, cathedrals survived all five, but some individual cathedrals did not.

Recommendation

As was true of *Going to Church*, this book is well researched, and has a helpful guide to technical terms in the back. Its many pictures give it graphic appeal, and the architectural renditions of some cathedrals also make the book visual.

The book does an admirable job of relating the history of cathedrals in England and Wales. Although admittedly beyond the book's scope, it would be helpful to have a section in each chapter, or in the concluding chapter, about how this history related to and differed from that of continental cathedrals. That book must yet be written.

The 2024 edition is revised from the original 2017 edition, but no indication is given where the revisions were made. This reviewer's sense is that content revisions are limited to the addition of a few relevant facts post-2017, including the effects of Covid (260).

Rescue Skills: Essential Skills for Restoring the Sexually Broken, by Deepak Reju and Jonathan D. Holmes, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2021. Pp 259. $16.00. Paperback. ISBN 9781629959054.

Rescue Plan: Charting a Course to Restore Prisoners of Pornography, by Deepak Reju and Jonathan Holmes, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2021. Pp 241. $18.99. Paperback. ISBN: 9781629953830.
Reviewed by Garrett J. Eriks.

One of the greatest threats to the church today is pornography. This is not hyperbole. In fact, it might be the greatest threat to the present

generations in the church. The statistics are staggering. According to the Covenant Eyes website, 51% of male students and 32% of female students first viewed porn before their teenage years. The average age of first exposure to porn among men is 12 years old. This problem is not just out in the world, but it is also in the church. Among those who attend churches, 64% of Christian men and 15% of Christian women say they watch porn at least once a month (the Covenant Eyes website has many other sobering statistics about porn usage). So many men, women, and young people are becoming enslaved to this deadly bondage that is so easily accessible to them on their devices. You expect high porn usage rates in the world. But pornography is a problem in the church. Therefore, the church needs good, reliable, biblical resources to help in the battle against pornography.

Deepak Reju and Jonathan Holmes, experienced pastors and counselors, have provided these two comprehensive, companion books, *Rescue Skills* and *Rescue Plan*, to help the church in this great battle. These books are meant to be read and used together. *Rescue Plan* explains the big picture of the nature of enslavement to pornography and what it looks like in the life of a single person, a married person, and in a child/young person. *Rescue Skills* explains how to disciple a believer who struggles with bondage to pornography.

These books are written for those who are in the trenches of battle alongside those who are struggling with this sin. The authors write, "Our target audience is pastors, counselors, best friends, parents, small-group leaders, roommates, fellow church members, and really anyone who is coming alongside a friend who struggles with pornography" (*Rescue Skills*, 10). This reminds us of the calling in the church to be side by side with each other in our sin struggles. Certainly pastors and elders want to be used to help those struggling with these sins. But parents must have a heart to help their children and church members must have a heart to help fellow church members to walk the way of purity and godliness against these deadly attacks of the evil one. These two books will provide the necessary resources for anyone in the church to help other members.

The highest compliment that can be given to books of this nature is that they are biblical. These two books are saturated with Scripture. At the same time, these books are the most comprehensive and prac-

tical that I have read regarding this sin and overcoming it. Because they are biblical, they are also gospel-centered and Christ-centered, so that hope is provided for those struggling with this powerful enemy.

In *Rescue Plan*, the authors describe the bondage of pornography with the biblical verbiage of slavery, double-mindedness, foolishness, idolatry, and desires. With a deep understanding of this sin from experience and Scripture, the authors unpack the cycle of this bondage. With helpful alliteration, the four foes of the porn addict are identified as access, anonymity, appetite, and atheism. While no punches are pulled regarding the offensiveness of this sin against God and the neighbor, the books also explain how this sin affects the brain. They make use of science and recent discoveries about the effect of pornography on the mind, which is helpful for the addict and the counselor to understand.

The authors also tackle the often-avoided topic of masturbation in two chapters. In one chapter they demonstrate from Scripture that masturbation is wrong because it violates God's design for sex in marriage between a man and woman. In the next chapter they provide many biblical and practical strategies to fight against this selfish sin.

In our day the church might buy into the myth that pornography is only an addiction affecting men. But porn usage is rising among women. Reju and Holmes identify the unique struggles of pornography for men and women and they encourage pastors especially to preach against this sin to men and women because silence about pornography use among women is hurting them. Women are especially ashamed of this sin in their lives because they are led to believe it is only a temptation for men. Therefore, the books are not only for those helping men, they are valuable resources for those counseling women as well.

The practicality of the books can be demonstrated in many ways, but here is one example. In the chapter dealing with young people who are struggling with pornography, the authors make the case for young people not dating while they are struggling with this bondage. Maybe you will agree or maybe you will not. But they make a strong case for it.

What will deliver someone from the bondage of pornography? These books do not provide a twelve-step program to free men and women from this addiction. Instead, they provide a gospel-centered, Christ-centered, biblical rescue plan. It would be a mistake to pick

up the books expecting to find a program only to modify behavior. Instead, you will find reading that is good for your own soul even if you have never battled this addiction because the focus is on Christ, the cross, and the beauty of God's grace. The biblical doctrine of repentance is covered thoroughly so that the one helping the addict can help him/her understand what true repentance looks like. This section on repentance is helpful for any sin in the life of a believer. But also, they remind those helping the addict to point this person to the cross to see the beauty of God's love. In this regard, one of the most powerful sentences in the books is this: "Sin is bad, but Christ is better" (*Rescue Plan*, 127). How true.

Each chapter of the book has at its conclusion a small gray box that includes something to reflect on, something to act on, and something to pray. These nuggets are helpful as a pastor, elder, or counselor puts together a unique way to apply God's rescue plan to one struggling with pornography. This is exactly what it should be: not a cookie-cutter approach or one-size-fits-all approach to dealing with pornography. The books are meant to be read slowly and digested. Then the reader puts together his/her own way of applying God's plan to help someone who is struggling with this life-dominating, destructive sin. I must admit that at first I was disappointed that there was not a list or some steps to follow when counseling those caught in this trap. But then I saw the wisdom of their approach.

Because the books are gospel-centered, they are full of hope for those who feel hopeless in their sin. The authors point to the God of hope and the God of all comfort. This is a good reminder for us in our work with those who want to turn from sin and live God-glorifying lives: give them hope.

I encourage pastors and elders especially to read these books. But I also encourage counselors, parents, and all members of the church to read them. We need more discussions about this great evil that is plaguing the church. It will not go away by ignoring it. But more than this, we need to know that there is power to overcome this sin in the cross of Jesus Christ.

Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology—Implications for the Church and Society, by Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2023. Pp 501. $34.99. Hardcover. ISBN 9780736988704. Reviewed by Joseph Holstege.

Writing on the topic of critical social theory[1] in the modern context is fraught with challenges. There is the challenge of terminology and definitions, for starters. What is critical social theory? Is it the same as "woke"? Is it a new cultural form of Marxism? Is it a branch of feminism, an arm of the LGBTQ movement, or a racial justice idea?

Then there is the challenge that arises due to the academic roots of critical social theory. What has recently emerged onto the scene through cultural phenomena such as "Black Lives Matter" and "drag queen story hour" has been slowly developing in the cocoon of academia for decades. That can make conversations about critical social theory feel fairly remote and abstract to the casual reader. We might hear the regular church member who does not have time to read thousands of pages of obscure academic writing saying to himself, "What is this all about, and what does it have to do with me? I certainly want nothing to do with drag queens in libraries or feminist liberation movements or social justice marches in the streets." What the same church member may not realize, however, is that these cultural phenomena that he or she finds especially offensive are but the tip of the iceberg. Beneath them is a vast network of ideas that aim to change the whole of society by redefining basic concepts, upsetting relationships within society, and breaking down institutions (including the church). It can be challenging to be clear about the insidious nature of these ideas and their prevalence both in the world and in the church without sounding like some kind of paranoid whistleblower. But prevalent and insidious they are, as well as destructive to the Christian faith.[2]

1 "Critical social theory" is the term the authors of the book under review prefer, and is the term I will stick with in the review. The same set of ideas is sometimes referred to as critical theory, critical race theory, cultural Marxism, or sometimes just by the word Theory. See pages 20-28 for an extended treatment of terminology.

2 See chapter 13, "Ideas That Will Devastate Your Church," where the authors call attention to eight ideas, attributable to critical social theory, that

Furthermore, there is the challenge that arises from the apparent compatibility of some of the ideas of critical social theory with basic Christian assumptions. The power of every lie is that it contains some element of truth, and critical social theory is no exception. Critical social theory claims to be a set of ideas that stands up for the oppressed and serves as a vehicle for the implementation of justice. Many Christians buy into the ideas of critical social theory—in part or in whole—thinking that this is simply a tool that will enable them to "do justly" and to "love mercy" and to "walk humbly" with God along the lines of Micah 6:8. What they do not realize is that terms like "oppression" and "justice" are being redefined and repackaged in ways that actually work against the core tenets of the gospel. Of course, it is not as though anyone teaching these ideas is holding up a sign that says, "We are purposely aiming to redefine core concepts in order to break down and revolutionize society and the church." Many of the people passing these ideas along do not even realize that their ideas are more closely tied to critical social theory than Christianity. Thus, the challenge of identifying critical social theory for what it is, and rooting its influence out of the church.

The reality of these and other challenges is what makes this new book by Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer both helpful and important. Though the book is fairly lengthy at 501 pages, and somewhat academic in its language and presentation, it is worth the effort of reading and carefully thinking through its concepts.

I would recommend this book to all Christians who are seeking to understand what is going on in the world today, and why the "foundations" seem to be shaking in a way not seen before. I would especially recommend the book to pastors and elders, to Christian school teachers (who were almost certainly exposed to the "critical pedagogy" methods of Paulo Freire in their college training [75-79]), and to those members of our churches who are deeply involved in working with abuse victims, either as advocates or in another capacity. It is vitally important that, as the church seeks to disciple her members, train her youth, and relieve the oppressed, she steers clear of the methods and the madness of critical social theory.

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are destructive to life in the church on the ground level.

Chapter one introduces the topic of critical social theory by defining key terms and illustrating the impact these ideas are having in society and the church. The rest of the book breaks down into three parts. Part one (chapters two through seven) is a thorough unpacking and description of critical social theory itself, along with its primary subsets, known as critical race theory and queer theory. Part two (chapters eight through twelve) is an extended critique of these ideas, focusing on their incompatibility with basic Christian teaching and Protestant theology in particular. Part three (chapters thirteen through fifteen) aims at pointing the way forward for the church as it seeks to keep its moorings in Scripture while also taking seriously some of the issues that critical social theory raises.

What I find especially helpful in the book is the authors' breakdown of critical social theory, which can be overwhelming to the uninitiated, into four main categories of ideas: 1) the social binary, 2) hegemonic power, 3) lived experience, and 4) social justice. It would be useful to read the book just to get a handle on these four ideas, which together serve as an all-encompassing worldview for those who embrace critical social theory. The authors repeatedly use these four categories in their analysis with the hope that "readers will immediately begin to recognize how deeply they have permeated our culture, showing up in HR departments, corporate boardrooms, the entertainment industry, commercials, sports, the military, and the government. As a university professor told Neil [the name of one of the authors—JH] after one of his talks: 'Once you see it, you can't un-see it'" (92).

Because even the basic categories used by the authors to describe critical social theory are themselves somewhat obscure, it is worth our while to define them briefly for the sake of clarity. The *social binary* refers to the division of all of society into "oppressed groups and oppressor groups along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, physical ability, age, and a growing list of other identity markers" (93). Closely related is the idea of intersectionality, namely, that "every person's social identity is a combination not merely of different social identities but of differently valued social identities. Hence, a queer Black woman is triply oppressed, whereas a straight White man is triply privileged" (87).

Hegemonic power refers to the way ideas and systems are used by those in power such that these ideas are accepted by everyone else as "natural and common sense, thereby blinding oppressed people to their real condition" (105). Hegemonic power is not necessarily "the product of conscious animus on the part of any person or group of people," but is "structural and systemic" (110).

Lived experience gets at the epistemology (how we know what is true) of critical social theory. "Lived experience gives oppressed people special access to truths about their oppression. Therefore, they have the innate authority to speak to these truths, and people from oppressor groups should defer to their knowledge" (118). One way in which the concept of lived experience is applied by critical social theory is in the realm of "microaggressions," that is, the subtle ways in which members of the oppressor class are said to marginalize and harm members of the oppressed class.

> The insistence that impact > intent is key to the concept of microaggression because it centers the lived experience of minoritized people. The victimized person, not their aggressor, determines what does and does not qualify as a microaggression. Moreover, the seriousness of the supposed harm is to be determined solely by the victimized person and accepted without question, no matter how disproportionate the magnitude of their response might appear to others. The legitimacy of their response is not open for discussion as even the questioning of what is legitimate is seen as a product of white supremacy and hegemonic oppression. (126)

Social justice can be understood as the practical outworking of the ideas of critical social theory. As employed by the promotors of critical social theory, social justice assumes all the baggage of critical social theory itself. It assumes the redefinition of terms like "oppression" and "justice." It then puts these ideas into practice. "Social justice exists to challenge authority and subvert what it deems to be unjust systems and institutions. In so doing, it shows its reliance on critical theory" (132).

If there is a weakness in the book's refutation of the above tenets of critical social theory, it is an overreliance on logical reasoning and an under reliance on biblical demonstration. To some extent, this is understandable given the authors' apologetic purpose and desire to

reach "people who do not profess any form of Christianity" but who are "just as concerned as we are about the spread of these ideas" (33). However, I would have liked to have seen more direct engagement with biblical texts and explicitly Christian principles in the arguments presented to readers. Perhaps there is room for another book in the future along these lines.

The biblical demonstration that is included by the authors, however, is sufficient to show the incompatibility of critical social theory with basic Christian beliefs. Over against critical social theory's drawing into suspicion all "hegemonic" power structures, the authors state that "the Bible itself functions as a hegemonic discourse" that serves to justify "God's complete sovereignty and authority over us (Psalm 115:2-3; Isaiah 40:12-17; 45:7-9; Romans 9:19-21; Ephesians 1:11)." Indeed, "on its own terms, contemporary critical theory would have to view God as the ultimate Oppressor" (290-291).

Over against critical social theory's assertion that the lived experience of the oppressed is not to be challenged, the authors point out that this ends up usurping "the place of Scripture and Scripture-informed reason as the final arbiter of truth" (295). One supporter of critical social theory, quoted in the book, argues that the "battle over inerrancy" in the church is "in part a proxy fight over gender," making the primary importance of inerrancy "to bolster patriarchal authority" (297).[3] As the authors point out, however, reducing biblical authority to a mere power play in favor of the lived experience of the oppressed leaves the church with no ultimate ground on which to stand.

> If we commit to seeing all theological truth claims as mere bids for power, what claims will be left? What doctrines cannot be deconstructed? Without the objective truth claims of Scripture that can be reliably known through exegesis, reason, and study, doctrinal decline will be inevitable. If *sola scriptura* is replaced by *sola lived experience*, we'll be left with the twenty-first century American version of the book of Judges, in which 'everyone did what was right in his own eyes' (Judges 17:6)" (297).

3 The quote is taken from Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, 1st ed. (New York: Liveright, 2020), 108-109.

Regarding the social binary that critical social theory inserts between oppressed and oppressor groups, the authors argue that this is "of first importance to…critical theory," because where you fall in one of these groups "determines your degree of privilege, your blindness to various forms of oppression, your inherent authority to speak on matters of social justice, and your primary role in social justice advocacy." However, the authors show how the Bible undermines this social binary by teaching four ways in which human beings are united "across lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, physical ability, etc." (305). These include the original creation of human beings in God's image, the common fall into sin, the common need for redemption in Christ, and, for Christians at least, the "radical equality in Christ," which results in the breaking down of "the middle wall of partition" between Jews and Gentiles (306; see also Eph. 2:14).

Whereas critical social theory, with its social binary, necessarily frontlines opposition and fragmentation,

> Christian life must begin with the recognition of our shared humanity, our shared sinfulness, our shared need for a Savior, and our shared identity in Christ. Although contemporary critical theory tends to center political activity [activism–JH], this subject is far removed from our central concern. We care very little about how Christians build political coalitions and far more about how contemporary critical theory will affect interpersonal relationships, especially within the church. (307)

I cannot help but add my own hearty "Amen" to this concern about how critical social theory affects interpersonal relationships, especially in the church of Jesus Christ.

All of these issues would be serious by themselves, but what makes them a threat that cannot be ignored is how they come together and function as a worldview. Critical social theory, as the authors point out, provides different answers than Christianity to the big questions of life.

> According to contemporary critical theory, our primary identity is horizontal. We are part of various oppressed and oppressor groups locked in a struggle for dominance. Our primary problem is not sin, but oppression…. The solution is not redemption, but activism… Our primary moral duty is to dismantle the systems and structures that

> perpetuate oppression. The end goal (and 'the right side') of history is the attainment of social justice, a state in which power is fully shared between groups" (283).

Because of this, you cannot play with one aspect of critical social theory without getting pulled in to the rest of it. "By their very nature, these ideas are totalizing. They will always seek to occupy more and more space in our conceptual imagination until they subsume every other aspect of our thinking" (285).

The above only represents a snapshot of the authors' very careful and well-documented analysis and critique of critical social theory. What strengthens their argument is an aim for balance and an acknowledgement of what it is that draws people to the ideas of critical social theory in the first place. There is such a thing as oppression and abuse. There is such a thing as systemic corruption. There have been times when Christians have been blind to real injustice in society or in the church. However, critical social theory, which is a powerful force running rampant in the current cultural zeitgeist, is not the answer. Social justice activism that dabbles in the ideas of critical social theory is not the answer. These ideas will lead the church off track, away from the gospel, away from the Christ of Scripture, and away from peaceful relationships in the church. These ideas are not only incompatible with Christianity, but they are truly antichristian. Like the mythical serpent that eats its own tail and ends up swallowing itself, the church that plays with these ideas—unwittingly, perhaps, but no less really—hits the self-destruct button.

To put the threat critical social theory poses into the authors' words:

> In summary, all these ideas will erode people's orthodoxy, their relationships with others, and the health of their local church. These ideas will . . . divide the body of Christ into Allies and Bigots, regardless of the demographic group to which they belong. Allies have 'done the work,' have been enlightened to their systemic privileges and oppressions, and have committed themselves to diversity, equity, and inclusion. In contrast, Bigots are blind to their complicity, are committed to protecting their privilege, and desire to maintain the status quo. Any suggestion that this generalized way of seeing reality is flawed will be met with accusations of gaslighting and lack of empathy. (430-431)

That is an outcome to be feared by those who value the gospel of redemption for sinners, and the church that teaches it. Getting a handle on critical social theory will go a long way to help the church avoid that outcome. Reading *Critical Dilemma* will go a long way to help you get a handle on critical social theory and the threat it poses.

A. C. Van Raalte: Pastor by Vocation, Entrepreneur by Necessity, by Robert P. Swierenga. Holland, MI: Van Raalte Press, 2023. Pp xxii + 680. $50.00. Softcover. ISBN 9781956060010. Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.

Robert Swierenga, historian of the Dutch Reformed in the United States, presents the definitive biography of Albertus Christiaan Van Raalte. Van Raalte was the Dutch pastor who led a group of Reformed believers out of the Netherlands to the shores of Black Lake, now Lake Macatawa, in Holland, MI. The settlement in Holland is of church-historical significance: it is the historical origin of Classis Holland of the Reformed Churches of America (RCA) in 1848; out of it was born the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRCNA) in 1857; and latent in the loins of the CRCNA was the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA). The book, in other words, is of broad interest to many Reformed believers.

This is the *definitive* biography of Van Raalte, but not the first. In his preface, Swierenga informs the reader of three Dutch and two English biographies of Van Raalte that already exist. Swierenga notes that previous biographies are incomplete; Swierenga is the only biographer to have access to "The Van Raalte Collection," an archived collection of some six thousand relevant documents. Swierenga also aims to be more objective in his assessment of Van Raalte than previous biographers have been. And Swierenga's book informs the English reader about Van Raalte's life before he immigrated, far more than does any other English biography.

That Van Raalte was a pastor is well known; that he also did many things beyond the work of the ministry is also no secret. Swierenga's argument, conveyed in the book's title, is simple: he had no choice, in light of the circumstances.

> The thesis is simple: Dominee Van Raalte juggled competing roles as pastor, churchman, education promoter, social entrepreneur, opinion leader, culture manager, and community builder, first in founding the Separated churches at home, then in building the Midwestern wing of the Reformed Church and . . . cofounding Hope College. . . . Despite the tension between his life in the pulpit and his life out of the pulpit, this Dutch immigrant leader made West Michigan the center of Dutch American population and culture in the United States (xvii).

Van Raalte in context

Every good biography presents its subject in context. This book opens (chapter one) by noting the life of Van Raalte's father. Father and son shared both names and occupations. The senior A. C. Van Raalte (1771-1833) served six pastorates during the time of apostasy due to the influence of the Enlightenment, the upheaval of the French Revolution, and tight state control of the church after the Netherlands became independent again. Father Van Raalte was not known as a dynamic preacher, nor as one who ardently opposed the state's intrusion into the church. He *was* known for his piety.

In this context, the younger Van Raalte was born and lived (chapter two). This was also the time of the Dutch Reveil, a movement that sought church reform *from within* but would not separate from the state church. Van Raalte has this in common with early sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers: working for reform from *within* an instituted church, they soon found themselves on the *outside* of that church, needing to form a new institute. This need they had not anticipated. Likewise, the *Afscheiding* was no orchestrated reformation, carefully planned ahead of time, and in place for performance when the curtain rose.

Swierenga also gives the reader a glimpse into the context of Van Raalte's life in America (chapter five). That context includes matters directed by the God of providence: Isaac Wyckoff's interest in helping the immigrants; the State of Michigan being formed a decade before Van Raalte's arrival; the Holland area being a frontier that the State was happy to see settled; and the presence not only of Indians but also of missionaries to them, as part of the 1801 Plan of Union.

Church divisions

Addressing controversy and division in the church characterized Van Raalte's life. Van Raalte was involved in the *Afscheiding* of 1834 from the outset, but in a unique way: whereas the other founding pastors were deposed from the state church, Van Raalte was a candidate for the ministry, and denied ordination. The first synod of the secession churches examined and approved him for ordination in 1836. Subsequently he, with the other leaders, endured persecution at the hands of civil government and society. Preachers who read the details of this persecution (84-142) should ask whether we are willing to suffer what he suffered. Turmoil within the new denomination was another burden for Van Raalte. Chapters two through five cover these matters.

If Van Raalte's life in America was free from persecution, it was not free from church divisions. Soon after founding the Holland colony, Van Raalte urged the newly organized churches (now known as "Classis Holland") to join the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church in 1850, as the RCA was then known. Soon dissatisfaction with this union led to the formation of the CRCNA in 1857, an event that Van Raalte viewed as schism. Chapter ten, the book's longest chapter, focuses on this history.

Even after the formation of the CRCNA, Van Raalte endured constant criticism from his own members about his frequent absences and his involvement in secular matters. This criticism was not entirely unwarranted.

Christian education and civil control

Throughout the book, two sub-themes run together: Van Raalte's insistence on the necessity of Christian education, and his efforts to get legal recognition for the churches and schools while keeping them free from state interference. Already in the Netherlands he promoted Christian education (117-119). The difficulties in obtaining permission were one reason he desired to emigrate (163-164). He encouraged Christian education in Michigan as well, but the people did not take his encouragement to heart: Why establish a Christian school funded by the people, when they could have a public school, funded by the government, in which the Dutch Reformed monitored and controlled what was taught? Nevertheless, Van Raalte was instrumental in founding both the Holland Academy and its successor, Hope College (341-353).

As to legal recognition, he finally received in the Netherlands what he sought, only to find that it had its downside: he was now part of a secession church that was recognized by the civil government, and less persecuted, while other secession churches were not recognized and were more persecuted (120-123). In the end, with whom did he desire true unity?

Secular affairs

If Christian education and civil control are sub-themes, the main themes of the book are Van Raalte's work as pastor and his involvement in secular affairs. His involvement in secular affairs began already in the Netherlands. With reference to Van Raalte's financial investment in fishing boats in 1837, Swierenga says, "Van Raalte was an economic activist who combined an interest in business with philanthropy, providing jobs for Separatist laborers blacklisted for employment" (111). Later he "truly became a social entrepreneur, mixing ministry and business on a larger scale" (134) when he partnered in a manufacturing firm. In both instances his goal was to provide work for those secession followers who could not find work, but in the latter instance "profit took priority, with philanthropy as a side benefit" (135). No surprise, then, that he helped form an emigration society (169), took the leading role in finding a site on which to settle in Michigan (chapters eight and nine), tried to fill the position of doctor in the colony (237), and was materially involved in building a pier at the mouth of the Black River and promoting the colony's economy (271-277).

Chapters twelve and thirteen treat this aspect of Van Raalte's life in Michigan. Chapter twelve focuses on his business and capital dealings; Swierenga notes that Van Raalte was "more of a promoter and fundraiser than a businessman" (405). Chapter thirteen examines his role in establishing the county's first newspaper, and in politics. The colony, of course, was a political entity as much as a religious one.

Swierenga's thesis is that Van Raalte's circumstances led him to this involvement in secular affairs. Understanding that God, in His sovereign direction of history, uses specific men in specific ways to accomplish His purpose, one could say that had Van Raalte not done all that he did, the colony might not have survived. But Swierenga, to his credit, also evaluates Van Raalte's involvement negatively. Van

Raalte himself felt the pressure of serving two masters (398-400), and his involvement in so many matters affected his work negatively: "Van Raalte's life off the pulpit consumed him" (443). In his final evaluation of Van Raalte (chapter seventeen), Swierenga also presents the man objectively, not covering his warts with makeup; specifically, Swierenga views Van Raalte's engaging in other affairs as a contradiction to his calling to be minister (583).

Van Raalte as preacher

To say that a preacher's calling is to preach is not a tautology; it is to remind the man of his fundamental work, and urge him to be diligent in it. What was Van Raalte like as preacher? In the Netherlands, facing persecution, he was bold. He preached extemporaneously, as well as fervently—souls, and their salvation, were at stake. In the new world, he was noted for preaching sermons that were doctrinal (especially his Heidelberg Catechism sermons), exegetical, and God-glorifying (305-311).

Three hundred of his sermons are extant. Other biographers suggest that hundreds of his sermons were lost, but Swierenga raises the possibility that these three hundred were the only sermons he ever made. He preached over 3000 times, but in many different venues before many different audiences. That, as well as his demanding travel schedule, may mean that he used these three hundred sermons repeatedly.

Natural gifts and competency in basic areas do not mean that the preacher will not be criticized. The preaching of that man who knows the Word but is too busy to study it and develop as a preacher will suffer. Van Raalte illustrates this. Some who left Classis Holland in 1857 to form the CRCNA alleged that his preaching was doctrinally weak (300). About the same time, his own consistory encouraged him to spend more time in his study.

Recommended!

Swierenga does indeed present us with the definitive biography of Albert Van Raalte. He also demonstrates his thesis, and comes to the right conclusion (chapter seventeen): in many ways Van Raalte's life was contradictory, and in various ways he paid the price. As always,

Swierenga's style is engaging. As a result, one can find shorter books that are tedious and seem longer. The 600 pages of this book's body are not so daunting as one might think.

The history treated and the conclusions drawn make the book a worthwhile read for anyone interested in either civil or church history, or both. For Van Raalte planted and watered two seeds, and God caused them both to grow: a colony that is now a city (Holland, MI), and a church that is the historical origin of an entire classis of the RCA, as well as of the CRCNA and PRCA.

Theoretical–Practical Theology, Volume 3*: The Works of God and the Fall of Man*, by Petrus Van Mastricht. Tr. Todd M. Rester. Ed. Joel R. Beeke. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021. Pp xlvi + 631. $50.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781601788405. Reviewed by Marco Barone.

Following volumes one (*Prolegomena*) and two (*Faith in the Triune God*), Todd M. Rester and his team continue to work on the translation of Petrus van Mastricht's *Theoretical-Practical Theology* by offering the third volume, *The Works of God and the Fall of Man,* and the fourth, *Redemption in Christ* (to be reviewed in a future issue of the *PRTJ*).

The translation is prefaced by the editor and translator who help the reader better understand and situate some characteristics of this volume: van Mastricht's lapsarian position mediating between infra- and supra- (xxvii-xxxiv), his rejection of Copernicanism within the context of his great interest in science (xxxiv-xxxix), his defense of the reality of demons and magic (xxxix-xliii), and his doctrine of the third heaven (xliii-xlv).

The text itself consists of the third and fourth books of van Mastricht's monumental manual of theology.

Book three, "The Works of God," is divided into twelve chapters, discussing respectively the world and the six days of creation, the good angels, the fallen angels, man and God's image, God's general providence, God's special providence, and the covenant of nature. Each

chapter is divided into four parts: the exegetical part, the dogmatic part, the elenctic part, and the practical part.

The first four chapters are an edifying and masterfully detailed exposition and defense of the Reformed doctrine of God's acts in creation and in His immutable decrees generally considered. These chapters also treat God's absolute sovereignty in predestination, election, and reprobation. In these chapters, we see van Mastricht's lapsarian position mediating between infra- and supra-, especially in the second chapter. Beeke and Rester summarize van Mastricht's view as follows.

> 1. To manifest God's glory of mercy on some indefinite persons capable of being created, and his punishing righteousness on others;
> 2. That individuals would be created and fall into sin;
> 3. The election and reprobation of these fallen individuals;
> 4. A preparing of and directing the means to fulfill or accomplish the destiny of elect and reprobate individuals. (xxxii)

Whether infra- or supra-, any Reformed believer needs to heed van Mastricht's call to stay within the boundaries of what Scriptures affirms on these subjects. These majestic truths are given to us not to feed our intellectual curiosity, but to adore, to obey, and to glorify God (46-47).

The fifth and sixth chapters are dedicated to the doctrine of creation in general and to the six days of creation, respectively. The practical part of chapter five is particularly edifying as van Mastricht reminds us to realize that creation was created for the sake of man and for the glory of God (although those relationships have been changed once sin entered the world), and, above all, as a means to know God and to glorify Him (118-122). Chapter six is very long. Van Mastricht divides it into four theorems, in turn each with its own dogmatic, elenctic, and practical parts. Our geocentric theologian expounds in detail each day of the six days with their respective created contents. Van Mastricht ably defends the biblical view of creation within six days, and in the elenctic parts he discusses questions and objections of varying degrees of subtleness (and of usefulness, one may argue).

Chapters seven and eight are about the good and bad angels, respectively. In addition to discussing the angelic beings' nature and works, van Mastricht presents arguments to show how the good

angels reveal God's glory (208), in what sense believers should take examples from them (208-209), and how the angels are a blessing to the saints (210-211). In turn, regarding the evil angels, van Mastricht shows in what sense also the evil angels reveal God's glory (240), in what sense believers should consider their example and do the opposite (241-242), and the reasons, motives, and means to fight against the fallen angels' continual attempt to rob us of our happiness (242-245). Though van Mastricht warns against abuses and speculations (210), neglecting the conscious realization of the existence and activity of wicked angels is as serious a danger as overemphasizing their reality. Chapter 8 offers precious teaching and needed reminders about the church's invisible enemies.

Chapter nine discusses man as created (theorem one) and the image of God (theorem two). In the first theorem, van Mastricht talks in beautifully covenantal language about the ends (254-255) and excellency (262) of the first man. Van Mastricht also offers an upbuilding discussion on the practical importance of knowing those things for a life of true self-knowledge and gratitude to God (277-278). The second theorem deals with the image of God in man. Here, too, the ends of God's image are described in covenantal language (283). The image of God in man is described as

> a conformity of man whereby he in measure reflects the highest perfection of God. It is a conformity, in which it agrees with a vestige, and through this conformity, there concurs in the image every likeness of God in man, by which, in his own way, man reflects God, that is, he displays such things which are to a certain extent and by analogy common to him and God. Finally, this happens in a certain most noble perfection, which is seen first in the very essence of man, then in the first faculties of the soul [the intellect and the will], and finally in the virtues of these faculties. (285)

Van Mastricht includes the mental faculties of the intellect and will (as well as dominion over creation, plus other powers) within the image of God in the broader sense. Thus, in that broader sense, remnants of the image of God are in all fallen humans. However, "the image of God perished with respect to its most excellent parts" [the narrow sense], that is, original righteousness, full immortality,

perfect dominion, and happiness (291). The theorem concludes with a powerful practical part that instructs us to see God's glory in the masterful contrivance of both pre- and post-lapsarian humanity (298-230), profoundly to grieve the incommensurable tragedy of the loss of the divine image through sin (304-305), and actively to rely on God's grace and means for the restoration, though only partial in this life, of that image (305-307).

Chapters ten and eleven regard God's general providence and special providence. The former regards all creation and creatures in general, while the latter regards rational creatures in particular. In general providence, God's influence is sovereign and all-pervasive (315-316), without violating the nature of the things and means that God themself was pleased to create: "God certainly produces faith in man, yet it is not God who believes, but man" (319). Earlier, van Mastricht denounced antinomianism and carnal security, which operate "as if by a foolish decree God has destined the end and salvation for us without the means, without any zeal for faith and obedience" (76). That said, God's presence is so intimate with all things that "God does immediately work all things which occur" (322), and "however often he uses suitable means, their strength and its incitement, and their application to an object, depends altogether immediately upon him" (323), to the point that "the preservation of these things entirely coincides with creation, except that the former excludes the newness of existing, which the latter includes, and, therefore, it would be not at all inappropriate to call it continued creation" (314). God, however, is not the author of sin (333-335). The chapter also contains many helpful discussions on freedom, necessity, and contingency (330-337; other helpful material on the same issues appear at 416, 424-425, 526-527, 539-541). The chapter on special providence has a similar vein, but applied to moral creatures endowed with intellect and will, that is, angels and men. God is the only king and ruler of all creatures, both rational creatures and animals, both sentient and non-sentient. This should stir us up not only to faith but also to loving obedience (366).

Chapter twelve is also on providence, but on special providence as specifically applied to men with whom God always deals through covenants (309, 368, 375). The chapter, titled "The Covenant of Nature," is an exposition and defense of the classical doctrine of the covenant

of works. Van Mastricht sets forth a contractualistic definition of the covenant as "an agreement between God and his people, in which God promises blessedness and all goods subordinate to it, and stipulates dependence, to his glory," and "the church in turn promises and yields to God its dependence and obedience, and stipulates the promised reward" (376-377). The chapter also contains the typical, idiosyncratic usage of the concepts of "earning" (375) and "merit" (395), applied to our first parents' hypothetical continuance in obedience. It is far from clear why the covenant of works schemes, and the created perfectness of the first parents, helps the inevitably counterintuitive claim that they could "merit" and "earn" with God.

Strangely, van Mastricht thinks that the term "choice, *arbitrium*" is "an excessively proud term" (526), though it can easily be used in a perfectly orthodox way, as van Mastricht himself does (527). Yet he makes no such comments regarding the claims that our first parents would have "merited" and "earned" blessedness if they continued in obedience. Van Mastricht feels strongly about this doctrine, since he is usually reconciliatory towards brethren whom he thinks err (32-34, 544-545), while those who object to the covenant of works do so allegedly "only from an itch for novelty" (388). To that uncharitable claim he adds the grandiose claim that "we can hardly secure very many heads of the Christian religion sufficiently—such as the propagation of original corruption, the satisfaction of Christ, and his subjection to the divine law…—when the covenant of works is denied" (389). The chapter is well argued, and it gives food for thought to those who object to the traditional view of the covenant of works (like the present reviewer). That said, the chapter presents beneficial discussions that benefits all Reformed readers, such as, for example, the covenant and God's condescension (370), the relationship between the covenant and commands (371, 380), and the nature of the prelapsarian life (373, 385-384). This chapter ends the third book.

Book four begins with "The Violation of the Covenant of Nature," or, put differently, the fall of Adam into sin. The first chapter of this book is a detailed step-by-step, heartbreaking exposition of "the principal offense of the whole human race, and the greatest calamity of the world" (421). Moreover, the chapter discusses the nature and

tactics of the tempter (407-410, 418, 425-426) and our call to stay on guard and informed against his wicked devices (433-441).

The second chapter, on original sin, expounds and defends the orthodox and Reformed doctrine of the origin, imputation, and propagation of Adam's sin that resulted in the total depravity of man without grace, with sobering applications to a conscious realization of the tragedy of sin (476-483). The same sound defenses of and practical considerations of Reformed hamartiology are found in the last two chapters of the volume, on actual sin and on the penalty and state of sin respectively. The emphasis of the *Nadere Reformatie* is variably perceivable in the practical parts of these chapters (with its excesses appearing once or twice, see, for instance, 553-554, paragraph XXXVIII), tempered, however, with van Mastrict's pastoral words found, for instance, in 47-48, 75-76. Van Mastricht not unusually ascribes the restriction of sin in men and society to a certain common grace (481). Almost ironically, van Mastricht ascribes to such common or "restraining grace" also the preservation of intellect and will in fallen humanity (528, especially men of intellectual and moral gifts), while, at the same time, he says that one of the main causes for most of humanity's "stupor and carnal security under the state of sin" is "a more honorable nature, a refinement of manners, through which they are not like the worst people, like publicans and sinners (Luke 18:11-12), *taking nature for grace* (John 3:9)" (552, emphasis added). Nor it is explained why "common grace" is necessary to account for the merely outward piety showed by the hypocrites in the church (543-544). These points besides, the last four chapters of this volume are a surgical dissection of the misery of mankind in the state of sin that calls the reader humbly to grieve and "marvel at the universal stupor, security, and senselessness of nearly all" (552), and to stand gratefully in awe at the mercy of the Lord for our deliverance (440-441, 480-481, 517-518, 558-559).

Van Mastricht is not the last word, but his conceptual precision, expository clarity, patience in writing, and spiritual depths are needed today. Van Mastricht's *Theoretical-Practical Theology* should be in the personal library of all Reformed pastors, theologians, professors, and teachers. It deserves such a place significantly more than Francis Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* because, as the title says,

Turretin's masterpiece focuses on the elenctic part, while Mastricht offers exegetical, dogmatical, elenctic, and practical parts for each head of doctrine, thus making this a very helpful tool for teaching, preaching, and research. *Volume 4: Redemption in Christ* is already published, and I look forward to the remaining three volumes of Mastricht's *magnum opus.*

Natural Theology, by Geerhardus Vos. Tr. Albert Gootjes. Grand Rapids, MI : Reformation Heritage Books, 2022. Pp lxxiii + 97. $25.00. Hardcover. ISBN 9781601789082. Reviewed by Marco Barone.

This volume can be divided into two parts. The first part consists of a foreword by Richard A. Muller, a technical preface by the translator, and an introduction by J. V Fesko, which makes up roughly a fourth of the book. In the introduction, Fesko ably introduces Vos' text, and also piggybacks Vos in order to point at his project of "reforming apologetics,"[1] a project that Fesko enthusiastically thinks Vos' work supports. This is evidenced not only by the criticisms of presuppositionalism and other approaches disliked by Fesko, but also by the presence of several debatable claims that already appeared in *Reforming Apologetics*.[2]

A new, peculiar debatable claim is that Herman Bavinck and Thomas Aquinas "shared a broadly Thomist epistemology" [xxxviii]. The reason for the claim is that Bavinck held to a certain correspondence between knowing and being, and that he made intellectual knowledge begin with the senses (a very bare criterion that would place within the category of "broadly Thomist" many Christian thinkers who are not Thomists). The reader needs to be aware that this is one of the goals of the introduction, and that Vos' and Fesko's respective aims and positions do not always coincide. That said, Fesko's introduction helpfully places Vos' lectures in their theological and historical contexts, identifies Vos' sources, and explains the role that Vos' natural

1 J. V. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

2 See my review of *Reforming Apologetics* in *PRTJ* 57, no. 1 (November 2023), 100-108.

theology plays alongside Vos' biblical and dogmatic theology. This is conducive to a better understanding and appreciation of the text.

The second part of the volume consists of the translation into English of Dutch notes taken during the lectures of Geerhardus Vos on natural theology. These notes were discovered in 2017 by James Baird in the archives of the Heritage Hall at Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan (vii). Though the dates on the manuscripts show that they were produced in 1895 and 1898, the lectures were delivered between 1888 and 1893, when Vos was a professor at the Theological School of the Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids (viii, xlv-xlvi).

The text is in the form of questions and answers, for a total of 224. The notes are divided into three sections titled: "Prolegomenon," "The Systems of Religion," and "The Immortality of the Soul."

The Prolegomenon consists of both foundational definitions and historical information. Natural theology is defined as "a knowledge of God that takes its content and method from the world [that is, creation] as it presents itself to us as governed by fixed laws" (7; in this review, all numbers refer to the questions, not pages). Vos referred to Psalm 19:1-4, Psalm 94:8-10, Acts 14:15-17, Acts 17:24-29, and Romans 1:19-21 as teaching the existence and possibility of natural revelation that is "sufficiently clear to hold people accountable before God concerning their religion, 'so that they are without excuse [Rom. 1:20]'" (10).

Though both revealed and natural theology have as their object the study of God (1), their methods differ (1, 8), and natural theology is insufficient for salvation (11). Put differently, "natural theology cannot account for regeneration, since it [regeneration] belongs to the sphere of grace" (222). Without God's special saving intervention (9), and without revealed theology that instructs on the proper nature of both God and man (11), natural theology does not lead to salvation, and, deprived of that revelation, it derails since "whenever the human race and human reason are not viewed as entirely corrupt, it becomes easier to try to build a theology on the basis of human reason alone" (21). Relatedly, on morality and religion Vos says,

> When religion is made to depend on morality, it, too, gets dragged along with various philosophical theories on ethics, and as the ethical concepts change, the view on religion will have to be adjusted

> accordingly. Viewed apart from the light of religion, the moral life is something so mysterious and inexplicable that one could never find an acceptable explanation for it. (193)

"The Systems of Religion" offers a historical overview of different religious and philosophical systems with relevant criticisms of the same (44-77). Strangely, Vos claims that "the principle of contradiction or negativity…[is] an entirely logical principle which one may not take to represent a metaphysical power" (52). It is not fully clear what Vos means with that claim. The triune God (who, in the second person, is the *Logos* of all things) both relates to Himself in His triunity and creates according to that principle of contradiction, so it is not clear why that principle (as well as any other logical principle) is not a metaphysical power (though intrinsic to God's being as the *Logos* of all things, since the assumption of any extrinsic principle that God has to follow would impinge His aseity).

Vos goes on to offer a critical overview of theories that seek to explain the origin and development of religion (75-91). Vos seems to favor a theory of intuition, that is, "an immediate testimony which God has given us of His own existence" (91). Vos confuses epistemology with soteriology when he ascribes the presence of the idea of God in man to "the common grace of the Holy Spirit" (91), nowhere mentioned in the verses indicated in question 10, even though an appeal to biblical providence and the remaining of the human nature in fallen man would have been enough to justify that theory of intuition.

Vos proceeds to discuss the classical arguments for the existence of God: the ontological argument (92-114), the cosmological argument (115-131), the physico-teleological argument (132-150), the ethical argument (151-174), and the religious argument (175-204). Particularly interesting is Vos' discussion of the physico-teleological argument, where he rejects the unbelieving claim that "every compound of means and end betray finitude and imperfection in the Composer" because "God does not use means because He cannot achieve the end without them, but simply because He takes pleasure in the beautiful connection between means and end" (141). For Vos, the regularity and order of nature can be explained only by the constant activity of God.

> A law of nature is nothing but an abstraction, it is not something that has independent existence. And so we must once again appeal to the immanent activity of God in order to explain that the laws of nature work as they do and will always work as they do. For [from] none of the laws of nature is it possible to prove a logical necessity. (148, see also 150)

In the discussion of the ethical argument, Vos offers a helpful explanation of the nature of conscience (154-155) and he argues (as he already did in 40) that only theism can justify a theory of human association and warrant the existence of moral duties towards others (171). The discussion of the religious argument contains helpful accounts of religion and of the intrinsic (and, in virtue of the very fact of being a dependent creature, *inevitable*) religious nature and inclination of mankind (196-203).

> Even when people fall from their awareness of the existence of a personal God, they cannot fail to set up something else in God's place so as to venerate it…People have been constituted to move around some center outside of themselves. Even after losing God as their center and becoming self-centric, people still find themselves under the power of their original inclination to the degree that they must find a new center that is—to their mind, at least—outside of themselves. They do so by placing their *ego* outside of themselves and now venerating it as something objective. All idolatry therefore contains an element of self-worship. (202)

This is related to Vos' previous point according to which real atheists cannot possibly exist: "Absolutely dogmatic, positive atheism is an impossibility, a delusion, at which one can only arrive by proud self-blinding and by superficiality" since "the witness of the conscience to God's existence—just like all other innate knowledge of God—remains in the deepest recesses of the heart, so that one cannot fully withdraw from it in practical life" (71). But even though we can still speak of religion and of the religious man after the entrance of sin in the world, "the religion of the unregenerate is…a religion that cannot be valid in the eyes of God. What it lacks is the very core" (200).

The third and last part of the text, "The Immortality of the Soul," is disappointingly short. It briefly sets forth the typical arguments

in support of the existence of the soul, in opposition to some of the contrasting views, with a few considerations on the soul's nature (205-224).

The book consists of notes taken in the form of questions and answers, with all the consequent limits that almost necessarily affect the level of development of most of Vos' arguments. Though Vos is generally clear, there are a number of disagreeable or puzzling statements (47, 52, 91, 99, 176, 210). The academic nature of Vos' discussions requires a basic familiarity with philosophy and philosophical theology. Naturally, and differently from Fesko's promotion of the classical approach to apologetics present in the introduction, the reader will not find in Vos' text a defense of this or that specific method, since the variety of apologetic approaches within Protestantism is something that would develop more clearly in the twentieth century (together with these approaches' respective criticisms of each other, including the objections towards natural theology and classical apologetics).

To conclude, this is a very interesting work that will attract readers of apologetics, Christian philosophy, and historical theology. Even for those of us who do not necessarily share Vos' apologetic methodology, *Natural Theology* can offer intellectual tools that can help to renew an appreciation of natural revelation as it manifests God's glory in creation. Historically, the book offers a fascinating window into Vos' classroom in the Grand Rapids of the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, *Natural Theology* is a good complement to Vos' *Biblical Theology* and *Reformed Dogmatics*, giving a more comprehensive picture of this important Reformed theologian.

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Books Reviewed

139 Biegel, John C. *Offering and Embracing Christ.*
Colquhoun, John *A. Treatise on the Law and the Gospel.*
Macleod, Donald. *From the Marrow Men to the Moderates: Scottish Theology 1700–1800.*
145 Heideman, Eugene P. *The Canons of Dort: God's Freedom, Justice, and Persistence.* Donald J. Bruggink, ed.
148 Murray, David and Tom, Jr. Karel. *A Christian's Guide to Mental Illness: Answers to 30 Common Questions.*
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156 Orme, Nicholas. *The History of England's Cathedrals.*
158 Reju, Deepak and Jonathan D. Holmes. *Rescue Skills: Essential Skills for Restoring the Sexually Broken.*
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162 Shenvi, Neil and Pat. Sawyer. *Critical Dilemma: The Rise of Critical Theories and Social Justice Ideology–Implications for the Church and Society.*
169 Swierenga, Robert P. *A. C. Van Raalte: Pastor by Vocation, Entrepreneur by Necessity.*
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