

Protest of Mr. Michael Vermeer
Protest against the action of synod through her deputies
Re Lanning Deposition

April 6, 2021

Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches
to convene Tuesday, June 8, 2021
in Georgetown PRC, Hudsonville, MI

Dear Brothers,

I hereby protest the action of synod through its deputies in concurring with the January 2021 meeting of Classis East in their decision to "advise Byron Center's Consistory to proceed with the deposition of [her pastor] from the office of the word and sacraments." Because this protest relates to the action taken by synod through its deputies, I request that this protest be treated prior to synod's treatment of the material from the aforementioned synodical deputies.

By this action of synod through its deputies I am aggrieved, since by my membership in a Protestant Reformed Church as well as in public worship I am being constrained to confess that, by his preaching, Rev. Lanning was and remains guilty of the sin of public schism. I am unable to confess that the sermons referenced in the decision constitute the sin of public schism, and so call Rev. Lanning to repentance. I believe the supporting grounds to which the deputies concurred reflect an uncharitable and improper understanding of the sermons preached, an improper view of the organic unity of the church, and an incorrect application of Matthew 18.

In the charges against Rev. Lanning, Classis (with concurrence of your deputies) claims that "*he publicly charges ministers and officebearers of the PRC with unrepentant sin*" (Grounds, I, A). However, Classis fails to prove that the intent and language of the sermons bring the charge of unrepentant sin against individuals which should go the route of Matthew 18. In these sermons Rev. Lanning is not bringing charges of unrepentant sin against individuals, which is demonstrated by the fact that he calls the church, but not individual men, to repentance. Rather, in the sermons Rev. Lanning demonstrates that the Protestant Reformed Churches are, as an organic body, guilty of error and that, as a body, we remain unrepentant. He does so by using two established facts: first, that in an assembly of the Protestant Reformed Churches we did teach, defend, and condone error; second, that as of the date of his sermon we were not hearing on every pulpit and in every magazine a resounding and continued hatred of the error exposed by Synod 2018. "*There's something so dreadfully wrong in the Protestant Reformed Churches and in Byron Center Prot-*

estant Reformed Church.... There's one calling for the congregation and the denomination. Repent. Repent.... Where is the rejection of the lie today? Where do you hear condemnation of the devil's theology as the devil's theology?" (Shepherds, p. 1, 2, and 5). This must be viewed as a charge of sin against our whole denomination; to view it as a charge of unrepentant sin against individuals is neither charitable nor honest with the language of the sermon.

In the charges against Rev. Lanning, Classis (with concurrence of your deputies) denies the organic unity of the church when they declare the sermons represented "*schismatic actions of publicly charging officebearers with sin*" (Grounds, I, B). Classis appears to assume that, because actions of men are referenced, the sermons must be charges of sin against men and not a charge against our denomination. This assumption made by Classis is wrong because, when officebearers in their offices commit error, they do so as leaders of Christ's church. If Classis commits an error of false doctrine, it is right to point to error of officebearers (acting in their official capacity as leaders of the church of Christ on earth) to demonstrate the guilt of the church, as was done by many prophets in the Old Testament. By virtue of the organic unity of the church, there is no part of the church—classis, church, family, or individual—that is not marred with the guilt of error which is committed by officebearers in their official capacity. This is true regardless of whether those officebearers have repented of their personal guilt. Classis continues in this error when they suggest that it constitutes sufficient repentance for Classis to later concur with the decision of synod: "*But Classis East formally declared three times that 'Classis East erred...'*" (Grounds, III, A, b). Rather, repentance must be denomination-wide, and requires that every church within the federation of the PRC preach the same repentance so that all might know their guilt and repent. To suggest that Classis closes the door on all guilt over this error by concurring with the decision of synod minimizes the extent of our guilt and denies the organic unity of the church.

In the charges against Rev. Lanning, Classis (with concurrence of your deputies) makes an incorrect application of Matthew 18, by forcing the steps of discipline in Matthew 18 to be the proper way to contradict known errors found in the church organism. Classis states, "*To publish the perceived error publicly in the church contradicts the principle of Matthew 18*" (Grounds, I, B, c.) Further, Classis claims that his sermons "*slandered the officebearers in the churches through his characterizations...*" (Grounds, II). However, Classis applies this to a situation where the sin of wrong doctrine is not merely perceived, but widely known and acknowledged—even officially by Classis and synod. By requiring the steps of Matthew 18, Classis opposes Church Order, Art. 72, which directs

us to Matthew 18 *“as long as the sin is of a private character, not giving public offense.”* Rev. Lanning is using the fact of past public error and the public defense of that error, along with public statements made in the *Standard Bearer*, to show his congregation and denomination that we are not acknowledging the depth of our guilt over this error which yet rests on us. He uses a type that emphasizes how horrifying the sin of defending error is to God. Regardless of whether they agree with the typology of Jeremiah, Classis may not constrain the believer, much less the minister of the gospel, with the way of Matthew 18 as the only way that public error in the church may be contradicted. If this decision stands, it will place a definite restriction on the public, bold, and consistent contradiction of error in the PRC. Proper contradiction of error is shown in the behavior of John the Baptist in his sermons to the rulers of the church of his day: *“O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance”* (Luke 3:7-8); in the behavior of the apostles toward each other: *“When Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face... before them all”* (Gal. 2:11,14); and in Paul’s commands to Titus: *“There are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers.... Whose mouths must be stopped.... Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith”* (Titus 1:10-13). In this case of guilt that is denomination-wide, as in the case of wrong doctrine that is broadly held, it is impossible and improper to require the route of Matthew 18 with each individual in the denomination; the appropriate behavior is that our shepherds preach boldly against that error.

Will all understand their guilt and repent at the same time? No. Will all acknowledge their guilt? Perhaps not. But the fact of the compromise of the gospel requires that, as was done so boldly and consistently from PRC pulpits after 1924 and 1953, so after 2018 we hear consistent, forceful preaching against the error that compromised the gospel of grace. As a result, every member of the PRC will know that the only possible truth to which we may hold is the truth defended against error exposed at Synod 2018. If this action of the synod through her deputies stands to depose a pastor who was fulfilling his calling to preach sharply against this error, we have taken a step away from this truth.

To uphold this protest is to reject the first two of the three grounds supporting the deposition. Given the rejection of these two grounds, synod ought to advise Classis East and Byron Center PRC to overturn their decision to depose Rev. Lanning. In this way, the more difficult work of healing the breach caused in our denomination can begin.

May God guide you by His Spirit into all truth.

In Christ,
Michael Vermeer