

Protest of Rev. Nathan Langerak

Protest of the concurrence of the delegates *ad examina*
from Classis West in the deposition of Rev. A. Lanning

Dear brothers of the synod,

I hereby protest the concurrence of the delegates *ad examina* from Classis West in the deposition of Rev. A. Lanning. By their concurrence they involved the synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches and thus also me in approving the decision of Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church to seek the advice of Classis East at its January 2021 meeting for the deposition of Rev. A. Lanning, and in approving Classis East's decision to concur with Byron Center's decision to depose Rev. A. Lanning and to advise the consistory to proceed with the deposition. By these decisions I am aggrieved. Because the delegates *ad examina* from Classis West were involved, the action of deposition received denominational sanction and brought the guilt of that action upon the whole denomination.

The deposition of Rev. A. Lanning was as high-handed, willful, unjust, hasty, hypocritical, disorderly, schismatic, and shameful an action as any in the annals of church history by a denomination against a faithful minister. By that action the Protestant Reformed Churches offended Jesus Christ, manifested themselves as departing from the truth and good order of Jesus Christ, hardened themselves against admonition, rejected the Word brought to them, and quenched the Spirit. By that action the Protestant Reformed Churches caused schism in the body of Christ by separating his sheep from the word of Christ faithfully brought by a shepherd given by the Lord Jesus Christ.

The action was disorderly. For all the quoting of the Church Order in the decree of deposition, the Protestant Reformed Churches, led by the church visitors, ran roughshod over the decency and order that Christ requires in His church. At the October annual meeting of the church visitors with Byron Center's consistory, the church visitors brought charges of sin against the minister of Byron Center for causing division and unrest in the denomination (schism). This is directly contrary to the church visitors' recommendation against Reverend Lanning that he had brought charges of sin against fellow ministers without going the way of charging sin at the consistory level. The church visitors' recommendation for the deposition of Reverend Lanning was also, then, hypocritical, for the church visitors condemned in him what they allowed for themselves.

The disorder continued with an abuse of Article 14 of the Church Order in advice to relieve Reverend Lanning of his preaching duties. That recommended use of Article 14 was wrong. A plain reading of the article shows that there is no hint in the article that it can be used arbitrarily to relieve a minister of duties. That disorder continued with the high-handed

action to relieve two elders of their God-ordained duties.

That disorder continued when five ministers—two of whom had charges of sin against Reverend Lanning—came to Byron Center’s consistory meeting and high-handedly led the consistory to adopt the church visitors’ recommendation to suspend Reverend Lanning. These ministers were not ashamed to bully or to countenance bullying of the consistory with threats not to help if the elders refused to do what the church visitors wanted. This was a grotesque abuse of their position as church visitors and an ungodly lording in the church of Christ. They exercised not the Spirit of Christ, but exercised ecclesiastical brutality.

The disorder continued when, contrary to every law of decency and good church polity, the church visitors advised the consistory to ignore protests the consistory had received against its previous decisions and to press on with the suspension and deposition. All the while and with a straight face, Classis East said that Reverend Lanning should have protested if he had problems with other ministers. The right of protest is a sacred right given by Jesus Christ to the believer who believes a decision is contrary to the Word of God or the articles of the Church Order. By ignoring those protests on the advice of the church visitors, the consistory trampled on the believers who had protested and trampled on the Spirit of Christ and Christ’s own word.

The disorder continued when the church visitors and Byron’s consistory chose the consistory of Trinity Protestant Reformed Church to give advice and passed over several other neighboring consistories. This savors of worldly court shopping.

The disorder continued when Trinity’s consistory did not merely concur with Byron Center’s grounds for the deposition, but wrote an entirely new decree of deposition with an entirely new set of grounds, so that Trinity was in effect trying Byron Center’s pastor for sin.

The disorder continued at Classis East when its committee wrote an entirely new decree of deposition with entirely new grounds, ignoring previous grounds and adding others.

Taking the process as a whole, Classis East, with the help of Trinity’s consistory, deposed Reverend Lanning. It could be argued that a handful of ministers, who lorded over their colleagues and over consistories, deposed Reverend Lanning. Byron Center’s elders did little work at all except to adopt the work of others as their own. That was a shameful dereliction of their responsibilities as elders and a *de facto* denial by the elders, the church visitors, and the classis of the autonomy of the local congregation and the headship of Christ in His church through the eldership. Then the classis was so shameless as to cite that Reverend Lanning had not followed the church orderly way. The Protestant Reformed Churches from this day

forward should blush with shame every time any member or officebearer mentions following the church orderly way or using the Church Order, for while using parts of it to condemn a minister for schism on dubious grounds, officebearers ignored the Church Order and twisted other parts of it.

The action was clothed with deceit. The deceit included lying against Rev. Lanning by his elders when they stated that their requirement that he resign as editor of *Sword and Shield* had something to do with a failure in his pastoral labors.

The lying continued with the church visitors when they blamed the division in the denomination on Reverend Lanning's writing in *Sword and Shield*.

That lying continued on the part of the elders of Byron Center when their announcement to the congregation said that Rev. Lanning was relieved of his duties while they considered the church visitors' advice. However, the elders had already fully considered the church visitors' advice and had taken decisions to suspend their pastor, to seek the advice of Trinity's consistory to suspend and depose, and to seek additional grounds for the decision to suspend.

That lying continued on the floor of classis when the church visitors who had charges of sin against Rev. Lanning insisted that it was not sin but only issues they had with Reverend Lanning. Thus they attempted to excuse themselves for going to Byron's consistory instead of recusing themselves. No one has yet answered the question of why it is that another minister was appointed by the classical committee, ostensibly to replace two who would recuse themselves, and yet why five—five!—ministers descended upon Byron Center's consistory. No one has yet answered the question whether those two church visitors who had charges of sin against Rev. Lanning were supposed to recuse themselves. No one has yet answered the question why they did not recuse themselves, as every rule of conflict of interest—even in a worldly court—would have demanded.

The deceit continued in the supporting documents for deposition in which two seminary professors—supposed experts in church polity but not in honesty—falsified Reverend Lanning's and my words and claimed that our position regarding Article 31 of the Church Order is that one may militate against a decision of a broader assembly instead of protesting.

Worst of all, the deceit was that Byron Center, Trinity, Classis East, and the delegates *ad examina* of Classis West lied against the truth of the sermon by their decisions. Reverend Lanning said that Classis East by its atrocious decision in February 2018 to approve false doctrine committed spiritual sodomy. That is true. That is God's own evaluation of classis' decision. Reverend Lanning said that Professor Dykstra by his *Standard*

Bearer articles after Synod 2018 minimized the error that synod had condemned. That is true. One only has to read his article or his responses to letters in the *Standard Bearer*. The church visitors, Trinity consistory, Byron Center consistory, and Classis East falsified his words and twisted them into charges of sin and slander. But read the sermons from beginning to end. Where in the sermons are their charges of sin? They are not there. In the sermons he was pointing out a prevailing attitude in the denomination and demonstrating that from the public record. This cannot be falsified as constituting public charges of unrepentant sin.

Trinity's consistory was not ashamed to employ sophistry in its efforts to lie against the truth. Trinity wrote that its decision to suspend and depose had nothing to do with the truth or falsity or even seriousness of the claims made in the sermon. The church visitors maintained the same. How can Reformed men even write that? A decision has nothing to do with the truth or the falsity of statements that are to be judged? The truth of something is the only thing that matters. We are called in judgment and in all other dealings to love the truth and to hate the lie. Yet Trinity declared it cared not one whit whether a statement was true or false. The only thing that mattered was that the sermon touched the honor of a seminary professor—who was worthy to be blamed not only because he, in fact, did minimize the error, but also because as a *Standard Bearer* editor he did not lift one finger to help the churches during their controversy; and when he finally got around to writing something, he threatened anyone who would take the condemned error as seriously as it should be taken—and touched the honor of a classis that had approved and defended false doctrine. If it is a question of the honor of a mere man or the honor of a classis that defended and helped to perpetuate false doctrine and to cement it in the consciousness of the churches, or the truth, I will take the truth every time. Deceit, and especially deceit in the dealings of the church, is the work of the devil and not of Christ. Yet everywhere one turns there was deceit in this process.

The action was hypocritical. Ten consistories of the Protestant Reformed Churches had sent open letters to their congregations against Reverend Lanning, myself, and others for our involvement with the publication of *Sword and Shield*, in which letters the consistories publicly charged us with schism and warned their congregations of the threat that the magazine in which we wrote was to the unity of the churches. They did this before the whole world, damning our writing and our magazine without so much as a hearing. Delegates from those consistories should have voted to depose themselves when the motion for Reverend Lanning's deposition came to the floor of classis, for they were guilty of the same thing: bringing charges of sin against a man without going the church

orderly way. The church visitors should have deposed themselves, for they were guilty of the same thing: bringing charges of sin against a man without going the church orderly way. But with straight faces they voted to depose. What hypocrisy!

The action was hasty: from a sermon preached at the end of November 2020 to deposition the third week of January 2021. Hasty does not even begin to describe the action. There was a minority report on the floor of classis that recognized this fact and recommended the whole thing be remanded to Byron's consistory. The report was ignored. Reverend Lanning was ridden out of the Protestant Reformed Churches on a rail. That was the rough justice of the Wild West. The Protestant Reformed Churches brought that into the churches of Jesus Christ, which is cruel and shameful. Put this over against the fact that a protest of false doctrine can take years to be adjudicated in Classis East. Put this over against the fact that Classis East for three years protected and defended a man who in his preaching compromised the unconditional covenant, compromised justification by faith alone, and displaced the perfect work of Christ. Why the haste in the instance of Rev. Lanning's deposition?

The action was schismatic. Schism is to divide the church of Jesus Christ from its head. The mere existence of division is not schism. The truth divides. There was already division in the churches because of false doctrine. When the definition of schism is merely "division in the church," then the truth can be labelled—and in this instance was labelled—as schism. The only purpose the definition of schism as division in the church serves is to cast out the truth. Calling out men for their errors and attitudes, colleagues included, is not schism. Calling out attitudes in the denomination, even sharply and with vigor, is not schism. Dividing from Christ is schism. I may safely divide the church of Christ from some man, if that man is a threat to the congregation's adherence to Christ, without ever fearing that I create schism; and, in fact, being confident that I do the Lord's work as a watchman. In such an action I endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit. It is not schism to point out the laughable analysis by a seminary professor of the denomination's departure from Christ in the truth. It needs to be pointed out so that no one believes him and no one takes seriously that beguiling analysis of the false doctrine that appeared in the churches. It is schism to divide from Christ. There are two ways this can be done. The first is bringing false doctrine into the church and so separating the congregations from the truth as it is in Christ Jesus. The second is lording in the church, which is the attempt to rule in the church or gain a following in the church by other than Christ's word, the only rule in the church.

The church visitors were guilty of schism when they sought to set the

consistory against Reverend Lanning and his teaching and preaching of the truth in the congregation and in his writing by slanderously blaming the division in the denomination on him.

Byron Center's consistory was guilty of schism when the elders declared the pure preaching of the word of God to be schismatic and so divided the congregation from Christ in the sermon.

The classis was guilty of schism for the same reason. Schism was charged to the wrong man.

The decision itself to depose minimizes the seriousness of the error condemned in the churches. In the sermon for which he was deposed, Reverend Lanning pointed out the seriousness of compromising the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the unconditional covenant, and displacing the work of Christ in salvation. That was not his analysis; that is God's analysis. That is God's analysis repeatedly in the scriptures, both in the Old and New Testaments. In fact, Reverend Lanning did not go far enough, because Christ said that it would be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for those who refused the truth in His day and so also in our day.

The classis rejected God's own analysis of its decision to approve false doctrine. That rejection also proves the truth of what Reverend Lanning preached when he accused the churches of minimizing the seriousness of the error and that this minimization was ongoing.

I can add my own anecdotal evidence to the analysis of Reverend Lanning: nine in ten people whom I talk to about what transpired in the Protestant Reformed Churches do not believe it was that big of a deal. But more importantly, the minimization of the doctrinal error was ongoing at the very classis where Reverend Lanning was deposed. God said to Classis East in Reverend Lanning's sermon that Classis East by the approval of Reverend Overway's preaching committed sodomy. Classis East said, "How dare you—God—say that?" and cruelly slew the messenger who delivered the word of God. As one minister said in his defense of the action: "I did not appreciate being called a homosexual." Tell that to God. He called you that. Better, repent and stop being so concerned about your own name and start being concerned with the honor and glory of God.

The decision is an offense against Christ. He sends ministers and gives them to His church to speak through them. He gave gifts unto men: to some apostles, to some prophets, to some evangelists, and to some pastors and teachers. Especially does He give ministers to warn against false teachers and lies that threaten to sweep the church away on the winds of false doctrine. The churches have been lamenting the lack of candidates for the ministry, and then in a matter of weeks for some perceived slight to the honor of a seminary professor and ministers of Classis East, the

denomination deposes—kills—a faithful minister, a faithful one about whom the classis itself said that he was sound in doctrine. And we are going to ask Christ to give us more ministers? All prayers for ministers at this point only add to the offense. Christ will tell us, "I gave you a minister and look what you did to him!" But Christ will also judge that shameful treatment of his servant and the judgment might not be merely a dearth of ministers, but a flood of hirelings and worthless ministers who do not know the gospel, cannot preach it, and when errors threaten the flock are like dumb dogs who will not bark, worthless watchman who will not sound a trumpet, and faithless soldiers who keep their swords sheathed and do the work of the Lord deceitfully. Cursed be all of them. It would be our just recompense.

The decision was willful. The proof is that many consistories of Classis East published open letters declaring Reverend Lanning and others schismatic for their writing in *Sword and Shield*. The proof is the church visitors' advice to Byron Center well before the preaching of the Jeremiah 23 sermon for which he was ostensibly deposed. The advice was that he was to blame for division (schism), by which advice the church visitors sought to divide the consistory from their pastor (schism). The proof is that he was banned by some consistories from preaching in certain pulpits in Classis East—which is the real schism. The decision to depose for schism was a decision looking for an opportunity. The minds were made up. Within days—days!—of the sermon, the advice was to depose.

The Church Order was brought in to craft the grounds. At classis someone finally found a Bible to sprinkle some texts upon the decision like salt and pepper to make it seem righteous. The whole decree from beginning to end, in all its various forms, and with all its shifting grounds begs the question. The whole decision assumes what needs to be proved, namely that the statements pointed to from the sermons contained charges of sin and were schismatic and slanderous (lying) and that to criticize a seminary professor and to identify a serious lack of love for the truth in the classis and denomination are sins for which Christ will bar one from the kingdom of heaven. When you put Classis East's behavior with false doctrine and its behavior against Rev. Lanning side by side the matter becomes even starker. Classis East for three years approved the denial of justification by faith alone, the compromise of the unconditional covenant, the displacement of Christ's perfect work, and the denial that Christ is the only way to the Father. They defended preaching in which the believer was made in part his own mediator! Reverend Lanning said that Professor Dykstra minimized the serious doctrinal error and that classis by approving that error committed spiritual sodomy. The ministers who so misled the churches are still leading them. The one who warned us is beheaded.

What self-conceit, pride, lack of love for the truth, and willfulness! The decision did not arise out of Scripture. It could not.

Reverend Lanning was deposed for criticizing from the word of God a seminary professor, and Classis East. He did what Paul did to Peter. If the church visitors and the ministers of Classis East had been in Antioch on that particular day they would have drawn up the apostle Paul on charges of schism. The decision willfully ignored that example and, in fact, condemned it as schismatic; all the while, of course, saying that the apostle could do that because he was an apostle. Paul did not do what he did because he was an apostle. He did what he did because there is nothing more serious that a fellow colleague can do than compromise the gospel of justification by faith alone, which Peter was doing, and for which he was worthy to be blamed publicly, and which Paul valiantly and lovingly did by rebuking him publicly. Peter had the humility and love for the gospel to take it and turn. Classis East put the man out of office.

The decision with all its grounds should be torn to shreds and burnt in a fire with profuse prayers that God will forgive our sins. Reverend Lanning, now departed, should be implored to come back. Those ministers and elders who took the lead in this should be deposed for intrusion into the office of another, for schism, for lack of love for the truth, for the lack of love for a brother, for lording, for the lies, hypocrisy, willfulness, and abuse, and for corruption of the good order and decency that Christ demands in His church.

For the delegates *ad examina* to participate in that is shocking! They had the calling to judge objectively, but they went right along—not one man stood for righteousness and truth—with this corruption of justice and truth in the church of Jesus Christ. The synod must disapprove of their concurrence to remove the blot from the denomination and overturn the decision of Classis East that has now become a great millstone about all of our necks to drag us down in the judgment of Jesus Christ.

I can only hang my head in total shame. But that is what happens when a denomination departs from the gospel. Only the gospel will give us the grace to put off the old man and put on the new. Without the gospel the church is full of all manner of corrupt communications, and that is evident in abundance in the decision to depose.

With great sorrow,
Rev. Nathan J. Langerak