

**Rev. VanderWal Protest of Deposition**

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Classis East of the PRCA  
To convene May 12, 2021  
At Trinity Protestant Reformed Church  
Hudsonville, MI

April 12, 2021

Dear Brethren,

With this letter I submit my protest against the decision taken by Classis East in its meeting of January 13, 2021, to approve the deposition of Rev. A. Lanning from the office of minister of the Word and sacraments in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

I submit this protest with the sincere and prayerful desire that Classis East might repent of this decision, both for the healing of the breach in our churches, and for the maintenance of the preaching of the gospel of sovereign grace from the pulpits of our churches.

In Christ our peace,

Rev. Martin VanderWal

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I, Rev. Martin VanderWal, protest the decision taken by Classis East at its meeting of January 13, 2021 concerning the deposition of Rev. A. Lanning from the office of the ministry of the Word and sacraments, as conveyed in the Summary published and distributed to the consistories of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America. That decision has been published as follows.

“That Classis East concur with the Byron Center’s decision to depose [her pastor] and advise Byron Center’s consistory to proceed with the deposition of [her pastor] from the office of the word and sacraments.”

First, this decision is faulty because the decision recorded in the above was not truly the decision of Byron Center’s consistory. The decision was made by Byron Center’s consistory under duress, duress imposed by Classis East through its so-called “Church Visitors.” The “Church Visitors” formed themselves into a committee of five ministers, instead of two church visitors. By the decision of the Classical Committee and with the approval of Classis of such actions at their January 13, 2021 meeting, these “Church Visitors” became a committee of five ministers representing Classis East.

In addition, this committee of Classis East did not allow Byron Center’s consistory properly to deliberate on their advice. The committee threatened to leave if their advice was not promptly adopted. They made it clear that they were not going to allow debate on the advice. They were only going to allow questions that would require explanation from them. They were not going to brook any opposition to their advice.

Thus the decision more properly is the decision of Classis East through its appointed committee to depose the minister of Byron Center from his God-given office. As such, this decision by Classis East, the work of its committee imposing on Byron Center’s consistory, and the approval of this work of the committee by Classis East, violated the autonomy and the deliberative character of the consistory of Byron Center PRC. This violation is further corroborated by the fact that Classis East felt it necessary to craft a new decision at its meeting, rather than simply honoring the decision of Byron Center’s consistory, or to speak more properly, the decision imposed on Byron Center by the committee of Classis East.

Second, I point out those grounds I believe are faulty to the extent of rendering the entire decision of Classis East above completely void.

Concerning Ground I: “[The pastor’s] actions in the sermons he preached on Jeremiah 23:4, 14; 2 Timothy 4:1-4; and Ecclesiastes 7:2-6 constitute the sin of public schism. With statements made in these sermons, [he] has sinfully divided the congregation and the churches into factions. These statements are not false doctrine, but his own wrong applications of the teaching of the texts, by which he divided the church and churches.”

Ground I is false. The pastor did not introduce division into the churches. He only called attention to the division that was already there. The controversy addressed by the sermon was not his making, but the making of others. The division in our churches from the controversy existed long before the sermon was preached. It is obvious from the history of this controversy

## Rev. VanderWal Protest of Deposition

that it was carried on by others long before any involvement of the pastor of Byron Center PRC.

More to the point, as these sermons were fundamentally an exposure of the terrible denials of the truth practiced and defended among our churches and a calling to repent of these terrible denials of the truth, they are by no means schismatic. They could only be schismatic if our churches had taken official decisions not to repent over our corporate displacement of the perfect work of Christ and our compromise of the doctrines of the unconditional covenant and justification by faith alone. If we are truly repentant, why should a further call to deeper repentance be taken as schismatic and slanderous? Why not say in response to Nathan the prophet's testimony (2 Samuel 12:7) with David, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13)?

On a personal note, I was devastated by the sermon on Jeremiah 23:4, 14. I felt the greatness of my own involvement and responsibility not only as a member of the PRC, but as a delegate of Classis East at its many meetings. I was responsible for these decisions that defended error and denied the truth. I was humbled in deep repentance that brought me to the acknowledgment of my own pride that caused me to fail to see these errors and their damage to the glory of God and the welfare of God's people. I saw more clearly my great need of the forgiveness of the blood of Jesus, and the power of His righteousness alone to be the ground of my salvation from my sin. In my heart I do not know why this sermon should be deemed schismatic, when it brought me nearer to my Savior.

Treating the statements under I, what I take to be the main ground:

A. indicates that preaching that rebukes a denomination for its errors is unlawful. The application made by these grounds to certain individuals, as if identified by name, is unwarranted. They were not. The sermon in question expressly stated a corporate responsibility for these sins, thus rejecting the division supposed in ground d. In short, A needs its ungrounded insinuations for its validity.

B, C, and D are invalid because they contain no reference to the sermons whatever. There is no mention of the particular sin or of the particular office bearers whom Byron Center's pastor was charging with sin.

With respect to the above, it is to be noted that they all speak about Scripture, the Confessions, and the Church Order, as if citing them proves that the decision to depose Byron Center's minister is correct. Especially telling is the point made in A.b. "At the very least he casts suspicion on the doctrinal orthodoxy of most of the ministers and elders of Classis East without ever bringing formal charges of sin, protests, or appeals to any assembly." To judge charitably the minister in question would have been in order. "Casting suspicion" is not grounds for deposition. Perhaps grounds for rebuke of a minister, but certainly not grounds for deposition. Instead of that "least" why did Classis East assume the very greatest for the deposition of one of her ministers?

From Grounds II and III I direct Classis East's attention to the following statements:

## Rev. VanderWal Protest of Deposition

II.A.a. "Jeremiah was able to say this because the God who knows the hearts of the prophets of Jerusalem gave this to Jeremiah by direct revelation. [The pastor] may not make this same claim."

II.A.e. "[He] judges and condemns the Protestant Reformed denomination as embracing the lie when such a lie can be found nowhere in the minutes of the assemblies of our churches."

III. A.b. "But Classis East formally declared three times 'that Classis East erred in its decisions of February 28, 2018, which decisions are then quoted, and the decisions of Synod 2018 are quoted and used as a ground (Art. 15-17).'"

III. B.b. "The consistory judged this sermon *upon a careful consideration of the content, tone, admitted occasion, as well as the following.*"

III.C.[The pastor] expressed publicly his disagreement and condemned the advice of the church visitors, and urged both his consistory and church to reject it before it was decided upon."

I include here also what I cited earlier, from Ground I.A.b. "At the very least he casts suspicion on the doctrinal orthodoxy of most of the ministers and elders of Classis East without ever bringing formal charges of sin, protests, or appeals to any assembly."

To the point of the deposition of the particular minister in question, taken together they make clear that the pastor was deposed for preaching the whole counsel of God. He was guilty of applying the Word of God in a way that only Jeremiah was allowed to do because the prophet received direct revelation. He was guilty of addressing himself to what he saw as the spiritual condition of the denomination and calling for action about it (application), because there were certain decisions taken by broader assemblies. These grounds suppose that all the light that can shine upon our churches is the light of decisions of the ecclesiastical assemblies of our churches.

But these particular grounds also carry a restricting force into all the preaching that can take place in our churches. The guilt of violating these particular grounds and the threat of deposition for that violation, chokes the preaching of the gospel, and limits the ability of preachers in our churches to carry out their promises to preach, maintain and defend the truth of the Three Forms of Unity and their responsibility to preach the whole counsel of God for the spiritual welfare of God's people.

II.A.a. does not allow ministers to apply to the hearts of God's people the Word of God that addresses the hearts of men. He may no longer rebuke or call to repentance concerning sins of the heart. He may no longer preach against apathy or lust or covetousness.

II.A.e. and III.A.b. demand that all preaching and teaching must consult prior decisions of the broader assemblies and must be the standard for what preaching is commendable or condemnable, rather than the Word of God.

III.B.b. make the subjective matters of a consistory's "careful consideration of the content, tone, and admitted occasion ..." grounds for deposition. Every preacher in the PRC must

## Rev. VanderWal Protest of Deposition

ensure his sermons in all these respects conform to the decisions taken by Byron about these particular sermons.

III.C. demands that a minister may never preach about issues pending before the consistory, even if he is convinced that those issues are potentially destructive to the cause of the truth. Personally I can say that if my consistory should be contemplating a decision to uphold the doctrine of the conditional covenant, I should feel responsible to preach against it.

These grounds must be rejected for their force against the preaching of the gospel, both in its position as the first mark of the true church of Jesus Christ and in its practical place in our churches. Essentially, this decision of Classis East with especially the ground II.A.a. gives deliberative assemblies control over the preaching of the Word of God in our churches. The Word of God may no longer be conscientiously preached by ministers in our churches. If the watchman upon the walls of Zion sees evil afoot in Zion, he is restricted from calling attention to it, from warning God's people about it, and from rebuking it. A minister can no longer preach against drunkenness or against fornication, but must instead go privately to persons thought guilty of those sins. If our churches should have some ministers begin to preach evolution, or homosexuality or justification by works, ministers are prohibited by this decision from preaching against these heresies.

The basis of my contention is succinctly expressed in the Second Helvetic Confession in Chapter 1. "Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is preached, and received of the faithful." Classis East's grounds are opposed to it. Especially ground II.A.a. of Classis East's above decision declares there is part of the Word of God that may not be applied. There can be application of the Word of God that is invalid. As a pastor cannot know the heart, but by direct revelation, he is forbidden from preaching the parts of it that apply to the heart.

To be more particular this decision is contrary to the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 31 where it identifies the preaching of the gospel as the first key of the kingdom, which opens and shuts the kingdom of God to believers and unbelievers. There is no such division of the Word of God allowed by this Lord's Day.

It is directly contrary to Ephesians 4:20-24, "but ye have not so learned Christ; if so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: that ye put off concerning the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." The first part of the text teaches that the Ephesians heard Christ teaching them in the preaching of the truth as that that truth is "in Jesus." The second part directly ties that teaching of Jesus Christ to the fundamental application of that truth to the lives of the members of Christ. The preaching in its application is the Word of God itself calling God's people to put off the old man and to put on the new man.

It is also contrary to the Canons of Dordt, the Third and Fourth Heads, Article 17. There the means of keeping the people of God "in the exercise of the Word, sacraments, and discipline" are "the sacred precepts of the gospel." If those precepts of the gospel are man's word and not God's, they cannot be said to be "sacred." Further, this ground of Classis' East's decision denies the very point made by the application of the example of "the apostles and teachers

## Rev. VanderWal Protest of Deposition

who succeeded them.” To deny the applications of Jeremiah in the preaching must certainly also deny the applications of the apostle Paul in his rebukes of Galatians 1:6, 7; 3:1; I Corinthians 11:17, 20; II Corinthians 6:11, 21; 12:20, 21, etc.

Our Formula of Subscription makes clear that there is only one standard which our ministers are obligated to uphold and defend, the truth of God’s Word as summarized in our Three Forms of Unity. In these doctrines, as the doctrines of God’s Word, is the unity of the church of Jesus Christ. That obligation does not and can not apply to the decisions of our deliberative assemblies. Ministers must understand that they are obligated to uphold the doctrines of the Three Forms of Unity even if those doctrines come under attack by the deliberative assemblies of the churches with their decisions. All the authority in the church is the authority of the Word of God. It is the calling, in particular of the ministers signing the Formula of Subscription, to uphold and defend that authority alone, even though the counsels of men may be against it. (Belgic Confession, Art. 7)

Third, I wish to address the disorderly way that this decision of Classis East to depose the minister of Byron Center PRC.

Our Church Order lays out the order very clearly. Honoring the autonomy of the local consistory, the decision to suspend or expel is taken by the consistory with the additional sentence of the neighboring consistory. Then, the matter is brought to Classis for approval before deposition can take place. The work of Classis is to approve the work done by the consistory for the deposition of the offending minister.

The manner of the proceeding of this case to Classis East was disorderly. Byron Center ostensibly did its work. Passing it on to Trinity, that consistory saw fit to take up the same work all over again. Bringing the matter to Classis East rendered the same kind of work over again. If there were protests, there was no mention of them, and they should have been given separate treatment.

I believe that this disorder demonstrates what actually drove the whole process that led to this decision to depose a faithful minister of God’s Word: hatred. Each step of the way was marked by a powerful discontent to leave things alone and have the process carry through. At no point was the previous work done deemed sufficient. It had to be done over again. Setting aside mere insecurity as a reason, the only conclusion is that at each level opportunity had to be taken to exercise deep hostility against the minister in question. What was it that made him so abhorrent?

This protest is submitted not only for the sake of the preaching of the gospel in our churches, but also for the sake of demonstrating the error of this decision in the hope that our churches will be broken in repentance for treating so evilly a faithful minister of the Word whose only goal was the restoration of the love of the truth in our churches and was motivated solely by a sincere love for them in the cause of the truth of God’s Word.

In Christ, our King,

Rev. Martin VanderWal

**Agenda 27**