

Letter of Concern to the Board of the Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA)

May 23, 2019

Dear Brothers in Christ of the RFPA Board,

Each of the undersigned are members of the RFPA board, the RFPA association, or *SB* readers. We come to you with this letter because we are deeply troubled by developments at the board and the paper of the RFPA, the *Standard Bearer* (*SB*). We have also addressed a letter of concern to the editors of the *SB* detailing our concerns and informing them that we have written a letter to you. The letter is attached.

Through the *SB* the RFPA gave birth to the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) in the early 1920s during the struggle over the false doctrine of common grace in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). In the 1950s the *SB* was instrumental in the preservation of the truth in the PRC during the controversy over the false doctrine of the conditional covenant. We care deeply about the organization and the paper. We love the theology for which they stand historically and officially, the cause for which they were started, and the principles for which they stand.

The theology for which they stand is the truth of God as God in all of creation and in the salvation of elect sinners. It is the truth of the sovereign and particular grace of God and of salvation all of grace, all of God, and all to the glory of the only good God, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things. It is the truth of the Reformed faith, which is the truth of the Scriptures. It is that truth as it has been historically maintained in the Protestant Reformed Churches over against any and all attempts to diminish the glory of God and to exalt man, especially by such false doctrines as the well-meant gospel offer, common grace, and the conditional covenant.

The cause for which they were started was to give witness to that truth to the glory of God and the salvation of his elect church. The RFPA was formed for this purpose and used the *SB* as the instrument to carry out this purpose.

Chief among the principles for which they stand is the freedom to write that truth, not only in the face of false doctrine, but in the face of trends and pressures to be silent about the truth. The RFPA and the *SB* are *free*. The principle is embodied in the name of the organization and printed in the masthead of every issue of the *SB*. They are free of denominational control. Ultimately they are free in the truth of God, which gives them their purpose and right of existence. The RFPA is not merely a printer, but has a right to exist as an independent witness to the truth of God's word based on the office of all believers. The RFPA carries out its calling to witness to that truth through the *SB*. They were started by worthy men while still members of the CRC in order to defend the truth of God's sovereign and particular grace against the error of common grace. They were started because the truth—especially in its criticism of false doctrine—could not be heard and was shut out of the CRC paper, *The Banner*. The RFPA and *SB* gave a free voice to the truth that could be heard nowhere else. The founders believed that there must be free discussion of doctrinal issues, not merely for the sake of liberty, but for the truth's sake. The truth is lost in an environment of censorship.

Because the RFPA stands for this truth, this cause, and this principle it has never been neutral in respect to the truth. The RFPA has never merely hosted a discussion of ideas. The

RFPA has decided what the truth is and stood for the truth. The RFPA stands for the historic Reformed faith of the creeds as maintained in the PRC as that was explained by the reformers of 1924. In pursuit of the purpose to witness to the Reformed truth the RFPA has allowed those that speak against it to have their voice heard so that they can be refuted by the truth and the truth can stand out victoriously. The Protestant Reformed truth, first and foremost, is given a voice by the RFPA.

We believe that the *SB* through the leadership of the present editors has departed from the purpose, mission, and principles of its founding and that the RFPA board is acquiescing in that departure.

First, the editors have set a direction for the magazine that is not in keeping with its distinctive character as sharply Protestant Reformed, doctrinal, and polemical. We are dissatisfied with the character of the editorials and the weak tone. This same character and tone is reflected by force of editorial leadership throughout the magazine. This stance of the magazine is one that we do not believe is simply the result of different men with different abilities and interests, but the result of a conscious decision to tone down the magazine and take it in another direction. In the present doctrinal controversy in our churches the editors have at last found a sharp voice, but it is directed against those who stand for the historic positions of the *SB*. This stance of the magazine we find unacceptable. We see it as the end result of the previous bad direction set by editors and, indeed, its fruit.

Second, the freedom of the magazine is being taken away by the editors. We have learned that a writer has been dismissed from writing for the rubric *All Around Us* after frequent censorship of his writings. We discovered through a letter published on the RFPA blog that a minister could not have his letter about the doctrinal controversy recently decided by the synod of the PRC published in the *SB*. We have learned that still another letter, intending to carry on a discussion of that current doctrinal controversy in the PRC and to give a response to the editors, cannot be published in the *SB*. Another minister could not have his letter about some editorials published. We learned that another letter written by yet another minister about the doctrinal controversy in the PRC took months to publish and only after efforts by the editors to have the writer withdraw the letter or substantially change it. We learned that the same minister has offered to write guest articles in the *SB* to illuminate the *SB* readership on the current doctrinal controversy in our churches, but was turned down. We understand that there has been interference from the editors of the *SB* at the RFPA with a view to having certain content about the doctrinal controversy in our churches placed on the RFPA blog taken down and to hinder the free publication of articles on the blog that may be critical of writing in the *SB*. Efforts to have discussion about these issues in the *SB* have been met with denials, deflections, criticisms, silence, delays, and refusals to publish. That is bad enough of itself but more serious when those that are obstructed and shut out are promoting the truth historically championed on the pages of the *SB*.

Third, there are recent troubling developments on the editorial pages of the *SB*. When the PRC were going through a doctrinal controversy over the place of works in salvation the editorial pages of the *SB* were silent. The controversy dealt with the fundamental doctrines of justification and the unconditional covenant, yet the *SB* said nothing. As soon as a decision was made by our synod the editorials of the *SB* minimized the issue and declared that it was neither false doctrine nor heresy, made threats against those who insisted that it was so serious, and insinuated that there are such radicals lurking in the PRC. Soon afterward editorials appeared condemning a new species of antinomianism that was allegedly a danger in the PRC. Now the

editors of the *SB* are criticizing the doctrine of the PRC as developed and taught to us by Rev. Herman Hoeksema and maintained through the doctrinal split of 1953. The editors are using the *SB* as a platform to call that doctrine dangerous and those that espouse and maintain that doctrine antinomian and hyper-Calvinistic, the very charges that this denomination and that paper have endured through the decades for their stand for the truth. For the first time in its illustrious history the *SB* was shamefully silent in a serious doctrinal controversy in the PRC over the very heart of the gospel. Now having found a voice the editors of the *SB* are criticizing the doctrine that is necessary to expose the error just faced in our churches. If there had been no blog writing, there would have been no writing at all that publically discussed the issues to inform and to instruct. We are still suffering at present from a great dearth of information and a flood of misinformation in that many are totally clueless about what the issues are that our churches are facing, do not understand their seriousness, or have a completely wrong understanding of the issues.

Fourth, we learned that the RFPA has given up control over the content of the magazine by means of an agreement that fundamentally alters the long-standing relationship between the RFPA and *SB*. The fact that such a document was deemed necessary is indicative of the problem in the relationship between the *SB* and the RFPA and of a power struggle for control of the content of the *SB*. The *SB* magazine is owned by the RFPA and is the paper of the members of the association and really of its readership. It has been taken over by the editors of the *SB* and is being pressed in a direction with which we are in disagreement. The editors are not vigorously maintaining the historic character of the magazine as Protestant Reformed, doctrinal, and polemical. They have censored content, refused good letters, and not honored the principle of the paper of freedom to write on the issues. They were silent during the recent doctrinal controversy in our churches. Now they have instigated criticism in the paper of the Protestant Reformed truth and believers who stand for it. We believe the RFPA board has acquiesced in this and given up control of the paper especially by means of the document that states the relationship between the RFPA and *SB*. The document alters the relationship between the RFPA and *SB* by ceding control of the content of the paper to the editorial staff and taking it away from the organization in whose hands it properly lies, but also by making the relationship, which heretofore was as organic and harmonious as that between the hand and the arm, into a legal contract. We strongly disagree with this and believe it serves to take the paper away from the organization that started and owns it and to insulate the paper and the direction the editors are taking it from criticism by the board and ultimately by the RFPA.

We are writing this to you to call you to take action on these issues. The RFPA board needs to assert its sovereign control over the paper and its content. The RFPA association itself will have the ultimate say. If the board is unwilling to take action, we are willing to address a letter to the RFPA board in harmony with the constitution's rules allowing fifteen members to call for a special association meeting to address these matters. We are calling the RFPA board to see these things as serious problems and to address them decisively, without delay, and with all due and deliberate speed.

We feel compelled to write this to you by a sense of the gravity of the changes taking place, the urgency of the issues facing our churches, and a growing sense that if nothing is done at all, the illustrious heritage of the RFPA and *SB* as a clear and feared witness to the Reformed faith as officially maintained in the Protestant Reformed Churches will be lost and the principles—especially freedom—for which the RFPA has historically stood will be further eroded.

We are further compelled to write this letter because we believe that at present the churches are in the midst of an unsettled doctrinal controversy over fundamental doctrines of the Reformed faith such as the call of the gospel, the nature and definition of grace, the understanding of faith, the place of works in salvation, and ultimately, then, the truth of God's unconditional covenant and salvation by grace alone. We believe that the truth on these matters is not receiving a hearing at the *SB*.

The men of the RFPA board must make up their mind where they stand on the issue of the truth, and on the principles, constitution, and history of the organization. The RFPA organization stands on the truth and they must take the side of the truth. They must demand that the truth be given a voice, especially as that has been historically maintained in the PRC and found on the pages of the magazine. The RFPA stands for freedom for the truth to be heard.. The truth will prevail. The only question is whether the RFPA will be found among its supporters as it has been in the past. The RFPA is not a neutral organization. It becomes irrelevant if it is neutral, and worst betrays its purpose, constitution, and history. That is what is at stake here.

As proof—by no means exhaustive—of the issues that we raise in our letter we include four attachments. First, we attach a letter that was rejected for publication in the *SB*. We agree with this letter and believe it must be published immediately. We include a brief explanation of the circumstances surrounding its rejection. Second, we include a letter from Rev. M. VanderWal that was rejected. Third, we include a time line and recollection from Rev. A. Lanning about his experience with the *SB* editors regarding his letter to the *SB*. Fourth, we attach a brief analysis of a recent editorial response to a letter that was printed in the May 15 *SB* that was in many respects the impetus for this letter.

For the cause of the gospel,

Attachment 1: Rejected Letter of Rev. N. Langerak

Explanation

In the Oct. 1, 2018 issue of the *SB Rev.* Koole wrote his editorial, *What Must I Do?*. On Oct. 8, 2018 Rev. N. Langerak wrote a letter disagreeing with that editorial and sent it to the *SB* offices. The editors of the *SB* would not publish the letter without Rev. Langerak making substantial changes to its content and because of its length. Rev. Langerak published the rejected letter on the RFPA blog as an approved blog writer. Only after many attempts by the editors to have the letter pulled down from the blog, did the *SB* editors publish the letter in the *SB* with a response. The letter that is attached is a follow up and response to Rev. Koole's response to the original letter. It is no small point that this letter was sent in January and no response was given until March and that a refusal and only after the letter had been sent to the RFPA blog again.

This letter was refused publication in the *SB* because the *SB* editors are charging Rev. Langerak with the sin of lying because he wrote on the blog that the *SB* would not publish his original letter. As a consequence they are refusing to publish anything by him until he meets certain demands of theirs.

This letter explains and points out the seriousness of the issue facing the RFPA with the *SB* editors. It also points out the doctrine involved in our controversy and the truth that the RFPA must uphold.

Rev. N. Langerak's Letter

January 7, 2019

Dear Editors of the *Standard Bearer*,

I read Rev. Koole's rebuttal of my blog post in the *Standard Bearer*. He reiterates without proof that the controversy recently decided by synod was about the question, "what is to be judged as antinomianism?" Can he not see that this matter of antinomianism only came up as a false charge against objections to preaching that compromised the gospel of grace? The gospel of grace in its criticism of that preaching was charged with being antinomian.

In his response Rev. Koole continues to press his point about the threat of antinomianism that he "fears," by criticizing "men full of misguided zeal for the truth that the salvation of the sinner is *all* of grace, and therefore *all* of God (in reaction to Arminianism or work-righteousness), but doing so by insisting that the preaching emphasize simply what God has done for us (prompting the believer to gratitude) and that the preacher then steer clear of stressing also how the hearer is called to live if he will experientially know the salvation and approval of his God." Is this a description of the kind of men "that loudly subscribe to the Canons and then proceed to trouble the churches with their antinomian sentiments again and again." Is this a description of "those of an antinomian strain...in our churches?" Since he is referring to preachers in our churches my questions are: who are they and what have they preached or written to which he can point as evidence of their misguided zeal?

But there is something curious about these misguided preachers. Are they a description of the real opponent *in this controversy* for Rev. Koole and the real problem in our churches as he sees it?

Let us examine the thinking of these preachers. They have a zeal for protecting the doctrine of salvation all of grace. They do that out of loathing for Arminianism and work-righteousness. In their preaching they emphasize simply what God has done for us. They believe that this prompts gratitude. What preachers! They would build up faith since the gospel is not what one

must do for salvation, but what God has accomplished by Jesus Christ and applies to us for salvation.

Rev. Koole accuses these men of antinomianism because they “steer clear of stressing also how the hearer is called to live if he will experientially know the salvation and approval of God.” These preachers are not accused of avoiding preaching on how the believer is called to live in thankfulness for his salvation. They are not accused of minimizing the law of God and the call to sanctified living. They are not accused of avoiding the exhortations and admonitions of the word of God. Doing that, they could legitimately be charge with antinomianism.

So what is this doctrine that earns a preacher the label of *antinomian* if he avoids it? “How the hearer is called to live” means obedience to the law of God. Rev. Koole makes the hearer’s experiential knowledge of the salvation and approval of God dependent on the hearer’s obedience. These preachers are condemned as antinomian because they will not tell the people that *if* they will know the salvation and approval of God they must obey the law of God. Rev. Koole adds the word *experientially*. But to know the salvation and the approval of God is experiential.

The Apostle says we know the salvation and approval of God by faith: “Yea doubtless, and I count all things *but* loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them *but* dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death” (Philippians 3:8-11).

Our obedience he calls the righteousness which is of the law. This he counts loss and dung to be found in Christ with the righteousness of God which is by faith. On the ground of that righteousness we know both the salvation and the approval of God experientially since our salvation consists in the forgiveness of sins and justification is the approval of God. *That I may know him* is the translation of the Greek infinitive of purpose. He says forsaking our own obedience as righteousness is necessary *in order that* we know Christ, know the power of his resurrection, and know the fellowship of his sufferings. To know Christ is to know him as the complete Savior personally and experientially who saves from the guilt and the pollution of sin. To know the power of his resurrection is to know personally and experientially the power of the resurrection of Christ to justify and grant eternal life and to transform the believer and make him a new creature in all his life. To know the fellowship of his sufferings is to know the persecution of the world because the believer stands in the world that hates Christ confessing his truth and living to his glory. So long as we hold on to our obedience as necessary to know the salvation and the approval of God—for righteousness—we are ignorant of Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his suffering. The Apostle says that we know all these treasures of Christ—experientially—only by casting off our obedience for righteousness and having Christ and his righteousness by faith. In short we know all this by faith because we know Christ by faith.

In light of the passage is it not wrong to teach that obedience is the *if* on which the experiential knowledge of the salvation and approval of God depends? Where is this doctrine in the creeds? Is this an example of the “development” that “needs to be done” in “understanding grace in its sanctifying power?”

If making the knowledge of the salvation and approval of God depend on obedience is the idea behind the novel quest that Rev. Koole suggests for “wording” that “may be used in the

preaching...to prompt and promote godliness,” then, I say, “No thank you.” Making some aspect of salvation—also the experience of it—dependant on works does not prompt godliness, but promotes a smug self-righteousness.

I like these imaginary preachers, then. I wish they were real men. I find that their zeal for the truth that salvation is all of God manifests itself in avoiding the doctrine that Rev. Koole praises as essential to the gospel and for avoiding which he charges them with antinomianism. They are not antinomian at all, but preach the gospel. Rev. Koole’s imaginary preachers—and all who are like them—are to be commended for avoiding that kind of preaching. I doubt they would have any interest in Rev. Koole’s quest for “wording” to “prompt godliness.”

Rev. Koole gets exercised about one of a series of questions that I asked in my blog post. I asked, “Are they [good works] fruits of faith or do works along with faith obtain? Is fellowship with the Father by faith and by the good works that faith produces? Is salvation by faith and by the works of faith?” Rev. Koole says, “The first two can pass inspection, but the third?...As if that was what Hope’s consistory was approving, what was being preached from their pulpit, and most of its members were oblivious to? And that this is what Classis East was willing to defend by its decisions? That is a serious misrepresentation. *That* was not the issue before synod. To indicate that it was is not honest or helpful.”

As if...!

What if?

What if it was preached, approved, and defended, and thus before synod, that, “we do good works to have our prayers answered...we do good works so that we can receive God’s grace and Holy Spirit in our conscience...obedience is required here, obedience that I must perform in order to enjoy fellowship with God...The way of a holy life matters; it is the way to the Father” (Acts of Synod 2018).

All this preached, approved, and defended under the banner of prompting and promoting godliness and exposing radical antinomians of all shades.

Synod said these condemned statements compromised justification and the unconditional covenant. If justification and the covenant are about anything they are about the truth that *salvation* is by faith *alone* and not by faith and faith’s works.

It is surprising that Rev. Koole would see any difference between the three questions that I asked. He accepts the first two as legitimate, but the third is simply the extension of them. How are they different? The three questions that I asked do not present the truth over against three different errors, but over against one and the same error that can be stated three different ways more or less subtly. They are all equally serious because they all compromise justification by faith alone and the unconditional covenant.

I wonder if the new search to find “wording” to “prompt godliness” was not begun because synod took away words and phrases that many thought were a fine way to prompt godliness and criticism of which was judged antinomian, but that in fact compromised the gospel.

His imaginary preachers will not preach “how the hearer is called to live if he will experientially know the salvation and approval of God.” The sad thing is that Rev. Koole criticizes them for a reactionary and misguided zeal for grace and condemns them as antinomian. I challenge the editor of the *Standard Bearer* to explain how the fault that he finds with those preachers differs at all from the theology of the statements quoted above. If those preachers are antinomian, then synod was dead wrong.

I wish there were more of these “antinomian” preachers. They remind me of Hoeksema who wrote, “If the preaching of the law would leave the impression with the church of Jesus Christ

that somehow we must add to the righteousness that is in Jesus Christ our Lord, then, of course, it would be far better that we never heard at all of the law again” (*Triple Knowledge*, vol. 3, 443).

Cordially in Christ,
Nathan J. Langerak

Attachment 2: Rejected Letter from Rev. M. VanderWal

The Letter

October 5, 2018

Dear Editors

I must admit my inability to understand the editorials presented in the pages of the Standard Bearer of late. I receive the understanding that there are forces present in the denomination against which its editors feel the need to take up warfare. I see devastating arms taken up against antinomianism, the teaching that believers are never so actuated by the Holy Spirit so that they live in obedience to the commandments of God. I see powerful weapons taken up against such persons who believe that if someone is not Protestant Reformed they are not in the kingdom of God. I see powerful rebukes directed against people saying that particular teachings that compromise the gospel, justification by faith alone, and the unconditional covenant are heretical.

I understand a kind of logic in operation. It is necessary to take up warfare against these people, devoting pages to this warfare in our denomination's magazine. Therefore, there must be such people in our denomination, people that pose an existential threat against our churches and the truth we as churches hold dear

What is truth that we hold dear?

It is the truth of salvation by grace alone. It is the truth of justification by faith alone. It is the truth of the unconditional covenant. These are the truths that have been compromised by some statements in sermons that were treated by our Synod in the way of appeal to this major deliberative assembly. So serious was

this compromise that Synod found it necessary to examine the author of these statements, to determine his orthodoxy. So serious was this compromise that Synod declared that the statements in these sermons compromised the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But now, as these editorials treat the decisions taken by our Synod on this very matter, we have these warnings given to us: beware of radicals; beware of antinomians; beware of calling officebearers heretics and teaching of PRC officebearers heresy. We find no warnings against resting our salvation on works that we do. We find no warnings against trying to achieve assurance by good works. We find no warnings against the error of justification by faith and works. We find no labor to clear ourselves publicly of association with the Romish error of justification by faith and works or of association with the proud error of the conditional covenant.

Instead we are told that our salvation does depend on our deed of believing. We are reminded that our blessedness is conditioned on our keeping God's commandments. We are reminded that God's acceptance of us does depend on our faithful obedience to Him. All worked by God's grace, of course.

Another matter that I cannot understand has to do with the response to the letter written by Mr. Manuel Kuhs. I had understood previously that doctrinal compromise was a very bad thing. I had understood previously that compromise of the gospel of Jesus Christ was a very, very bad thing. But now I must understand that doctrinal compromise is not such a bad thing after all, not even compromise of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Rather, this compromise is like getting a virus on one's computer.

I do not understand, then, how Synod could even legally treat the matter if it was outside the scope of our creeds and confessions. I do not understand how Synod would take the trouble to decide the matter. I do not understand why Synod would find it necessary to convene again,

in order to examine a man according to the Formula of Subscription. I do not understand why Synod would not then have been content to say merely that the work already done was sufficient, leaving it decided only that such sermons containing such statements were ambiguous and demonstrated a lack of clarity.

I do not understand.

I look for help.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Martin VanderWal

SB Rejection

November 5, 2018

Dear Marty

The letter you wrote for publication in the SB cannot be printed in its present form because it contains serious charges of false doctrine. You write, “Instead we are told that our salvation does depend on our deed of believing. We are reminded that our blessedness is conditioned on our keeping God’s commandments. We are reminded that God’s acceptance of us does depend on our faithful obedience to Him.”

There are two very important issues here. First, these statements are not substantiated. No quotations are given to demonstrate that these doctrines are indeed being taught in the Standard Bearer. These statements, without proof, cannot then be printed as they are.

Second, while you do not name anyone, it is obvious from the letter that you are talking about the editorials. It is not right simply to state it in the passive – “We are told...” and “We are reminded...” as if you are not accusing someone. The editors are being identified as the men who are teaching these errors. Brother, this is not the proper way to deal with such serious matters. If you are convinced and can demonstrate that some or one of the editors is teaching these things, it behooves you to bring this to the writer and demonstrate his error. And if, in fact these are being taught in the SB, and there is not repentance, then the right thing to do is bring it to the proper ecclesiastical body. For the things you write are contrary to all that the PRC hold and maintains on the basis of the confessions.

We will say that we believe there is misunderstanding concerning some of what was written, as for example, the article on radicalism – that was not a response to Synod. It was the conclusion of a series of articles on the true church. And as Ken will make plain in his November 15 editorial, his October 1 article was not reflecting on Synod, but on discussions that came after Synod. But that is not the main problem. The charges of false doctrine must be brought to the man or men who wrote these things, and then, if necessary, to consistories. They may not simply be stated in the pages of the Standard Bearer.

Accordingly, we cannot print the letter as it is.

Cordially in Christ,

Russ Dykstra

On behalf of the editors