

February 15, 2020
Consistory of Crete Protestant Reformed Church

Dear Brothers of the Consistory

I write this letter concerning the charges of gross sin against our minister, as I will be unable to attend the meeting on Monday February 17.

I want everyone to know that I am also one of the twenty concerned men who have been charged with “engaging in activity that can only be described both as slanderous and as schismatic”

This group of concerned men have written letters to our RFPA board of directors voicing some of our mutual concerns about the administration of the Standard Bearer magazine.

Some of us are ministers, elders, deacons, about 10 of us have been, or are currently, on the board of the RFPA.

The reason we addressed the RFPA board with our concerns about the Standard Bearer is because the magazine belongs to the members of the Reformed Free Publishing Association

The reason we approached the board with a group of 20 is because the constitution requires 15 to call a special meeting, and we wanted to have enough men, in case a few changed their mind.

At the time we sent our first letter of concern to the RFPA Board, May 23, 2019, we also sent a copy to each of the co-editors out of good will and respect for their position as co-editors of a magazine that we love.

Since this original letter we have maintained ongoing correspondence with the board of the RFPA.

In all of our labors, we have never participated in any of the gross sins, and / or wicked activities that we are accused of in the letter from the editors, including, but not limited to: slander, raising discord in the church, public schism, gross misrepresentations, judging men rashly and unheard, defamation, or collusion.

I would be glad to refute each of these charges individually and in greater detail if anyone would desire.

Below are some statements / accusations, with my comments following.
Lastly the “heart of (their) concern”

Their statement: "A genuine concern for the maintenance of truth under attack brings one to the assemblies of the church. A genuine concern for erring brothers will seek to correct them, not by gathering a group that brings slander to the RFPA, but bringing charges to the brothers and to their consistories"

My opinion: I have concerns for my magazine, and I don't like the abdication of the responsibility for the direction of the magazine by the board of the magazine publisher.

I have absolutely no grounds to bring ecclesiastical charges against anybody, much less to their consistories.

The implication: The editors are stating that if I don't appreciate some articles in an independent magazine, or the direction that I feel my periodical is headed, then rather than write a letter to the editor, or in this case, a letter to the publisher and copy to the editors, I should instead go to the elders of the church where the editors are members and accuse them of sin.

Their statement: Error cannot be properly addressed, and may not be addressed, by seeking to control the words they put on the pages of a magazine."

My opinion: I have no desire to silence the editors or otherwise control the words they put on the pages of a magazine. Although the editors are doing just that "controlling the words they put on the pages of a magazine", and that is why we are making our concerns known to the men with ultimate responsibility for the words put in the magazine; the board, and ultimately, the association.

Would that the editors follow their own counsel.

The implication:

If the editors had been heading, and/or publishing the letters of concern that had been submitted prior to this all coming to a head this whole issue could have been avoided. Instead they chose to change the nature of the paper into one of censorship and editorial excess.

I quote the first paragraph of the letter they took snippets from "The SB as a magazine is dear to us. It stands for the Protestant Reformed truth. It stands for freedom to write and to publish that truth, It stands for polemics and vigorous debate of the doctrinal issues, not only issues of a former day, but issues of the new day

Their statement "the signatories have, already in this, joined in condemning men rashly and unheard, having not themselves investigated the matter but simply signed on to the defamation, encouraged to so do by the instigators"

My opinion: This statement is patently false. We have not even come close to condemning ANY man of sin- much less in the wicked manner stated. These charges, specifically against the 17 men who signed the letter, are unfounded, untrue, and derogatory.

The implication:

Rather than lash out in spontaneous defense, I ask myself, what do these men stand to gain by insulting the intelligence and godliness of this group of concerned men, and then issue charges against these men?

What do they hope to accomplish through this intimidating behavior?

Their statement below which is really the only semi-discernable speculative charge against them with anything that resembles grounds is their interpretation of the below paragraph to invent the charge of slander against us.

They charge us with slander them even though our concerns were repeated in a later letter to the editor by Prof Engelsma who voiced the same concerns, and that we agree with 100%

Finally, with reference to the response in the *SB* to a writer who had, in a letter to the editor, referred to a line in a particular sermon of H.H., the group writes this:

“The theology of Herman Hoeksema as it was preached in that sermon is now viewed as a danger to the PRC and those that espouse it are considered hyper-Calvinistic and antinomian. Rev. Hoeksema and Hoeksema’s theology now is criticized in the paper he founded.

“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 using the *SB* as a platform to call the doctrine of Herman Hoeksema 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.

“This stance of the magazine we find unacceptable. The editors’ treatment of Hoeksema’s theology and those that support it shows how far the magazine under your leadership has departed from its historic stance. We see it as the end result of the previous direction set by editors and, indeed, its fruit.”

There is the heart of our concern. The editors of the *Standard Bearer* are charged with opposing the theology of Herman Hoeksema, specifically the doctrine of the unconditional covenant. The unconditional covenant is the heart of PRC doctrine. To oppose that is necessarily to promote the false doctrine of a conditional covenant.

“This is the heart of our concern. The editors of the *Standard Bearer* are charged with opposing the theology of Herman Hoeksema, specifically, the doctrine of the unconditional covenant. The unconditional covenant is the heart of the PRC doctrine. To oppose that is necessarily to promote the false doctrine of a conditional covenant”

My opinion: This is not an intellectually honest argument.

It is not intellectually honest to exaggerate a concern brought to the board about your disagreement with Herman Hoeksema’s writing into a charge of promoting false doctrine.

It is not intellectually honest to change a concern into a charge.

It is not intellectually honest to say that any deviation from the words of Herman Hoeksema is promoting false doctrine.

We have not brought charges against any man.

I do not feel that our letter was near as harsh and confrontational as the letter of Professor Engelsma who in his letter called his letter a “protest” and then called for an apology.

The implication: To take one small portion of a letter voicing concerns, pull it out of context, change it from a voicing of our collective concerns about the treatment of a sermon by the editors of the SB and change that into the action of us men making an accusation of “promoting false doctrine” is outrageous.

It took till November 15 to finally publish a letter by Professor Engelsma where-in he mentions many of the same concerns, although his letter was directed more toward doctrinal changes in the magazine: “having waited in vain for response to one of the editors calling Herman Hoeksema’s denial that faith is a work “nonsense” with an exclamation point, I am compelled to write in protest.” “I call for an apology. I doubt that in all his public writing and speaking, much less preaching Hoeksema ever uttered nonsense, much less nonsense deserving of an exclamation point. Undoubtedly, he was in error on occasion. But “nonsense” never. Not even his avowed foes accused him of nonsense” Prof. Engelsma then goes on to delineate things that aggravate the statement in the SB

The response from the editors following Engelsma’s letter was (at least in part) a hardening of the position of the editor

The editorial response in response to the letter of Prof Engelsma above include the following quotes:

- “I take exception to the notion that the issue of antinomianism was extraneous to this controversy. Contrary to your assertions, it was not a “red herring”
- **“Let us not forget that no less worthy than Calvin had a much different view than Hoeksema when it came to explaining the spirit behind the same question....”**

Have the editors also charged Prof Engelsma with slander? Is he guilty of slander?

To ask the question is to answer it

As rightful owners of this magazine through our office of all believer as well as our membership in the association that publishes the magazine, we voiced some of the exact same concerns- enumerated above by Professor Engelsma, to the board of the RFPA.

The argument that the editors have made in their letter is that if readers disagree with the editor, we are “charging them with ‘promoting false doctrine’”.

That too is not an intellectually honest argument, indeed it is quite a stretch.

Let us not forget! As quoted by one of the editors when defending his opposing view to Hoeksema.

Other problems I have with their charges of sin:

1. The editors charge that “Rev. Langerak is a leader of this group”. While it is true that Rev. Langerak has a personality of leadership, this group does have a leader and neither he, nor any of the other ministers who meet with this group of concerned men, is the leader.
2. It is disingenuous for these men to call the elders to “take action” against our minister, (and necessarily me) while providing the elders with only a small portion of one letter as the basis for their charges from which it is impossible to evaluate and judge the situation and the charges leveled.
3. Because of this manner of validating their position (with these few paragraphs without the pages of validation for these arguments) and all the inflammatory rhetoric, their argument is necessarily misleading.

4. This letter was sent to the RFPA to address. These are problems WE have with OUR magazine that WE want the RFPA to address. We are not charging the editors with sin.
5. The charge of collusion is false. Not only is this not “a secret group of PRC members formed to declare such things about ministers to an organization of more PRC members. The last page of that letter was signed by all 20 men right next to our name which was type written.
6. These editors alone have decided to push our concerns to the level of the RFPA board, in part through their decisions to censor articles from certain ministers. In some cases, demanding changes to articles with the threat of non-publication, and in extreme cases, completely censoring ministers from our denomination.
7. These editors equate disagreement with defamation. This is not the true.
8. If one of the editors follow through with the promise to bring charges of gross sin, I think good order demands that the charges be brought by a person, rather than an “accusation committee” bringing charges of sin to a consistory.
9. It does not seem that the editors are concerned to bring specific charges either. I think they should bring accusations of specific sins that include specific grounds, rather than a “shotgun” approach to accusations of gross sin. As elders, I feel that we can direct and assist members who need guidance, but I do not feel that we need to build a case for the professors if they decide to bring charges against our minister
10. It seems that rather than bringing a case with specific charge(s) and accompanying grounds to the elders, these ministers prefer to cast a wide net of threats of charges in order to silence their targets.
11. I have a problem with the charge of collusion. Specifically, when men talk and meet with each other to share common concerns about the association that publishes the magazine they love, and collectively voice those concerns, are thereby accused of “sowing discord in the churches”
12. I take issue with the false and unproven accusation that Rev. Langerak is remis in his duties included in the form for ordination “to the end that everything may be transacted in good order and decency”. To which they respond “Hardly”.
All of us men, including, and especially the ministers, have taken great pains to ensure that everything that we have done has been done in decency and in good order.
13. The closing statements that these men “pray that you will understand that action must be taken by the elders, whose responsibility it is to oversee the doctrine and walk of life of their pastor. Rev. Langerak should be brought to see that he must separate himself from that group and do whatever he can to counsel those over whom he has considerable influence to cease their divisive activities. If that does not happen, and if the group continues down its current path, what is already known by at least 40 men (and thus arguably, already public) will very soon become known among the entire denomination. **Thus, the actions of your pastor and his group will unarguably become public schism.**

This argument is not at all intellectually honest. This statement is a combination of exaggeration, insufficiently-supported slippery slope fallacy or domino argument (which is an argument that says that doing A will inevitably lead to B where B is agreed to be bad), playing on widely held fears, intimidating opponents, and redefining words.

Summary:

I believe Reverend and I still have valid concerns which have been properly addressed to and should rightly be addressed by the RFPA.

I feel that with this letter the editors are engaging in fearmongering in order to silence the ministers, the other men in this group, and ultimately their consistories

While the editors have had the this letter from us since May of last year, I think what occasions these accusations is an additional letter to the board of the RFPA, sent recently, calling for a meeting of its association members as per the method prescribed in the constitution of the RFPA.

This action too, should come as no surprise to anyone- since it was forewarned in the same letter that the editors used in order to make charges against our minister, as follows:

“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 actions, we are willing to address a letter to the RFPA board in harmony with the constitution’s rule allowing fifteen members to call for a special association meeting to address these matters. We are calling the RFPA board to see these as serious problems and to address them decisively, without delay, and with all due and deliberate speed.”

While it was, and still is, our desire that our concerns be addressed via board action and avoid the public attention, we also have nothing to hide, and are not afraid that what we have written becomes public.

If the RFPA publishes the letter and supporting documents that the group of men has requested they do, this will all be out in the public view. At that time, there is a good chance that the editors will be able to maintain sovereign control over the content of the magazine. If that is the case, so be it.

It is our desire that God guide the members of the association to decide the future of THEIR magazine.

It is my personal desire that the men of the consistory will agree that the charges presented are without merit and pass a resolution of support for our minister in his work, including this work.

Yours in Christ,

Andy Birkett

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