

The PRCA: Our Apostatizing Sister Churches

Dear Session of CERC,

I hereby protest against your letter dated 19 June 2021, in which you state that “the PRCA has not changed its doctrinal position on the unconditional covenant, justification by faith alone, or salvation by grace alone, but that our sister churches continue to maintain the same doctrines they have taught and confessed throughout their history” (p. 7).

2. I further protest against your judgment that “the deposition of Rev Lanning...was lawful and carried out according to the requirements of the Church Order” (p. 9).

3. It is the effort of this letter to prove two things:

a) the heresy of a conditional covenant fellowship has been taught, and continues to be taught, in the PRCA; and

b) church discipline is consistently exercised against those who oppose the doctrine of a conditional covenant fellowship.

4. These two things will attempt to prove that the PRCA have lost the marks of the true church according to Article 29 of our Belgic Confession, which loss necessitates our separation.

A Conditional Covenant Fellowship

5. The PRCA taught, and continues to teach, a conditional covenant fellowship. This doctrine teaches that fellowship with God, or the experience of salvation, is conditioned on man’s obedience. Man must do something in order to experience God’s fellowship in the covenant.

6. Conditional covenant fellowship was first taught in Hope PRC by Rev. David Overway in his sermon on John 14:6:

“The way unto the Father includes obedience.”

“The way of a holy life matters. It is the way unto the Father.”¹

7. The teaching of a conditional covenant fellowship continued to be preached throughout the years of controversy. For example:

“Obedience is required here, obedience that I must perform in order to enjoy fellowship with God.”²

“We do good works so that we can receive God’s grace and Holy Spirit in our consciousness. So that we can consciously and with awareness receive the grace and Holy Spirit of God.”

“We enjoy God’s fellowship, again, only in the way of good works. We abide in His love only in the way of good works.”³

¹ Acts of Synod 2018, p. 73.

² Acts of Synod 2018, p. 64.

³ Acts of Synod 2018. p. 62.

8. In 2017, a classical committee drew up a doctrinal statement that taught a conditional covenant fellowship. This statement was never repudiated for teaching the false doctrine of a conditional covenant fellowship. In this doctrinal statement are the following statements:

“Because the work of sanctification is not complete in this life, God calls His people to holy living in order to live with them in covenant fellowship.”

“Furthermore Scripture and the Confessions also emphasize the necessity of the exercise of faith *in a holy life of obedience* to enjoy the intimacy of the Father’s fellowship.”

“Positively, a sanctified life of obedience unto good works is necessary to experience God’s fellowship because of the holy character of God.”

“One can have fellowship with the holy God only through a sanctifying faith.”⁴

9. Even though the PRCA’s assemblies claim to have rejected these doctrinal errors, the assemblies have failed to identify these errors as that of a conditional covenant fellowship. Their failure to identify this heresy accurately and to condemn it has resulted in the continued teaching of this heresy to this day.

10. After Synod 2018 had supposedly rejected these doctrinal errors, the teaching of a conditional covenant fellowship surfaced again in sermons and articles:

“...He’s not establishing, of course, a condition. There are none. But he is talking about not the condition to establish a union but he is establishing a condition that deals with communion. Not union, that’s grace, it’s all grace, only grace. But communion, fellowship.”⁵

“And that’s why we can also say, beloved, that the more you live a life of conversion, the more that you walk in good works, the more you will experience God’s love and fellowship, the more you will experience the blessing of salvation.”⁶

“In fact, the more faithful the saints are to God’s law in the grace of Jesus Christ, the more they prosper in the great blessings of the covenant. They prosper in their marriages, in their family life, and in their church life. Above all, they prosper in the enjoyment of God’s covenant fellowship.”⁷

11. Teaching that the experience of covenant fellowship depends on that which a man must do, a *Standard Bearer* (SB) editor wrote the following statements in 2018 and 2019:

“...if a man with his household was to be saved and consciously enter into the kingdom, placing himself with his family under the rule of Christ as his Lord and Savior, he was called, he was required, to respond obediently to the call and command of the gospel...”⁸

“If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do...For until a man responds to the truth and call of the gospel by believing it, confessing it, he is not, and cannot be saved.”⁹

⁴ *Doctrinal Statement Re Experiencing Fellowship with the Father*, p. 3-5.

⁵ Sermon preached by Rev. Van Overloop on June 23, 2019, entitled “The Church of Christ at Laodicea.”

⁶ Sermon preached by Rev. Clayton Spronk on September 13, 2020, entitled “Christian Conversion.”

⁷ *Standard Bearer*, October 15, 2020, p. 28.

⁸ *Standard Bearer*, October 1, 2018, p. 8.

⁹ *Standard Bearer*, March 1, 2019, p. 254.

12. Conditional covenant fellowship continued to be taught in SB articles in 2020.¹⁰ Appealing to a 17th century Reformed theologian, Herman Witsius, who taught a conditional covenant (as admitted by the SB editor himself)¹¹, the SB editor wrote that “in light of the controverted issues with which we are dealing in the PRC, we are convinced Witsius’ judicious insights are of value to us.”¹² Quoting Witsius, the SB editor says:

“Scripture teaches that something must be done that we may be saved.”

“Whence it is, that by how much one is more holy, by so much he is the more acceptable to God.”¹³

“Scripture teacheth that man must do something, that he may obtain the possession of the salvation purchased by Christ.”¹⁴

13. Teachings in the PRCA today continue to give good works a place and function that are out of harmony with the Reformed confessions. Synod 2018 had clearly stated that “if we are truly justified by faith in Christ alone, then true faith cannot look to its works to help or maintain the assurance that is found in Christ alone.” “Good works have a proper place and function in the Christian life but they do not function as helps for finding and maintaining assurance of our justification.”¹⁵ “Justification, which includes the experience and assurance of justification in the sinner’s own consciousness, is by faith alone in Christ alone to the exclusion of all good works.”¹⁶ Yet in 2021, a PR professor taught that good works have a place in strengthening our assurance of salvation—another form of conditional covenant fellowship:

“Good works are used by God the Holy Spirit to strengthen the assurance of believers.”

“God has determined that our good works, as the fruits of election and salvation, shall play a role in our assurance. They are mistaken who contend that our good works have nothing to do with our assurance.”¹⁷

14. The reason why conditional covenant fellowship continues to be taught is that it was never properly identified and repudiated as the false doctrine that was being taught in the PRCA. Although the PRCA claim that all the doctrinal errors have been repudiated in her assemblies, the quotes above demonstrate that the doctrine of a conditional covenant fellowship is well and alive in the PRCA today.

15. I request for the Session’s judgments of these specific statements—post-Synod 2018—that continue to be taught and defended in the PRCA today. Are they biblically sound and Reformed statements? Do they harmonize with our belief concerning God’s unconditional covenant? How do these statements harmonize with the doctrinal decisions of Synod 2018?

¹⁰ An analysis of the conditional covenant of Herman Witsius as taught in the *Standard Bearer* is published in the *Sword & Shield*, May 2021, p. 20-23.

¹¹ See the *Standard Bearer*, February 1, 2013, p. 197-199. The SB editor admits that Herman Witsius “went in the direction of a conditional covenant...” (p. 198).

¹² *Standard Bearer*, December 1, 2020, p. 101.

¹³ *Standard Bearer*, December 15, 2020, p. 127.

¹⁴ *Standard Bearer*, January 1, 2021, p. 150.

¹⁵ Acts of Synod, p. 69.

¹⁶ Acts of Synod, p. 71.

¹⁷ *Standard Bearer*, May 15, 2021, p. 376.

16. If it is true that the doctrinal errors had really been rejected by the denomination, where was that repentance seen? After Synod 2018 declared that the sermons of a minister, defended by his consistory and multiple assemblies, had compromised the gospel of Jesus Christ and displaced His perfect work, was the denomination roused to repentance for corrupting God's truth? Was the denomination determined to identify the doctrinal error and to root it out? No; the *Standard Bearer*, taking the lead to respond to Synod 2018's judgment, began telling us that the real problem in the denomination was radicals and antinomians.¹⁸

The Abuse of Church Discipline

17. In close connection with the corruption of the first mark of the true church is the third mark. The third mark of the true church of Jesus Christ is: "church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin" (Belgic Confession Article 29). In the PRCA's controversy, church discipline has not at all been exercised against those who taught or defended false doctrines that compromise the gospel of Jesus Christ. On the contrary, church discipline has been *consistently* exercised against those who rebuke the denomination for her sins and errors.

18. Mr. Neil Meyer suffered abuse by the PRCA for his faithful witness to the truth. For protesting against a sermon that taught conditional covenant fellowship in 2015, Mr. Meyer was accused of lying, heresy, and a multitude of other sins. He was disciplined, deposed, and on the verge of being excommunicated. The Session's letter states that Mr. Meyer was exonerated of this charge in 2016. This is only partially correct. In reality, Hope PRC's consistory continued to keep Mr. Meyer under discipline even after Synod 2016's exoneration. For three more years, Mr. Meyer would be under discipline—barred from Christ's kingdom. It was not until after Synod 2018 that Hope's consistory, left with no justification for keeping Mr. Meyer under discipline, lifted these wicked and false charges against God's servant. Today, Hope PRC continues to vote the same men into special office—the same men who had abused Christian discipline against Mr. Meyer. Then Rev. Overway, having compromised the gospel of Jesus Christ and displaced His perfect work, was judged by Classis East of March 2020 as being "not worthy of discipline."¹⁹

19. Mrs. Connie Meyer suffered reproaches for her faithful testimony. For condemning the heretical sermons that were preached at Hope PRC, she was abused and slandered as a heretic. Classis of February 2018 declared that "by arbitrarily imposing her own heretical meaning on these statements, Mrs. Meyer necessarily condemns as heretical all P.R. ministers and spiritual fathers who have used the exact same language in the same context."²⁰ Synod 2018 would prove that Mrs. Meyer was no heretic, but that her accusers were guilty of teaching and defending false doctrine. Even after Synod 2018 sustained her appeal against Classis of February 2018, Classis of September 2018 would not so much as offer her an apology for slandering her. She was abused and reproached as a troublemaker.

20. Rev. Nathan Langerak, opposing conditional theology in the PRCA's controversy, would suffer the same abuse of Christian discipline. In April 2021, he was suspended from office for insubordination and public schism, which sins were only due to his continued labors in *Sword and Shield* with "a currently deposed minister of the Protestant Reformed Churches which is causing division in our congregation."²¹ For refusing to stop writing for *Sword and*

¹⁸ See *Standard Bearer*, September 15, 2018, p. 485-488.

¹⁹ Summary report supplied by the Stated Clerk of Classis East, Rev. Spronk.

²⁰ *Appeal of Mrs. Connie Meyer to Classis East, January 2018, Reconvening February 28, 2018*, I.,B.

²¹ Letter from Crete PRC to congregation, dated 24 April 2021.

Shield, he was cast out. (While the denomination thinks nothing of cooperating with other Reformed and Presbyterian denominations in inter-denominational projects such as the psalter revision, it suspends its own minister for writing in a magazine with another Reformed minister.)

21. The three examples cited above are illustrative of the consistent pattern of abuse of Christian discipline in the PRCA throughout this controversy. Church discipline is not exercised in punishing of sin, but in punishing of those who oppose a conditional covenant fellowship and rebuke the denomination for her errors.

The Deposition of Rev. Andy Lanning

22. I protest against the Session's judgment that "the deposition of Rev Lanning...was lawful and carried out according to the requirements of the Church Order" (p. 9). In three short paragraphs the Session gives its grounds for judging the deposition to be lawful. These paragraphs merely state that this was a lawful action initiated by Byron Center's consistory, that the action received classical and synodical concurrence, and that we must not interfere too much into matters between Byron Center's consistory and their pastor.

23. A matter as serious as the deposition of our former minister requires more thoughtful and careful judgment.

24. Byron Center consistory's decision to require Rev. Lanning to resign as the editor of *Sword and Shield* was unlawful and deceitful. It was unlawful because in his editorship of *Sword and Shield*, Rev. Lanning was fulfilling his calling as a minister: "that they faithfully explain to their flock the Word of the Lord, revealed by the writings of the prophets and the apostles; and apply the same as well as in general as in particular to the edification of the hearers; instructing, admonishing, comforting, and reproofing, according to every one's need...refuting with the Holy Scriptures all schisms and heresies which are repugnant to the pure doctrine."²² In his editorship, Rev. Lanning was contending for the faith, fulfilling his vow in the Formula of Subscription to be disposed to refute and contradict errors, and to exert himself in keeping the church free from such errors. In demanding that he resign as the editor, Byron Center's consistory grossly violated Rev. Lanning's calling as a minister of the gospel.

25. The consistory's decision to require Rev. Lanning to resign as the editor of *Sword and Shield* can hardly be defended. The consistory indicated that the grounds for requiring Rev. Lanning's resignation was that "the congregation is in a fragile state," and that Rev. Lanning had not "asked permission, been given approval, or sought the advice of his consistory to accept the position of editor."²³ The second ground is deceitful because the consistory knew that Rev. Lanning's work as editor had been going on for some five months, and not once in those five months had they objected to his editorial work. Every pastoral oversight committee meeting approved of his work during those five months, knowing that he was also doing the work of editing *Sword and Shield*. Some five months later in November 2020, the consistory brought up the fact that Rev. Lanning had not asked prior permission from the consistory to be the editor as grounds for its demand of him to resign.

²² Form for Ordination (Installation of Ministers).

²³ See Deposition Case, p. 24.

26. It was never about the *fact* that Rev. Lanning was the editor of *Sword and Shield*. It was always about *what* he was writing in *Sword and Shield*. As soon as *Sword and Shield* was published to explain and to uphold the decisions of Synod 2018, a fierce storm of opposition swelled against Rev. Lanning and the magazine, accusing him of being schismatic and promoting divisions in the denomination.

27. In his sermons on Jer. 23:4 and 14,²⁴ 2 Tim. 4:1-4, and Ecc. 7:2-6, Rev. Lanning rebuked the denomination for tolerating false doctrines—which is exactly what the denomination did by its defense of heretical sermons and subsequent defense of false teachers.²⁵ All three of his sermons only brought one message to Byron Center PRC and the denomination: repent! At the heart of his sermons was the call to repent from false doctrine and the toleration of false doctrine. The denomination’s response to Rev. Lanning’s call to repentance was to call him a schismatic and to cast him out as a troublemaker.

28. Disorderliness ruled the entire proceedings in Rev. Lanning’s deposition.²⁶ Instead of first judging Rev. Lanning’s sermons according to Scripture, Byron Center’s consistory swiftly called in the church visitors for advice. Five church visitors showed up—two of whom had ongoing charges of sin against Rev. Lanning—instead of the usual two. The two church visitors who had charged Rev. Lanning with sin did not recuse themselves from the proceedings. With great swiftness the five church visitors drew up advice to suspend Rev. Lanning from the ministry. Byron Center’s consistory readily agreed with the advice.

29. Article 79 of the PRCA’s Church Order states that Ministers of the Divine Word shall only be suspended by “preceding sentence of the consistory thereof and of the nearest Church.” In the leadup to Rev. Lanning’s deposition, Byron Center’s consistory sought not the sentence of the nearest church, but that of Trinity PRC. The question why Trinity PRC and not the nearest church (or churches) has never been answered by Byron Center’s consistory.

30. Rev. Lanning’s accusers could not agree on the grounds for his suspension and deposition. The church visitors judged that Rev. Lanning’s sermon on Jer. 23:4 and 14 was “in violation of Articles 31, 74 and 75 of the Church Order and the Formula of Subscription and as such is schismatic.”²⁷ Adding another ground, Trinity PRC’s consistory judged that “Rev. Lanning committed the sin of public schism in Byron Center PRC congregation and in the entire denomination by violating Articles 31, 74 and 75 of the Church Order in his public preaching which is contrary to his vows of ordination and the Formula of Subscription.”²⁸ Classis East went further by adding more grounds and ignoring the Formula of Subscription entirely as a ground for his deposition. In its minutes, Classis East declared that “Rev. Lanning’s actions in the sermons he preached and in his subsequent defense of these actions constitutes public schism when he slandered the office-bearers in the churches through his characterizations, accusations, and charges, which is a violation of the 9th commandment.”²⁹

²⁴ A detailed analysis of this sermon is found at https://firstrpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/First_RPC_Jeremiah_23_Sermon_Analysis_compressed.01-1.pdf, with which I am in agreement.

²⁵ A defense of Rev. Lanning’s actions is found in the minority report of Classis East January 2021, found in the “Deposition Case,” p. 8-12, with which I am in agreement.

²⁶ A full account of the proceedings is recorded on Dewey Engelsma’s blog (<https://astraitbetwixtwo.com>).

²⁷ Deposition Case, p. 28.

²⁸ Deposition Case, p. 48.

²⁹ Deposition Case, p. 6.

Further, “Rev. Lanning’s actions in the sermons he preached constitute public schism by insubordination to the authority in the church in violation of the 5th commandment.”³⁰

31. In the history of the controversy that has spanned more than six years, the PRCA took over four years to deal with the controversial preaching of a minister, but it took less than two months to judge that Rev. Lanning’s preaching constituted public schism that warranted deposition. The one who taught heresy was “not worthy of discipline,” but the one who rebuked the denomination for tolerating heresy was swiftly suspended and deposed. How may it then be properly said that Rev. Lanning’s deposition was lawfully carried out according to the requirements of the Church Order?

32. Having examined the facts of the case, I will not participate in this ecclesiastical murder of a faithful prophet. This deposition was cruel, wicked, and unjust. I will not shed innocent blood by declaring this deposition “lawful.”

Conclusion

33. The corruption of the pure doctrine of the gospel, along with a consistent abuse of Christian discipline, continues in the PRCA today. The doctrine of a conditional covenant fellowship, at its heart, may be summarized by the statement: “If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do.” I consider this statement to be heretical and an assault on the gospel of grace. I believe that the gospel teaches that if a man would be saved, there is *nothing* which he must do. God in Christ accomplishes every aspect of our salvation, including working faith in us to believe on Him, fellowshiping with us by His Spirit, and assuring us of our salvation in Him. Man does—lives in good works and obedience—*because* He is saved and *because* he has experienced his salvation in Jesus Christ.

34. In view of the above, I request the Session’s reply to these questions:

- a) Have the doctrinal errors that plagued the PRCA all these years been properly identified and repudiated, so that the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached and maintained in the PRCA? Does the Session recognize that the teaching of a conditional covenant fellowship continues to be taught in the PRCA, and if so, requires repudiation?
- b) Does the Session recognize that church discipline has consistently been abused in the PRCA’s controversy in punishing of God’s faithful servants? Or has church disciplined been properly carried out in punishing of sin?

35. I appeal to you to read all the editorials in *Sword and Shield*, which set forth the great doctrinal division between the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Reformed Protestant Churches. It is *not at all* sufficient to say that because the PRCA’s assemblies have repudiated doctrinal error, all is well in the PRCA, and that they have not departed from their doctrinal positions. The great division must be clear for all to see; the division is between an unconditional covenant and a conditional covenant.

36. I conclude my protest by posing to you the same question posed by Rev. Lanning in *Sword and Shield*: “The doctrinal controversy in the PRC has been whether or not a man’s

³⁰ Deposition Case, p. 7.

obedience to God's law obtains God's covenant fellowship with that man. Is God's covenant fellowship with man essentially conditional, so that a man's obedience to God gains for that man a richer measure of covenant fellowship with God and a fuller experience of that covenant fellowship? Or is God's covenant fellowship with man entirely unconditional, so that a man's measure and experience of God's covenant fellowship with him is entirely a gift of God's grace through faith in Christ and not at all dependent on the measure of that man's obedience to God's law?"³¹

Sincerely,
Aaron Lim
14 August 2021

³¹ *Sword and Shield*, July 2021, p. 7.