

Dear esteemed brethren of the consistory of Grace Protestant Reformed Church,

I am writing you out of love for the church of Jesus Christ, especially as it is manifested in the Protestant Reformed Churches at Grace Protestant Reformed Church. This letter is written to you because you have the oversight over the flock and preaching at Grace church.

I have concerns with two sermons that were preached in the last year on your pulpit. The concerns that I lay out call into question the orthodoxy of those sermons.

Also concerning to me is that Rev. Van Overloop preached both sermons after he preached the sermon on conditions to communion, which sermon was protested to Classis East in January 2021. Classis ruled that Rev. Van Overloop is not persistent in teaching the error of conditions in the covenant of grace.

I discussed these two sermons over the phone with Rev. Van Overloop on January 25, 2021. He mentioned that I was the first one to call him about the sermon "Calling toward Remaining Canaanites." He expressed regret for making the statement in this sermon about the two rails of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.

Rev. Van Overloop had to get ready for catechism classes, so we could not continue our conversation. We had only discussed briefly the sermon I heard preached when I was sitting in the pew at Grace church Sunday night, March 1, 2020 which was the first in this series of sermons.

Since Rev. Van Overloop and I could not finish our telephone conversation regarding these sermons, I decided to put my concerns in writing. I ask you to consider my concerns and take a decision on whether the sermons are orthodox, and that you let me know your decision and the grounds. I stand ready to be corrected and am but a weak servant. If I am wrong on any point, please by all means correct me with scripture and the creeds.

If I misquoted anything in the sermons, I apologize upfront. I made a transcript of them, and if I transcribed wrongly, it was not intentional. I can send you my transcripts if you would like them. Quotations from the sermons are in quotation marks.

The first sermon I bring to your attention was preached on July 12, 2020, and was entitled "The Conquest of Ai." The text of the sermon was Joshua 8:1-29.

This sermon taught that God gave the Israelites the land of Canaan by the use of the means of their obedience. Erroneously, the sermon taught that the promises of God were and are "realized" by means of obeying. Also in the sermon "in the way of" was erroneously taught to mean "in the use of," or means.

"Now, set an ambush. God commands, God assures them of victory, but then at the very same time he commands them, Lay thee an ambush for the city behind it. He's going to give victory, but he is going to give victory in the way of and in the use of their obedience, their faith-induced obedience. Victory is theirs in the way of their obeying God, obeying by faith. Obedience is that which God works within us, but that obedience required on their part diligence and self-denial. Diligence and self-denial."

“No, they all had to work together each one in their own place with their task, required to do their work faithfully. That’s God’s instruction as to how his sovereignty is to be executed. And that’s the way in which the victory, the promised victory, was realized.”

Regarding the “perseverance of the saints,” Rev. Van Overloop taught in this sermon that God uses the means of our obedience.

“God is sovereign. If the five points of Calvinism are summarized in one statement, it’s that. When we profess total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints, they all flow from the sovereignty of God.

But the sovereignty of God uses means. The sovereignty of God uses means. Not as a diversion, but as an explanation, we take the time to read the seventeenth article of the third and fourth heads of the Canons of Dordt: ‘As the almighty operation of God [there’s the sovereignty], whereby he prolongs and supports this our natural life, does not exclude, but requires the use of means.’”

“So God says to the children of Israel, ‘I have given Ai and all of the king and all of this land. Now you—I’m going to use the means of your diligence and self-denial.’”

Rev. Van Overloop used Canons 3–4.17 as an “explanation” to support the erroneous teaching that God uses the means of diligence and self-denial to gain the land. My concern is not that Rev. Van Overloop proclaimed that God uses means. Article 17 clearly states that God uses means. However, the article teaches about the *means of grace*—the sovereign use of the means of the gospel, the sacraments, and discipline as the means to support our new seed of regeneration. God’s use of the means of our obedience to gain promises, as taught in the sermon, is not mentioned in the article nor supported by this article or other of our creeds. The truth that this article explains is that God causes the church in its official offices primarily to preach the word of God and secondarily to administer the sacraments and discipline, thus sustaining our spiritual lives and strengthening our faith by the operation of the Spirit through the use of these means. This article also shows the duty of the believer to persist in using these means of grace by faith, the fruit of which will be obedience. The first part of the article shows that God is sovereign and neither cooperates with the means or cooperates with our use of the means to accomplish “the supernatural operation of God called regeneration which produces and sustains our spiritual life” (Homer Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers*, 563).

Rev. Van Overloop said that the sermon is to be a lesson for us today. As we all know, Israel’s gaining the land of Canaan is an Old Testament picture of gaining heaven and salvation itself.

God did not use Israel’s obedience as the means for gaining the land or for the fulfillment of his promises. He commanded, and by the grace of God the Israelites obeyed. However, the *means* of their gaining Canaan was the gospel and the command, as exemplified by God’s saying to Joshua, “Fear not, neither be dismayed: take all the people of war with thee, and arise, go up to Ai: see, I have given into thy hand the king of Ai, and his people, and his city, and his land” (Jos. 8:1). The Israelites believed that promise. By faith they had that promise and the victory. The fruit of their faith was obedience. Now go forth and fight.

All of our obedience is accomplished by God’s sovereign power and grace through faith. The Israelites gained the land by faith’s resting in the promises of God and not by an obedient faith or by “faith-induced obedience.” Faith is the means/instrument to receive the promise, and obedience is a fruit of

faith as thankfulness and cannot be the *means*. We gain the victory by faith—the instrument—in the promise, the object of faith Jesus Christ, in the way of (conduct or manner of living) thankful obedience. Obedience/works are the fruit of faith as our thankfulness, but those works are not faith. Therefore, obedience/works cannot be the means for salvation, either *in the way to* or *in the way of*. That place is held only by faith clinging to the object of faith Jesus Christ. By faith in Christ, Israel gained the land, in the way of their obedience.

Lastly in this sermon, there was no mention of Christ that I could find. Christ is the reason Israel gained any victory. The covenant was eternally established with Christ as the head and by implication with those who are in Christ by election. A sermon that speaks of the promises of God must speak of Christ, who is *the promise* and to whom all of God's promises in the Old Testament point. Christ *is* in the text in the type of Joshua and in the promise of God that began the text, but there was no preaching of Christ in the whole sermon. The only mention of Christ I could find is in the end of the closing prayer: "Hear us and bless us for Christ's sake. Amen."

The second sermon that I bring to your attention is entitled "Calling Toward Remaining Canaanites."

The primary focus of the sermon was "the responsibilities, the calling, that God gave to Joshua and the children of Israel, really the children of Israel not just Joshua, towards the remaining Canaanites."

Regarding Joshua, "God will not leave him free of the responsibilities to serve God."

"Our responsibility" or "our obedience," as taught in the sermon is our responsibility or obedience to "circumcise the foreskin of your heart" and to love God and keep the commandments.

Rev. Van Overloop quoted Deuteronomy 10:12–16.

"God's sovereignty never removes responsibility because responsibility is determined by God's commandments. What doth God require of thee? Circumcise the foreskin of your heart. And that beloved, is not something you do once and you got-r-done. A physical foreskin being cut off in circumcision—once, it's finished. The calling to circumcise the foreskin of our hearts never stops. How many times every day?"

"Here's your duty, here's your calling, again summarized in verse 12 of Deuteronomy 10: Fear him, walk in all his ways, love him, serve him with all of your heart and soul, keep the commandments of the Lord and his statutes, which I command you this day."

The error in the sermon was not that we have duties in the covenant of grace: loving God and our neighbor, obeying. This is orthodox. The error in the sermon was that it taught that our obedience is the *means* that God uses to bring us into the rest of heaven.

Another error in the sermon was separating God's sovereignty from man's responsibility or obedience. Thus the sermon made the maintenance of the covenant to be man's obedience or man's work apart from God.

The sermon also wrongly equated responsibility and obedience. Man was created as a responsible creature. As fallen and as regenerated, man remains a responsible creature. Responsibility means that man stands as a moral creature, as the conscious and willing subject of all his moral works. In this responsibility man is always hemmed in by God's sovereignty. All men, both as regenerated and as

fallen, stand before God as responsible creatures. Obedience is doing what God requires. Sin is transgression of the law of God. God works in his people both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

In the sermon there were numerous references to “our activity,” “our responsibility,” and “our obedience.” Rev. Van Overloop made activity, responsibility, and obedience all synonymous. Certainly, we are called to gratitude (activity, obedience) for everything God has given us in Jesus Christ, and this gratitude is a gift from God as a *fruit* of faith in Christ’s finished work. Our willing thankful gratitude of obedience even grows by the Spirit’s working in us as we more and more cling to Christ by faith and detest our old man of sin. This sanctification is itself a gift of God and is by faith alone. Faith is the means, or instrument, used by God for all the gifts of salvation (Heidelberg Catechism 7, Q&A 20; Belgic Confession 22; Canons of Dordt 3–4.10, 14.

The sermon taught that our activity is not God’s gift or even caused by God’s gift.

“But now, God’s gift, a divine gift, does not make Israel or us passive recipients. We’re receiving the fulfillments of God’s promises, but his promises and gifts to us don’t make us passive. Our activity that God commands us to perform also...Turn it around: our activity does not deny God’s gifts.”

The meaning of the above quote is further explained in the sermon as “God’s sovereignty, man’s responsibility.” Here God’s sovereignty is explained as “God’s gifts.” “Our activity,” or the fact that we are not passive, is explained as “our responsibility.”

Going on further in the sermon:

“Gods sovereignty, man’s responsibility. Gods gifts and Christ’s merits does not exclude God’s use of means. Does not exclude God’s gift of the use of the means of our obedience. One more time: God’s gifts and Christ’s merits does not exclude God’s sovereign use of the means of our obedience.”

Here God’s sovereignty is explained as “God’s gifts and Christ’s merits.” “Man’s responsibility” is explained as “our obedience,” and it is clearly explained that God uses “our obedience” as *means*. In the sermon, God’s gift is actually explained as the “the use of our obedience” and not the obedience itself: “Does not exclude God’s gift of the use of the means of our obedience.”

What is our obedience used for, according to the sermon? The sermon clearly shows this by quoting from Hebrews 4:11: “Labour...to enter into the rest, lest ye fall in unbelief.”

“So as the inspired word in Hebrews 4:11 says, ‘Labour...to enter into the rest, lest [ye] fall...[in] unbelief.’ Labor to enter into the rest, lest ye fall in unbelief, Hebrews 4 verse 11. And that labor is what we identified in Deuteronomy 10:12: keep his commandments.”

The truth is that faith and the fruits of faith—the want, desire and activity of the believer—are the gifts of God. God’s gift is not God’s sovereign use of our “Labour,” which labor Rev. Van Overloop defined in the sermon by Deuteronomy 10:12: Our obedience to the law, so that we enter into the rest and do not fall in unbelief (Belgic Confession 24; Canons 5.14; 3–4.12, 14, 16–17, and rejection 9). Hebrews 4:11 was erroneously explained to teach that labor by itself is that by which we enter the rest. But when Hebrews 4:11 says, “lest ye fall after the same example of unbelief,” it gives the reason that that generation did not labor to enter the rest, namely, their *unbelief* in God’s promise, on account of which

they could not enter in. Unbelief never enters into God's promised rest. Faith enters into God's promised rest, trusting that what God has promised he is able to perform, and the fruit of that is that believers also labor to enter that rest by fighting, self-denial, and diligence. Our old man always wants to trust in our own works. So in this text we are called by the Holy Spirit here to faith ("labour" in the text) in Christ's finished work.

Later in the sermon:

"God's sovereignty never removes responsibility because responsibility is determined by God's commandments. What doth God require of thee? Circumcise the foreskin of your heart. And that beloved, is not something you do once and you got-r-done. A physical foreskin being cut off in circumcision—once, it's finished. The calling to circumcise the foreskin of our hearts never stops. How many times every day? To deny self, to see how much gratitude I owe for what he has been pleased to do in choosing, in love, his people—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, their seed."

"Today, you and I stand spiritually before a God who has graciously and mercifully chosen us among all the others that he has chosen—not just us—but a remnant, a remnant, according to the election of grace. Of ourselves, that old man (Romans 7) is still so powerful and so ever-present. That's why we need to circumcise the foreskin of our hearts continuously. Nothing good can we produce. What we do that is recognized by God as good is what he has given us to be able to do.

We don't cooperate in our election; we don't cooperate in our redemption; we don't cooperate in our justification.

But that does not mean that as regenerated and justified people we are to be passive. The Christian, as a rational, moral creature, receives commands and responsibilities. He reasons with us; he sets before us right and wrong; and he calls upon us to do that which is right. He gives us the command to fight the good fight of faith; he commands us to use the means of grace; he commands us to resist the devil; he commands us to draw nigh to him; he commands us to adhere to his scriptures, to his word—to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. And it is precisely grace which gives us a correct outlook and say, 'God is working in me, in all of us, so that we want to do the right and not the wrong.' And so when we are enabled to do the right instead of the wrong, we look back and say, "It was through Christ, who strengthened me. Not me. It was through Christ."

Right after this in the sermon, the responsibility (obedience) of man was separated from God's sovereignty. God's sovereignty was set up as one rail, and man's responsibility (obedience) was setup as another rail.

"And yet God commanded; I performed a duty.
Two rails. They go side by side.
In the wisdom of God—his sovereignty, our responsibility.
And it's all grace, and nothing but grace."

First, the obedience of the believer is not a rail that he rides to heaven along with Christ. This according to Christ's own words in John 14:6: "I am the way [to God the Father, to fellowship with God, and to everlasting glory], the truth and the life [and you and your obedience are not the way].

Second, Rev. Van Overloop said obedience is “all grace.” However, grace that enables the works of the believer (by fact of the statement) cannot be *sovereign* grace but must be *some other grace*, for God’s sovereignty sits on the other rail. It is a corrupt grace that is not simply God’s unmerited favor and the power by which he saves his people and works in them all their salvation and all their thankful obedience as fruit of that salvation, but it is a grace that *graciously uses our imperfect obedience as a means to give us our salvation*. This is no grace. And that makes the believer’s salvation dependent on his obedience as a condition.

There is no other grace other than sovereign grace, and obedience is on account of God’s sovereignty, both the willing and doing.

We believe that this true faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Ghost, doth regenerate and make him a new man, causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin...We are beholden to God for the good works we do, and not He to us, since it is he that worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure...Moreover, though we do good works, we do not found our salvation upon them...Thus, then, we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences vexed, if they relied not on the merits of the suffering and death of our Savior. (Belgic Confession 24)

This sermon then taught that even our daily conversion (circumcising the foreskin of our hearts) is our act. According to the sermon, the believer’s act of daily conversion is what God graciously uses as the means to give him the promised rest. This is erroneous.

Our works can never be the means that God uses to bring us into the rest because even our best works are imperfect. Our God is a just God who demands perfect obedience, the obedience of Jesus Christ. Teaching works as the *means* to enter the rest is a corruption of God’s justice. We reject the error of those

who teach that the new covenant of grace, which God the Father, through the mediating of the death of Christ, made with man, does not herein consist that we by faith, inasmuch as it accepts the merits of Christ, are justified before God and saved, but in the fact that God, having revoked the demand of perfect obedience of faith, although imperfect, as the perfect obedience of the law, and does esteem it worthy of the reward of eternal life through grace.

Rejection: For these contradict the Scriptures: Being Justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood (Romans 3:24,25). And these proclaim, as did the wicked Socinus, a new and strange justification of man before God, against the consensus of the whole church. (Canons of Dordt 2, error and rejection 4)

Rev. Van Overloop in these two sermons did not preach the faith of Psalm 44:2–8, according to the Holy Spirit’s explanation of the conquest of Canaan:

How thou didst drive out the heathen with thy hand, and plantedst them; how thou didst afflict the people, and cast them out. ³For they got not the land in possession by their own sword, neither did their own arm save them: but thy right hand, and thine arm, and the light of thy countenance, because thou hadst a favour unto them. ⁴Thou art my King, O God: command deliverances for Jacob. ⁵Through thee will we push down

our enemies: through thy name will we tread them under that rise up against us.⁶For I will not trust in my bow, neither shall my sword save me. ⁷But thou hast saved us from our enemies, and hast put them to shame that hated us.⁸In God we boast all the day long, and praise thy name for ever.

Cordially,
Jeremy Langerak