

“Who Built the Ark?”

by David J. Engelsma

Suddenly, as though the Protestant Reformed Churches did not have labor and controversy enough, without manufacturing an unnecessary conflict, there is, evidently, a burning and basic dispute over the question, “Who built the ark?” Such is the importance of the issue that everyone with a podium or other means of communication thinks it necessary that he deliver himself of a judgment on the issue. Thus, the controversy continues and intensifies.

Now also the present writer. But my motive is different. It is not to argue on behalf of one side or the other, and thus exacerbate the debate. God forbid! It is to put the unnecessary conflict to bed.

The biblical, doctrinal, and creedal—and, therefore, conclusive—answer to the question, “Who built the ark,” is: “Noah built the ark *at the command, and by the enabling and efficacious power, of Jehovah God.*”

This answer is biblically and theologically sound. It ought to be, and is, the end of all the (unsubstantial) controversy.

If there has been a statement to the effect that Noah did not build the ark, but that God built it, the statement, and the theology behind it, are erroneous. The error is not in the second part of the statement, that is, that God built the ark, but in the first part, that is, that Noah did not build the ark. God did build the ark, but He built it by means of Noah—Noah’s obedience and activity. This is the clear, conclusive history of Genesis. This is the authoritative explanation of Hebrews 11:7: “Noah...prepared an ark.” The history in Genesis and the analysis in Hebrews 11 expose as erroneous any and every denial that Noah built the ark. The denial is false. Noah did build the ark.

Hebrews 11 adds something. Noah built the ark “*by faith.*” This “by faith” ascribes the will and all the effort of Noah’s ark-building to God. Faith united Noah to God through Jesus Christ, so that the obedience and effort of Noah in his ark-building were the work of God in and by means of Noah.

The “by faith” of Hebrews 11 ascribes everything of the ark-building to God.

But the “by faith” does not so ascribe the ark-building to God in such a way as to deny that Noah built the ark. It does not even ascribe the ark-building to God in such a way as to minimize the obedience and effort of Noah in the building of the ark. On the contrary, it emphasizes and magnifies Noah’s activity.

This is important in the matter of the building of the ark.

First, it does justice to the history of Genesis and to the clear statement of Hebrews 11 that Noah prepared an ark. Theology does not, and may not, contradict the history of Genesis, or set aside the plain assertion of Hebrews 11, not even in the interests of the Reformed faith’s determination to glorify God in all aspects of salvation.

Second, that God accomplished the building of the ark by means of Noah’s building it glorifies God in the highest. It glorifies God more than it would have glorified God to create an ark out of nothing, calling it into existence by His creative word, as once He called the heavens and the earth into being. He might have done this. He did not because He was glorified more by Noah’s building the ark than He would have been by calling it into existence directly.

Is it not astoundingly glorifying of God and marvelously extolling of His gift of faith that Noah worked on an ark for more than 100 years in a world that had never before seen rain, much less a flood of water, and in the face of constant mockery of him by a wicked world concerning an enterprise that was by all human standards utter folly? And daily overcoming the doubts of his own sinful nature: “What foolishness am I engaged in here, building an ark?”

“By faith” attributes the work and its glory to God, not by setting aside the work of Noah, but exactly by confessing as loudly and clearly as possible the activity of Noah, Noah’s building the ark. Reformed theology glorifies God in the matter of the ark-building, not by denying that Noah built the ark, not even by whispering, as softly as possible, “Yes, Noah built the ark,” but by shouting this as loudly as possible.

Therefore, let the ministers and others in the PRC presently engaged in warfare over the question, “Who built the ark?” cease and desist the internal strife over the question. Let us be busy working together, by faith that renounces our own natural powers and draws on the power of God in Jesus Christ, building a

spiritual ark for our people's salvation—believers and our children—in view of the fire of God that is about to fall upon the wicked world in which we now live.

We want it to be said of us, one day, “By faith, they, being warned of God of things not seen as yet (the coming fire), moved with fear, prepared a shelter in true churches, unified by the gospel of grace which empowers believers to obey and work, to the saving of their houses; by the which they condemned the world, and became heirs of the righteousness which is by faith.”