

Questions and Answers after the Lecture “The Act of Separation”

1. Can the other officebearers, in particular Rev. Lanning and Elder Van Baren, attest to the truth of the events that have been recounted on Elder Engelsma’s blog?

Elder VB: Yes, that question has been asked. That is something we have lived through together, and I attest to what has been written. Much was done that was disturbing and that was often allowed to go in the wrong way. We as fellow consistory members labored very hard to help each other understand and even to see what was right and the right way to go forward. What Dewey has written is true, and it recounts the situation that we were in.

Rev. L: And I can attest to the truth of everything that Elder Engelsma has written as well. I appreciate the way the blog is setting out the facts. It is analyzing the facts, and I can attest that what it is setting out are the facts.

Elder VB: I would like to say too that what is laid out in the blog is not meant to defend us or our actions. It is meant to show only what was done that was not according to the word of God, and it has to be seen as the defense of the name of the Lord, not of the defense of men.

2. Will you speak to the argument that you were deposed for your conduct and emphatically not for your doctrine? (Rev. L: I think Elder Engelsma has something to say to that.)

Elder E: In the first place, that charge will always come that it is not doctrine, but it is conduct. History has shown that to be the case time and time again. In fact, I remember reading about Machen and his separation, and the charge came back that it was his unruly conduct. And I remember the words: his lack of zeal for the unity of the church that caused him the problems in the situation he was in.

But the truth is that the division that took place did not just happen in the last two months. There has been a division in the Protestant Reformed Churches for the last four or five years.

And that division can be witnessed (I’ll speak just as a lay person or as a member of the church) by our reaction when the controversy first arose. We rose up with almost one voice to condemn the appellants and the protestants and to defend the man and the men who were preaching, teaching, and tolerating the false doctrine. That continued unabated for five years. So the Protestant Reformed Churches have been making a choice week after week, month after month.

I think those words probably prick all of us; at least they do me in the choices I made throughout this controversy. We have been making that choice, and we chose to defend a doctrine that displaces Christ, that, according to the twenty-second article of the Belgic Confession, is “too gross a blasphemy.” We chose to defend that, and we chose to condemn the few voices that were brave enough to condemn that lie.

So what has taken place in the last two or three months is really just a coming to fruition and a coming to fulfillment of what has been present in our churches for the last five years.

So for someone to say that it’s not doctrine but behavior is willfully to ignore the history that has taken place. It might be the case that it is just sheer apathy or complacency for many, which is no excuse.

So this is emphatically doctrine, so that the doctrine of a further reformation theologian [Witsius] is what reigns in the editorial pages of the *Standard Bearer*, and those who want to set forth the truth of the gospel have to form their own magazine.

3. You said there were years of fruitless labor with protests. What about Synod 2018? Would that demonstrate that there was hope for another protest for your deposition?

Rev. L: At Classis East in January 2021, synod spoke. There is no need to wait until June in Synod 2021 to find out what synod thinks about deposition. It was not only Classis East that spoke, but the three synodical delegates voted in unison to concur with my deposition.

Second, in answer to that question (and understand that I am loathe to speak of myself, but necessity demands it here, I suppose), my deposition was in effect synod's reversing the decision it made in Synod 2018. In Synod 2018 synod said that the sermons that were brought to it "compromised the gospel." Synod said the sermons "displaced the perfect work of Christ." I took that, and I ran with that. And I dare say that everyone here or everyone who has heard even a little of the controversy has seen that or heard me saying that.

Does it grip us? Do we see how wretched it is to displace the perfect work of Christ? God hates that. He hates it that his Son was displaced and his work was displaced.

When I rebuked the Protestant Reformed Churches for falling into that sin and then continuing by minimizing the seriousness of that error, and demonstrating the minimizing of that error, the churches' response was to cast me out. And by that they cast out that view of Synod 2018.

The question I would have for the Protestant Reformed Churches is, do you believe that the gospel was really compromised? Do you believe that?

If you believe that the gospel was compromised, it has to set you on a certain course. It has to set you on the course of rebuking yourselves, even deposing and disciplining yourselves. It has to set you on that course.

But if you take the other course of throwing out the man who is bringing that rebuke, then you are repudiating your own decision of Synod 2018.

So, no, I do not believe there was hope for a protest at synod, and such a protest was not necessary anyway to know what synod thought. Synod judged through its synodical deputies.

4. By joining the First Reformed Protestant Church (RPC) now would it mean the same thing as signing the Act of Separation?

Elder E: Someone who joined today would not sign the Act of Separation. That document was signed, and it formed the church. Someone who joined First RPC later would not sign that document but would join the way they would join any other church or any other denomination: that is, by requesting their membership papers and bringing those papers to the council of First RPC, where those papers would be accepted.

So the question asks, would it mean the same thing? Someone who joined today may have that same conviction, and probably would have the same conviction, because article 28 of the Belgic Confession says that you do not come out of the true church. So by joining First RPC you are confessing that this is where the truth is most clearly taught. So from that aspect, perhaps, it would be the same; but it would not be signing or resigning the Act of Separation.

5. Is there a proper way that an officebearer can come out of the Protestant Reformed Churches other than by an Act of Separation?

Rev. L: Each officebearer is going to have to weigh that for himself. When God called that man to office, God gave him the charge to feed the sheep and to care for the sheep. And the man made a vow in the Formula of Subscription that he would endeavor to keep the church free from error, free from false doctrine. So a man who is an officebearer and is convicted that he must go out, I believe that he must do that by leading others out with him.

Whether that has to be done in every case by a new Act of Separation—so, for example, an officebearer coming out to form a new congregation—could be debatable, I suppose. But certainly, he would have to give notice and instruction to God’s people why he is coming out and why he is calling them to come out too.

6. There are a few questions that are similar. We feel the call to separate. How can we do this if we live in the West? For those of us who feel the need to separate, or feel that the actions of the Protestant Reformed denomination are wrong, what can we do if we don’t have a pastor? Do we need to wait for certain events to happen elsewhere before separating from our church? How can we come out? Can a group separate without a pastor or leadership of elders and deacons?

Rev. L: The answer is that members of a congregation who feel the need to separate do not have to wait for any specific event to happen. If they are convicted now, today, yesterday, or tomorrow that they in good conscience can no longer remain as members in the Protestant Reformed Churches, then they may come out. And as they come out, a church can be organized. It can be organized because the people of God are the church. And the special offices too arise out of the church.

We would be willing to help in that, by coming to lead a meeting and chair a congregational meeting at which nominations for officebearers are made and a vote is taken and that church is instituted. We are prepared to help in that.

But a congregation or members that are convicted, even without officebearers, that they must come out can do that, and the church can be reinstated.

That happened in many cases in the *Afscheiding* of 1834, so that the fathers of that secession—De Cock, Van Velzen, and others—were very busy organizing congregations.

As far as coming out without a pastor, this can be done too. I do not know how the Lord is going to provide. I don’t know that anyone knows how the Lord is going to provide. But we do know this: he will provide. He always has, and he will continue to provide. His word to his flock is, “Fear not, little flock; it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom,” including giving that kingdom through the preaching of the pure gospel. So I don’t have all the answers to exactly how pastors will be provided, but we may rest assured that God will provide.

7. What about staying to inform others?

Elder E: This is a question I hear. This question is asked with the recognition that there are problems in the Protestant Reformed Churches. This comes from one who was ignorant at first and saw many around them ignorant too.

Reverend Lanning addressed this question to a degree in his speech, so I won't repeat that.

But those who do stay should recognize that the watchmen who were on the walls saw danger, saw the sword coming, and they called the people out. That is in Ezekiel 33:3–4: "If when he seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people; then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet, and taketh not warning; if the sword come, and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head."

If the watchman does not sound the trumpet, the blood will be upon his head (v. 6).

So when you do stay and you do protest and you do appeal, remember that the watchmen who were on the walls considered all of these things. If we felt it was the calling to stay and protest, we would have done that. But there comes a time when the trumpet has to be sounded that the people have to come out. So be very, very careful because what can happen is that you are going to stay for six months to protest, and then your grandchildren are still in that church.

And anecdotally, the morning Elder Van Baren and I were relieved of our duties there was a Christian Reformed man visiting Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church, and he heard the announcement regarding Reverend Lanning. Elder Van Baren and I happened upon him after the service, and we were talking. He warned us. He said, "Be careful. It sounds as though there could be a split coming if officebearers are being relieved of their duties." For this man the most grievous thing he could consider was that a split could be coming. I was thinking that the most grievous thing would be to be a member of the Christian Reformed Church in the year 2021. Perhaps that man had a grandfather or a grandmother who stayed there, and now he is in a denomination that has homosexuals serving in office.

So, like Reverend Lanning said in his speech, "Beware!"

8. Should those in a Protestant Reformed church with faithful preaching, faithful administration of sacraments, and faithful application of church discipline leave their congregation?

Rev. L: Apostasy does not happen in a denomination evenly. It doesn't happen in every sermon the same. It doesn't happen in every congregation the same. Within a denomination there may be stronger, that is sounder, ministers and less sound ministers. There may be more sound consistories and less sound consistories. This means that apostasy may show up in one place faster than it does in others.

It also happens in a denomination that there is a spiritual element, even in an apostatizing denomination. There is a spiritual element that loves the truth and insists on it and probably is busy protesting and doing other work to try and reform the denomination.

But within a single denomination, we remain corporately responsible for each other, so that if there is a man who judges his own local, individual congregation to be sound and faithful according to the marks, that man cannot congratulate himself on his soundness, and he may not assure himself that it will always be this way for him and his church.

The denomination as a whole is responsible, and when there is corruption in a part, or to use the words of Jesus, leaven in a part, that leaven will leaven the whole lump, so that that man is endangering his generations if he is not actively laboring in his denomination for her reform and repentance.

9. What are your thoughts on partaking of the Lord's supper? Is it okay for a believer to abstain from partaking of the Lord's supper if fellow partakers believe that works have a role in fellowship or the covenant, and if the form speaks of being "united...in true brotherly love"?

Rev. L: The Lord's supper is a testimony of unity in the faith and of unity of confession. It is a testimony of the likemindedness in the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ that Paul writes about in Romans 15. Those who sit down together at the Lord's table confess with the same mouth the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In an apostatizing congregation or denomination, if false doctrine is being tolerated, defended, or even explicitly taught, then a believer who rejects those things cannot confess with one mouth with the other members of that denomination and congregation.

This is how the sacraments play in to the marks of the true church. The moment you corrupt the truth, you take away all of the marks of the true church. You don't lose one mark for a while but keep the others. The moment the truth is lost or corrupted, that is the moment you lose all of the marks.

When a member then says, "I cannot partake of communion here because I am not united with you in what you have done with the truth," then it is not that believer's fault that he is not partaking of the Lord's supper. The church itself has corrupted the sacrament by taking it away from that member.

And the same for baptism: if a member cannot say, "I confess the truth as it 'is taught here in this Christian church,'" it is the church's fault for taking the gospel and baptism away from that member.

So you see how the corruption of the truth runs through all the marks, including the sacraments.

Speaking for myself, what I believe ought to be the view, if I were in a congregation that was corrupting the truth and it was shown that the church was committed to that, I would not take the Lord's supper. So that if communion had been offered at Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church in those last months, I would not have partaken (never mind the fact that I was under discipline), but I would not have taken even if I could have.

10. Are we called to be reconciled with each other? As we are called to be reconciled with each other, does Matthew 5:24 apply with First Reformed Protestant Church and the Protestant Reformed Churches? Matthew 5:24 says, "Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."

Elder VB: I think there are certain understandings there that would help us see that, as the Act of Separation lays out, it is the desire of First RPC to be reconciled. But that reconciling has to go along with what Reverend Lanning laid out tonight in the speech as well, that there must be repentance and turning, so that we can speak again with one mind.

11. Is there a way to help people understand the issues if they refuse to read? What is our response to elders who refuse to read or study material? What is our response if the consistory refuses to answer questions about the events in the Protestant Reformed Churches?

Elder E: This is not the first controversy that has shown individuals, officebearers, or otherwise who have refused to read. God's people have died for lack of knowledge in the past. I shouldn't say "God's people," but men and women have died for lack of knowledge in the past, and they will continue to do so.

I think perhaps to ease the conscience of this questioner, it doesn't depend on you. Your calling is to be faithful, not successful. So when you bring these things faithfully to your consistory—the word of God, the creeds—and you bring them to your pastor and try to engage them in discussion, if they will not hear that word, they are hardening their shoulders to that word, then that is not your fault and you should not reproach yourself for that.

Your responsibility is to be faithful, to bring the word of God. When your conscience convicts you because the marks are so clear, then you come out. You come out of that church. And there will be those who are destroyed for lack of knowledge, but that blood will not be on your head.

12. I am still Protestant Reformed and heard that you preached that we would not welcome back those members of First Reformed Protestant Church. Why would you preach that? Everyone I have talked to would welcome them all back.

Rev. L: This question raises the matter of what it would mean for members of First Reformed Protestant Church to go back to the Protestant Reformed Churches. That would require that we would say with the Protestant Reformed Churches, "The word of God is sin. The word of God is schism." That is what the Protestant Reformed Churches have said. That is what my discipline was, and that is what my deposition was. The word of God in Jeremiah 23:4, 14 applied to the Protestant Reformed Churches today is sin.

So if there is anyone in the Protestant Reformed Churches who believes that there is some path to a very easy return, and everybody goes back, and things will be like they were before, that is not the case.

I can assure you that the Protestant Reformed Churches would require that we repent and would require that we say with them, "That sermon was schismatic." And I cannot say that and don't believe anybody in First Reformed Protestant Church can say that. That is blasphemy to call the word of God sin.

As far as the sermon goes that is referenced here, I did preach that the members of the church were pretty well despised everywhere. And if they would try to join a respectable church (respectable in quotation marks), people would say, "What are you doing here? Can't you go to the next church down the road?"

That statement was not made ignorantly or lightly. Those things were said to many of God's people who joined First Reformed Protestant Church. They were said to them when they joined Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church. There were men who were called to judge their membership who said, "I don't want them here." Or men who didn't rise up in holy horror when that statement, "I don't want them here," was made. There were members who approached them and said, "What are you doing here?" The members of First Reformed Protestant Church are no strangers to being slandered, reviled, and falsely spoken of.

I am thankful that the premise behind this question is that not everybody thinks that way in the Protestant Reformed Churches. I am glad to hear that.

But what was said to many of the members is shameful. They have borne reproach. Two of them who began protesting in 2015 and 2016 have borne unbelievable reproach. And they will bear the scars of their reproach to their graves. They do it without complaint. Thank God for that. And thank the Lord Jesus Christ, who says to us, “Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake.”

But behind this question is some misunderstanding about the meaning of my statement and about what it would mean to go back to the Protestant Reformed Churches.

13. Another question along that line: The Act of Separation was not the reason schism was brought up. [I think what is meant here is the charge of schism against me for my preaching.] Do you acknowledge that your charge of schism was due to misapplying scripture by putting yourself in the same light as Jeremiah?

Rev. L: This question brings to light a strange view of the preaching of the gospel that to my knowledge is new in the Protestant Reformed Churches. I have not heard of this view of the preaching of the gospel before. But this view of the preaching of the gospel is that when the minister preaches the word, and even preaches it faithfully, there are parts of the word that are not the word of God. There are parts of the sermon that are not the word of God.

The view is not this: that if the minister speaks false doctrine, that is not the word of God. I subscribe to that. If a minister speaks false doctrine, he has brought man’s word, and man’s word is not the word of God. And there must be rebuke for bringing man’s word.

But the view is this: when the minister applies the word of God and the sound doctrine of the word of God to the congregation, that part of the sermon is not the word of God. And if the minister insists that it is the word of God and the congregation must heed it, then he is proud. Then he is putting himself forward as some inspired prophet who knows the hearts of the people. That is a strange and novel view of preaching in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

If that view were held only by an individual or maybe in one question, I would be inclined to say that it is not a view; it’s just a mistake. But that view was brought up by the fathers of Classis East. The accusation was made on the floor several times that I view myself as inspired, that I think I am a prophet; I think I know the hearts of God’s people. That view also made it into the official decision that classis adopted.

The truth is that the minister is not inspired. I certainly am not inspired.

But God has given every minister an inspired book to preach. And when the minister takes the sound doctrine of the word of God and applies it to the church—including by rebuking the church, including when he says, “O church, there is evidence that you are guilty of this. Repent”—what the minister is preaching there *is* the word of God: not his own word, not the word of man, but the very word of God.

The minister must know that about his preaching. Otherwise, what is he doing on the pulpit? Who cares what he thinks? The church needs to hear what God thinks. The congregation needs to know that the sound word of God faithfully applied is the word of God. That is 2 Timothy 4:2: “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.” Rebuke with doctrine.

So yes, the official, formal charge of schism was leveled against me for my preaching. The word of God was called schism. The word of God faithfully brought was called sin.

But certainly the Act of Separation has been declared schismatic too by many.

14. Should matters in a consistory room be kept private when dealing with a sin? Does it say in the Bible to spread sins?

Elder E: There are probably twenty questions on this. I choose this one deliberately not because I want to speak in defense of myself and my blog, but because the blog is my responsibility. If there is something written there that is in error, is false, then that should be brought to me and shown. The blog is not the responsibility of this council or consistory.

But it has been brought up a lot, and I fear it is an impediment for some. So I would like to answer that briefly.

There is precedence for relaying a history that names names and quotes individuals, even in private meetings or a classis. If you reread the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches by Herman Hoeksema (no, this is not Dewey comparing himself to Hoeksema), he deliberately names names. So that today we know that it was J. de Hoog, W. Hoeksema, and H. Vander Vennen who were the three elders who appeared in his parlor with a protest against him, which wasn't actually written by them. And we know what they were putting forth falsely. Hoeksema names those names deliberately and says that those names needed to be recorded for the history. Hoeksema goes on to name more names: Reverend Vander Mey and Reverend Schans. Hoeksema tells exactly how those men behaved themselves. And he relates conversations that he had with them, even things that were said on the floor of classis. And he points out the utter corruption that went on in those meetings.

I recommend that you read those first two or three chapters. I think that you will find, as I did, that it is chilling what went on at those meetings of classis. He calls it the grossest corruption. He said that even a worldly court would not deal with a man as he was dealt with.

When you consider the history that went on the last two months, it is a sobering, sobering thing to consider that when a church is apostatizing, its assemblies become corrupt; they become political; they become very shrewd. It is hard to find Christ in those assemblies.

There is also the biblical precedent of naming names: "Alexander the coppersmith" (2 Tim. 4:14) and "Hymanaeus and Philetus" (2 Tim. 2:17). These names are named there.

In the past I have used the idea of sounding a trumpet. But after considering that idea more, I think sounding the trumpet is the official work of the church, such as we are doing tonight in the preaching. So my effort in the blog is not blowing a trumpet but banging pots and pans together and just generally making a racket, and trying to get your attention that all is not well. It is not well at all.

Think of a family member running into your bedroom at 2 o'clock in the morning, flicking the light on, and saying, "There is a fire! The house is on fire!" Sure enough, you look, and there is black smoke billowing at the ceiling and coming out from under the doors. You will have one of two reactions when hear the warning and see the smoke. You're going to say, "Yes, there is a fire, and I need to investigate it. And I probably need to get out of the house." Or, you will say, "Turn the light off. Can't you see I'm sleeping?"

So you will have one of two reactions to the blog.

I think of John 3:19–21 also in relationship to these things. "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to

the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.”

In my last blog post, I put one of the first questions that was asked by a delegate to Classis East: why Reverend Lanning doesn't have to pursue the assemblies, or something like that. But that was not the first question asked during the deposition. The first question asked was this: “Mr. Chairman, are we sure they can't hear us from behind the glass?”

15. What are the doctrinal differences between the First Reformed Protestant Church and the Protestant Reformed denomination?

Rev. L: The main doctrinal difference is that the Protestant Reformed Churches have taught, tolerated, and defended conditional fellowship with God. Conditional fellowship is the heart of the doctrinal difference.

First Reformed Protestant Church maintains unconditional fellowship with God.

That doctrine of conditional fellowship with God was brought to light in a sermon on John 14:6, where Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” The sermon taught that our obedience is part of the way to the Father. And the sermon made clear that it was dealing with the *experience* of being with Father, the *experience* of covenant fellowship with God. And part of the way to that experience of fellowship is our *obedience*.

That doctrine of conditional fellowship has given rise to other false doctrines, such as conditional assurance instead of the assurance of faith. It is currently giving rise to corruption of the truth of total depravity. It is also giving rise to the teaching that if a man would be saved, there is that which he must do, so that the salvation and fellowship of God's people is preached to them as man and man's doings.

That is the doctrinal issue: conditional fellowship.

The doctrinal issue does not go by that name in the Protestant Reformed Churches. It goes by this name: fellowship in the way of obedience. That is how you will hear it in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

I do not object to the phrase “in the way of obedience” as Herman Hoeksema taught that. I do not object to that phrase as it has been used in the past by Protestant Reformed ministers, but that phrase has been corrupted. That phrase has been taken over by conditional theology in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

The sermon that taught that our obedience is part of the way to the Father was defended by a consistory—Hope's consistory—by Classis East, and by Synod 2016. In every case the defense of that false statement—our obedience is part of the way to the Father—was done by the phrase “in the way of.” All that the sermon means, these assemblies said, is that we enjoy fellowship “in the way of” our obedience. What the assemblies got wrong was that that was not what the sermon taught—not at all what the sermon taught. The sermon displaced Christ. The sermon made something other than faith the means of obtaining Christ and all his benefits. The sermon taught rank heresy, sheer conditionalism, though it was careful enough never to use the word *condition*.

Conditional fellowship is the doctrinal difference.

That shows up in the preaching. And it shows up in the preaching this way: When some fellowship or some blessing of God is held back from God's people until first their works have

been preached to them. And once their works have been preached to them, they are told, “In the way of’ you will now have this fellowship.” That is false doctrine. That is conditional fellowship. It is conditional covenant at its heart.

Elder VB: I would like to speak to the one accusation that this [our work] was not done in love.

In our work in the consistory at Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church there was love throughout all that was done on our behalf, and I speak for Dewey and myself. The love in the consistory was love for bringing what had to be seen as the truth according to the word of God.

And this Act of Separation that we wrote and signed was done in love.

And I love the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches, speaking for myself, so much that this is what we had to do for the sake of the Protestant Reformed Churches. It is love for the truth that must be first. And we do love our family and friends. As a father loves a child, he will rebuke and call that child to repentance. That has to be seen as love. Otherwise, it is not of God.