

First Reformed Protestant Church

7740 Byron Center Ave Suite 100

Byron Center MI, 49315

April 5, 2021

To: Synod 2021 of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America
Convening June 8, 2021, in Georgetown PRC
c/o Rev. Ron Van Overloop, Stated Clerk
rvanoverloop22@gmail.com

We write to the Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches out of the love that we bear for the churches of your denomination and for the denomination's many members. You are our ecclesiastical mother, and out of love and grief for our mother, we are compelled to warn you regarding your sin of rejecting the Word of God and deposing a faithful servant of the Lord.

We ask that our letter be considered by synod, according to your Rules for Synodical Procedure VI.B.3.f. "The following matters shall be considered by synod: Correspondence received from individuals or bodies outside our denomination." (green plastic book, 90–91).

We also ask that our letter be included in the public copy of the synodical agenda, since the decisions that we address in this letter were distributed publicly by the PRC. We also will be making this letter public.

Our warning concerns the decision of the Protestant Reformed denomination to depose Rev. Andrew Lanning from the office of minister of the Word and sacraments. "That Classis East concur with Byron Center's decision to depose Rev. A. Lanning and advise Byron Center's Consistory to proceed with the deposition of Rev. A. Lanning from the office of the word and sacraments." This advice was adopted by Classis East with the concurrence and advice of the synodical deputies at the January 2021 meeting of Classis East (Minutes of Classis East 1/13/2021, Articles 37, 39).

Classis' charge against Rev. Lanning was that he committed the sin of public schism in his sermons. "Rev. Lanning's actions in the sermons he preached on Jeremiah 23:4, 14; 2 Timothy 4:1-4; and Ecclesiastes 7:2-6 constitute the sin of public schism" (Minutes, Article 37, II. A. of the majority report). "The sin of public schism is listed in Church Order Article 80 as 'among the gross sins which are worthy of being punished with suspension or deposition from office'" (Minutes, Article 38, amendment to add a ground D).

Because this was a decision of the classis and the synodical deputies, it was a decision of the entire denomination, for which all of the churches of the PRC and all of the members of the PRC are responsible. Therefore, we address synod as the body now responsible for Rev. Lanning's deposition.

We maintain that the PRC's deposition of Rev. Lanning was unholy and unjust. By this decision, the PRC rejected the Word of God brought by Rev. Lanning and persecuted a righteous man. Classis explained its charge of public schism in three main grounds, which grounds we address below.

First Ground: Public Charges of Sin

Classis' first ground for deposing Rev. Lanning was that "in these sermons he publicly charges ministers and office-bearers of the PRC with unrepentant sin" (Minutes, Article 37, II.A.1. of the majority report).

But this ground misrepresents Rev. Lanning's sermons. Rev. Lanning's sermons were not a public charge of sin against officebearers, but a public rebuke of the church for her sins. In his sermons, Rev. Lanning exposed the gravity of the denomination's sin of false doctrine. He exposed the denomination's wickedness of minimizing and denying its sin. He called the congregation of Byron Center PRC and the Protestant Reformed denomination as a whole to repentance before God and to faith in Jesus Christ. Classis erred by construing Rev. Lanning's public rebukes against the church as public charges against officebearers. The sermons themselves make clear that they were directed to the church as public rebukes against the church's sins. Here is the introduction to his sermon on Jeremiah 23:4, 14, "Shepherds to Feed You."

Listen to these first words: beloved congregation in our Lord Jesus Christ. That's what this whole word proceeds from: beloved. Beloved congregation in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah prophesied during the last five kings of the southern kingdom of Judah, which represented about the last forty years or so before Judah was taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar and by Babylon. And conditions in Jerusalem especially, but in all of Judah, at that time were so spiritually awful it makes us shake to read about them. So spiritually awful. And we'll get into some of those conditions here this morning. But there was also this about Jerusalem and Judah, that if you looked around, it didn't look so bad. Things looked pretty much okay, because they had all of the formal, outward things that they had always had. Things looked like they always had in Jerusalem. There was a temple; there was worship in the temple; there were priests; there were prophets; there were kings; there were the people and their families who could come and keep the feasts, to bring their sacrifices; they could listen to the priests and hear the priests' instruction; the prophets were going through the land crying out, "Thus saith the Lord; thus said the Lord." That's the way it had always looked, and that's the way it still looked in Jerusalem. The form was there, but the spiritual condition was awful. In fact, if we had taken these prophecies of Jeremiah back in those days and we read this and then we looked around in Jerusalem, we might think, "Well, where is all of that, that Jeremiah is talking about?" And there were people in Jerusalem who said that to him. "Jeremiah, you keep telling us we're going to be judged. Where is it? Where is it? Where is your word that you spoke? We don't see it. We don't see it anywhere." The form was all there, but the spiritual condition was corrupt.

And that makes this word a perfect word for our congregation in these days, because the same, same situation characterizes the Protestant Reformed Churches. The form is there. It looks the same as it always did. We've got churches; we've got consistories; we've got ministers; we've got sermons; our families come to church on Sunday. The form is there, just like it always was in the days of our fathers and our fathers' fathers. But there's something wrong.

There's something so dreadfully wrong in the Protestant Reformed Churches and in Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church. And what's so dreadfully wrong is the same thing that happened in the days of Jeremiah: the word of God was perverted, corrupted, twisted. And there are those who will look around and say, "Where is that? I don't recognize that. I don't see

that. We've got everything we always did. Where is that corruption you're talking about?" But it's there.

That was quite a word to the prophets of Jerusalem, because the prophets of Jerusalem made sure that they looked a lot different than those prophets up north in Samaria, in Israel. And God talks about those prophets too, in Samaria, in verse 13: "I have seen folly in the prophets of Samaria; they prophesied in Baal, and caused my people Israel to err." Things did not look the same as they always had in Israel. Prophets were walking around prophesying in the name of Baal, building altars to Baal. That looked a lot different. But in Jerusalem—in Jerusalem the prophets were walking around wagging their tongues, saying, "He saith! He saith! The word of the Lord! The word of the Lord! Thus saith the Lord." And that was awful of them. Terrible, terrible spiritual condition.

And we this morning must not think that because we don't look like Rome that everything's well. It's not well. The word of God has been perverted! There is one calling for the congregation and the denomination: repent! Repent.

Clearly, the sermon is directed to the congregation and to the denomination. Clearly, the sermon is rebuking the church for her sins. Classis was wrong to construe Rev. Lanning's public rebukes against the church as public charges against officebearers.

When Rev. Lanning exposed the church's sins, explained the gravity of those sins, rebuked her for those sins, and called her to repent of those sins, he was doing exactly what the Lord Jesus Christ called him to do as a minister of the gospel. Scripture requires the minister to rebuke the church for her sins.

God commanded Isaiah, and thus all prophets and ministers: "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins" (Isa. 58:1).

Paul commanded Timothy, and thus all ministers: "I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (II Tim. 4:1-4).

The *Form for the Ordination of Ministers of God's Word* requires the Reformed minister to rebuke the church for her sins.

Consequently, it is evident that the office of pastors and ministers of God's Word is: First. 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 in general as in particular to the edification of the hearers; instructing, admonishing, comforting, and reproof, according to every one's need; preaching repentance towards God and reconciliation with Him through faith in Christ; and refuting with the Holy Scriptures all schisms and heresies which are repugnant to the pure doctrine.

In his sermons, Rev. Lanning proved his accusation against the denomination by quoting from public documents that represent the popular mind and the official position of some Protestant Reformed churches. He quoted from heretical sermons of a minister that classis had failed to deal with in early 2018 and that Synod 2018 had condemned. This quotation was necessary because of the popular notion that there has been no false doctrine in the Protestant Reformed Churches. Rev. Lanning also quoted passages from two *Standard Bearer* articles that minimized the false doctrine and that made threats against those who would call it false doctrine. This quotation was necessary to demonstrate that the popular view in the denomination, as represented by the denomination's unofficial magazine, was that the false doctrine of the sermons was not heresy and that it did not truly contradict the Reformed confessions. Rev. Lanning also quoted from the letters of two consistories to their congregations that denied that there was error in the Protestant Reformed Churches. This quotation was necessary to demonstrate that even officially at the consistory level, Protestant Reformed churches were unable or unwilling to acknowledge the denomination's sin of false doctrine, which failure would prevent the denomination from repenting.

These quotations were not public charges of sin against officebearers but were demonstrations and proofs of the denomination's impenitence. The materials quoted represent either the popular mind of the churches (*Standard Bearer*) or the official position of churches (letters from consistories). By hearing what is in these public documents, the denomination can see and understand its own impenitence.

When Rev. Lanning quoted from these materials in order to prove his rebuke against the denomination, he was doing exactly what the Lord Jesus Christ called him to do as a minister of the gospel. Especially when a congregation and denomination do not believe that they are sinning, the minister's calling is to show them their sin and prove to them the Lord's accusation.

Isaiah was called to "shew my people their transgressions" (Isa. 58:1). The people had to be shown their transgressions because they did not see them. They behaved outwardly as the people of God. "Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God" (Isa. 58:2). Isaiah had to demonstrate the people's sins to them by pointing them to their own public behavior. "Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness" (Isa. 58:3b-4a). So also, when the Protestant Reformed Churches are denying that they have walked in the lies of false doctrine and that they are currently minimizing those lies, the minister's calling from God is to "shew my people their transgressions" from the pulpit.

Timothy was called to "reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (II Tim. 4:2). The doctrine of the Word of God that Timothy was to preach had to be applied to the congregation in reproofs and rebukes. The word "reprove" means to convict someone of their sin by proving their sin. So also, when the Protestant Reformed Churches are denying their sin or minimizing it, the minister's calling from God is to "reprove" them—to prove it to them—so that they are convicted and repent.

When classis construed Rev. Lanning's public rebukes against the church as public charges against officebearers, it built a straw man. When classis proceeded to knock down its straw man as contrary to Scripture, the confessions, and Article 74 of the Church Order, it was not truly dealing with Rev. Lanning's sermons but only with its own straw man. All of classis' subsequent arguments in this first ground only knock down their straw man, but these arguments do not prove that Rev. Lanning was schismatic.

Second Ground: Slander

Classis' second ground for deposing Rev. Lanning was 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" (Minutes, Article 37, II.B. of the majority report).

This ground fails to deal with the actual texts that Rev. Lanning was preaching and expounding. This is so important because the applications in sermons arise out of the texts and arise out of the doctrine of the texts. The minister is called to "reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (II Tim. 4:2). The doctrine itself is the material from which the reproof and rebuke spring. When a minister faithfully expounds the doctrine of the text, that doctrine will demand a certain application to the life of the congregation in its actual circumstances. The question is not whether those who hear the Word feel like the minister is elevating himself or like they are enemies of the minister. The question is whether the applications are faithful to the Word of God.

Everything that Rev. Lanning said came out of the text of God's Word, was in harmony with the text of God's Word, and was demanded by the text of God's Word. When the Word of God is brought faithfully in both doctrine and application, that Word of God is not slanderous or schismatic. This can be demonstrated in each instance that classis mentions.

First, Rev. Lanning's portrayal of the events of Classis East in February 2018 as homosexual fornication comes directly out of the text of Jeremiah 23:14. God accused the prophets of Jerusalem of walking in lies. Their lies were the false teachings that contradicted God's Word and God's will. God said about all of the prophets who walk in lies: "They are all of them unto me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah." By this, God taught the spiritually sleepy inhabitants of Jerusalem how abhorrent false doctrine is to him. By such a startling comparison, God shook them awake from their spiritual slumber. The application of that Word to the Protestant Reformed Churches leaps off the page. The Protestant Reformed Churches committed the gross sin of false doctrine, which is to walk in lies. They taught, defended, and tolerated the devil's lie among them for years. But even after Synod 2018 exposed that error, the churches remain spiritually sleepy. The constant refrain in the churches is that there was no false doctrine and that the churches have always been united in one holy theology. The text of Jeremiah 23:14 shakes the churches awake by teaching them how much God abhors that false theology. When the delegates to Classis East in February 2018, representing all of the churches and all of the members of Classis East, officially excused the devil's theology by refusing to uphold an appeal against that theology, God abhors what the denomination did as much as he abhors the homosexual depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah. This is God's own word about it: "They are all of them unto me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah."

This is further confirmed in Lamentations 4:6: "For the punishment of the iniquity of the daughter of my people is greater than the punishment of the sin of Sodom." Jesus also makes this comparison when he contrasts the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah to that city that will not receive the preaching of God's word: "Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city" (Matt. 10:15).

The point of the comparison was not to judge the men of Classis East as unbelievers. Rather, Rev. Lanning made the point, faithfully from the text, that God abhors false doctrine, and the comparison to the abhorrent sin of sodomy was made to drive that point home to the church.

Rev. Lanning's application of the text has nothing to do with the fact that he is not an inspired prophet like Jeremiah. Rev. Lanning knows the difference between Jeremiah and himself. Rev. Lanning knows that Jeremiah was inspired and that he is not. Rev. Lanning does not imagine that his preaching is done by direct revelation of the Spirit, the way that Jeremiah's preaching and writing was done by direct revelation of the Spirit. Rev. Lanning has never claimed inspiration or direct revelation of the Spirit. However, Rev. Lanning does claim to preach the Word of God. Rev. Lanning does claim, and we with him, that his preaching of the Word of God, in both its doctrine and its application, when it is faithful to the text of God's inspired Word, is indeed the Word of God and not the word of man. "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe" (1 Thess. 2:13). The question is not whether Rev. Lanning receives direct revelation but whether Rev. Lanning's preaching is faithful to the inspired Word of God.

In his sermon, Rev. Lanning was faithful to the doctrine and application of the text that God abhors false doctrine as much as he abhors the sin of sodomy.

Second, the quotation of the *Standard Bearer* article was not a charge against an individual man but a demonstration of the denomination's mindset, as represented by a popular publication within the denomination.

Third, Rev. Lanning's characterization of the church visitors as the counsellors of Egypt was made faithfully from the Word of God in Isaiah 30, as that Word was applied to the actual situation in Byron Center PRC and to the church visitors. In Isaiah 30, God rebukes his people as "rebellious children." The rebellion of God's people was that they "take counsel, but not of me." Instead of seeking counsel from God, they "walk to go down into Egypt, and have not asked at my mouth; to strengthen themselves in the strength of Pharaoh, and to trust in the shadow of Egypt" (1-2). The rebellious children of Israel sought counsel and strength in Egypt, even though God had sent his own Word to Israel through his prophets. When the prophets came to Israel, the people silenced them. "Now go, write it before them in a table, and note it in a book, that it may be for the time to come for ever and ever: That this is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the LORD: Which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophecy deceits: Get you out of the way, turn aside out of the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us" (8-11).

The application of the passage, which Rev. Lanning did not make publicly in his preaching but privately to the elders of Byron Center PRC, leaps off the page. God sent his Word and his prophet to Byron Center PRC in the preaching of Rev. Lanning. Rev. Lanning faithfully labored for three years in Byron Center PRC, preaching repentance toward God and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ. Rev. Lanning did not preach smooth words to Byron Center. He regularly exposed the sins and the errors of the congregation and denomination. By the time he preached on Jeremiah 23:4, 14, he was infamous in the Protestant Reformed denomination for preaching the controversy and for not preaching smooth words.

In the three years of Rev. Lanning's preaching at Byron Center PRC, the consistory had never charged that Word with sin. Even when Rev. Lanning preached a view of the controversy that was unpopular in the denomination, no one could ever accuse him of not bringing the Word of God. Rev. Lanning's preaching had been the counsel of God to Byron Center.

Instead of heeding that Word, the majority of the consistory decided to look elsewhere. Instead of evaluating the sermon in question in the light of God's Word, the consistory turned to the church visitors of classis, who already had told the consistory that the problem in the congregation and in the denomination was not false doctrine, but the problem was Rev. Lanning. When the consistory turned away from the Word of God and turned to the church visitors to judge Rev. Lanning's preaching, they already knew that the church visitors would put a stop to Rev. Lanning's preaching. In turning away from the counsel of God in the preaching of Rev. Lanning, the consistory refused the counsel of God. In turning to men who would bring them contrary counsel, the consistory went down to Egypt. The consistory became rebellious children, and the church visitors indeed brought the counsel of Egypt to stop the mouth of Byron Center's minister.

The point of this comparison is not to judge the salvation of the consistory or the church visitors. Rather, the point is that Byron Center's consistory refused to hear the counsel of the Lord and said to their prophet, "Prophesy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits." The church visitors played the part of the counsellors of Egypt by helping the rebellious children of Byron Center to silence their prophet who had brought to them the Word of the Lord.

For Rev. Lanning to say these things was not slander but was a faithful application of God's Word to the actual condition and situation in the churches.

Fourth, Rev. Lanning's contradiction of the church visitors' advice in his sermon on Ecclesiastes 7:2-6 had nothing to do with the honor or the character of the church visitors themselves. Rev. Lanning's statements in the sermon were strictly about the advice that the church visitors had given. It is not true, as classis stated, that "This rash accusation is aimed at office bearers in the church in order to discredit them as enemies of the cause of Christ" (Minutes, Article 37, II.B.1.d. of the majority report). The statements in the sermon were not aimed at officebearers in the church but were aimed at the advice that was sitting on the consistory's desk. The statements were not made to discredit the men, but were made to discredit the advice as detrimental to the cause of Christ.

The sermon is crystal clear on this. There is nothing in the sermon about the church visitors' character or honor whatsoever. The only thing the sermon dealt with was the advice.

Beloved congregation, we stand at a crossroads. We stand before that calling: go to the house of mourning. Do not go to the house of feasting as a church, as a congregation. Will we go to the house of mourning, or will we go to the house of feasting? The essence of the church visitors' advice to this church is that the rebuke against our sin as a church and as a denomination of displacing the perfect work of Christ is not allowed in this pulpit. That is the essence of this advice.

Furthermore, Rev. Lanning faithfully applied the text that he was preaching to the church visitors' advice. The preacher in Ecclesiastes instructs the church that the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting because "it is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools" (Ecc. 7:5). In the house of mourning, which is the house of worship, God's people hear the rebuke of their wise God. If the people reject that rebuke and demand that it be replaced with the empty song of fools, then they will perish in their empty folly. The church visitors' advice was that Rev. Lanning had sinned in bringing the rebuke of God's Word to the congregation and denomination. The advice was that Rev. Lanning be suspended from the ministry for his rebuke. The effect of that advice would be to

remove that specific rebuke from Byron Center PRC and from the denomination. The effect of that advice would be to bring the denomination to the house of feasting and the song of fools.

Rev. Lanning's exposition of the passage and application proved to be true. The church visitors' advice put Rev. Lanning out and ensured that no Protestant Reformed pulpit may hear a rebuke against the sin of false doctrine committed by the PRC.

For Rev. Lanning to preach these things was not slander but was a faithful application of God's Word to the actual condition and situation in the churches.

Fifth, classis appeals to the minutes of the assemblies of the PRC as proof that the denomination is not walking in lies and is not minimizing and excusing the lie. Rev. Lanning's sermons demonstrated that walking in lies can happen in many places in a denomination, including sermons, letters from consistories, and a denomination's unofficial magazine. Whether a lie can be found in the minutes of the assemblies is beside the point.

In summary, classis' charge of slander against Rev. Lanning cannot stand. Rev. Lanning faithfully brought the Word of God in its exposition and application, which can never be slander. Rather than charging the Word of God with sin, the denomination should have humbled itself under the reproofs and rebukes of that Word.

Third Ground: Insubordination

Classis' third ground for deposing Rev. Lanning was that "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" (Minutes, Article 37, II.C. of the majority report).

But this ground misrepresents Rev. Lanning's sermons. Rev. Lanning did not preach in opposition to the authority in the church, but he was careful and deliberate to honor that authority, even as he warned and rebuked the denomination for its sin. This can be demonstrated in each example used by classis.

First, Rev. Lanning did not contradict the decisions of Classis East at its September 2018 meeting. We marvel at this charge against Rev. Lanning's preaching. Rev. Lanning's sermons called the denomination to live up to the decisions of Classis East September 2018 and warned the churches about the danger of contradicting the decisions of Classis East September 2018. Though Rev. Lanning did not mention Classis East September 2018 by name, his sermons took hold of the doctrine of that classis and pressed it home to the churches. How could classis then charge Rev. Lanning with insubordination to Classis East September 2018 and depose him for it?!

Classis' error is that it continues to misconstrue Rev. Lanning's preaching as public charges of sin against officebearers. "In his sermon on Jeremiah 23, Rev. Lanning charges that the office-bearers of Classis East remain guilty for the wrong decisions they made and must repent; that they continue to walk in lies, twist, pervert, and corrupt the truth, commit spiritual fornication, and strengthen the hand of the evildoer" (Minutes, Article 37, II.C.1.a. of the majority report).

As shown above, Rev. Lanning's sermons were not public charges of sin against officebearers but public rebukes of the church. As part of those public rebukes, Rev. Lanning demonstrated—for the sake of those who still did not know about that sin—that the sin of false doctrine had actually been committed. Rev. Lanning instructed—for the sake of those who were indifferent to that sin—how evil the sin of false

doctrine is in the eyes of God. And Rev. Lanning called the denomination to repentance for her sin—for the sake of the recovery of the entire denomination.

In doing all of this, Rev. Lanning was preaching exactly in harmony with Classis East September 2018. That classis, after a tremendous struggle to the contrary, had finally agreed with Synod 2018's declaration that there had been doctrinal error that gave to man's works a place and function out of harmony with the confessions. Rev. Lanning's pointing out the dreadful evil of the decisions of Classis East February 2018 does not militate against Classis September 2018. Rather, it lives up to Classis September 2018. It says the same thing as Classis September 2018. It is good that Classis September 2018 declared the decisions of February 2018 to be in error. How is it now schismatic for Rev. Lanning also to say that February 2018 was in error? It is exactly in harmony with September 2018 for Rev. Lanning to instruct the congregation in the error of what happened in February 2018 and to show the perverse wickedness of the lie.

Second, Rev. Lanning did not express "public disagreement with the decision of his consistory to the congregation and denomination through the pulpit, thus showing insubordination to his overseers, the elders." Rev. Lanning's sermon was not "a public expression of his disagreement with the Nov. 1, 2020 [sic] decision of his consistory that required him to resign as editor-in-chief of the *Sword and Shield*, and about which decision the congregation had just been informed."

Rev. Lanning has acknowledged that the decision of the consistory was an occasion for the sermon on Jeremiah 23. However, Rev. Lanning was careful and deliberate in the sermon not to mention the decision of the consistory. Nowhere in the sermon does Rev. Lanning criticize or repudiate the decision of his consistory. The sermon is simply not about being an editor of a magazine. Rather, the sermon is about the controversy as a whole in the PRC.

At the time that Rev. Lanning preached the sermon, he was privately working on a protest against the consistory's decision requiring him to resign as editor of *Sword and Shield*. It is in that private protest, following the way of Church Order Article 31, that Rev. Lanning privately opposed the consistory's decision and asked them to rescind the decision. But all of that private opposition he deliberately kept out of the sermon on Jeremiah 23, as is evident from the actual content of the sermon.

The charge has repeatedly been made against Rev. Lanning that his sermon on Jeremiah 23 was militancy against Byron Center's requirement that he resign as editor. This charge alone seems to be a stumbling block for many. So let everyone ask themselves what that sermon on Jeremiah 23 was actually about. Was it about being an editor? Search the sermon front to back, and one will find nothing in it about being an editor or not being an editor. Rather, the sermon was about the controversy as a whole. Search the sermon front to back, and one will find that the whole sermon was about the controversy and nothing more. The sermon on Jeremiah 23 was not about the meaningless, indifferent matter of editing a magazine. Rather, the sermon on Jeremiah 23 was about the all-important, denomination-consuming matter of false doctrine in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Third, Rev. Lanning did in fact express "publicly his disagreement and condemned the advice of the church visitors, and urged both his consistory and church to reject it before it was decided upon." And Rev. Lanning did in fact make "public in that sermon what had not yet been decided." Classis is correct that "the only explanation can be an attempt to sway the consistory and set the congregation against the advice the church visitors gave to the consistory."

However, this was not insubordination on the part of Rev. Lanning. The church visitors' advice was not the settled and binding decision of an ecclesiastical assembly. It was merely advice, and advice without the "teeth" of an assembly. Neither had the consistory of Byron Center yet voted on it, for the advice had yet to be considered by the consistory. It is the right and the duty of the pulpit to cry a warning even regarding private dangers that will scatter the flock of Christ. When a watchman is placed on the walls by being put into office, Christ gives him a position to see things that others might not see. For example, he can see the private advice of the counsellors of Egypt that will destroy the congregation. When he sees these things, he must cry the alarm, lest the citizens of the city perish. "Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me" (Ezek. 3:17).

Rev. Lanning's warning against the church visitors' advice appears to be a stumbling block for many. They have a hard time seeing how it is right for a minister to bring to the pulpit a private matter from the consistory room. Let all who stumble at this look through the sermon from front to back to see what settled and binding decision Rev. Lanning contradicted. One will not find anywhere such a contradiction. Rev. Lanning was careful and deliberate not to criticize a settled and binding decision. And then let all who stumble at this imagine what a minister should do if the church visitors had brought advice to approve divorce and remarriage, for example. Would the congregation really want the minister to wait and see whether the consistory would adopt the advice, and only then have the minister silently protest once it was adopted? Rather, the minister's calling is to cry out as a watchman on the walls to the consistory and to the congregation that danger threatens. So also when Rev. Lanning saw the danger of the rebukes of the Word being silenced by the church visitors' advice, he cried out with the deliberate purpose of instructing both consistory and congregation in the right way.

In summary, in all of Rev. Lanning's preaching, he was careful and deliberate to honor the authority in the church, even as he cried out the warning of God's Word against the sin of the congregation and denomination.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we warn you as our ecclesiastical mother that Rev. Lanning is not guilty of the sin of public schism. He has been faithful in his calling from Christ to the Protestant Reformed Churches to bring the Word of God. In casting out Rev. Lanning, you have brought innocent blood upon your heads. The words that Jeremiah spoke to the princes and people of Israel in Jeremiah 26 hold true for you.

7. So the priests and the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speaking these words in the house of the LORD.

8. Now it came to pass, when Jeremiah had made an end of speaking all that the LORD had commanded him to speak unto all the people, that the priests and the prophets and all the people took him, saying, Thou shalt surely die.

9. Why hast thou prophesied in the name of the LORD, saying, This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate without an inhabitant? And all the people were gathered against Jeremiah in the house of the LORD.

10. When the princes of Judah heard these things, then they came up from the king's house unto the house of the LORD, and sat down in the entry of the new gate of the LORD's house.

11. Then spake the priests and the prophets unto the princes and to all the people, saying, This man is worthy to die; for he hath prophesied against this city, as ye have heard with your ears.

12. Then spake Jeremiah unto all the princes and to all the people, saying, The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and against this city all the words that ye have heard.

13. Therefore now amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the LORD your God; and the LORD will repent him of the evil that he hath pronounced against you.

14. As for me, behold, I am in your hand: do with me as seemeth good and meet unto you.

15. But know ye for certain, that if ye put me to death, ye shall surely bring innocent blood upon yourselves, and upon this city, and upon the inhabitants thereof: for of a truth the LORD hath sent me unto you to speak all these words in your ears.

We warn you that, having put a righteous man to death ecclesiastically through deposition, you have brought innocent blood upon yourselves, upon your denomination, and upon the inhabitants thereof; for of a truth the LORD hath sent Rev. Lanning unto you to speak all the words that he did in your ears.

Dear mother, repent.

In Christ's service,
The council of First Reformed Protestant Church

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dewey Engelsma". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Elder Dewey Engelsma, Clerk