

**The Church Today  
And  
The Reformation Church:  
A Comparison**

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A Protestant Manifesto

## **Preface**

It is the commendable practice of the Protestant Reformed Church of South Holland, Illinois, to commemorate, annually, Christ's Reformation of His Church in the 16th century, by a fitting speech around the end of October, the time of Martin Luther's standing up to contend for the gospel of grace by publishing the 95 Theses. With all sound-minded Protestants, we look back to the Reformation as Christ's deliverance of us and our children from the worst slavery of all — the spiritual slavery of heresy, and as the source, in history, of the most precious freedom of all — the spiritual freedom of the truth of the gospel.

This pamphlet was originally such a Reformation Day address, given in 1972, and published in pamphlet form soon thereafter. Now that a second printing is needed, the original pamphlet has been significantly corrected, up-dated, and revised. This revision — virtually a new pamphlet — is now offered to the interested public.

These are dark days for Protestantism. One who loves the Zion that God restored at the Reformation weeps over her faithlessness, her shame, her poverty, her misery at the end of the 20th century. He is reminded of the prophet's lament, "How is the gold become dim!" (Lamentations 4:1), and of the apostle's exclamation, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from Him that called you into the grace of Christ . . ." (Galatians 1:6).

But they are not hopeless days! For "the Son of God, from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves . . . a Church chosen to everlasting life . . ." (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 54). In this confidence, we resolutely and joyfully carry on the work of the Reformation, "earnestly contend(ing) for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3).

The Evangelism Committee

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by Prof. David J. Engelsma

**Introduction**

Comparing the Protestant Church of the Reformation and the Protestant Church at the end of the 20th century may not remain a merely academic exercise. The subject confronts every professing Protestant with the calling to determine whether his church is faithful to her origins. If she is not, he must exert himself on behalf of her reformation. Failing in this, because of his church's obduracy, he must join himself to a church that is faithful to the principles of Protestantism, and thus to the Lord Christ.

As one of the creeds of the Reformation puts it, "it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God . . . to join themselves to this congregation, wheresoever God hath established it." All those who do not, "act contrary to the ordinance of God." This involves separating themselves from a church that "ascribes more power and authority to herself and her ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit herself to the yoke of Christ" (Belgic Confession, Articles 28, 29). For some, a comparison of the Church of the Reformation and the Church today may be a painful experience, leading to radical action.

As we make the comparison, it will help to keep several things in mind. First, we are comparing what we might call "the Protestant church-world" at the end of the 20th century with the Church produced by the Reformation of the 16th century. Even though this Church soon divided into two Churches, the Lutheran and the Reformed, there was a fundamental unity of early Protestantism, so that we may speak of a "Reformation Church."

Second, it is assumed that the Church of the Reformation was the Church of Jesus Christ, the one, holy, catholic Church, as established in the world by God. She proved this by adhering to the Word of God. She was not faultless. She had not yet fully matured in Christ. But she was the true Church of Christ, “fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners” (Song of Solomon 6:10). She can, and should, be the standard by which Protestantism today is measured.

Third, a comparison such as this runs the risk of an unfair generalizing. What an enormous entity is “Protestantism today”! What a bewildering array of denominations! What a baffling diversity! One danger in particular must be guarded against — the “Elijah-error.” In an idolatrous age, amidst an apostate Israel, the prophet despaired of God’s Church, supposing himself to be the sole survivor of the people who worshipped God in spirit and in truth: “I, even I only, am left” (I Kings 19:14). Jehovah disabused Elijah of this notion: “I have left Me seven thousand in Israel . . .” (v. 18). The condemnation of modern Protestantism, vehement though it may be, must recognize that God preserves His (Protestant) Church today and that, even within denominations that are falling away from the Word of God, there yet are faithful individuals, faithful pastors and elders, and even faithful congregations.

Fourth, our criticism of Protestantism as it appears in the churches today is not an exercise in mere party-strife; nor is it attributable to a narrow, partisan spirit. We love Christ’s Church. We love her in her Old Testament immaturity; in her New Testament maturity; in her loveliness in the age immediately following the apostles — the loveliness of doctrinal fidelity, of martyrdom, and of charity; in her agony in the Middle Ages, when the Devil and wicked men seduced her to become a whore; in her Reformation purity and beauty; and in her every manifestation today. It is love for the Church, chosen and precious, that compels us to the comparison so

damning to Protestant churches today.

### **By What Standard?**

The spiritual condition of Protestantism today is wretched. One cannot see in her that she is the daughter of the Church of the Reformation. Protestantism now very much resembles the pre-Reformation Church. Its misery is compounded by the fact that, like the Laodicean Church of Revelation 3, it supposes that it is "rich, and increased with goods, and (has) need of nothing." The evil of Protestant churches today is that they preach and believe another gospel than did the Reformation Church. The Protestant churches are weighed and found wanting, above all, in respect to their gospel, their doctrine. This is fatal, for a church's gospel is the essential thing. It is the gospel that makes a church the true Church of Jesus Christ. In his work, "Concerning the Ministry," Martin Luther wrote:

The public ministry of the Word, I hold, by which the mysteries of God are made known (is) the highest and greatest of the functions of the Church, on which the whole power of the Church depends, since the Church is nothing without the Word and everything in it exists by virtue of the Word alone.

By this criterion, the best that can be said of Protestantism today is that it is nothing.

The Reformation was the restoration of the pure preaching of the gospel. That tremendous Church-reforming and world-shaking event was *doctrinal*. It was the purpose of the Reformers, as it was the purpose of the Holy Spirit, to do away with another gospel (that is no gospel) and to restore the gospel of God revealed in the Scriptures. Although there were abominable practices in the pre-Reformation Church, they were not the cause of the Reformation. The cause of the Reformation was not the papacy, unbiblical and tyrannical as that institution is. Luther said more than once that he would have lived with the pope, if only the pope preached the gospel.

Neither was the cause of the Reformation the outrageous immorality of the Church's leaders, from the greedy, whore-mongering, humanistic, political popes and cardinals to the lowly priest living in concubinage. In his "Reply to the Letter of Cardinal Sadolet," John Calvin explained why the Reformation occurred:

(There are) many examples of cruelty, avarice, intemperance, arrogance, insolence, lust, and all sorts of wickedness, which are openly manifested by men of your order, but none of these things would have driven us to the attempt which we made under a much stronger necessity.

What was that "much stronger necessity"? Calvin continued:

That necessity was, that the light of divine truth had been extinguished, the Word of God buried . . .

Already at the outset, in 1517, in his 95 Theses, Luther indicated what the Reformation aimed at, when he wrote, as the 62nd thesis:

The true treasure of the Church is the holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.

### **The Reformation - Gospel**

We must, therefore, briefly note what that "holy gospel" was, in contrast with the "other gospel" that was destroying the Church. The gospel restored by the Reformation is the good news of salvation by grace alone, to the glory of God alone. This gospel, encapsulated in the epistle to the Romans, proclaims that the misery of every man is that he is a sinner, totally depraved and exposed to the wrath of the offended God (Rom. 3:9ff.). Man's misery is not the various earthly ills that always plague mankind — poverty, oppression, war, sickness, and death, as a natural calamity, but his sin, especially his guilt before the judgment of a just God. His great need is the forgiveness of his sins and a righteousness that will stand up in the judgment of God. This forgiveness and righteousness is in Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:3,4). It becomes ours through faith in

Jesus. When we believe on Him, God reckons Jesus' righteousness to our account. Our righteousness before God is nothing that we have done, or what we are, but only what Jesus has done for us and what He is on our behalf. Christ's people are justified by faith alone (Rom. 3:20ff.). This justifying faith is not the basis of God's forgiving the sinner; it is not a work of the sinner to earn righteousness; it is not the one condition that man must fulfill, in order to be saved. But it is the means by which God imputes Christ's righteousness to the guilty sinner and the instrument by which he embraces Christ, his righteousness. In fact, faith itself is God's gracious gift to the man who has it: "... faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

This passage points out the vital role that the preaching has in God's great work of justifying His people. It is by means of preaching that the Holy Spirit works in men the faith that knows and trusts in Jesus Christ, the Savior, including the repentance that renders them needy. Also, it is in the preaching that God presents Jesus Christ to men, as the Object of faith (Rom. 1:1ff.). Then, it is through the preaching of the gospel that God utters the divine verdict in the consciousness of the believer, to acquit him: "... I am ready to preach the gospel... for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth... for therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:15-17). It was not one of the least charges of the Reformation against the pre-Reformation Church, that it did not preach. That Church did many things — built cathedrals, went on pilgrimages, plunged into politics, and fascinated the people with pageant and liturgy; but it did not preach.

If the means of the forgiveness that is the heart of the gospel is preaching, the one and only basis of forgiveness is the satisfaction and atonement of Jesus Christ. In His life-long passion, but especially by His death on the cross, Jesus paid in full for the sins of His people, and fulfilled all righteousness. The Reformation proclaimed the cross of Christ as redemption

from sin — effectual, substitutionary, bloody, sin-covering redemption (Rom. 3:24ff.). Just as it declared Jesus to be the eternal Son of God (Rom. 1:4), so the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead proved the cross to have been the effectual acquiring of righteousness for those sinners for whom Jesus was delivered: “(He) was raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4:25).

The source and foundation of this salvation is God’s eternal, gracious election (Rom. 9-11). In Christ, God has chosen unto salvation a people from all the nations — His Church. The grace of this election is peculiarly illustrated by the fact that God did not choose all men, but reprobated some, according to His own good pleasure. Salvation is wholly and exclusively gracious.

The life of the man who believes this gospel will be a life of freedom — freedom to serve God and his neighbor, in thankfulness, (Rom. 12-15).

### **Rome’s “Gospel”**

In contrast to the gospel stood the “other gospel” of Rome. That was the teaching that the sinner must save himself by his own works. The gross form of this teaching, against which Luther went to war in 1517, in the 95 Theses, was indulgences: selling the pardon of sins for money. But the root error was Rome’s official doctrine that men could, and must, earn righteousness with God by their own good works. A man’s righteousness with God consisted partly of the work of Christ and partly of his own work. Justification was by faith and works. What made it possible for a sinner to earn, or merit, salvation, according to Rome, was his possession of a “free will.” Though fallen, mankind is not totally depraved; all men retain the ability to choose God and the good, and to cooperate with grace, when grace is offered in the Sacraments and in the Word. If a sinner will only exercise his “free will” properly, God will bestow grace upon him. By virtue of his own will and by virtue of grace bestowed, the man performs

good works. On the basis of these works, as well as on the basis of Christ's work, God forgives the sinner's transgressions and pays him the salvation he has partially earned. "Free will" was fundamental for that "other gospel." Upon it, all of salvation depended. Even God's election of men to salvation in eternity (which the pre-Reformation Church taught!) was due to God's foreseeing who among men would believe and who would not believe.

The life of the man who believed this "gospel" was bondage — the bondage of the fear that he had not done enough to placate God, and the bondage of a service of God (often exacting, arduous service) from the motive of a slave.

This doctrine, this "gospel," the Reformation condemned as "another gospel," in terms of Galatians 1:6-9: "If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed." It was not merely a faulty presentation of the gospel; but it was heresy — Christ-denying, God-dishonoring, Church-destroying, comfort-robbing heresy. Galatians 5:2 proves the Reformation to have been right in this indictment: "Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing," that is, "If you add any work of man to Christ as part of your righteousness and as the basis of salvation, you destroy the gospel altogether, and whoever trusts in that work, in addition to Christ, will be eternally damned."

### **The Condition of Protestantism**

Now how does the Protestant Church today compare with the Reformation Church, as regards the gospel? This is a proper question, because the gospel of grace restored by the Reformation is unchanging truth, the good news for every age. It is a particularly foolish and arrogant notion of some today that we "modern men" need a new gospel. But this is the same as to insist on, and create, a new christ and a new salvation. So the question is in order: Where does Protestantism stand with regard to the gospel proclaimed by the Reformation Church?

The Roman Catholic Church today is the same as it was in the days of the Reformation. On the essential matter of the gospel, Rome has not changed; nor does she claim to have changed. The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, which condemn total depravity, denial of free will, justification by faith alone, the doctrine of a once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, and predestination; which damn those who teach and believe these truths; and which even bless the practice of indulgences, stand to this day as the official creed of Rome. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) explicitly reaffirmed every Roman doctrine contested by the Reformation. One of Rome's own, the priest and author, Malachi Martin, gives the lie to the popular, Protestant pipedream that the Roman Catholic Ecumenical Council, Vatican II, effected basic changes in the Roman Catholic Church. In his book, *The Jesuits*, published in 1987, Martin writes:

. . . the intent, the effort, and the message of Vatican II were simple. They formed an attempt on the part of the Roman Catholic Church to present its age-old doctrine and moral outlook in a new way that would be intelligible to the minds of modern men and women. The Church changed no doctrine. It changed no part of its hierarchically structured bishops and Pope. It abandoned not one of its perennial moral laws. It affirmed all. (p. 477)

Rome is a false Church, proclaiming another gospel.

But what about Protestantism, heir of the Reformation?

Very early in its history, the Lutheran Church strayed from the truth and became a bitter foe of the Reformed Church over the doctrine of salvation by sovereign grace — the very doctrine that was the central message of the Reformation and that Luther so vigorously defended in *The Bondage of the Will*. Soon after Luther's death, Philip Melanchthon, the leading Lutheran theologian, taught, in his popular work on theology, the *Loci Communes*, that the conversion of the sinner is accomplished by three co-operating factors — the

Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and the free will of man. In their confession, The Formula of Concord (1576), the Lutheran Church paid lip-service to the doctrine of election, which testimony, weak to begin with, it promptly corrupted by an explicit affirmation of a universal will of God for the salvation of sinners and by an explicit denial of reprobation. She also launched a furious attack upon the Reformed doctrine of predestination, caricaturing it just as Rome has always done and slandering it as “false, horrid, and blasphemous,” depriving godly minds of “all consolation.”

Today, much of Lutheranism shares in the advanced apostasy of Protestantism generally, denying such cardinal doctrines as the infallible inspiration of Scripture, creation, and the Virgin Birth of Jesus. In 1963, international Lutheranism assembled in Finland, to formulate a statement on the crucial truth of justification. The conference failed, because the Lutheran Churches were unable to agree on the doctrine that Luther called “the article of a standing or falling church.” Luther’s fear that the Church would not be able to maintain the truth that is the cornerstone of the gospel has been realized in much of the Church that bears his name. In light of these developments, it is not surprising that Lutheran Churches are presently engaged in ecumenical discussion with Rome and that both the secular and the religious press report that agreement has been reached on all main doctrines, including that of the Sacraments, and that only the issue of the papacy remains to be resolved.

The Anglican Church ordains a bishop, the Bishop of Durham, who publicly denies the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ, and thus His Deity, and who ridicules the bodily resurrection of the Lord as a “conjuring trick with bones.” Antichrist sits in that temple of God, opposing and exalting himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped (II Thess. 2:4).

As for the largest, “mainline” Protestant Churches in the United States, their apostasy from the faith once delivered to the saints is appalling. They have abandoned the gospel

entirely. Man's misery is no longer sin, but poverty and physical oppression. The enemy is no longer the Devil of hell, but the capitalism of the West (never the Communism of the Soviet Union), the government of South Africa, and the chauvinism of the male. Redemption is no longer by the blood of Jesus, but by social action, including violent, revolutionary action that sheds the blood of all "oppressors." The people of God are no longer the poor in spirit, but the materially and politically poor. Salvation is no longer peace with God, but earthly peace.

Miserable examples are the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the United Church of Christ.

The Presbyterian Church, spiritual heir of John Knox, the Westminster Assembly, the Hodges, and Thornwell, has officially shelved the Westminster Confession of Faith and replaced it with the humanistic Confession of 1967. Nothing more needs to be said.

The United Church of Christ, recent amalgam of the Congregational Church (descendant of the Puritans and Pilgrims) and of the Evangelical and Reformed Churches, is bold to advertise its defection from the Reformation. In 1966, one of its leading theologians, Douglas Horton, wrote a booklet, "The United Church of Christ," in which he explained his denomination to the world:

. . . the bond which joins United Churchmen to (Roman) Catholics is of the essence, and the differences between them are largely accidental.

Again:

Often in the course of history theological issues which at one time divided the Church have faded eventually into nothingness or even become transformed into bonds of agreement. The doctrine of justification by faith was crucial to Protestants in the 16th century, for example, as was also the authority of the Bible. Yet, since today many Catholics and Protestant theologians see eye to eye on these matters, so, it is felt by United Churchmen,

tomorrow may show us that the differences which rule in theological thought today are on the whole, secondary, and susceptible of being resolved.

With reference to the Reformation:

. . . many of the great divisions in Christendom were the result not of opposing theologies but of bad human relations . . . It is obviously for us . . . to substitute good for bad human relations.

On its own admission, the United Church of Christ has sold out its Reformation birthright, with specific reference to both the formal and material principles of the Reformation, the sole authority of Scripture and justification by faith alone. It now stands ready for union with Rome, with whom it professes to be essentially one.

If we look to the Reformed Churches, heirs of John Calvin, for a clear, loud, certain, and fearless blast on the trumpet, against all this iniquitous departure, we are bitterly disappointed. They too have dropped the standard and are become traitorous. Of them too, it is true, as a version of Psalm 74 sings, "Amid Thy courts are lifted high/ The standards of the foe/ And impious hands with axe and fire/ Have laid Thy temple low." The "axe and fire" are higher critical scholarship, universalism, and sheer world-conformity. Where we ought to find an unabashed defense of an inerrant, authoritative Bible, we find instead the admission of Scripture's fallibility; the denial of the historical truth of Genesis 1-11; and the insistence that much of the New Testament is the mistaken word of man (about the earthquake at the time of Jesus' resurrection, about the headship of the husband, about the exclusion of women from the offices in the Church, and about many more matters) rather than the Word of God. Where we expect the message of salvation by free, sovereign, particular grace to be sounded forth, as is required by these Churches' creed, the Canons of Dort, there is instead a bold denial of predestination, limited atonement, and total depravity, or a deafening silence regarding these doctrines of grace. Where we expect to hear a

ringing call to holiness, in obedience to all the commandments of God's Law, we hear instead from the degenerate sons of that "theologian of holiness," John Calvin, an approval of homosexuality. In the infamous "Report of the Commission on Church and Theology to the General Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, Bentheim 1981," these Churches speak of "many sincere Christian homophiles." They assert that:

There will be . . . homophilial Christians who — likewise in much struggle and prayer — through a growing friendship find a genuine friend, male or female, with whom they are prepared and willing to share the joys and sorrows of life. Only that intimate union may create an atmosphere of trust and confidence in which people can give themselves to each other. They will also feel constrained to involve God in their relationship.

The Church may not condemn such a relationship. On the contrary, we must "accept one another in the ongoing process of understanding and reflection." Where we hope to see separation from infidelity and idolatry, in a faithful keeping of the marriage-covenant with the Church's only Husband and Lover, Jesus, we see instead Reformed Churches in bed with the apostates of the National and World Council of Churches, or lusting for such carnal union, and shamelessly eyeing Rome itself. Indeed, they give signals that they, like the churches of the World Council, now desire the world religions and their gods.

The Protestant church-world also includes the churches that call themselves "evangelical." They have not been backward in railing on Rome and in excoriating the "liberals." As their name indicates, they pride themselves on proclaiming the gospel (*evangel* is the Greek for 'gospel'). Nevertheless, a large part of "evangelical Protestantism," although it preaches about sin, Jesus, the blood, and heaven, has perverted the gospel. Its error is the lie of "free will." It holds that every man naturally possesses the spiritual ability to make a decision for

Christ, to open up his heart to God, and to accept the offered salvation. It maintains that all of salvation, from election to final glory, depends squarely upon the will of man. Their revered representative is Billy Graham.

This gospel is a different gospel than that of the Reformation; and it is another gospel than the gospel of grace of Scripture. It is not a whit better than the gospel of Rome. There are, in fact, many “evangelicals” who proclaim a dependency of salvation on man who would have embarrassed Rome in the 16th century, and who would have given that old hawker of salvation, Tetzl, pause. Rome teaches that salvation is of man’s running, that is, working; “evangelical Protestantism” teaches that it is of man’s willing; both are equally opposed to the gospel’s teaching that salvation is of God Who showeth mercy, as Paul declared in Romans 9:16. The apostle mentioned “running” here, because the Holy Spirit saw Rome coming; he mentioned “willing,” because the Spirit saw “evangelical Protestants” in the offing.

That the doctrine of free will is “another gospel,” in the sense of Galatians 1:6ff., was the judgment of Augustine (cf. his “Anti-Pelagian Writings” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, Eerdmans, 1956). It was the judgment both of Luther, who, in his *The Bondage of the Will*, declared the issue of the bondage or freedom of the will of the natural man to be the basic issue of the Reformation, and of Calvin, who, in Chapters II-V of Book II of the *Institutes*, refutes those who teach free will, characterizing them as “enemies of divine grace,” and their efforts on behalf of free will as the erecting of “their statue of free will,” that is, idolatry. The Reformed Churches officially condemned free will as heresy at the Synod of Dordt (1618, 1619), in the Canons of Dordt; and the Presbyterians did so by implication when, in the Westminster Confession, they confessed the bondage of the will to be the truth of the gospel (Chap. IX). In embracing free will, “evangelical Protestantism” has returned to the vomit from which Christ delivered His Church by the Reformation.

## Doctrinal Indifference

Still another, related characteristic of Protestantism today, because of which it comes off badly in a comparison with the Reformation Church, is Protestantism's indifference to the truth. There are still some, perhaps many, who know the truth. They know what the Reformation stood for. They know that Protestant churches have forsaken, or are in the process of forsaking, their doctrinal heritage. But this does not perturb them, much less move them to take any action. This is a sin, not only of the leaders, but also of the people. The *people* will not endure sound doctrine; the *people* resist expository, doctrinal preaching; the *people* clamor for entertainment in the services of divine worship, instead of instruction; the *people* tolerate deviations from the Scripture and permit the wolves to ravage the sheepfold of Christ, looking on while their own children and grandchildren, the lambs of the flock, are destroyed (cf. II Tim. 4:1ff.; Acts 20:28ff.). Jeremiah 5:30, 31 is fulfilled: "A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?"

There are several outstanding expressions of present-day Protestantism's indifference to the truth. One is the ecumenical movement — the effort to unite the churches. Whereas Biblical ecumenicity finds unity in, and grounds union upon, doctrinal oneness, which oneness is expressed creedally, the unions of the World Council, of COCU, and of the Protestant churches' turning towards Rome are effected with disregard of doctrinal difference and at the expense of the truth. Indifference to the truth is the oil that makes all the vast machinery of modern ecumenicity go.

Another indication of indifference to the truth appears among "evangelical Protestantism" in their willingness to join and co-operate with churches and groups that maintain doctrines widely at variance with the doctrine proclaimed by

the Reformation Church, and differing sharply among these churches and groups themselves, *in the cause of evangelism*. A glaring instance of this was the ecumenical venture in evangelism some years ago, known as *Key '73*. Its objective was "to raise an overarching Christian canopy in North America under which all denominations, congregations, and Christian groups may concentrate on evangelism during 1973." It brought together such groups as Campus Crusade, thoroughly "free willist" in theology and practice, and the Salvation Army and such churches as the American Baptist, the Christian Church, the Brethren in Christ, the United Methodist, the Anglican, the Church of the Nazarene, the African Methodist Episcopal, the Reformed Church in America, and the Roman Catholic. Whatever the result may have been in North America as regards evangelism, many churches and groups united in carrying out the fundamental calling of Christ's Church, namely, preaching the gospel, in total disregard of doctrinal soundness and of doctrinal agreement. This spirit, long the driving force in the "liberal" churches of the World Council of Churches, now pervades the "evangelical" churches. It ignores the fact that the main requirement of evangelism is the message, the doctrine, that will be proclaimed; refuses to ask about any church, or group, whether it holds the truth of the gospel; is deaf to the prophet's warning that two cannot walk together, except they be agreed; and omits to notice, for the present, that if churches can co-operate in preaching the gospel, they can also unite institutionally. Ominous in the extreme are the statements in the official literature of "Congress 88: A National Festival of Evangelism" (scheduled for Chicago in August, 1988; purposing the evangelizing of the unchurched in America; and uniting on the Board of Directors the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America with such churches as the Presbyterian Church in the USA, the United Methodist, the Mennonite, the Christian Churches, the Church of God [Anderson], the Progressive National Baptist Church, and the

Salvation Army):

... thousands of Catholics and Protestants ... have been quietly striving to undo the scandal of Christian disunity which has ripped apart the seamless robe of Christ ... Let us join together in Chicago, sharing ideas and resources, and helping to carry out our Lord's Great Commission and *his prayer for a unified church* (emphasis added).

Yet another expression of indifference to the truth is the powerful movement in Protestantism today that extols the working of the Holy Spirit and the religious feeling of the church-member, at the expense of solid, expository Biblical preaching; sound doctrine; and belief of the truth. This movement is devastating Protestantism today. It takes several forms, all pernicious.

One form is the "happy church," where salvation is feeling good about oneself; a blessed congregation is a people who smile and shake hands with their neighbor; and the ambassador of Christ is a man who gives a cheery "good morning" to the flock and enables the audience to leave the service thinking shallow, positive thoughts.

Another is the teaching that explicitly disparages doctrine, and theological orthodoxy, in favor of the mystical workings of the Holy Spirit, and the experience of these workings. The Chinese teacher, Watchman Nee, is an influential purveyor of this unbiblical, and dangerous, philosophy. In his book, *The Release of the Spirit*, Nee writes:

(When a brother has been broken by the Spirit), in listening to a message he will use his spirit to contact the spirit of the preacher, rather than focusing upon the pronouncement of the words or the presentation of doctrine ... And it is further true that whenever God's Spirit makes a move upon any brother, never again will he judge others merely by doctrine, words, or eloquence ... when there is the flowing of His Spirit we will forget the theology we have learned.

All we know is that the Spirit has come. Instead of mere knowledge we have an 'inner light.' (pp. 87, 88)

Nee speaks of "two very different ways of help before us. First, 'there is a way that seemeth right' in which help is received from the outside — through the mind — by doctrine and its exposition. Many will even profess to have been greatly helped through this way. Yet it is a 'help' so very different from that help which God really intends." "The help which God really intends," of course, is "the way of spirit touching spirit . . . until we have found this way we have not found true Christianity" (p. 89). This is mysticism at its very worst. For a church, or for an individual, the embrace of this "spirit" is the kiss of death. Incidentally, this philosophy exposes church and individual to cultic enslavement to the charismatic leader.

A third form of the expression of indifference to the truth that consists of playing up the Holy Spirit while playing down sound doctrine is the charismatic, or neo-Pentecostal, movement. (For a thorough analysis of this movement, from the viewpoint of the Reformed Faith, the reader is invited to write us for a copy of our booklet, "Try the Spirits: A Reformed Examination of Pentecostalism.") The charismatic movement is, at bottom, an attack upon the Word of God — upon the sole sufficiency and authority of Holy Scripture; upon the content of Holy Scripture, namely, Jesus Christ and Him crucified; and upon the only way of receiving the salvation of the cross, namely, believing sound doctrine, when it is preached. Neo-Pentecostalism is an ancient error in new dress: mysticism. It is in virtually every detail the mysticism that tempted and opposed the Reformation, as soon as that movement was underway. The Reformation was fought on *two* fronts, and not on one only. Every bit as fierce, and important, as the conflict with Roman Catholicism on the right was the Reformation's warfare with the "heavenly prophets" on the left. These were the radicals who faulted the Reformation for not going beyond mere doctrine to the full experience of the Holy Spirit; who denigrated doctrine and preaching; who

boasted of the power to work miracles (which power the Reformation freely acknowledged it did not have); and who gloried in such indwelling of the Spirit as to provoke Luther to muse that these foes of the Reformation had surely “swallowed the Holy Spirit, feathers and all.” This movement drew off multitudes from the Reformation Faith. The difference between the Reformation Faith and Protestantism today is that the Reformation Church said no to this mysticism, sharply and unconditionally, whereas almost every Protestant church today is saying yes to it, in the charismatic movement.

Because of its sublime indifference to doctrine, that is, truth, the charismatic movement is one of the most powerful and effective forces at work in the world today, for the union of all Protestants and for the uniting of Protestants and Roman Catholics. This was illustrated by the North American Congress on the Holy Spirit and World Evangelization that met in New Orleans in the summer of 1987. Some 40 denominations or fellowships were represented in the Congress, which intended both to draw the churches together and to unite the churches in the work of evangelizing the world. Of the 35,000 participants, 51% were Roman Catholics (cf. *Christianity Today*, September 4, 1987, pp. 44ff.).

The refusal of members in the Protestant churches to fight for the truth is also an evidence of indifference to the truth. There are Protestants who not only know what the truth is but who also embrace it, personally. They are well aware that their church is corrupting the truth, or forsaking it; and they are concerned about it. But they do not contend for the faith, at least not with the zeal that either results in the church’s reformation or in their own ouster. Apparently, these people can live with the lie. They excuse themselves this way: “Regardless of its unfaithfulness, this is my church, and the church of my parents and grandparents before me. I love my church. I cannot bear to think of making any trouble for her, much less of leaving her.”

Certainly, a love for the Church and a desire for the peace

and unity of the Church, manifested in one's own congregation, are good and praiseworthy qualities. But to make love for the Church an argument against contending vigorously for the truth, and an argument for putting up with the lie, not only for oneself, but also for one's family, is a bad argument. This very argument was the strongest argument of Rome against the Reformation: "You make schism in Mother Church!" At the Diet of Worms, in 1521, when the enemies of Luther, both imperial and ecclesiastical, were urging him to retract his books and recant his teachings, they warned him "kindly and gently . . . that he should keep in mind the unity of the holy, catholic, and apostolic church . . . that he should not rend apart what he ought to respect, venerate, and adore . . ." (cf. Oskar Thulin, *A Life of Luther*). The appeal to maintain the unity of the Church was powerful, not only because of Scripture's emphasis on the oneness of the Church, but also because men in the 16th century knew but one institute, and that, hallowed by centuries. The rebuttal of the Reformation was, "Where the gospel is corrupted, there the Church ceases to be." Calvin wrote, "Christ has so ordered in His Church, that if (the pure preaching of the gospel) is removed, the whole edifice must fall" (*Institutes*, IV, I, II). To those who pleaded for tolerance of doctrinal errors in the name of Mother Church, Calvin replied:

There is something specious in the name of moderation, and tolerance is a quality which has a fair appearance, and seems worthy of praise; but the rule which we must observe at all hazards is, never to endure patiently that the sacred name of God should be assailed with impious blasphemy — that His eternal truth should be suppressed by the devil's lies — that Christ should be insulted, His holy mysteries polluted, unhappy souls cruelly murdered, and the Church left to writhe in extremity under the effect of a deadly wound. This would be not meekness, but indifference about things to which all others ought

to be postponed. (“The Necessity of Reforming the Church”)

Protestant people, tolerating false doctrine and clinging to apostate institutes, do not understand that their ancestors gave up all — *for doctrine*. They do not understand that men of flesh and blood like themselves once dared everything, and risked throwing the world into a tumult — *for doctrine*. They do not understand anymore the words of Luther’s mighty hymn, “Let goods and kindred go/This mortal life also” — *for doctrine*.

The gravity of this indifference to the truth is that it is indifference to the glory of God. God is glorified in the truth of the gospel; and He is dishonored when men change His truth into a lie. The Reformation Church burned with desire for God’s glory. Where is this to be found in Protestantism today? God judges this contempt for His glory in the gospel, even as He punishes those who glorify Him not as God when He is revealed in creation (Rom. 1:18ff.). For a lack of love for the truth, men and women are punished in these last days by a strong delusion, from God Himself, that they should believe a lie, “that they all might be damned who believed not the truth . . .” (II Thess. 2:10-12).

### **Rejection of the Word**

All of this — abandonment of the gospel of grace, adoption of the other gospel of works and free will, and indifference to the truth — can be summed up as rejection of the Word of God. This was the sin of the pre-Reformation Church: she rejected the Word by denying the sole authority of Scripture, and she rejected the Word by repudiating the message of Scripture — salvation by grace alone. Everything wrong with that Church could be traced to this evil. This is the evil of Protestantism today.

There are many more evidences of Protestantism’s rejection of the Word. Not only does it challenge Scripture’s authority, but it also obscures Scripture’s clarity. When Genesis 1-3 is interpreted in such a way that it is no longer straightforward,

factual history, but a religious myth, so that the six days are now billions of years; “after his kind” is now “each species evolving into another species”; Adam is now the supreme ape; and the eating of forbidden fruit is now the inherent weakness of the supreme ape, from the very beginning, well, then the “ordinary” believer says, “I cannot understand the Bible.” The “ordinary” pastor says the same thing. The result is either that men give up on Scripture, or that they give over the interpretation of it to the scientist and professional theologian. Thus arises a new papacy, now Protestant — sole authoritative interpreter of the Bible. There is also an attack upon preaching itself. Protestantism has come full circle. Rome insisted, against the Reformation, as she still insists today, that the faithful must be taught by pictures, statues, and images, “books to the laity.” Ignoring Question 98 of the Heidelberg Catechism, “God . . . will have His people taught, not by dumb images, but by the lively preaching of His Word,” even Reformed Protestants today clamor for pictures, plays, dances, dialogues, musical groups, and the like tomfoolery in the worship services, in the place of preaching. There are also many Protestants who, by this time, agree with Rome that the chief part of worship is the liturgy and that the Eucharist, not the preaching, is the chief means of grace. Another evidence of the rejection of God’s Word is the proliferation of unreliable, and even deliberately falsified, versions of the Bible, e.g., the enormously popular *The Living Bible*. Old Rome withheld the Scriptures; now Protestants bury the Word with corrupt versions. In the end, there is no difference.

### **Consequences**

Rejection of the Word of God always has consequences; and Protestant churches suffer these consequences. Protestantism is without peace. It lacks the blessed assurance of pardon, of eternal life, of the Fatherly love of God. Neither a “social gospel” nor a “liberation theology” gives peace with God. The gospel of salvation by man’s willing must ever sing with Rome

the sad song that no one can be sure of his eternal salvation, as the Arminians themselves (proponents of free will in the 17th century) admitted. Nor can tongues-speaking and doubtful experience do what the doctrine of justification by faith only did in the Reformation-era, and still does today: give to the wretchedest of sinners the confidence that he, even he personally, is God's dear child, and heir of life eternal. A Protestantism that has rejected a sovereign God insists that the evils that befall its people are not under God's control, as though this were a great good, instead of a cry of terror; it has lost the Reformation's comfort that "all things work together for good to them who love God" (Rom. 8:28). It is shot through with fears, anxieties, doubts, and dependencies on drink, drugs, pills, work, and pleasure. "Oh, Protestantism, if you had known, even you, at least in this your day, the things which belong unto your peace! but now they are hid from your eyes."

Protestantism is unholy. On the one hand, it is devoid of genuine good works: worship of God in spirit and in truth; Sabbath-observance; submission to State and employer; faithfulness in marriage and home. On the other hand, it is characterized by bizarre good works. The pre-Reformation Church had its crazy good works: crusades; pilgrimages; relics; indulgences; and the like. So does Protestantism today: promoting civil disobedience and revolution at home and abroad; jumping on the world's bandwagon of feminism; defending abortion; advocating sexual licence and perversity; and similar "exercises of piety." It is worldly through and through. It is not on a pilgrimage; it does not seek the "city which hath foundations." As for discipline, the Church's excommunication of impenitent heretics and transgressors from the fellowship, it is well-nigh unheard of.

Let not "evangelical Protestantism" preen itself on its superior holiness. The churches with a name for orthodoxy and conservatism are full of unbiblically divorced and remarried persons. The epidemic rages in "evangelical

Protestantism,” unchecked. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). Jesus Christ explicitly judges the man and woman who remarry after divorce, the original mate still living, an adulterer and an adulteress (Mark 10:11,12; Luke 16:18). Paul and John exclude the impenitent adulterer from the kingdom of heaven (I Corinthians 6:9, 10; Revelation 22:15). But “evangelical” pulpits are silent! “Evangelical” elders are inactive! “Evangelical” church members either celebrate the adulterous wedding, or helplessly wring their hands! “Evangelical” theologians write pious and clever books defending the abomination, so that no one need have a guilty conscience! This exposes much of “evangelical” Protestantism’s agitation over abortion as hypocritical. Abortion is the pagan way to rid oneself of an unwanted child; divorce is the Protestant way to be free of undesired children. Abortion is the murder of one child; divorce is the murder of the whole family, and, as a rule, the murder also of the family of the woman, or man, lusted after. “Evangelical Protestantism” can talk this good among themselves, or politely decline to talk about it at all. But there comes a Day when they will talk about it to God, the righteous Judge; and they will never talk it good to the God Who is Himself faithful in the covenant, even at the cost of the giving up of His own dear Son, and the God Whose purpose with a permanent marriage-institution is a “godly seed” (Malachi 2:15).

### **Causes**

Why has so much of the Protestant church-world come to reject the Word of God? In part, it is the work of the Devil, the Church’s “ancient foe,” whose craft was evident from the very beginning in that he attacked God’s Word: “Yea, hath God said . . . ?” (Gen. 3:1). In part, it is due to the spirit of Antichrist, which is already in the world and which makes ready the way for the Man of Sin by bringing about a great falling away in the churches (II Thess. 2). In part, it is the havoc worked by false teachers — pastors in the churches; theologians in the

seminaries; and teachers in the schools, especially the nominally Christian colleges and universities: “. . . there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies . . . and many shall follow their pernicious ways . . .” (II Pet. 2:1, 2).

But none of this could succeed apart from men’s unbelief concerning the Word of God. Men doubt the truth, power, sufficiency, and worth of the Word. They doubt whether the Word is able to gather, defend, and preserve the Church. They doubt whether the Word will keep the children and youth. They doubt whether the Word can comfort the distressed. They doubt whether the Word can stand the test of science. They doubt whether learned men will approve the Word’s teachings — creation; total depravity; predestination; the unbreakable marriage-covenant. They doubt whether the Word is relevant for modern man. So they give up on the Word of God.

What folly!

God’s Word is truth! God’s Word is holy! God’s Word is almighty! God’s Word is precious! God’s Word is the only power unto salvation! God’s Word is the only light in the darkness of earthly life! God’s Word judges everybody and everything, and is judged by no one and nothing! God’s Word is pregnant with significance, giving meaning to all things; without the Word, modern man, with all his vain life, is irrelevant. God’s Word abides! It abides, unscathed, in spite of all attacks upon it! It abides, when the fashion of this world passes away and the wisdom of this world dissipates like smoke! So also do they abide, who reverence the Word of God, and trust it with a child-like faith — the true Church of God in the world.

### **Calling**

Let every son and daughter of the Reformation in a church that stubbornly corrupts or abandons the gospel recovered by the Reformation “come out of her” (Rev. 18:4), and join

himself, or herself, to a church that does clearly display the marks of the true church — the pure preaching of the Word, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the proper exercise of discipline — or institute the church anew. It is ironic that men and women who praise the Reformation refuse to take the action that was essential to the Reformation, namely, separation from a hopelessly corrupt church, and go on depriving themselves and their families of the very thing that the Reformation aimed at, namely, a sound, faithful church, in which God is worshipped rightly and saints are edified by the pure Word of God. It is as though slaves were to extol the emancipation proclamation that set them free, while choosing to remain in bondage, and a grievous bondage at that.

Let every Protestant saint within a church that is faithfully proclaiming the Reformation-gospel praise God for His goodness; love that church; and give himself to her support, for the truth's sake.

As for us in the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, let us thank God for what He gives us in these churches: the pure gospel of His grace, in His Son, Jesus the Christ. We must be thankful, for in giving us the truth God has given us His all. We must be humble, for we have nothing, and are nothing, that has not been given, out of mere grace. We must be faithful, in safeguarding the treasure that has come to us by the Reformation. We must be active in confessing and proclaiming it to others. In all this, we must be constantly reforming, for we have not yet attained, neither are we yet perfect. Speaking the truth in love, we are to “grow up into Him in all things, which is the head, even Christ” (Eph. 4:15).

We should more thoroughly acquaint ourselves with the treasures of the Reformation, by reading Luther's three, great Reformation treatises — “An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility,” “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” and “The Freedom of a Christian,” as well as his *The Bondage of the Will*, and Calvin's *Institutes*, “A Treatise of the Eternal

Predestination of God,” and “A Defense of the Secret Providence of God”; by studying the creeds of the Reformation; and, above all, by reading and studying the Holy Scriptures themselves, for they “are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (II Tim. 3:15).

And let us pray! Let us pray for God’s Church today, that she be called out of the darkness of ignorance and the lie into the light of the knowledge of God in truth. Let us pray for ourselves, that God not plague us with the worst of all plagues—a famine of the Word, but that He fill us with the Spirit of Christ, Who guides us into all truth, as the Son of God has promised (John 16:13).

#### ADDITIONAL BOOKLETS UPON REQUEST

- GOOD NEWS FOR THE AFFLICTED** - A series of brief meditations proclaiming “Good News to the Afflicted.” A testimony to the marvelous grace of God in Jesus Christ which alone is able to sustain God’s children in times of sickness, old age, bereavement, and distress due to the difficulties of earthly life. The size of the pamphlet ( $3\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{1}{2}$ ) makes for easy mailing, much as one would mail a Christian greeting card to a friend in need. By Rev. Herman Hoeksema (1886-1965).
- MODERN BIBLE VERSIONS** - An examination and criticism of the proliferation of new translations, revisions, and paraphrases of the Bible; and a resounding conviction that “the King James Version is the Word of God and that it can be relied upon” to nourish and build up the church in her most holy faith. By Rev. David J. Engelsma.
- REMEMBERING THE LORD’S DAY** - gives the Biblical and creedal answer to the question whether Jehovah God, in the Fourth Commandment of His law, still today sets apart one day of the week as a special day; and exhorts the saints to holy living with respect to this day. By Rev. David J. Engelsma.
- GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY IN SALVATION** - calling the saints to glory in the God of their salvation, which is a gift to them by pure, free, sovereign grace alone. “Bless ye God in the congregations!” (Psalms 68:26a). By Rev. Steven R. Houck.
- EVANGELISM AND THE REFORMED FAITH** - in which timely and urgent questions are dealt with: Why evangelism should not corrupt the Gospel . . . Why the Reformed are zealous in missions . . . Why the Reformed doctrine of sovereign predestination gives good confidence and courage to a Reformed church in her mission calling, and makes her work always fruitful. By Rev. David J. Engelsma.