

May the Lord continue to prosper the godly work of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Respectfully, in Christ,
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Agreement and objections re faith and works

Thank you for publishing my letter and revised letter in the March 1 and March 15, 2019 issues of the *Standard Bearer*, even though the letter exceeded the length allowed by *SB* policy. (As for your apology for publishing the wrong letter originally, apology accepted—no harm done and no hard feelings.) Thank you as well for your thorough response to my letter in two installments in those same issues. We are agreed that these matters are of greatest importance and are worthy of the space devoted to them in the pages of the *SB*. I ask for your indulgence in allowing me to respond once more, since this letter again goes beyond policy.

I have read your responses repeatedly and carefully, and I believe that I understand what you are saying. I am in complete agreement with much of what you write, and I think it would be beneficial in this discussion to highlight precisely where we are of one mind.

First, you contend that faith is an *activity*. To which I say a hearty, Amen. Faith is believing in Jesus (John 6:35), following Jesus (John 8:12), entering by Jesus (John 10:9), knowing Jesus (John 10:14), coming to Jesus (John 14:6), abiding in Jesus (John 15:5), trusting confidently in Jesus (Lord's Day 7), and embracing Jesus (Belgic Confession, Art. 22)—activities all. You further contend that faith, because it is an activity, is a *doing*. Here, my Amen is much less hearty, because I do not think that calling faith a 'doing' distinguishes it clearly enough from 'working.' For that reason, I would not describe faith as a 'doing.' Nevertheless, I can go along with you here, as long as calling faith a 'doing' only means that faith is an activity, but in no way, shape, or form means that faith is a work.

Second, you contend that the regenerated child of God is *able* to believe. To which I say a hearty, Amen. Father Abraham believed God (Rom. 4:3). We spiritual children of Abraham believe God (Rom. 4:11). The Spirit of Christ, who regenerates a man, confers, breathes, and infuses into that man the gift of faith. Further, the Spirit of Christ in a man's heart produces that man's will to believe, and the Spirit of Christ produces that man's very act of believing also (Canons III/IV, 14). By the Spirit's work in him, man is able to believe. By the Spirit's work in him, man actually does believe.

Third, you contend that faith is the *necessary means* of salvation. To which I say a hearty, Amen. Without faith, there is no salvation. This is because without *Christ*, there is no salvation. Jesus is the bread of life

(John 6:35), the light of life (John 8:12), the door of the sheep (John 10:7), the good shepherd (John 10:11), the resurrection and the life (John 11:25), the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), and the life-giving vine (John 15:1). Jesus is our life and our salvation, and the only way to have Jesus is by faith. The very reason that Christ purchased faith for us by His death (Canons II, 8), that God gives faith to us as a free gift (Canons III/IV, 14), and that the Spirit works faith by the gospel in our hearts (Lord's Day 7) is that through this faith we have Christ, and therefore have salvation and the knowledge of salvation (Belgic Confession, Art. 22).

On all of this we are fully and enthusiastically agreed.

However, I still object to the teaching in your original editorial of October 1, 2018—teaching which you defended and repeated in your articles of March 1 and March 15, 2019. I object to this teaching: "If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do." I object to this teaching: "If a man with his household was to be saved and consciously enter into the kingdom, placing himself with his family under the rule of Christ as his Lord and Savior, he was called, he was required, to respond obediently to the call and command of the gospel—'Repent and believe, that thou mightest be saved with thy house.' Covenantal salvation is to be found in no other way." I object to this teaching: For salvation, "there was something they were called to do. And they did it."

I object to this teaching because I believe that it changes the *message of the gospel*. That is really what we are dealing with in this whole discussion: What is the message of the gospel? Our discussion is not merely a quibble about words or language, but about the message of the gospel. Not merely this: What words may we say or not say when we talk about the gospel? But this: What is the gospel? What is the gospel's message? What does the gospel say? By the way, I greatly appreciated in your responses that you did not dismiss this discussion as mere semantics, but addressed my line of thinking. That is what I am trying to do as well; not quibble over words, but address a line of thinking.

And so the question is, What is the message of the gospel? What does the gospel say to the man shaken by the earthquake, and what does the gospel say to the men pricked in their hearts? Does the gospel say this: If you want to be saved, here is the obedience you must render (by the Spirit's power, of course)? Or perhaps this: If you want to be saved, here is the activity required of you? Or maybe this: If you want to be saved, here is a list of do's and don'ts you must perform? Is the gospel message: "If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do?" I maintain that this is not the gospel. It is not the good news of salvation in Christ. It is

the miserable news of me and my doing and my obeying for salvation. It is the miserable news that my salvation comes by my doing, so that I had better get busy with my doing if I want to be saved, but always plagued by the terror that I have not yet done enough and hounded by the realization that I cannot ever do enough. This line of thinking that “if a man would be saved, there is that which he must do” is miserable news.

But in reality, the gospel does not say those things. The message of the gospel is not what I must do, but what Jesus Christ has done! His obedience, not mine. His doing, not mine. Him, not me. The message of the gospel is not Me, but He! This is good news. The gospel is the good tidings of great joy that the Savior is born (Luke 2:10, 11), who was first promised in Paradise (Gen. 3:15), who was published by the prophets (Rom. 1:2), and who was sent forth by God when the fullness of the time was come (Gal. 4:4) to redeem them that were under the law (Gal. 4:5) by being made a curse for us (Gal. 3:13) that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (II Cor. 5:21). The gospel is that He was wounded for our transgressions (Is. 53:5) because it pleased the LORD to bruise Him (Is. 53:10) that by His knowledge His righteous servant might justify many (Is. 53:11). The gospel is that He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:8), that by the obedience of one many might be made righteous (Rom. 5:19). This is the gospel: the promise that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life (Canons II, 5). This is the gospel: the Word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the glad tidings concerning the Messiah, by means whereof it hath pleased God to save such as believe (Canons III/IV, 6). This is what the gospel says to the man shaken by the earthquake: Jesus Christ, Savior! This is what the gospel says to men pricked in their hearts of their sin: Jesus Christ, Savior! This is what the apostolic gospel says wherever it is preached: Jesus Christ, and Him crucified (I Cor. 2:2). The message of the gospel is never me and my doing but always and exclusively Jesus Christ and His doing—His complete, wonderful, saving, redeeming doing. And, thanks be to God, this is what the gospel says to poor sinners such as you and me.

But now what about the fact that the gospel message includes the *call* to repent and believe? That call is an imperative verb. That is, that call of the gospel is a *command* to repent and believe (Canons II, 5). And what about the fact that faith as the response to that gospel command is *obedience* to the gospel (Rom. 10:16; Canons III/IV, 10)? The message of the gospel includes a command! And the response of faith to the gospel is obedience! Does this mean that the message of the gos-

pel really is, after all, “If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do”? Does this mean that part of the good news of salvation really is, after all, my obedience and my doing if I would be saved?

This cannot be.

One might even say about such a notion, Nonsense!

Fact is, the call of the gospel—repent and believe—is a command, but it is a command *unlike any other command*. It is an entirely unique command. The call of the gospel stands out from and stands apart from and is essentially different from every other command in the Bible. The call of the gospel is an entirely unique command because, although it is a command, it is not part of the law of God like the other commands are. We might say it this way: The call of the gospel is a *command*, but it is not a *commandment*. The command to believe in Jesus Christ is essentially different from the first commandment to have no other gods than Jehovah, or the third commandment not to take God’s name in vain, or the seventh commandment not to commit adultery, or the first great commandment to love the Lord thy God. The command of the gospel is essentially different from the commandments of the law because the law requires man’s obeying and man’s doing for salvation. The law says, “The man that *doeth* them shall live in them” (Gal. 3:12). The law says, “Cursed is every one that *continueth* not in all things which are written in the book of the law to *do* them” (Gal. 3:10). The law says, “This *do*, and thou shalt live” (Luke 10:28). The law is all about *man’s* doing in order to live: *Thou* shalt, and *thou* shalt not.

The call of the gospel, however, is far different. The call of the gospel does not suspend man’s salvation upon man’s doing and man’s obeying, as the law does. The call of the gospel does not even suspend man’s salvation upon his doing the activity of believing. Rather, the call of the gospel confronts man with Jesus Christ and suspends man’s salvation upon Jesus Christ alone. The gospel says, “Believe on the *Lord Jesus Christ*, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:31). The great message of the gospel call is not what I must do, but Jesus Christ and what He has done. So essentially different is the command of the law to obey from the command of the gospel to believe, that Scripture sets them over against each other as opposites when it comes to our salvation. We have not received the Spirit by the works of the law, but by the hearing of faith (Gal. 3:2), and the law is not of faith (Gal. 3:12). And if they which are of the law be heirs of salvation, then faith is made void, and the promise is made of none effect (Rom. 4:14). Therefore, what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh (Rom. 8:3).

For salvation, the law can only curse a man (Gal. 3:10), but the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth (Rom. 1:16).

So it is with faith. Faith is the *activity* of believing. Faith is even an *obedience* to the call of the gospel. But faith is an activity and an obedience that is entirely unique from all other human activities and obedience. The uniqueness of faith is found in faith's Object—Jesus Christ. Faith believes in Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31) and embraces Jesus Christ (Belgic Confession, Art. 22). The power of faith is not found in what faith *does*—believing, embracing, and all of its other activities—but in *Jesus Christ*, in whom faith believes and whom faith embraces. The power of faith is not found in itself, but in the Other to whom it looks. Therefore, the power of faith is not found in faith's *believing* in the bread of life, but in the *bread of life* (John 6:35). The power of faith is not found in faith's *knowing* the Good Shepherd, but in the *Good Shepherd* (John 10:14). It is for exactly this reason that the call of the gospel is what it is: Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. By this call, God tells a broken sinner to put away all of his doing, his obeying, and his working for salvation and instead find his complete salvation in Jesus Christ alone.

This is why I object to the teaching, “If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do.” It turns the call of the gospel into just another commandment of the law, and it turns faith into just another work of obedience. When the gospel is law and faith is work, there is no Christ and no salvation. You have made it clear in your articles that this is not at all what the editorial meant or intended. The editorial meant that the child of God is called to respond to the gospel by believing in Jesus, and that the Spirit in a man's heart enables him to do so. A hearty, Amen. But the line of thinking that the editorial actually taught—“If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do”—goes far beyond that.

In light of my objection to that statement, you asked how I would finish it: If a man would be saved.... What? You suggest I might answer: “If a man desires to be saved, he must do nothing.” Or, “There is nothing he is called to do.” Well, I don't mind those answers. They remind me of an excellent sermon by Herman Hoeksema. But here is how I would answer. When we are talking about salvation, about obtaining salvation, then the message is not our obeying and doing, but the message is Christ. Not this: “If a man would be saved, there is that which he must do.” But this: If a man would be saved, he must have Jesus Christ, the Savior.

Warmly in Christ,
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