

Lecture by Rev. Andrew Lanning in First Reformed Protestant Church on March 12, 2021, entitled "The Act of Separation"

Jeremiah 5:30–6:17

30. A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land;
31. 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?
1. O ye children of Benjamin, gather yourselves to flee out of the midst of Jerusalem, and blow the trumpet in Tekoa, and set up a sign of fire in Beth-haccerem: for evil appeareth out of the north, and great destruction.
2. I have likened the daughter of Zion to a comely and delicate woman.
3. The shepherds with their flocks shall come unto her; they shall pitch their tents against her round about; they shall feed every one in his place.
4. Prepare ye war against her; arise, and let us go up at noon. Woe unto us! for the day goeth away, for the shadows of the evening are stretched out.
5. Arise, and let us go by night, and let us destroy her palaces.
6. For thus hath the LORD of hosts said, Hew ye down trees, and cast a mount against Jerusalem: this is the city to be visited; she is wholly oppression in the midst of her.
7. As a fountain casteth out her waters, so she casteth out her wickedness: violence and spoil is heard in her; before me continually is grief and wounds.
8. Be thou instructed, O Jerusalem, lest my soul depart from thee; lest I make thee desolate, a land not inhabited.
9. Thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall thoroughly glean the remnant of Israel as a vine: turn back thine hand as a grapegatherer into the baskets.
10. To whom shall I speak, and give warning, that they may hear? behold, their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot hearken: behold, the word of the LORD is unto them a reproach; they have no delight in it.
11. Therefore I am full of the fury of the LORD; I am weary with holding in: I will pour it out upon the children abroad, and upon the assembly of young men together: for even the husband with the wife shall be taken, the aged with him that is full of days.
12. And their houses shall be turned unto others, with their fields and wives together: for I will stretch out my hand upon the inhabitants of the land, saith the LORD.
13. For from the least of them even unto the greatest of them every one is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even unto the priest every one dealeth falsely.
14. They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace.
15. Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush: therefore they shall fall among them that fall: at the time that I visit them they shall be cast down, saith the LORD.
16. Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein.
17. Also I set watchmen over you, saying, Hearken to the sound of the trumpet. But they said, We will not hearken.

The Act of Separation

Introduction

The title of the speech tonight is “The Act of Separation,” which was a document that was signed on January 19, 2021, by two elders and three deacons of Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church. In that Act of Separation, they expressed their grievances with the Protestant Reformed Churches and by that Act of Separation led God’s people out of the Protestant Reformed Churches in the formation of a new congregation, which is now known as First Reformed Protestant Church.

On January 21, 2021, two days later, a public meeting was held, which had been announced with the distribution of the Act of Separation. At that public meeting a time of question and answer was held, the Act of Separation was read, and opportunity was given to all present who were also convicted that they may not be members anymore of the Protestant Reformed Churches to sign that Act of Separation.

The speech tonight is about the meaning of that Act of Separation, about the necessity of that Act of Separation, and also about the implications of that Act of Separation.

The speech is meant for those in the Protestant Reformed Churches who have seen problems, are convicted of error, and are wondering themselves what they ought to do.

As we work through the speech tonight, and as we work through the questions and answers, our intention is to be entirely open and candid about the meaning, the necessity, and the implications of the Act of Separation.

The Meaning

Secession

We begin, then, with the meaning of the Act of Separation.

First, the Act of Separation was a secession from the Protestant Reformed Churches by the officebearers and the members who signed that Act. They had been members of Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church and Southwest Protestant Reformed Church especially, and others. By signing the Act of Separation, they seceded from their Protestant Reformed churches.

This signing of that Act of Separation was done with astonishment. The members who signed the Act of Separation never imagined that things would come to such a state that they would leave the Protestant Reformed Churches. The Protestant Reformed Churches have been our mother. The Protestant Reformed Churches have nourished us in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We ourselves have taught the goodness and thanked God for the strength of the Protestant Reformed Churches. We never imagined that the churches we loved would so depart that we would have no place left in her anymore. The signing of the Act of Separation was done with great astonishment.

It was also done with great grief because we have loved the Protestant Reformed Churches. We love the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches. It brought us no glee in our hearts to say the things that we did about the Protestant Reformed Churches. It brought us great grief.

The signing of the Act of Separation was also done with great joy, spiritual joy. In spite of the astonishment, in spite of the grief, we saw in the Act of Separation the work of Jehovah God of preserving and reforming his church. And when God's people see God preserving his church, even if that is through a secession from that church, a secession from an apostatizing church, that is a cause of great joy for God's people.

The Act of Separation was a secession from the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Organization of a New Congregation

Second, regarding the meaning of the Act of Separation, the Act of Separation was also the organization of a new congregation, now known as First Reformed Protestant Church. That congregation was organized under the leadership and oversight of the two elders and the three deacons who first signed the Act of Separation.

And that gives us an opportunity to address what may be a misconception among some. The misconception is that the two elders and the three deacons resigned their offices in Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church when they left the Protestant Reformed Churches. That is a misconception; that is incorrect.

The two elders and the three deacons were duly elected into their offices by the Lord Jesus Christ in the lawful vote of a congregation. They were installed using the appropriate forms in a worship service of the congregation. They were official officebearers of the church of Jesus Christ. They did not lay down their offices in leaving the Protestant Reformed Churches. They exercised their offices. They exercised their offices in leading God's people out of the Protestant Reformed Churches and into First Reformed Protestant Church.

So also for the members who signed the Act of Separation two days later. Their signing the Act of Separation was the equivalent of their membership transfer. Their membership transfer was not accomplished by the giving and receiving of membership papers. Their membership transfer was accomplished by their signing the Act of Separation. At the moment the members signed the Act of Separation, they were no longer Protestant Reformed but were that evening constituted as a new congregation.

And so also for myself as the pastor of First Reformed Protestant Church. The Act of Separation declares that my deposition from office was unjust. And the signatures of the two elders, the three deacons, and of all of the members of that church by that declare that they did not acknowledge the deposition and that they continue to acknowledge me as their pastor. This means, then, that there was no call letter extended to me. By the signing of the Act of Separation, that congregation, one could say, called me to be their pastor.

The signing of the Act of Separation, therefore, was not only a secession from the Protestant Reformed Churches, but it was also the institution and organization of the First Reformed Protestant Church.

Many of the members of First Reformed Protestant Church have also instructed their consistories of which they were formerly members to send their membership papers to their homes. That instruction to send membership papers to their homes has nothing to do with joining membership in First Reformed Protestant Church. The one purpose of that instruction is so that there is a record on the consistory books of those Protestant Reformed churches, which consistory books shall be opened one day in the judgment at the return of our Lord Jesus Christ,

so that there is a record on those books that those members are no longer members there but belong to another congregation now.

Application of Article 28 of the Belgic Confession

The Act of Separation is the application of article 28 of the Belgic Confession. The Act of Separation is not some new, unheard of thing in the life of Christ's church. It is not something unfounded upon the confessions of the church but has solid grounding in article 28 of the Belgic Confession.

The title and subject of article 28 is that "Every One Is Bound to Join Himself to the True Church." That article reads as follows:

We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and out of it there is no salvation, that no person, of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw himself to live in a separate state from it; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it, maintaining the unity of the church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them.

And that this may be the more effectually observed, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the church, and to join themselves to this congregation wheresoever God hath established it, even though the magistrates and edicts of princes be against it, yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment. Therefore all those who separate themselves from the same, or do not join themselves to it, act contrary to the ordinance of God.

Article 28 of the Belgic Confession calls for separation. Article 28 calls for believers to separate themselves "from all those who do not belong to the church." That call for separation in the language of article 28 is where the Act of Separation gets its name. And the Act of Separation is the living out of the confession of article 28 by those who signed the Act of Separation. They separated themselves "from all those who do not belong to the church."

Now that language of article 28, "separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the church," refers to an *ecclesiastical* separation. And the Act of Separation uses that language too. We will exercise "no more ecclesiastical fellowship" with those who are not part of this congregation.

The fellowship that is being spoken of there is not personal fellowship. Neither the Belgic Confession in article 28 nor the Act of Separation says anything about family relationships, about business relationships, or about neighborly relationships of an individual man with those who live around him in life. Belgic Confession article 28 and the Act of Separation are about *ecclesiastical* fellowship and *ecclesiastical* separation. The idea is that one must leave an apostatizing church with his church membership and may not by his church membership have ecclesiastical fellowship as a member of that apostatizing church anymore.

That call for separation "from all those who do not belong to the church" is also not a call for someone who lives in a land where there are very few churches and very few people

who belong to a church to separate ecclesiastically from all those who are non-church members to join a church. But the reference is those who have membership in an apostatizing church.

That is “all those who do not belong to the church.” In the days when the Belgic Confession was written, there were many, many members of a church institute, the Roman Catholic Church. The Belgic Confession refers to all of those who were in the Roman Catholic Church as “those who do not belong to the church.”

There has been confusion on that point about what the Act of Separation actually calls for, whether it calls for personal relationships, ties to be cut. That is not the case. If there are any limits to personal fellowship or other kinds of fellowship, they are not addressed at all by article 28 or by the Act of Separation.

Belgic Confession article 28 calls for separation. And article 28 calls for members who have so separated from an apostatizing church to join themselves to a congregation, to join themselves to a church. They are to separate themselves “from all those who do not belong to the church, and to join themselves to this congregation wheresoever God hath established it.” If there is an existing institution that a believer finds that demonstrates the marks of the true church, then he is to join his church membership there. If he cannot find an institute that satisfies the marks of the church as he believes they are laid out in the word of God, then he must institute the church anew.

That is what happened when First Reformed Protestant Church formed. The church was instituted anew, and by that all those who signed joined themselves to the true church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

According to the Word of God

Article 28 of the Belgic Confession is founded squarely upon the word of God. The word of God calls for separation. And the word of God calls believers to join themselves to a faithful church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The word of God calls for that in the passage that was read tonight in Jeremiah 5:30–31: “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?”

Here is what you do in the end thereof: “O ye children of Benjamin, gather yourselves to flee out of the midst of Jerusalem.” And as you “flee out of the midst of Jerusalem...blow the trumpet.” And as you “flee out of the midst of Jerusalem” light a signal fire (6:1), so that everyone who sees you leaving may also be warned of the prophets who prophesy falsely and the priests who bear rule by their means and the people who love to have it so. Article 28 of the Belgic Confession stands on Jeremiah 5 and 6 in its call to separate.

That is also the call of the word of God in Revelation 18:4. In the context of all of the nations who have “drunk of the wine of the wrath of [the] fornication” of “Babylon” (vv. 3, 2), who represents the apostatizing and the apostate church, the call in verse 4 is “I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.” “Come out of her” is the calling of Jehovah God himself with regard to all of those who behold Babylon and the wine of the wrath of her fornication in false doctrine, in priests bearing rule by their own will and not by the word of God.

“Come out her.”

And “come out of her, my people,” in the first place, “that ye be not partakers of her sins.” The word of God stands on the truth of corporate responsibility. Those who are members of a church are corporately responsible for the sins that are committed in that church. And when Babylon is pouring out “the wine of the wrath of her fornication,” then all who are members are partakers of that fornication.

The second reason to “come out of her” is that he be not partaker of “her plagues.” God judges Babylon. God judges the false church and the apostatizing church. When the church responds to the trumpet of God’s word by saying, “We will not hearken,” then God sends a plague upon that church, and he calls his people, “Come out of her.”

Article 28 of the Belgic Confession stands squarely upon the word of God in its call for separation. The Act of Separation, which stands upon article 28, then stands squarely upon the word of God.

The signing of the Act of Separation was obedience to the Reformed confessions and obedience to the word of God, which calls God’s people, “Come out of her.”

True Church Reformation

This means also that the Act of Separation is a work of true church reformation. When a separation stands on the confessions and stands on the word of God, that separation is reformation. There may be reformation within a church, as a church identifies error and turns from that error and repents from that error and puts out the false teachers of that error. There may be reformation within a congregation and denomination. That turning and that repentance stand on the confessions and on the word of God. But if there is not turning and there is not repentance, then reformation takes the form of separation. And that separation stands on the confessions and the word of God.

The separation of First Reformed Protestant Church from the Protestant Reformed Churches is God’s work of preserving his church. It is God’s work of reestablishing his church upon the cornerstone, who is the Lord Jesus Christ. The Act of Separation was God’s work of glorifying his Son, Jesus Christ, and glorifying his own name and glorifying his own truth. The Act of Separation was God’s work of making the stone that the builders refused, which stone is Jesus Christ, the headstone of the corner. This is the Lord’s work. It is marvelous in our eyes. The signing of the Act of Separation is due entirely to the grace, the goodness, and the mercy of Jehovah God, who reestablished his church upon the Lord Jesus Christ through that Act of Separation.

This means that the signing of the Act of Separation stands in the line of all true church reformation throughout history. It stands in the line of the great sixteenth-century reformation of the church. It stands in the line of the reformation that God wrought through Martin Luther and John Calvin. The Act of Separation stands in the line of the great reformation that God worked in 1834 in the *Afscheiding*, the separation and secession of the Reformed fathers from the corrupt State Church in the Netherlands. The Act of Separation stands in the line of the leaving of the Christian Reformed Church from the Reformed Church in America in 1857. And the Act of Separation stands in the line of 1924 in the formation of the Protestant Reformed Churches when they were cast out of the Christian Reformed Church.

Even the name of the present congregation, First Reformed Protestant Church, reflects that it stands in the line of those reformations. The church takes the name *Reformed*, and it

takes the name *Protestant*, not in the same order as Protestant Reformed, but it takes the same names as a testimony that this church is the continuation of the theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches, and that First Reformed Protestant Church counts as its spiritual forefather Herman Hoeksema and as its spiritual forefather George M. Ophoff, in addition to men like Martin Luther, John Calvin, Hendrik de Cock, Gysbert Haan, and other Reformed fathers who themselves were used by God to work reformation. We are the spiritual children of every true reformation by the Act of Separation.

Act of Separation Is Holy, Not Schism

The implication is that the Act of Separation is holy. It is a holy work of God. The Act of Separation is not the sin of schism. The Act of Separation has been charged with the sin of schism, which is a popular charge today—a charge being thrown left, right, and center today. That charge has been hurled at the Act of Separation. The Act of Separation is not schism but holy reformation.

It is certainly true that the Act of Separation is division. There is no doubt about that. Those who were members of the Protestant Reformed Churches are no longer members of the Protestant Reformed Churches. They separated from the Protestant Reformed Churches. That division and that separation and that secession is not schism.

Remember what the Lord Jesus Christ said in Matthew 10 about his own coming to earth: “Think not that I am come [to the earth] to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword” and “to set a man at variance against his father [and against his brother and against the whole world]” (vv. 34–35). The Lord Jesus Christ himself works division and sets men at variance against men. That separation that the Lord Jesus Christ works by his word and by his Spirit is not the sin of schism. If it is, then every reformation in the history of the church must be charged with schism. And the Lord Jesus Christ himself must be charged with schism, which is blasphemy.

When the Lord Jesus Christ preserves his church by standing her upon the truth, then those who are separated from a congregation and denomination by that work of Christ are not guilty of schism.

The charge has been and will continue to be schism. It always has been. Martin Luther was charged with being a schismatic by Rome. Hendrik de Cock was charged with being a schismatic by the State Church in the Netherlands. Herman Hoeksema was charged with being a schismatic by the Christian Reformed Church.

When a charge of schism comes, don’t look at this: was there division? But look at this: was the division necessary? Does that division stand upon the word of God and upon the Reformed confessions? Was that division the casting out of faithful believers who stand upon the truth by those who will not hear any longer that truth? Then you may know the spiritual character of that division.

The Act of Separation stands on the word of God and is holy reformation, a work of God himself and not the sin of schism.

Form of the Act of Separation

First, regarding the form of the Act of Separation, the Act of Separation is modeled very closely after the Act of Secession of 1834. That was the document drawn up by two elders and

three deacons, strikingly, in 1834 in the Reformed congregation of Ulrum, by which that first *Afscheiding* church seceded from the State Church. That Act of Secession works with articles 28 and 29 of the Belgic Confession. That Act of Secession of 1834 works with the scriptures upon which the Belgic Confession is founded. That Act of Secession is a model for all of those who find themselves in a similar predicament of seeing the apostatizing of their church. And so the Act of Separation is modeled after the Act of Secession. In fact, if you compare the two, you will find that in places our Act of Separation of 2021 even quotes portions of the Act of Secession of 1834.

Nevertheless, the two documents are not identical. The Act of Separation of 2021 is its own document written for its own time and its own circumstances.

A second note regarding the form of the Act of Separation is that the Act of Separation is declarative in nature. The Act of Separation is not a line-by-line proof of everything that it declares. The Act of Separation is not meant as an answer to the opponents of the Act of Separation. The Act of Separation is not meant as an exhaustive, or comprehensive, and in some cases not even a beginning, proof of the things that are stated. It is declarative in form.

It is declarative in form because it is the declaration of those who lived through the history, of those who saw the things that are declared in the Act of Separation. It is the declaration of those who signed it that these things are true; that these things we have witnessed with our own eyes; we have been a part of and we have lived through. It is a declaration of the convictions of those who signed it that they must take a certain course of action. It is a declarative document.

There is certain proof given in the Act of Separation. There are instances listed of what is alleged, so that the Act of Separation does in some cases carry its own proof in itself, but the Act of Separation is not an exhaustive proof in itself but a declaration of these things.

The Act of Separation has that form, and this is the explanation of that form.

The Necessity

The Act of Separation was necessary. It was necessary. The signers of the Act of Separation were compelled to separate from the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Secession is not something that those who signed the Act of Separation sought. It is not something even that they desired.

Reform from Within?

It can be said that almost up until the last minute the members who ended up signing the Act of Separation were testing whether there were ways to remain in the Protestant Reformed Churches and to work for reform in the Protestant Reformed Churches from within. It was considered whether it might be best to remain as members of the PRC, to continue going to church, although even that had become impossible for many, and as members of the Protestant Reformed Churches to write protests and appeals—more protests and appeals in addition to the many protests and appeals that had already been written over the preceding years.

It was considered whether, if we could not go to church in the Protestant Reformed Churches because of the things that had happened there, that we leave as a protesting Protestant Reformed Church and maintain a certain connection to the denomination—be

Protestant Reformed but have our own worship in our own separate place and have our own officebearers overseeing the life of the congregation and not sending any delegates to the meetings of Classis East or to synod. And as a protesting Protestant Reformed Church maintain an appeal or a protest to synod.

Up until almost the last minute, the signers of the Act of Separation were looking for ways to work for reform from within the Protestant Reformed Churches, but it wasn't possible because those who signed the Act of Separation looked at the Protestant Reformed Churches in the light of article 29 of the Belgic Confession, which lists the marks of the true church and the marks of the false church. Looking at the Protestant Reformed Churches in light of those marks, the signers declared, "There is no way that we can stay within and keep our membership there. We are compelled to leave."

Not Hasty Leaving but Laboring

The leaving and separation was not hasty—not by any means was it hasty. That too has been a charge laid against the Act of Separation. The charge is, "You should have stayed. You should have used the process of protest and appeal," for example, with regard to my deposition or with regard to decisions that Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church's consistory had made. "You should have appealed or protested to Synod 2021. You were hasty to sign an Act of Separation and to leave."

The Act of Separation was not done in haste.

The members who signed the Act of Separation have been laboring for years for reform in the Protestant Reformed Churches. They have been laboring by means of their church membership in the Protestant Reformed Churches, by their testimonies to the ministers and consistories in the Protestant Reformed Churches with regard to the preaching in the pulpits and the decisions of the assemblies. They have been laboring by means of their protests and appeals for years to consistory, to classis, and to synod.

If anyone doubts the labor of the members who signed the Act of Separation, then take out a random volume of the *Acts of Synod* from Synod 2016 to the present. Or take out a random agenda of Classis East from 2016 to the present, and see in that one volume how many protests and appeals there are from many of those who ended up signing the Act of Separation. The members who signed have labored.

They have also labored for reform in the Protestant Reformed Churches by their insistence—not their requests, not their suggestions, but their insistence—that the preaching of the gospel in the Protestant Reformed Churches be pure. They have labored for that by their insistence that the preaching be pure, from the fact that many of the protests and appeals were against sermons—sermons as they had been preached and sermons as they had been decided on by the ecclesiastical assemblies—and by their insistence that their minister preach the truth of the word of God to them and feed them with Jesus Christ.

I say before all of you tonight and before the face of God tonight that the members who signed the Act of Separation insisted on that from their own pastor. They insisted on that from me. They would not have been satisfied, not at all, with false doctrine or with a weakening of true doctrine. And I believe that if not every one of them, then the vast majority of them, would have risen up with protests and appeals against my preaching if I had preached false doctrine.

The members of the congregation labored for years for reform from within, and in doing so they never followed a man—they never did. They followed Jesus Christ; they followed his truth. They insisted on Jesus Christ; they insisted on his truth. That was their labor for many years.

That culminated in the Act of Separation.

Finally, that labor became fruitless. Finally, it became evident that there would be no hearing of the truth. For finally, the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ that rebuked the Protestant Reformed Churches for her errors was declared to be sinful, schismatic preaching. And the minister who preached those sermons was cast out. And when the minister who preached those sermons was cast out, there was no place left for all of those who had been laboring for years.

The Act of Separation was the culmination of years of labor for reform.

And when those years of labor do not bear the fruit of reform *within* a church, then those years of labor in the goodness of God bear the fruit of secession from an apostatizing denomination.

Apostatizing of the Protestant Reformed Churches

The Act of Separation was necessary then because of the apostatizing of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

The Act of Separation speaks of the “apostatizing” of the churches, not that the Protestant Reformed Churches are *apostate*. The Act of Separation nowhere calls the Protestant Reformed Churches thoroughly false. The Act of Separation does say the Protestant Reformed Churches are “apostatizing.”

This means that just as the Protestant Reformed Churches at the beginning of her existence did not call the Christian Reformed Church a false church—a departing church certainly, a church that was heading in entirely the wrong direction, but did not call her the false church—so also First Reformed Protestant Church does not call the Protestant Reformed Churches thoroughly false, or the apostate church. Our contention is that the Protestant Reformed Churches are “apostatizing.”

The difference between apostatizing and thoroughly apostate is not so great that we must insist on one word over the other. When a church sets itself on the path of apostasy, that church will continue on that path until she *is* thoroughly apostate and false and there is no salvation in her, except she repent.

This is the Lord’s own warning to his church in Revelation 2 and 3. To those churches in whom the Lord found sin and who were by that departing from him and departing from his truth, the Lord says to them, “Except thou repent, I shall come and remove thy candlestick.” That is, you will not be a church anymore. You will have a building, maybe; you will have the form; you will be an institute, but you will not be the church.

When a church is apostatizing, she is already in dreadful condition. She is in danger! She is sinning grievously, and plagues and destruction are coming swiftly! When it becomes plain that a church has set itself on the path of apostatizing, then that church will be destroyed in her generations. When it becomes clear that she will not turn, then it is time for all those in her who see that apostasy to come out.

When “the prophets prophesy falsely” with false doctrine; when “the priests bear rule by their means,” by their own will and their own wisdom and not the word of God; and when “my people love to have it so,” they throw up their hands in indifference to the grievous sins in the church; then “what will ye do in the end thereof? O ye children of Benjamin...flee” (Jer. 5:31; 6:1)!

When the Act of Separation calls the Protestant Reformed Churches “apostatizing,” it refers to the body. It refers to the institution. It does not refer to every individual member as an ungodly, unregenerate person. The declaration of “apostatizing” is a declaration about the institute; it is not a declaration about individual members. The Act of Separation does not declare that all of the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches are going to hell. It does not declare that they are all unregenerate unbelievers.

The Act of Separation has something to say to the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches. It has this to say: “Beware! Repent, or perish in your generations!”

But the declaration of apostasy is a declaration about the institution. The institution of the churches is apostatizing.

How do we know? How is one to know?

Belgic Confession Article 29 and the Marks of the Church

According to the declaration of the Belgic Confession, it is easy to know. It is not hard to know. The two churches are “easily” distinguished from each other. It is painful to know. It is astonishing to know. But it is easy to know. And it is easy to know because the church of Jesus Christ is characterized by “marks”—the marks of the true church.

The false church is also characterized by “marks”—the marks of the false church.

And when one understands those marks and examines the church in light of the marks, it is easy to know whether a church is apostatizing or not.

We make it complicated. We make it hard to know by our own natural folly and by looking in all kinds of directions except the direction pointed to in the word of God and in the Belgic Confession article 29. We look at the people. The Protestant Reformed Churches are full of good men, full of good people. How can you say they are apostatizing? Because people are not the mark of the church. Good people are not the mark of the true church, and bad people are not the mark of the false church. Don’t look at people; don’t look at men. They have nothing to do with the marks of the true or of the false church.

Or we look at our own emotional tie and connection to the church, and that tie is strong. That tie is very strong. We’ve been raised in the Protestant Reformed Churches; we’ve defended the Protestant Reformed Churches; we’ve fought for her; we’ve learned from her; we’re tied to her as mother, and ties to mother are strong. But that is not the mark of the true church—your or my tie to her, the way you feel about her, the way you love her. That is not the mark of the true or of the false church.

The marks of the true church are what the church is doing with the word of God. That’s the mark—that’s the one mark.

The mark of the false church too is what she is doing with the word of God, with the truth of the word of God, with the Christ who is revealed in the word of God, and with the God whose word it is. That’s the mark. What does she do with sound doctrine? What does she do

with false doctrine? What does she do with teachers of false doctrine and teachers of true doctrine? What does the church do with the word of God?

Article 29 of the Belgic Confession divides that one mark into three.

The marks by which the true church is known are these: if the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin.

And now the summary: “in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God.” There it is—“the pure Word of God.” “All things contrary thereto rejected”—not tolerated but rejected—“and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the church.” Those are the marks: the pure preaching of the gospel.

It is the testimony of those who signed the Act of Separation that the preaching of the gospel in the Protestant Reformed Churches is no longer pure. Individual sermons could be pointed to—sermons that teach that union with Christ is unconditional, but communion with Christ is conditional—which sermon was defended against protests for a year and a half, strenuously. And finally when a classis decided that there had to be an apology for that sermon, there were shenanigans on the floor of classis to protect the reputation of a man and to leave the reputation of Christ and his truth in the mud. Or sermons that teach that God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility lie next to each other as two rails, two tracks, that run into heaven. Or God’s grace and sovereignty and Christ’s merits do not rule out man’s obedience as a means by which man enters Canaan, or heaven.

And closely connected with preaching is writing. And individual writings could be pointed to, writings that drag Witsius out of his grave to teach the Protestant Reformed Churches that if a man would be saved, there *is* something he must do after all. That’s perverse; that’s corrupt; that’s not pure.

When the Belgic Confession calls for the pure preaching of the word, it does not mean this: Make sure that most of what is preached is true. Make sure that ninety-nine percent of a sermon is true. It calls for purity, the *pure* doctrine of the gospel. That’s 1 Peter 2:2: “sincere milk,” pure milk unmixed with poison that will destroy those who drink it—the pure preaching of the gospel. So that if a sermon is ninety-nine percent true and one percent false, it is not the pure preaching of the gospel. And the church that tolerates it is a church that has corrupted the mark of the true church. Or if ninety-nine sermons are sound doctrine, but one sermon is false doctrine, the church that tolerates it is not preaching the pure doctrine of the word. “Pure,” “pure”—that is the emphasis of the Belgic Confession.

Individual sermons and individual writings could be pointed to, but preaching in the Protestant Reformed Churches is in a sad state today. There is an emphasis in the preaching that our forefather Herman Hoeksema warned us about. It is the emphasis on man. And it is the holding back of the gifts of God and the grace of God and the fellowship of God until man has done his part and man has done his thing and man has done his doing. And then they are given; then God’s stores in heaven are opened for man to receive. That is not pure preaching.

When it is subtle, even; when you think, “Was that right?” but can’t quite catch it in a sermon and go back and listen again and see there is something wrong—that is not pure preaching.

We don't need man. We don't need man preached to us. The church of Jesus Christ may not have man preached to her. Even the obedience of man and the calling of the word of God to man to be obedient is the fruit of man's salvation. What the church needs is Christ preached to her, and the grace of God preached to her, and election preached to her, the sovereignty of God in salvation preached to her. She needs Jesus Christ proclaimed! The church of Jesus Christ who hears Jesus Christ will bear fruit according to the word of God: obedience and gratitude.

The judgment of those who signed the Act of Separation was that preaching is not pure, and, therefore, that mark is corrupted.

So we could go through the other marks that are listed in article 29 of the Belgic Confession. The sacraments are taken away from those who cannot have their children baptized because they cannot answer that "the doctrine...which is taught here in this Christian church" is the pure and complete "doctrine of salvation." They cannot take the Lord's supper because they cannot have communion with those who are tolerating or outright teaching error and heresy.

And then there is the mark of Christian discipline, and here it becomes especially easy for the church to identify the true and the apostatizing or false church. Discipline. Who suffers discipline? The false teacher? The false teachers? The officebearers who defend the false doctrine month after month and year after year? Never once—never once—did any false teacher or any defender of false doctrine suffer discipline over these last years. Six men, six officebearers, have been disciplined by the Protestant Reformed Churches over these last years for their defense of the truth and for their rebuke of the lie. And when the church disciplines those who defend the truth and rebuke the lie, that is persecution. And persecution of teachers of the truth and rebukers of the lie is always the mark of the false church. It is an easy one; it is so obvious to see.

And for one who says, "But the Protestant Reformed Churches apologized to five of those men," then my question is, "If they were sorry, why did they keep doing it year in and year out? Why did they keep doing it?" The answer is, because she is an apostatizing denomination and because the honor of men, which she protects at all costs including the cost of the gospel, has been more important than the honor of Christ and his glorious truth.

I say that with no relish. I say that with no glee but with grief. She is an apostatizing church.

The marks of the true church and of the false church are how one knows whether a church is apostatizing.

That means, then, that the Act of Separation was necessary. It was necessary. When the marks are applied, year after year when the marks are applied, we came to a point where we could not stay any longer but had to leave.

A note regarding the necessity yet before we move on to the final point regarding implications. The necessity we found when we looked at pulpits and preaching and the sacraments and discipline. There may be those who see problems in the Protestant Reformed Churches; they may even see grievous problems; they may see how the honor of men trumps the honor of Christ's truth. But they say to themselves, "But there is not three points of common grace adopted yet by the classis or by the synod." Or they say, "There are not three points of conditional fellowship adopted yet by classis or by synod, and I must wait and see whether the synod ever adopts false doctrine explicitly, and then I will know that the Protestant

Reformed Churches are apostatizing.” I ask that man or that woman, “Where in article 29 of the Belgic Confession do the marks have anything to do with synod or classis?”

The marks are preaching, the sacraments, and discipline. If a church is clever enough and shrewd enough to make sure that three points will never come to a synod, you can still tell by the pulpit whether she is apostatizing. Don’t look to the *Acts of Synod* to weigh the condition of the church. Look to the word of God and what is in the pulpit. And look to the Belgic Confession, which teaches us where to look.

The Implications

Finally, the implications of the Act of Separation are, first of all, that the Protestant Reformed Churches will be judged by Jehovah. However much we might wish it otherwise, the word of God teaches that when “the prophets prophesy falsely, and priests bear rule by their [own] means [and not by the word of God], and [the] people love to have it so”—through their indifference; through their not having any idea of what’s going on in the churches; through their support of this man or that man because I like him, because he’s been good to me; through indifference toward the truth—when that happens God himself says, “Evil appeareth out of the north” (Jer. 5:31; 6:1). That is God’s own judgment; that is not mine. That’s not the judgment of the members who signed the Act of Separation. God judges apostatizing churches.

This means, then, that the implication of the Act of Separation is that a calling and a warning are issued to all of the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches who see the problems, who see the errors, and who are convicted of these things. The warning is, “Watch out! Beware.” That warning goes to all of the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches—“Repent, repent”—just as that warning always comes to the church. But beware, judgment is coming.

This means, second, that the call also goes out to come out. Come out. If you are convicted that the truth is not preached purely, that all things are not managed according to the word of God but according to the will of man, then come out. That is God’s own calling in Revelation 18:4: Come ye out from among them.

If there are members of the Protestant Reformed Churches who cannot leave in good conscience though they see problems, then the calling for those members is whatever work you are waiting to be done, do it. If you are waiting to speak to your consistory to ask where they stand on certain articles or on certain actions of the assemblies or certain sermons, then go to the consistory and ask where they stand on those things. If you believe that a protest or an appeal is yet necessary and are waiting for that work, then do that work. But don’t linger as you do that work. Do that work and finish that work, and then stand before the face of God with his word in your hand and article 29 of the Belgic Confession in your hand and measure and weigh and evaluate and judge.

Keep in mind that there is no end to protest and appeal. There is always one more thing you can do. There is one more synod you can protest to. There is one more year you can wait with an appeal. There is even one more year you can wait yet with an overture. There is no end of documents. One could write documents for ten more years using the lawful means in the Church Order. Keep that in mind too as you weigh your calling and where you belong in your membership.

And for those who are convicted that they too must come out and separate, First Reformed Protestant Church stands ready to help, to assist you.

If there are officebearers in Protestant Reformed churches, your path could be to write your own Act of Separation and lead out from your own congregation those whose souls are imperiled by their remaining in an apostatizing denomination.

If there are no officebearers in your congregation who see these things, but you are convicted you must come out nevertheless, then we stand ready to help here, if you get in touch with us, to organize that.

But the call comes, "Beware. What will you do in the end thereof? Gather yourselves and flee."

And this for the glory of God, for the glory of God and the glory of his truth! What can be more glorious than that? What cost can there be to pay that is not worth that? What suffering would one not endure and what grief would one not go through for that—for the glory of God and the glory of Jesus Christ? For it is the glory of God who in his grace has given his pure gospel to his church, who has given Jesus Christ unspotted by man to his church, unspotted by all our guilt and iniquity, for he bore it upon himself and he bore it away.

For the glory of God, for the glory of the truth, the Lord Jesus Christ, those who signed the Act of Separation did so. That itself was the grace of God to us, so that at the end of it all there is nothing, nothing, in which man can boast.

This is the Act of Separation, a holy work, holy reformation of Jehovah of his church!