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in this issue:

<i>Editor's Notes</i>	1
<i>A Critique of the Covenant of Works in Contemporary Controversy</i>	3
<i>Nathan J. Langerak</i>	
<i>Herman Bavinck on Covenant and Election</i>	54
<i>David J. Engelsma</i>	
<i>On the Way to Calvary: Isaac Does Not Need to Be Sacrificed</i>	69
<i>Jürgen-Berckhard Klautke</i>	
<i>Bound to Join: A Review and Defense</i>	88
<i>Angus Stewart</i>	
<i>Book Reviews</i>	121

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**Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary**  
**4949 Ivanrest Avenue**  
**Wyoming, MI 49418**  
**USA**

**Book Reviews**

- 121 denBoer, William. *God's Twofold Love: The Theology of Jacob Arminius*
- 133 Goodman, Martin. *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations*
- 140 Kostenberger, Andreas J. and Kruger, Michael J. *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity*
- 143 Kuyper, Abraham. *Our Worship*
- 148 Metaxas, Eric. *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*
- 154 Prime, Derek and Begg, Alistair. *On Being a Pastor: Understanding our Calling and Work*
- 156 Sandlin, P. Andrew. *A Faith That Is Never Alone: A Response to Westminster Seminary California*
- 169 VanDrunen. *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought*

## Editor's Notes

Welcome once again to the pages of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*. We, the faculty of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, are grateful for the privilege of presenting another issue of our journal to our readership. We trust that you will find the articles included in this issue informative, soundly Reformed, and edifying. A word about the contents of this issue.

The Reverend Nathan Langerak is pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church in Crete, Illinois. In his article, entitled "A Critique of the Covenant of Works in Contemporary Controversy," Rev. Langerak analyzes the teaching of the covenant of works as it developed in Reformed and Presbyterian churches, as well as the role that the doctrine is playing in the current controversy over the theology of the Federal Vision. We trust that you will find that Rev. Langerak presents a penetrating analysis of a false teaching that is wreaking havoc in Reformed and Presbyterian churches in our day.

Professor David Engelsma contributes an article on Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant as it relates to election. This contribution will be part of a book that he is completing and that will be published in the near future entitled *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition*. Not only does Prof. Engelsma summarize Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant, but he demonstrates clearly that Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant was governed by election. Bavinck did not teach, as many are teaching today, that while the covenant is established unilaterally, it is maintained bilaterally. He did not teach that the maintenance and perfection of the covenant was due to a cooperative effort of God and man. Bavinck was not at all unclear as to the relationship between election and the covenant. God is sovereign both in the establishment and in the maintenance of the covenant.

Included in this issue is an article entitled "On the Way to Calvary: Isaac Does Not Need to Be Sacrificed." This is an article that first

appeared in the theological journal entitled *Bekennende Kirche*. The author of the article is Dr. Jürgen-Burkhard Klautke, who is also the editor of *Bekennende Kirche*. Dr. Klautke is Dean and Professor of Christian Ethics and Systematic Theology in the Akademie Für Reformatorische Theologie in Marburg, Germany. Dr. Klautke has been a friend of the Protestant Reformed Churches since the mid-2000s, and member of the Bekennende Evangelisch-Reformierte Gemeinde (BERG), a Reformed church in Giessen, which has informal contact with the PRC (for more information on the contact, see the *Standard Bearer*, October 1, 2007). Mr. Peter VanDerSchaaf has translated this article. The article is a fine exposition of Genesis 17 and God's command to His covenant friend, Abraham, to offer up his only son, the son of the promise, Isaac. You will be edified by this fine exposition of Holy Scripture and the unique insights that Dr. Klautke has. We are indebted to him for his contribution.

*Bound to Join: Letters on Church Membership* is a recent publication by the Reformed Free Publishing Association. The book consists of a series of e-mail letters that Prof. David Engelsma wrote on the matter of the necessity of membership in the instituted church at the request of a number of attendees at the 2004 British Reformed Fellowship Conference. Rev. Angus Stewart contributes a review article of this book, giving a detailed account of its contents and defending its conclusions on the basis of Scripture and the Reformed standards.

This issue of *PRTJ* also contains a number of book reviews. Interesting, well-written, helpful book reviews. You will want to read them. The books reviewed are undoubtedly books that our readers will want to read themselves and add to their libraries.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*

—RLC

# A Critique of the Covenant of Works in Contemporary Controversy

Nathan J. Langerak

## Introduction

The doctrine of the covenant is the peculiar treasure of the Reformed churches. Although the early church fathers mentioned the idea of the covenant, the systemization of the doctrine of the covenant occurred in the Reformed tradition. Heinrich Heppe gives the Reformed consensus: “The doctrine of God’s covenant with man is thus the inmost heart and soul of the whole of revealed truth.”<sup>1</sup> He bases this assessment upon statements such as that by Johannus Heidegger:

Hence the marrow and as it were the sort of centre of the whole of Holy Scripture is the *berith*, the covenant and testament of God, to which as their single and most target-like target (*scopus unicus et σκοπιμω, τατὸ*) everything comprised in them must be referred. Admittedly nothing else has been handed down to the saints of all ages through the entire Scripture, than what is contained in the covenant and testament of God and its chapters, save that in the flow and succession of times individual points have been expounded more lavishly and clearly.<sup>2</sup>

Although John Calvin discussed the covenant, Heinrich Bullinger, Huldrych Zwingli, and Martin Bucer are generally acknowledged as the main early Reformed proponents and expounders of covenant theology. This is the assessment of Geerhardus Vos: “In Switzerland the Reformers had come into direct conflict with the Anabaptists. This

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1 Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: Wakeman Great Reprints, 1950), 281.

2 Ibid.

external circumstance may have already caused them to appreciate the covenant concept.”<sup>3</sup>

Herman Bavinck states fundamentally the same position: “The relation in which believers have come to stand to God by Christ is repeatedly described in Scripture with the term ‘covenant.’ Zwingli and Bucer already seized upon these scriptural thoughts to defend the unity of the Old and New Testaments against the Anabaptists.”<sup>4</sup>

The doctrine of the covenant—a covenant of God’s sovereign grace—expounded by the early Reformed theologians was successively elaborated upon in Reformed theology as a peculiar treasure of Reformed doctrine.

### **The Covenant with Adam in the Tradition**

One aspect of covenant theology that the Reformed theologians developed “with special predilection,” especially from the seventeenth century onward, was a covenant of God with Adam.<sup>5</sup>

However, the idea that the relationship between God and Adam was a covenant was not original with the Reformed. Already in the fifth century Augustine stated that God and Adam were in covenant:

But even the infants, not personally in their own life, but according to the common origin of the human race, have all broken God’s covenant in that one in whom all have sinned. Now there are many things called God’s covenants besides those two great ones, the old and the new, which any one who pleases may read and know. For the first covenant, which was made with the first man, is just this: “In the day ye eat thereof, ye shall surely die.”<sup>6</sup>

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3 Geerhardus Vos, *The Covenant in Reformed Theology*, trans. S. Voorwinde and W. VanGemenen (Philadelphia: K. M. Compbell, 1971), 3.

4 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 567.

5 Ibid.

6 Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods, *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 18, ed. Robert Hutchins (Chicago: William Benton, 1952), 439.

Herman Bavinck recognized that Augustine and others spoke of a covenant of God with Adam long before the Reformed theologians of the seventeenth century:

The relationship in which Adam originally stood vis-à-vis God was even described by Augustine as a covenant, a testament, a pact; and the translation of the words *keadam* by “like Adam” [in Hosea 6:7] led many to a similar view. Materially, therefore, the doctrine of what was later called “the covenant of works” also already occurs in the church fathers. Included in Adam’s situation, as it was construed by the Scholastics, Roman Catholics, and Lutheran theologians, lay all the elements that were later summed up especially by Reformed theologians in the doctrine of the covenant of works.<sup>7</sup>

Although Bavinck’s account does not give a very propitious provenance for the doctrine of the covenant of works—Scholastics, Roman Catholics, and Lutherans—the Reformed perpetuated and expanded on the idea of the covenant of God with Adam in paradise. The Reformed described the relationship between God and Adam in paradise as a covenant not so much because others did it before them, but because all of God’s dealings with men are in covenant, and because the Scriptures teach it. Specifically as the tradition developed they began to define that covenant of God with Adam as a covenant of works.

The covenant of works has a long pedigree in Reformed and Presbyterian theology. Depending on whom one reads, the history may be longer or shorter, but its presence in Reformed theology for hundreds of years cannot be debated.

No one does.

It is frankly admitted by all, even by the men of the Federal Vision (FV), that the pedigree of the covenant of works in Reformed and Presbyterian theological history is impeccable.

Copious citations from Reformed theologians showing what they taught about the covenant of works, therefore, does not constitute an adequate answer to the arguments presented against the doctrine by

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7 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:567.

its critics. An average seminary student could with a little work assemble an impressive list of names and citations from past Reformed theologians explaining what the covenant of works is, who taught it, and for how long it has been taught in Reformed theology.

Reformed theology's conception of the covenant with Adam developed under the idea of a covenant of works. Some developed the concept with great detail. Others merely mentioned it, or treated it briefly. A representative treatment of the doctrine—something of a Reformed consensus—is given by Heinrich Heppe. According to him, Cocceius defines the covenant with Adam as follows:

The covenant of works is God's pact with Adam in his integrity, as the head of the whole human race, by which God requiring of man the perfect obedience of the law of works promised him if obedient eternal life in heaven, but threatened him if he transgressed with eternal death; and on his part man promised perfect obedience to God's requirement.<sup>8</sup>

Heidegger describes the covenant with Adam as “the agreement between God and Adam created in God's image to be the head and prince of life and felicity, should he obey all his precepts most perfectly, adding the threat of death, should he sin even in the least detail; while Adam was accepting this condition.”<sup>9</sup>

Hodge states it this way:

God having created man after his own image in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience, forbidding him to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil upon pain of death.<sup>10</sup>

The teaching of a covenant of works was found not only in the

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8 Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 283.

9 Ibid.

10 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (London: Charles Scribner and Company, 1873; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1952), 2:117.



writings of the theologians, but also in some of the Reformed confessions, although not in the Three Forms of Unity.<sup>11</sup>

The Irish Articles of 1615 explain the nature of the covenant with Adam in Article 21:

Man being at the beginning created according to the image of God (which consisted especially in the wisdom of his mind and the true holiness of his free will), had the covenant of the law ingrafted in his heart, whereby God did promise unto him everlasting life upon condition that he performed entire and perfect obedience unto his Commandments, according to that measure of strength wherewith he was endued in his creation, and threatened death unto him if he did not perform the same.<sup>12</sup>

The Westminster Confession of Faith of 1648 describes the covenant of works in Chapter 7.2: “The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect obedience.”<sup>13</sup>

These are by no means the most elaborate statements of the covenant of works. The Irish Articles do not even contain the name. Neither creed sharply defines the life that was promised to Adam as

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11 The Three Forms of Unity do not mention the doctrine of the covenant of works at all. The insistence, therefore, in the recent study committee report on the FV by the United Reformed Churches (URC) that the covenant of works is found “materially” in the Three Forms of Unity is mistaken. A covenant with Adam is found implicitly in the Three Forms of Unity. Every Reformed minister who still preaches on the Heidelberg Catechism knows that he has to say something about this when he comes to Lord’s Day 3, where it says about Adam, “and live with Him in eternal happiness.” The Belgic Confession, Article 14, mentions “the commandment of life.” But the covenant of works is not found; there is not so much as a breath concerning the doctrine, especially in the elaborate form in which it is stated by many and in which the report would have it taught.

12 Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), 3:530.

13 Ibid., 3:617.

the heavenly, higher life that Jesus Christ merited. The Westminster Standards do not speak anywhere of Adam's meriting or of his coming into possession of higher, heavenly life.<sup>14</sup>

The most involved official statement of the covenant of works is in the *Formula Consensus Helvetica* that Johannus Heidegger, Francis Turretin, and Lucas Gernler wrote in 1675 and that attained quasi-confessional status in the Reformed tradition. In summary the *Formula* taught about the covenant with Adam:

Canon VII:... Having created man in this manner [in God's image] he put him under the Covenant of Works, and in this Covenant freely promised him communion with God, favor, and life, if indeed he acted in obedience to his will.

Canon VIII: Moreover the promise connected to the Covenant of Works was not a continuation only of earthly life and happiness, but the possession especially of eternal and celestial life, a life, namely, of both body and soul in heaven, if indeed man ran the course of obedience, with unspeakable joy in communion with God....

Canon IX: Wherefore we can not assent to the opinion of those who deny that a reward of heavenly bliss was proffered to Adam on condition of obedience to God, and do not admit that the promise of the Covenant of Works was any thing more than a promise of perpetual life abounding in every kind of good that can be suited to the body and soul of man in a state of perfect nature....

Canon X: God entered into the Covenant of Works not only with

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14 Some proponents of the covenant of works appeal loudly to the Westminster. There is no question that the Westminster explicitly calls the covenant with Adam a covenant of works, but it also allows other names. Westminster also does not teach it elaborately. Some have argued that Westminster's exact language cannot bear all the freight that has been put onto it. For instance, Prof. David Engelsma writes, "It is doubtful whether one bound by the Westminster Standards is committed to the notion that Adam might have merited eternal life by his obedience.... Nor do they define the 'life promised to Adam' as the higher, immortal, eternal life that Christ has now won for the new human race" ("The Covenant of Creation with Adam," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 40, no. 1 [November 2006]:15). For a Presbyterian's view see Eugene Case, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in the Westminster Standards," in *ibid.*, 72–102.

Adam for himself, but also, in him as the head and root with the whole human race....<sup>15</sup>

A comparison between these statements on the covenant of works from 1675 and that of Westminster from 1648 reveals a development in the formulation of the covenant of works. The Formula is not so explicit as to use the term *merit*, but it does speak of “eternal and celestial life” as the end of the covenant of works with Adam, and it describes the covenant in great detail, far greater detail than Westminster.

These three representative definitions cited from three orthodox Reformed and Presbyterian theologians, from three different eras, as well as certain creedal statements demonstrate that while they each define the covenant of God with Adam somewhat differently, nevertheless, there is a certain unanimity in the Reformed tradition on the essentials of the covenant of works.

The following features may be regarded as its key elements.

First, the whole tradition taught that the covenant of works was established with the probationary command in Genesis 2:16–17. According to the tradition, the covenant of works was not inherent in the creation of Adam, but the covenant was added to Adam’s paradisiacal life with the probationary command.

In harmony with this idea, the tradition spoke of Adam’s being created “for the covenant,” and the covenant’s being called the covenant of nature “because it was founded on the nature of man (as it was at first created by God) and on his integrity or powers,” not because it was inherent in creation.<sup>16</sup> Heppe says, “Since man as such was created for this covenant of works and since this determination of man is already based on his nature in the image of God, it may also be designated the

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15 Martin Klauber, “The Helvetic Formula Consensus (1675): An Introduction and Translation” *Trinity Journal* 15 (Spring 1990):117. The Formula is also found in *Creeds of the Churches*, ed. John H. Leith, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 312–14.

16 Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 1992), 575.

covenant of nature.”<sup>17</sup> Christian Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof informs us that the covenant with Adam in the beginning was called the covenant of nature, “which was rather common at first, [but] was gradually abandoned, since it was apt to give the impression that this covenant was simply a part of the natural relationship in which man stood to God.”<sup>18</sup> Bavinck sums up this view of the Reformed well:

It was called “covenant of nature,” not because it was deemed to flow automatically and naturally from the nature of God or the nature of man, but because the foundation on which the covenant rested, that is, the moral law, was known to man by nature, and because it was made with man in his original state and could be kept by man with the powers bestowed on him in the creation, without the assistance of supernatural grace. Later, when this term occasioned misunderstanding, it was preferentially replaced by that of “covenant of works.”<sup>19</sup>

The Reformed were insistent that God and Adam were not in covenant by virtue of his creation, but the covenant was added to Adam’s life after his creation.

Consistent with the teaching that the covenant of works was added to Adam’s life, the tradition taught that the covenant of works was added as the means to the end of eternal, heavenly life that was promised to Adam in the covenant. Berkhof says, “When God created man, He by that very fact established a natural relationship between Himself and man.” This relationship was emphatically not the covenant relationship: “In addition to the natural relationship He, by a positive enactment, graciously established a covenant relationship.” The difference between these two was simply stated. In the natural relationship “even if he did all that was required of him, he would still have to say, I am but an unprofitable servant.” By virtue of the covenant, God “enabled man to improve his condition in the way of obedience,” and because of this covenant Adam “acquired certain

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17 Heppie, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 281

18 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1932, repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 211.

19 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:567.

rights,” so that “this covenant enabled Adam to obtain eternal life for himself and for his descendants.”<sup>20</sup> Adam was created as a natural, earthly creature in the image of God, but was destined by means of the covenant of works for heaven. God added the covenant of works to enable Adam to arrive at a higher state of life than he possessed by virtue of his creation in God’s image. Virtually all proponents of the covenant of works affirmed that heavenly life is the only possible explanation of the life that Adam was promised in the covenant of works.

Further, the Reformed tradition, virtually with one voice, taught that the covenant of works was a bargain, or pact, that was struck by God with Adam. Along with this the Reformed insisted that the pact, or agreement, was conditional. That is how the Reformed consistently defined the essence of the covenant of works: “the covenant of works is God’s pact with Adam in his integrity” or “the covenant of works is the agreement between God and Adam created in God’s image.”<sup>21</sup> The Reformed tradition may have on occasion stated that God put Adam in this arrangement by virtue of the fact that he is God. So the writers of the Formula state: “Him, thus constituted, He [God] put under the Covenant of Works.”<sup>22</sup> Yet, the arrangement as such was a pact with stipulations, promises, and conditions. Although some stated that God established it unilaterally, it was held that Adam definitely had a role in accepting the condition of this covenant or in maintaining the covenant through the conditions of the covenant stipulated by God in order that he might obtain heavenly life by means of that covenant.

Behind all this, the Reformed tradition taught merit by Adam in the covenant of works. Adam would have *merited* the eternal, heavenly life promised to him conditioned on his obedience. Even if the word *merit* was never used, the very idea was inherent in the whole doctrine of the covenant of works. The covenant was added to Adam’s natural state for the very purpose of Adam’s meriting heavenly life. The preferred name of the covenant reveals how he was to do this: by his works. Merit, the idea of merit, was essential to the doctrine. Heppe

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20 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 215.

21 Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 283.

22 Leith, *Creeds*, 312.

sums up the tradition's idea of merit: "On condition that Adam gave perfect obedience he was promised eternal life... which he was to merit for himself *ex pacto* (though not *ex congruo* or *ex condigno*)."<sup>23</sup>

This is also the notion of merit that contemporary theologian Cornelis Venema supports in his recent defense of the covenant of works as formulated in the Westminster Confession of Faith:

There is one obvious sense in which the language of "merit" has no place in a biblical theology of the covenant. At no point in God's dealings with man as covenant creature may we say that God, in the strict sense of justice, owes the creature anything.

The fact is that God has, by entering into covenant with man, *bound himself by the promise and as well the demands/obligations of that covenant*. This means that Adam's obedience to the probationary command, though it were an outworking and development within the covenant communion in which he was placed by God's prevenient favor, would nonetheless "merit" or "deserve" the reward of righteousness God himself had promised. In the covenant itself, God bound himself to grant, *as in some sense a reward well-deserved*, the fullness of covenant fellowship into which Adam was called.<sup>24</sup>

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23 Heppie, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 294–95.

24 Cornelis Venema, "Recent Criticisms of the 'Covenant of Works' in the Westminster Confession of Faith" *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 9 (Fall 1993):172. Emphasis is the author's own. Venema's article is odd. In it he purports to defend Westminster's traditional formulation of the covenant of works from recent criticism, but promptly defines the covenant as a fellowship, defends merit, and claims the explicit promise of heavenly life to Adam, all of which, while part of the developed tradition on the covenant of works, are not explicitly part of Westminster. In addition, while the article purports to be a refutation of recent criticisms of the covenant of works, he never mentions the earliest and weightiest recent criticism of the covenant of works by Herman Hoeksema. Recently, Rowland Ward engages in historical-theological revisionism when he states, "It is very disturbing to see that quite a number of orthodox writers [current, modern writers] have the notion that the covenant of works is a merit based arrangement, the reward being wages earned. But in its formulation of the covenant of works the Reformed tradition has constantly rejected any such idea" (Rowland S. Ward, *God and Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant* [Wantirna, Australia: New

His point is clear. Bare, robust, full merit does not belong in the theology of the covenant of works, because, “at no point in God’s dealings with man as covenant creature may we say that God, in the strict sense of justice, owes the creature anything.” However, a certain kind of merit must have and does have a place in the covenant of works. By the covenant of works God “bound himself to grant” the fullness of covenant fellowship into which Adam was called, “as in some sense a reward well deserved.” It is merit by virtue of the covenant that God made with Adam, whereby God bound Himself to give to Adam “in some sense a reward well-deserved.” He may put *merit* in quotation marks, and use the qualifying words, “in some sense,” but, for all that, God gives the reward to Adam as “well-deserved.”

Merit both in the tradition and presently is essential to the concept of the covenant of works. The contemporary defenders view this as the most essential piece of the covenant of works because, as they argue, if Adam could not have merited, or did not merit, then neither did Christ merit.

### **The Covenant with Adam: A Contemporary Issue**

Because of the controversy in Reformed and Presbyterian churches over the heretical movement known as the FV, the covenant of works has again come to prominence. Despite the apparent unwillingness of many who oppose the more glaring errors of the FV to deal with the root of these errors—its conditional covenant doctrine—the issue of the covenant is part and parcel of this controversy and will not go away. The FV itself will not allow it to go away. The men of the FV argue for their heresies on the basis of their covenant doctrine.

One aspect of the covenant that certain ostensible opponents of the FV are dealing with is the FV’s denial of the covenant of works. Early on, this doctrine was part of the doctrinal controversy surrounding the case of Professor Norman Shepherd at Westminster

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Melbourne Press, 2003], 14). It is not true that the Reformed “constantly rejected” the idea of the covenant of works as “a merit based arrangement.” Rather, they maintained consistently that Adam could have merited eternal, heavenly life with God, albeit *ex pacto*.

Theological Seminary in Philadelphia in the late 1970s and early 1980s and has continued to be an issue in the controversy. Among those who are opposed to the movement, the doctrine of the covenant of works has become something of a shibboleth by which they guard the fords of their churches. Buckets of ink and reams of paper are being used to defend the covenant of works. This vigorous defense of the covenant of works is illustrated by recent reports from synodically appointed study committees, articles in magazines, a plethora of articles and blogs on the Internet, books, and learned papers in theological journals.

The 2010 report on the FV received by the United Reformed Churches contains a large defense of the covenant of works. It calls the denial of the covenant of works by the FV “one of its most significant features” and one that “bears directly on the doctrine of justification.” The report argues that “in the Three Forms of Unity the absence of the terminology of a ‘covenant of works’... does not alter the fact that all of the elements or components of the Reformed doctrine are present ‘materially’ in them.”<sup>25</sup> In this light, and arguing in favor of the covenant of works, the report states that to say that the Three Forms of Unity do not teach the covenant of works is “too hasty.”<sup>26</sup> The report argues that the covenant of works promised eternal life to Adam, that it was the means to his attaining eternal life, that Adam would have merited eternal life, and that maintaining this doctrine is essential to the controversy with the FV.

Virtually the same is the 2007 report on FV by the Presbyterian Churches of America (PCA), which states,

The covenant made with man before the Fall, is called by our Standards a covenant of *works* (respecting its terms or conditions) (*WCF* 7.2), a covenant of *life* (respecting its goal or end) (*LC* 20), a covenant with *Adam* (respecting its party or representative) (*LC* 22), and the *first* covenant (respecting its chronological priority and indicating that

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25 [https://www.urnca.org/urnca/StudyCommittees/FederalVision/Federal\\_Vision\\_Study\\_Committee\\_Report.pdf](https://www.urnca.org/urnca/StudyCommittees/FederalVision/Federal_Vision_Study_Committee_Report.pdf), 34, 36.

26 *Ibid.*



there is a successor) (*WCF* 34 7.2). All four names describe the same pre-Fall covenant and aspects essential to it.

This first covenant or covenant of works entailed both promises and conditions (*WCF* 7.2). Furthermore, it comprehended Adam as federal head or representative, and required of him perfect and personal obedience to the moral law (*LC* 22, *WCF* 19.1–3). When Adam fell, however, he made himself and all his posterity by ordinary generation incapable of life by the covenant of works, and plunged all mankind into a condition of sin and misery (*WCF* 7.3, *LC* 22, 23–25).

The *Confession* does not equate the instrumentality of faith in relation to justification in the covenant of grace with the conditions of the covenant of works. It carefully distinguishes conditions from requirements and reminds us that even the faith of the elect is the gift of God (*WCF* 11.1; *LC* 32). Likewise, the *Confession* draws a line from the conditions of the covenant of works to the obedience and satisfaction of Jesus Christ, teaching us that it is not our faith or faithfulness but Christ's work which satisfies the covenant of works (*LC* 20, 32, *WCF* 3.5, 7.2, 11.1, *SC* 12).

This is precisely the point of the Standards' use of the term and theological category of "merit." Merit relates to the just fulfillment of the conditions of the covenant of works (*LC* 55, 174). This no man can do since the Fall (*LC* 193) but Christ only (*WCF* 17.3). The Standards consistently assert our inability to merit pardon of sin (*WCF* 16.5), 7 and contrast our demerit with Christ's merit (*LC* 55, cf. *WCF* 30.4). Christ's work (active and passive, preceptive and penal, perfect and personal, obedience and satisfaction) fulfills the conditions of the covenant of works (*WCF* 8.5, 11.1, 3, 19.6), and thus secures a just and righteous redemption that is at the same time freely offered and all of grace.

In a footnote the report also states,

Hence, denial of the category of merit, or the substitution of the idea of maturity in its place, neither enriches our covenant theology nor makes God more gracious in his dealings with us, but instead compromises the Cross's vindication of the righteousness of God, and diminishes

the believer's apprehension of the security that flows from the costly justice of free grace.<sup>27</sup>

A recent book by the faculty of Westminster Seminary in Escondido, California, also defends the covenant of works as one of the main defenses against the FV.<sup>28</sup> In copiously referenced essays, the faculty again and again argues for the covenant of works against the FV's denial of it.

From the Internet blogs we need only cite PCA minister Rev. Wes White's posts regarding the covenant of works, in which he argues about his analysis of the doctrine:

This analysis demonstrates that even though this doctrine is not explicitly mentioned in the TFU [Three Forms of Unity], it is still an important doctrine that should be defended, as the great Dutch Reformed theologians of old have done. The Dutch Reformed theological heritage is a rich one, and my suggestion is that we go back to these older theologians and take a much more serious look at what they propose.<sup>29</sup>

His argument, and the argument of many who are at present vigorously defending the covenant of works, is clear: it has a mas-

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27 <http://www.federal-vision.com/pdf/pcafvreport.pdf>, 2206–2207. It is perhaps somewhat understandable that the PCA would defend the covenant of works since the terminology is used in the Westminster Standards. However, when the report states that the work of Christ “fulfills the conditions of the covenant of works” and implies that Adam could merit with God, they go way beyond Westminster and some of the divines at the assembly. There is a vast difference between saying that Christ merits and saying that Christ's merits fulfill the conditions of the covenant of works. Besides, the creedal references they cite in the footnote as proof of their assertions contain no such doctrine.

28 *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California*, ed. R. Scott Clark (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2007).

29 <http://www.weswhite.net/2010/04/brief-account-of-development-of/>.

sive history in Reformed and Presbyterian theology and must be defended as a vital doctrine. Within this defense of the covenant of works as one of the primary Reformed bulwarks against the FV heresy, there has also been the insinuation, if not the explicit charge, that a denial of the covenant of works is a kind of cloaked FV teaching.

Regardless of whether one holds to the covenant of works, this much is apparent: the covenant of works has achieved prominence in the controversy, a prominence far greater than it deserves. It is specifically to the FV's present denial and Reformed theologians' renewed defense of the covenant of works that this article responds.

### **The Federal Vision's Denial of the Covenant of Works**

The covenant of works as formulated in the Reformed tradition has not been without its critics. It has been criticized by heretics. The Remonstrants were not fond of it, even though James Arminius taught something similar to it.<sup>30</sup> Barth denied it. The heretics of the FV also deny it. In their *Joint Federal Vision Profession* several teachers of the FV write:

*We affirm* that Adam was in a covenant of life with the triune God in the Garden of Eden, in which arrangement Adam was required to obey God completely, from the heart. We hold further that all such obedience, had it occurred, would have been rendered from a heart of faith alone, in a spirit of loving trust. Adam was created to progress from immature glory to mature glory, but that glorification too would have been a gift of grace, received by faith alone.

*We deny* that continuance in this covenant in the Garden was in any way a payment for work rendered. Adam could forfeit or demerit the gift of glorification by disobedience, but the gift or continued possession of that gift was not offered by God to Adam conditioned upon Adam's moral exertions or achievements. In line with this, we affirm that until the expulsion from the Garden, Adam was free to eat from

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30 Arminius' version of the covenant of works is found in James Arminius, *Works*, vol. 2, Disputation XXIX and XXX. The book can be found at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/arminius/works2.toc.html>.

the tree of life. *We deny* that Adam had to earn or merit righteousness, life, glorification, or anything else.<sup>31</sup>

The main FV critics of the covenant of works are James Jordan, Richard Lusk, Andrew Sandlin, Roger Wagner, and Peter Leithart. These men put forward a supposedly new understanding of God's covenant with Adam.

The basic objection that unites all of these men in their criticism of the covenant of works is their wholesale rejection of the idea of merit. Andrew Sandlin says, "There is simply no such thing as a meritorious basis of eternal life, and there is no such thing as a meritorious Soteriology. It is simply a fiction."<sup>32</sup>

Richard Lusk says the same: "Several considerations militate against the meritorious view of the primal covenant. There does not seem to be any room for synergism, much less full blown Pelagianism, in the original covenant."<sup>33</sup> Richard Lusk recently writes, "My overarching rejection of 'merit theology' should be kept in view. I utterly abhor and reject any notion that our works can have merit in God's sight."<sup>34</sup>

These men also reject merit for Jesus Christ.

Lusk again:

Jesus is the successful Pelagian, the One Guy in the history of the world who succeeded in pulling off the works righteousness plan. Jesus covered our demerits by dying on the cross and provided all the merits need by keeping the legal terms of the covenant of works perfectly. Those merits are then imputed to us by faith alone.<sup>35</sup>

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31 [http://www.federal-vision.com/resources/joint\\_FV\\_Statement.pdf](http://www.federal-vision.com/resources/joint_FV_Statement.pdf), 4-5.

32 P. Andrew Sandlin, ed., *A Faith That Is Never Alone: A Response to Westminster Seminary California* (La Grange, CA: Kerygma Press, 2007), 70.

33 E. Calvin Beisner, ed., *The Auburn Avenue Theology Pros and Cons* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 122.

34 Sandlin, *A Faith That Is Never Alone*, 312.

35 Beisner, *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 137.

This is Lusk's mocking way of denying the merits of Jesus' work and their imputation to believers by faith alone.

Clearly, the idea of merit must be rejected. It must be rejected for man, for Christ, for everyone. The men of the FV huff and puff against the word *merit*. Because the concept of merit finds its root in, or is at least a significant part of, the covenant of works, they also reject the covenant of works.

The FV men also reject the idea inherent in the covenant of works that the essence of the covenant is a pact, which pact was added to Adam's life sometime after his creation:

The covenant of works model verges on reducing the covenant to a contract, making Adam into an employee who had to earn wages of eternal life.... Adam was not created in a neutral position with regard to the favor of God. He began his life within the circle of God's covenant blessing.<sup>36</sup>

Any notion of a pact involves one in a meritorious arrangement that resembles a contract. Any notion of a pact makes the covenant an addition to Adam's life after his creation. Such a notion of the covenant as a pact must, therefore, be rejected.

In place of the definition of the covenant as an agreement, or pact, the men of the FV variously define the covenant, but basically along the lines that Roger Wagner draws: "In Biblical terms, the 'covenant' is a relationship of union and communion (fellowship) which God established with His human creatures, made in His own image—first Adam and Eve in the beginning, and in them with all their posterity."<sup>37</sup>

Richard Lusk and James Jordan emphasize the son-ship of Adam as the essence of the covenant, which would coincide with the definition of Roger Wagner.<sup>38</sup> James Jordan defines the covenant as "a

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew, P. Sandlin, ed., *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective* (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2004), 38.

<sup>38</sup> Beisner, *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 118–148; Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, ed., *The Federal Vision* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2004), 151–195.

personal-structural bond which joins the three persons of God in a community of life, and in which man was created to participate.” The precise nature, then, of the covenant with Adam was a relationship of communion and fellowship with God.

In this covenant, God made a promise of life to Adam. Regarding that life, which Adam could have attained, the men of the FV men are clear. Jordan says concerning the promise to Adam,

Coming to the Tree of Knowledge, Adam would experience a first kind of death and glorification.... Full glorification with all the elements of the world would await the coming of the son of Adam, who would also be the Son of God the Father.<sup>39</sup>

Adam without Christ would have attained to an initial stage of glorification, and with him the entire human race, merely through obedience to the probationary command. However, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, would eventually become incarnate anyway, apart from sin on the part of Adam, in order to bring Adam and his posterity into the second stage of maturity—the glorious heavenly life. Jordan believes that “the incarnation of the Son of God, who would also be the Son of Adam, was planned all along, apart from sin.”<sup>40</sup>

Lusk states the inheritance promised to Adam in the more comprehensive terms of the gathering together of all things:

God would have eventually given him the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This Tree would have represented the bestowal of kingly office and glory upon Adam. It would have meant a promotion from earthly dominion to heavenly (1 Corinthians 15:47; cf. vs. 44, 45 and Ephesians 2:6). It would have meant the dawning of the new age, the removal of the boundary between heaven and earth (Genesis 1:6–8), the joining together of heaven and earth (Revelation 21, 22).<sup>41</sup>

When Adam had passed his test of obedience to God by not eating of

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39 Wilkins, *Federal Vision*, 187.

40 Ibid., 185.

41 Beisner, *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 139.

the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “it would have meant a promotion from earthly dominion to heavenly.” He would have accomplished through his own obedience all that Scripture ascribes to Christ in his work: “the dawning of the new age, the removal of the boundary between heaven and earth, the joining together of heaven and earth.”

In the place of the concept of merit, which the men of the FV reject, they develop the concept of maturity. Maturity, they believe, fits with Adam’s relationship as a son: sons do not merit with their fathers, but they receive inheritances. James Jordan says,

My thesis is that what Adam was supposed to provide, and what Jesus did provide for us, is maturity. That is to say, the new status that Jesus provides for us does not come about because He earned something Adam failed to earn, but because He persevered in faith toward the Father until He was mature, which Adam did not do.<sup>42</sup>

Lest this is thought to be the idiosyncratic opinion of James Jordan, Richard Lusk states basically the same thing when contrasting his view with the covenant of works: “Was Adam to merit this eschatological form of life? Was he to earn this glorified life or was he to mature into it through patient and faithful service?” In answer to his own question, Lusk writes, “He would make his way towards the goal of maturity by faith, not chalking up brownie points in a merit system.”<sup>43</sup>

The FV’s concept of maturity is that there are two stages in human existence:

That there are two stages in human existence is clear from Romans 5, which tells us repeatedly that what we have in Christ is “much more” than what Adam lost. Hence, there is an Adamic stage of human life and then a glorified stage, which Adam failed to attain.

What, then, is the nature of these two stages of life? On the face of it, the two stages would seem to be childhood and maturity. Indeed, this is the language Paul uses to describe the change of ages brought about by Jesus (Gal. 3:23–4:11). A person does not become a mature

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42 Wilkins, *Federal Vision*, 155.

43 Beisner, *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 124.

adult by “earning” or “meriting” it by doing good works. Rather, a child is supposed to grow up to be an adult, unless he dies before attaining mature age. Adam came under death as a child, and hence did not attain maturity and glory.<sup>44</sup>

Adam was created in a childhood relationship with God. The stage attained by Jesus Christ is the adult stage of life, which life Adam could have, but failed to attain.

Specifically, maturity involves obedient faith and trust in God as one matures from childhood to adulthood. Adam “was to trust and obey, for there was no other way to enter eschatological life.”<sup>45</sup> Adam received the command from God not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He was to abstain from that tree while partaking of the tree of life, all the while trusting that this was the good way for him to attain to the glorified life that God had promised him, and through the exercise of his faith in being obedient he was striving after that promised eschatological life.

Through the obedience of faith, so that he was maturing, Adam was to attain to the glorified life that God promised to him. Recognizing that this opens them up to the charge of merit, they attempt to save this condition in the covenant by saying that the reward was granted by grace.

God threatened judgment if Adam and Eve disobeyed, but He did not promise eternal life as the *reward* for obedience. I infer from this omission that they would have been granted eternal life on some *other* ground than their obedience. It seems to me that this ground is the unmerited favor of God. Eternal life, even in the prelapsarian period, was of grace, and not of merit.<sup>46</sup>

The heavenly life God promised to Adam would be granted as a gift of God’s grace when he saw that Adam was ready for that stage of his life. Yet, this gift of grace was given to Adam as the result of his maturation process. Adam had to “prepare himself through faithful-

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44 Wilkins, *Federal Vision*, 151.

45 Beisner, *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 125.

46 Sandlin, *Backbone of the Bible*, 69.



ness to receive God's new gift." In effect Adam was to make himself worthy of such a heavenly life by faithfully obeying God's word and trusting His promises. God would track Adam's progress in maturity until he "saw fit to grant him the transfiguration."<sup>47</sup>

Against this new understanding of the covenant of God with Adam, contemporary defenders of the covenant of works charge that it leads to the denial of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer. One such defender states it this way:

It is crucial that I discuss the covenant of works in my analysis of the Federal Vision because it has denied the existence of this covenant. For some time I did not fully understand why these men were denying this covenant, but now I understand. There is a common thread that runs through their theology. Since they have redefined the meaning of justifying faith to incorporate the essence of covenant faithfulness or obedience, they must by necessity deny the covenant of works. The doctrine of the active obedience of Christ finds its root in the covenant of works. Romans 5:12–21 finds its analogy in the covenant of works. The second Adam, Jesus Christ, is able to perfectly obey what Adam was unable to do. In the mindset of the Federal Vision, if Adam's eternal life was not bound to a perfect compliance to God's commands, then there is no need for a perfect obedience for us in the covenant of grace.... In their denial of the covenant of works, the Federal Vision continues to reveal its ugly gospel.<sup>48</sup>

The charge is that if one denies the covenant of works, one will also inevitably deny the doctrine of justification by faith alone because one will deny the imputation of the active obedience of Christ to believers that "finds its root in the covenant of works."

The critic is right in relating the FV's denial of the covenant of works to its denial of the legal aspect of the Christian's salvation, specifically justification by faith alone.

This is not news.

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47 Wilkins, *Federal Vision*, 195.

48 John M. Otis, *Danger in the Camp: An Analysis and Refutation of the Heresies of the Federal Vision* (Corpus Christi, TX: Triumphant Publications, 2005), 94

The men of the FV have pointed this out.

However, it is necessary to show that, although the FV rejects certain features and terminology of the covenant of works, its essential position is closer to the traditional formulation of the covenant of works than may appear at first glance. Indeed, it can be argued that it is its development. Besides, a rejection of the covenant of works as such is not the problem with the FV, but the root of its heresy is the rigorous application of a conditional covenant promise of God to the covenant of God with Adam.

### **Critique of the Federal Vision's Understanding of the Covenant with Adam**

The teaching of the FV on the covenant of God with Adam is erroneous on a number of points.

Its doctrine of the covenant of God with Adam has an evil root. The contemporary prominence of the covenant of works is due in part to the fact that many theologians today treat the FV as a heresy that at its root denies justification by faith alone. This leads to their weak and ineffective defense of that vital doctrine by recourse to a defense of the covenant of works along with loudly championing Luther's law/gospel distinction over against the FV's denial of the covenant of works.<sup>49</sup>

Besides being a weak and ineffective defense against the errors of the FV, an appeal to the covenant of works and the insistence by many that the denial of the doctrine is almost at the heart of the FV controversy plays into the hands of the FV. This is so because, while defending the covenant of works, some opponents of the FV are ignoring what is at the root of the FV's denial of that doctrine.

The FV is a covenantal heresy, the root of which is the FV's denial of a gracious and unconditional covenant of grace. The denial of justification by faith alone and of the imputation of Christ's righteous-

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49 For example, the report of the United Reformed Churches on the FV says, "To appreciate the significance of the FV criticism of the formulation of the pre-fall and post-fall covenants, it is important to note the way FV authors treat the distinction between the "law" and the "gospel." ([https://www.urcna.org/urcna/StudyCommittees/FederalVision/Federal\\_Vision\\_Study\\_Committee\\_Report.pdf](https://www.urcna.org/urcna/StudyCommittees/FederalVision/Federal_Vision_Study_Committee_Report.pdf), 20).

ness to believers is the most obvious and offensive fruits of that evil root. The FV is a covenantal heresy that denies the truths of sovereign grace by teaching a conditional covenant with a conditional promise. The men of the FV tout this fact, virtually defying any to challenge this or to refute their doctrine on this basis. Indeed, because of this fact many of their critics are silent about this, even apologetic, or the controversy takes place in the theological stratosphere of learned, well-researched books with a spirit of scholarly rapprochement.

Hear one FV proponent of many who could be cited: “The Bible does not teach that the Gospel is merely a message that grants freely, to an exclusively passive faith and apart from demands and conditions of the sinner.” And he continues his bold proclamation of conditions: “The idea that man’s obligations in salvation counts as good works or merit or achievement in which man could boast makes a mockery of the Scriptures, for the Bible emphatically teaches that man stands under obligation to meet certain conditions if he is to be saved by grace and if he is to be justified in the Final Day.” He shows that he does not mean by *demand* what Reformed theology intended by it, that is, the required and necessary way. He means *conditions*, that is, that upon which another thing depends. The conditions that he is talking about and which he wrongly equates with demands are conditions for justification and that in the Final Day. He takes deliberate and deadly aim at the doctrines of grace: “Three obligations stand out clearly as conditions for man’s salvation—faith, repentance, and submission to the Lordship of Jesus.” The context, in which he cites Abraham as an example of this, means that he intends salvation *in the covenant*: “God’s salvific call to Abraham is a prime example in the OT.”<sup>50</sup>

James Arminius could not have said it better.

In fact, the FV’s covenant doctrine is the development of the conditional covenantal theology that has existed in Reformed churches since James Arminius, and has been allowed to propagate itself throughout the centuries as genuine Reformed theology, while it is a not-so-subtly-disguised Arminianism that teaches the same resistible grace that James Arminius taught. The fully developed form of this conditional covenantal theology is the FV and its denial of justification

50 Sandlin, *A Faith That Is Never Alone*, 206.

by faith alone along with all the other doctrines of grace. The men of the FV teach a covenant that has a conditional promise. The promise is given to every baptized child and is conditioned on the child's faith, repentance, and lifelong obedience. In this covenant, justification, the ground of a man's blessing in the covenant, is by a working faith and on the basis of that working faith—works—a man is approved in the final judgment and receives eternal life.

The FV's rejection of the covenant of works is rooted in this covenant doctrine. The FV denies the covenant of works and fashions the covenant of God with Adam in the image of its doctrine of the covenant of grace. So says Peter Leithart:

The difference between the covenants has *nothing* to do with how one has fellowship with God, or receives rewards from God, or with the shape that the life of godliness takes. In the garden and out, what God requires of Adam is the 'obedience of faith'.... God still demands obedience of faith of us—as he did from Adam, as He did for all believers throughout the Old Covenant—but in different conditions and with us in a different location.<sup>51</sup>

The "covenants" that Leithart is talking about are the covenant with Adam and the covenant of grace. His phrase "obedience of faith" is FV jargon for justification by faith and the good works of faith. This "obedience of faith" is the condition of the new covenant just as it was for Adam in the Garden.

Furthermore, by their doctrine, if James Jordan is to be believed, the men of the FV teach the inevitability of Adam's death apart from sin—an explicit denial of Romans 5:12 that death came by sin—the planning of the coming of the Son of God apart from sin, and a plethora of other absurdities.<sup>52</sup>

In addition, the FV's doctrine of the covenant of God with Adam is built on allegory and not on exegesis of Scripture. James Jordan

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51 Sandlin, *A Faith That Is Never Alone*, 189–190.

52 For his multiple absurdities see James B. Jordan, "Merit Versus Mur-turity: What Did Jesus Do for Us?" in *The Federal Vision*, ed. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2004), 151–201.

is the exegete of the FV and upon him the men of the FV depend for much of what they say about the covenant with Adam. He is an allegorist, as wildly speculative as they come, as his absurd treatment of the covenant with Adam makes clear.

The FV also teaches that Adam could merit with God as robustly as the covenant of works does. The persistent bluster of the FV against “merit” in any form in the Christian religion is just that. It is persiflage, a red herring, a rabbit trail. And it conceals its vicious doctrine that mere men make themselves worthy of a reward before God on the basis of their works. The men of the FV deny the word *merit*, but they vigorously espouse the principle of merit.

This comes out in their teaching on justification, which they insist is by faith and the obedience of faith, or in their lingo, “by a working faith” or “by the obedience of faith.” This comes out in their teaching especially concerning the final judgment in which a man will be justified “by works,” as Richard Lusk boldly writes, twisting and manipulating Scripture:

He never says that the righteousness of Christ takes the place of our obedience, such that our own personal righteousness is superfluous. Instead, he says we will only be pronounced “worthy” at the last day if we have pleased him with a working faith (2 Thess. 1:3–13, especially verse 11). He never says that works play no role in the culmination of our salvation or our final acquittal. Instead, he explicitly insists that works are the criterion of the final judgment (2 Cor. 5:9–10).

All that to say: in the final installment of our justification, there is a very real sense in which works will be the *decisive* factor. If we take time to bother with the actual words of Scripture, this conclusion is unavoidable. It is so plain, one wonders how it could be missed or suppressed. God requires obedience just as surely as he requires faith. Obedience is not optional, but essential.

At the same time, it is crucial for us to relate initial and final justification to one another in the proper way. We will develop the biblical picture as we go, but note at this point that initial justification by faith alone must, in some sense, serve as *the foundation* for final justification by works.<sup>53</sup>

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53 Sandlin, *A Faith That Is Never Alone*, 318. Emphasis is the author’s own.

The FV's teaching of merit also comes out in its formulation of the covenant of God with Adam. The men of the FV deny merit but maintain the essential features of the covenant of works with Adam that implies merit. Adam could attain to the heavenly, higher life that comes by Jesus Christ and faith in His name. Adam would have made himself worthy of heavenly life by his obedient trust in God. The FV simply substitutes *maturity* for merit and *an obedient, working faith* for raw works. It maintains that not only Adam's life in the garden but also his entering heaven were contingent upon his obedience in the garden.

That is *merit*, all protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.

The men of the FV, too, think that they save *maturity* from being meritorious by teaching that Adam's entering heaven was gracious. But herein is another problem with their doctrine: it puts grace in the covenant of God with Adam, a covenant for which there was no need of grace because grace is properly understood to have come in Jesus Christ. As creature, Adam owed God everything, perfect obedience included. He was indebted to God for every single breath he took. Adam also was created perfect and upright and able by virtue of his creation in the image of God to will, to love, and to do the will of God perfectly. Also, to attempt to redeem any notion of merit—and we could add notion of condition—by mere men with God by appealing to grace is fallacious. Rome does nothing different with its notion of qualified merit.

Furthermore, all the FV's bluster about *merit* is also applied to Jesus Christ. Its objection to merit is not that a mere man merits, but that any and all merit, including Jesus Christ. In this they are wrong. Any objections to the term merit must make one massive exception. It is a creedal exception. Jesus Christ merited.<sup>54</sup> He merited salvation and all the blessings of salvation for all His elect people.

In their war against the legal aspect of the Christian faith, including gracious justification by faith alone, the men of the FV charge that the

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54 This is the teaching of the Reformed creeds, for instance, Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 7 and 31; Belgic Confession, Articles 22, 24, and 35; and Canons of Dordrecht, Head 1, rejection of errors 3 and Head 2, rejection of errors 1.

covenant of works imports a foreign principle of merit and or works into Reformed theology. The real target of their loathing is Christ's merits and the imputation of Christ's merits to the believer as the sole ground of the believer's justification before God. This is the evil fruit of the evil root of their heresy in a conditional covenant.

Norman Shepherd, an architect of FV theology, says, "It [the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience] arose out of a need created by the imposition of a covenant of works on the text of Scripture and is actually defended as a 'good and necessary consequence' flowing from that doctrine."<sup>55</sup> In order to get rid of the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's active obedience, which "arose out of a need created by the imposition of a covenant of works on the text of Scripture," the FV must get rid of the covenant of works.

And the tactic to fool the unwary is plain: equate any mention of merit with the teaching of the covenant of works. Throw out the covenant of works, and *voilà*, merit goes with it, including the merit of Jesus Christ as the only ground of the believer's justification before God. Then, in the place of the merit of Jesus Christ as the only ground of the elect believer's salvation, which the FV denies, it teaches justification by a working faith, or justification by faith and good works.

Besides, for all its absurdities and errors, the FV's supposedly new understanding of the covenant with Adam is closer to the traditional formulation of the covenant of works than it may appear at first.

First, the FV maintains that Adam was to attain to the heavenly life. The question is not what Adam *would* attain, but *how* he would get there.

Second, the FV maintains a concept of merit for Adam, as the defenders of the covenant of works readily admit.<sup>56</sup> The difference is whether Adam could have earned eternal life on the basis of his works by virtue of the covenant or by making himself worthy of eternal life through the process of maturation by virtue of the covenant. There is virtually no difference between these two positions. The current defenders of the covenant of

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55 Sandlin, *A Faith That Is Never Alone*, 275.

56 Michael S. Horton, "Déjà Vu All Over Again," *Modern Reformation Magazine* 13 (July/August 2004):1–9.

works are simply scandalized by the FV's drawing out of the implications that Adam could merit with God by teaching that men also merit with God in the covenant of grace.

Third, although the FV denies that the covenant is a pact, it maintains that the covenant is conditional and dependent on man for its maintenance and realization.

Fourth, the FV teaches that Christ's work is only a restoration of that which Adam lost and a gaining of that which Adam could have attained, which are outstanding characteristics of the covenant of works.

When it is stripped to its essentials, the FV's doctrine of the covenant with Adam can be considered "not far" from the covenant of works, as federal visionist Peter Leithart says.<sup>57</sup>

In this light any appeal by the men of the FV to Herman Hoeksema's doctrine of the covenant or to his criticism of the covenant of works in support of their novel understanding of the covenant with Adam is disingenuous and wrong. They loathe his doctrine of the covenant out of which he criticized the covenant of works as much as they loathe the doctrine of justification by faith alone that they deny by their doctrine of the covenant. They would not tolerate him for five seconds. Even though on occasion they quote his conception of the covenant as essentially friendship and refer favorably to his criticism of the covenant of works as "penetrating," they ignore the doctrines for which he contended. He would have as vigorously opposed their doctrine of the covenant—including their covenant with Adam—as he did that of Heyns and Schilder. Indeed, the doctrine of the FV is that of Heyns and Schilder.<sup>58</sup>

### **Protestant Reformed Criticism of the Covenant of Works**

While denied historically by heretics of all stripes and colors, including the FV, the covenant of works has also been criticized by Reformed theologians.

John Murray was not in favor of the covenant of works. G. C.

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57 Sandlin, *A Faith That Is Never Alone*, 186.

58 For a typical passing reference see *ibid.*, 223.



Berkhouwer criticized the doctrine.<sup>59</sup> Foremost among the critics of the covenant of works was Herman Hoeksema.

With regard to a denial of the covenant of works, a contemporary promoter of that doctrine, PCA minister Rev. Wes White, poisons the waters when he implies that the denial of the covenant of works is insipient Arminianism: “I do admit that some Dutch theologians did reject it, men like Simon Episcopius and Philip van Limborch, who taught at the Remonstrant Seminary in Amsterdam.” The Remonstrants not only denied the covenant of works but any covenant of God with Adam, as White notes, “[Episcopius taught that] there were commands, but only commands with warnings; there was no stipulation or promise without which there can be no covenant properly so-called.”<sup>60</sup>

The Protestant Reformed Churches have never denied that there was a covenant with Adam. These churches, following Herman Hoeksema, defend a distinct covenant of God with Adam. They stand squarely in the mainstream of the Reformed covenantal tradition in this regard.

These churches do, however, have a long-standing critique of the definition of the covenant with Adam as a covenant of works. It was first articulated by Rev. Herman Hoeksema.<sup>61</sup> It has been reiterated and developed by other Protestant Reformed ministers and theologians.<sup>62</sup> These churches have consistently and repeatedly rejected the covenant of works and put forward a different explanation of the nature of that covenant. They have given a sustained and cogent critique of the covenant of works on the basis of Scripture and the Reformed confessions. This has been by and large ignored in the

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59 G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 207–209.

60 <http://www.weswhite.net/2010/08/one-canadian-reformed-ministers-negative-evaluation-of-the-urcna-synod/> and <http://www.weswhite.net/2010/04/brief-account-of-development-of>.

61 See Herman Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed: Children in the Covenant*, rev. ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997).

62 Prof. David Engelsma recently developed the idea of the covenant of God with Adam in “The Covenant of Creation with Adam,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 40, no. 1 (Nov. 2006).

Reformed church world, and many continue to press on defending the crumbling walls of their covenantal paradigm, including the covenant of works.

In the controversy with the FV, however, in which many passionately defend the covenant of works, as the Myrmidons fought for the dead body of Patroclus, the longstanding arguments of the Protestant Reformed Churches against the covenant of works deserve another hearing.

And an answer.

The criticism of the covenant of works by the Protestant Reformed Churches is unique. It is certainly not like the FV's. The criticism of the covenant of works by the Protestant Reformed Churches is weighty, theological criticism against a doctrine that the FV now exposes more clearly as being part of the problem in Reformed churches in their explanation of the doctrine of the covenant.

The problem with the doctrine of the covenant of works begins with its definition of the covenant as a pact. This definition of the essence of the covenant has been virtually built into the doctrine and is still defended today.

Whatever we say about the covenant of God with Adam, it was a covenant, and its essence must be that of a covenant. To say that the covenant is an agreement does not do justice to the two outstanding biblical words for covenant: *berith* and *diatheke*. Scholars admit that:

The OT statements which use the word *berith* may be divided into two main groups. To the one belong those in which the concept is understood as the firmly regulated form of a fellowship between God and man or man and God. To the other belong those in which the covenant is presented as the half-legal and half-sacral form of a fellowship between man and man.<sup>63</sup>

Botterweck and Ringgeren give the etymology of *berith* from a root meaning "to clasp" and insist that the basic meaning of *berith*

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63 G. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Vol. II*, trans. Geoffery W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 109.

in the Old Testament is “binding, putting together, bond...and not agreement or settling between two parties.”<sup>64</sup>

Concerning the New Testament word *diatheke*, Kittel says,

Neither “covenant” nor “testament” reproduces the true religious sense of the religious term *diatheke* in the Greek Bible. *Diatheke* is from first to last the “disposition” of God, the mighty declaration of the sovereign will of God in history, by which He orders the relation between Himself and men according to His own saving purpose, and which carries with it the authoritative divine ordering, the one order of things which is in accordance with it.<sup>65</sup>

As far as his dispute about the translation of the term, he recommends the word “covenant for *diatheke* in accordance with our religious usage, even though we are always dealing with a one-sided disposition of grace.”<sup>66</sup>

According to these scholars the words *diatheke* and *berith* refer to a one-sided disposition of God (*diatheke*) and fellowship or bond (*berith*). Even in a formal sense the attempt to define these words, as they are used in Scripture, as a pact or an agreement is mistaken.

The final and decisive line of evidence, however, is the scriptural context of the words themselves. The first is the covenantal formula that is found exemplarily in Jeremiah 31:33: “But this *shall be* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.” God says, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” The language of the text indicates a work solely of God. The establishment of the covenant is an act of the sovereign good pleasure of God. And this covenant is the relationship in which He is their God and they are His people, a relationship also in which He puts His law in their inward parts and writes it in their hearts.

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64 G. Johannes Botterweck, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 255.

65 Kittel, *Theological Dictionary*, 134

66 Ibid., 134.

Furthermore, the Bible gives two great symbols of the covenant: the marriage relationship and the father-son relationship. The first is clearly evident in Ezekiel 16:8: “Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time *was* the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I swore unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God, and thou becamest mine.” The naked little girl over whom the Lord cast his skirt, and to whom the Lord swore an oath, did not have a part in the establishment of the covenant, but the Lord swore an oath and entered into a covenant. The covenant is not the oath. The covenant was established by the oath. There is no pact or agreement entered into here between two parties. In fact, the woman was not even faithful in her marriage to the Lord, but the Lord says, “Nevertheless I will remember my covenant with thee in the days of thy youth, and I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant” (v. 60). Marriage pictures the covenant as a bond of friendship, fellowship, and communion established and maintained by the Lord by unconditional promise.

This was clear already in paradise with the great symbol of the covenant that God gave to Adam and Eve in their marriage. God married Adam and Eve when He brought the woman “unto the man” (Gen. 2:22), and verse 24 says that a man “shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” Marriage pictures the covenantal relation. The marriage of Adam and Eve pictured the covenant with Adam in paradise as an intimate union of fellowship and friendship.

The other earthly symbol of the covenant is the father-child relationship, as expressed in the Old Testament in Exodus 4:22: “And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel *is* my son, *even* my firstborn” and in the New Testament in 2 Corinthians 6:18: “And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.” These two pronouncements by God show that the covenant as pictured in the father-child relationship is a relationship of love. The Father is the authority, and the son is under authority in love.

To conceive of covenant in the sense of an agreement is mistaken, and is not borne out by the biblical formula or by the two outstanding biblical pictures of the covenant. The idea of covenant, the covenant

also with Adam, is a relationship of fellowship, friendship, and intimate love, like a marriage and the relationship of a father with his son.

Following from the erroneous definition of the covenant as a pact, the covenant of works makes the covenant a means to salvation and not salvation and bliss itself. The covenant is merely a means to the *summum bonum*. This is Hoeksema's analysis of the covenant of works: "The covenant relation is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is not given with man's creation, and therefore is not a fundamental and essential relationship, but an agreement established sometime after man was called into being."<sup>67</sup>

Such a view flows out of the description of the essence of the covenant as a pact, an agreement reached for attaining some goal, as in the case of Adam's attaining eternal life. The questions legitimately may be asked: what exactly was Adam's state before he entered into the covenant of works with God; how long after Adam's creation was he put under the covenant of works; what would have happened, speaking now entirely theoretically, to the covenant of works once Adam entered heaven? The first two cannot be answered, and the answer to the third is obvious: it would have been finished, having served its purpose.

The view of the covenant generally as a means to an end is not in harmony with the biblical presentation of the covenant as a goal: "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (Rev. 21:3). The apostle John sees the New Jerusalem descending out of heaven, and he hears a voice say that the tabernacle of God is with men. Then comes the great formula of the covenant: "I shall be their God, and they shall be my people." In view in the text is the covenantal relationship that is perfected in the new heavens and the new earth. The covenant is the goal of God's counsel and the culmination of all history. Also, then, the covenant of God with Adam cannot be described as a means to an end. Rather, the covenant was for Adam the highest good, in the continuation of which he would have enjoyed a glorious earthly life.

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67 Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, rev. ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), 1:311.

The erroneous definition of the covenant of works as pact and viewing it as a temporary arrangement to achieve heaven led many to find the biblical basis for the establishment of the covenant of works in Genesis 2:16–17: “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

It must be admitted that connecting God’s establishment of the covenant with Adam to the probationary command was a shift in the view of the covenant with Adam from earlier theologians such as Olevianus and Ursinus, who saw that covenant as inherent in Adam’s creation. Olevianus defined the covenant of God with Adam this way:

It was a relationship...of perfect conformity: a conformity of holiness and righteousness between Creator and creature (the *imago Dei*) and a conformity of human mind, will, and affections, of faculties and all actions to that image.... It was a relationship in which Adam and Eve were “naturally,” i.e., by nature as bearers of God’s image, conformed to their Creator.<sup>68</sup>

Both men tightly tied the covenant of God to the creation of Adam in the image of God:

The authors of the great Heidelberg Catechism (1562), Zacharias Ursinus (1534–83) and Caspar Olevianus (1536–87), were important in the development of covenant thinking. Olevianus speaks of a “covenant of creation” [*foedus creationis*], being the obligation of obedience inherent in the human’s status as God’s image-bearer, hence the synonyms he uses—covenant of *nature* and covenant of *law*.<sup>69</sup>

Adam was, therefore, in covenant by virtue of his creation in the image of God, according to the early Reformed theologians such as Olevianus and Ursinus.

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68 Lyle D. Bierma, *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 112.

69 Ward, *God and Adam*, 54.

The later tradition consistently founded the covenant of God with Adam on Genesis 2:16–17. In the passage, repeatedly cited by all Reformed theologians, there is supposed to be a promise made to Adam, and even an agreement between God and Adam. If there is no covenant established here, then the proposal of the covenant of works falls with it.

There were those who tried to deduce the idea of Adam’s attaining heavenly life from the probationary command itself and from other lines of evidence in Scripture. Turretin says,

The law of works had the promise of heavenly and eternal life; therefore also the law prescribed to Adam. In each instance, it is the same law as to substance. The former is evident from “who doeth these things, shall live by them” (Lev. 18:5); “if thou wilt enter into life” (namely, the heavenly) “keep the commandments” (Mt. 19:16, 17); and “the commandment was ordained to life” (Rom. 7:10) assuredly, not earthly but heavenly.<sup>70</sup>

Turretin’s basic argument, and the argument of those who continue to support the covenant of works, is that the law promises heavenly and eternal life to those who keep it; therefore, since Adam was to keep the law, and could have kept the law, he must have been able to attain heavenly eternal life.

However, that the law promised heavenly life is not what these passages cited by Turretin teach. Romans 7:10 teaches that the law of itself is good and holy; it was ordained with a view to life, and there is nothing wrong with the commandments themselves. Herman Hoeksema in another connection says this about the law—the law mentioned in Romans 7:4 and the same law of Romans 7:10:

Under the law there is no mercy, no pardon, no way out. The law can never say anything but “Keep me, and live.” The law does not say, “If you keep me, I will give you the eternal life that is in Christ.” The law cannot give the higher, perfect life that we have in Christ. It is often presented so, but this is a mistake. The law cannot say anything but “Observe me and live; break me and die”.... Under this

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70 Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:583.

law Adam was placed. With Adam it seemed a little better. It did not seem quite so hopeless with him. The Lord said to Adam, “If you keep My law, I will not kill you.” The Lord did not say, “If you keep My law, I will give you life,” but he said, “If you don’t keep My law, I will kill you.”<sup>71</sup>

Leviticus 18:5, which is quoted several times in the New Testament, does not teach either that the law promises eternal, heavenly life, but it teaches the basic equity of the law, in line with Herman Hoeksema’s exegesis of Romans 7:10. If one does what the law requires, he will live and continue to live. There is as such no promise of heavenly life attached to the obedience of the law.

Turretin continues with another argument that God promised to Adam a heavenly, glorious life:

The threatening of death denounced against the transgressor embraces both temporal and eternal death to be suffered in hell.... Thus also the promise of life (opposed to it) includes the heavenly and eternal life. The reason of the consequence depends on the goodness of God, which is no less than his justice.<sup>72</sup>

The argument is that if God’s justice demands that breaking the law incurs the punishment of eternal death in hell, then it stands to reason that His goodness demands that the reward for obedience be heavenly, eternal life. The problem is that this argument does not follow. It does not follow that God must reward obedience with the opposite of His punishment for disobedience. The punishment of disobedience in hell is just, because sin transgresses against the most high majesty of God. But the obedience of Adam would in no way have corresponded to the glory of the reward he would have received, and therefore would not have been either just or good.

But the question is: where is the promise in Genesis 2:16–17; where is the agreement between God and Adam? God in the text

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71 Herman Hoeksema, *Righteous By Faith Alone: A Devotional Commentary on Romans* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2002), 278.

72 Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:584.



simply informs Adam of his duty in the covenant and by virtue of the covenant. There is in the passage no pact, but a sovereign command. The idea—elaborately expressed by some—that the passage contains a promise is simply an assumption imposed upon the text.

Perhaps most serious is the criticism that the covenant of works teaches that a mere man, a man who is not Jesus Christ, could merit with God. It ensconces the merit of a mere man at the very beginning of the history of God's covenants and brings with it a host of irreconcilable problems and bad implications.

Even if the Reformed tradition on the covenant of works was not always so bold as to speak of Adam's meriting with God, nevertheless, the idea is embedded within the very structure of the doctrine of a covenant of works. It is the inescapable conclusion of the doctrine, which is why the Reformed, remarkably, used and defended the term *merit*. Heppe notes that Cocceius said concerning merit in the covenant of works that:

God's *debitum* here is not to be connected with a *dignitas operum* in man. God could never become man's debtor: (1) Man as creature is essentially the "slave of God" and himself owes everything to God; (2) he has nothing which he has not received from God. A *debitum* on God's part only exists *ex pacto*, "and that by the single agreement by which works are exacted as the condition of righteousness."<sup>73</sup>

Witsius defended the concept of *meritum ex pacto* in similar terms. By obeying perfectly, or by remaining in perfection, man had a right to reward by virtue of the covenant. The idea behind *meritum ex pacto* is that, while God is not and never can be a debtor to man, nevertheless, He allowed Himself to be a debtor to man by making a covenant with Adam. The Reformed insisted that by virtue of the pact God condescended to Adam and made it possible for Adam to merit with God. God would become indebted to man so that God owed man the higher life that He promised in the covenant, or *meritum ex pacto*.

The Reformed had roundly condemned the Roman Catholic concepts of *meritum ex condigno* and *meritum ex congruo*. They de-

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73 Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 288.

fensively attempted to distinguish this merit from Rome's merit like Witsius, who wrote, this reward is not "from any intrinsic proportion of the work to the reward, as the grosser Papists proudly boast; but from God's covenant, and engagement, which was no ways unbecoming him to enter into."<sup>74</sup>

The Reformed were right to be uncomfortable with the teaching that Adam could merit as the feeble attempt to distinguish it from Rome's merit shows. The Reformed thought that they redeemed Adam's meriting by saying that it was *ex pacto*, that is, merit by virtue of the covenant, a supposedly qualified or softer form of merit.

Yet they taught that Adam could *merit* with God.

Whatever supposedly redeeming name Adam's merit might be given, it is *merit*, merit for a mere man, and merit for man is bad. With regard to *meritum ex pacto* in particular, it is as much an invented notion of merit as Rome's *meritum ex congruo* and *ex condigno*. Besides, attempts to qualify the manner in which man merits are dangerous. Even Rome admits that full merit is impossible for mere humans. The dispute over man's meriting with God never revolves around full merit. The question always is about merit in some qualified sense. The question is: can man in any sense merit with God? Can God ever become indebted to man to pay him his wage? More seriously, the question is: can God bind Himself to be man's debtor?

To ask the question is to answer it.

The notion that man can merit with God is repugnant. The notion that even unfallen and upright man could have merited with God is repugnant. Merit was repugnant to the Reformed in every other context, except for some reason in the covenant of works. It is impossible for mere man to merit with God, ever! This is what Jesus taught: "When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, we are unprofitable servants: we have done all that which was our duty to do" (Luke 17:10). It is repugnant because it ascribes too much to man—what is impossible for man. It is repugnant because it ascribes to God what is impossible for Him: to give His glory to

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74 Herman Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, trans. William Crookshank (London: T. Tegg and Son, Cheapside, 1838), 70.

another. Merit in the covenant of works makes God the debtor of man. The relationship between God and man is debtor to worker. It is impossible for God by some arrangement to enable man to merit with Him and to make Himself man's debtor. To do such is unworthy of God.

To deny that Adam could merit does not mean that Christ did not merit. He merited all the blessings of salvation, the covenant itself, for all His elect people. The Reformed insisted that Christ merited. Yet they made this the basis of their teaching that also Adam could merit by keeping the law.

Turretin says, "Christ acquired the eternal and celestial life which he bestows upon us in no other way than that...he fulfilled the righteousness...of the law for us (Rom. 8:4; Gal. 4:5). This could not have been done unless the law had promised heavenly life to the obedient."<sup>75</sup> Turretin's argument is that since Christ merited eternal life by fulfilling the righteousness of the law, this could not have been possible except the law promised eternal life. But we would argue that Christ's meriting eternal life is not due to the promise of the law, but to His person. There is no doubt that Christ merited eternal life by keeping the law perfectly. The question is, why could Christ merit, while it was impossible for Adam to merit? The answer is in 1 Corinthians 15:45–50. Adam was of the earth earthy. He was a mere man. Besides, he was an earthy man. Christ was not a mere man, as Adam was, but was "the Lord from heaven," and, "a quickening spirit." He is the Lord who came as the Servant of Jehovah. He is the Son who worked as the Servant. He willingly placed Himself under the law. He restored what He took not away. Only Christ can take the covenant to the heights of heaven and the glories of the resurrection. Only Christ can take the covenant to heights that were entirely impossible with Adam. We deny that Adam could merit. We insist that Christ, only Christ, can merit. This was not unworthy of God because in the incarnate Son, God paid God what God was due from Man.

Because the covenant of works teaches that Adam could by his merits—the simple act of not eating some fruit—obtain for himself and all his posterity the very same heavenly, eternal life that Christ merited,

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75 Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:584.

the covenant of works must also be rejected because it minimizes the work of Jesus Christ. The covenant of works makes Christ's work a mere remedy. Cornelis Venema takes this position:

This inheritance [the doctrine of the covenant of works] has always understood the work of Christ, in the context of redemption and the covenant of grace, to be one which *restores fallen man to that original favor and communion with God in and for which he was first created*. The covenant of grace is a post-fall remedy for the rupture in the covenant relationship between God and man brought about by the failure of Adam to live happily in terms of the first covenant.<sup>76</sup>

This is also the position taken by contemporary defender of the covenant of works Guy Waters:

The fact that Christ purchased eternal "life" for his own, and that he did so for those who were eternally "dead" in Adam means that Christ's work was intended to remedy what Adam had wrought (death), and to accomplish what Adam had failed to do (life.)<sup>77</sup>

The work of Jesus Christ is really only a work of recovery—a remedy—which on a closer analysis is not as full as the original work in Adam could have been. Christ merely won what Adam demerited and only some of what Adam could have attained. Adam, by his simple obedience to the probationary command, could have merited the glorious heavenly life that Christ merited through the long, deep way of sin and grace, through His incarnation, lifelong obedience, suffering, death, and resurrection. In addition, Adam, by merely abstaining from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, could have earned eternal life for all humanity without exception, while Christ earned eternal life for only the elect, and the rest of humanity will perish. Adam, then, could have merited not only more easily, but also for a much greater number of people than those for whom Christ

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76 Venema, "Recent Criticisms," 197. The emphasis is the author's.

77 *The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, ed. Brian D. Estelle, et al (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2009), 230.

merited. Christ and Adam are equal? Adam could have potentially done far more than Jesus Christ? Herman Hoeksema memorably expresses this devastating critique of the covenant of works:

[The covenant of works] really always makes us stand nostalgically with our noses against the fence of Paradise, with the futile wish in our souls that Adam had not fallen! For after all, if it be true that Adam also was able to earn that which Christ now bestows on us, if only he had remained standing, then it remains eternally tragic that the First Paradise is no longer there and that we did not receive eternal life through the obedience of the first man.<sup>78</sup>

The covenant of works idea makes the work of Christ, really the whole counsel of God, eternally tragic! That is devastating—and accurate—criticism. The work of Christ is only a partial work compared with what Adam could have done, and Christ's work was accomplished at a far greater cost to God—the cost of His own Son. The covenant of works is unworthy of the wisdom of God and virtually ignores the counsel of God and Christ's being first in that counsel, which according to Colossians 1:15–20 He is.

The purpose of God with Adam—and his covenant—was his failure. Adam must fail, God willed it so. He decreed the fall of Adam. This in no way minimizes the sin of Adam, any more than the Reformed's insistence upon God's sovereignty over the fall of Adam minimizes Adam's sin. Rather, it looks at the covenant of God with Adam from the viewpoint of God's decrees, which is how the Reformed view Adam himself. They are adamant that the fall of Adam into sin took place according to God's counsel and with a view to Jesus Christ:

This fall of Adam's was of course already foreseen by God in eternity and was ordained with a view to a more perfect and richer manifestation of the divine glory and grace, as well as to a richer blessing and a higher elevation of man by electing and redeeming grace.<sup>79</sup>

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78 Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 67.

79 Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 303.

The divine glory and grace revealed in Jesus Christ is richer and higher. It was with a view to the manifestation of this higher and richer blessing that God not only foresaw, but ordained, the fall of Adam from eternity. Even on the view of the most adamant traditional Reformed defender of the covenant of works, God decreed that fall of Adam with a view to Jesus Christ. The Reformed have insisted on this as strongly as they have insisted on anything else in the *locus* anthropology. The Reformed insist on that in the interest of Jesus Christ. They absolutely refused to view the work of Jesus Christ as a mere restoration or repair of what Adam lost.

What Reformed man could have a problem with this viewpoint applied to the covenant with Adam? God did not promise to Adam eternal, heavenly life, and God never intended that Adam would reach heaven in the first covenant. He never intended anyone to reach heaven in the first covenant. He determined that the covenant would be breached by the sin of Adam and in him by the whole human race, in order to lay that breach as the foundation of His stupendous work of salvation in Jesus Christ in the covenant of grace with the new elect human race. The PRC view the coming of the Lord from heaven to reveal, establish, and fulfill the covenant of God as the revelation of greater riches and blessing. What Christ did, Adam never could have done, even if he had never sinned and had remained in the state of perfection for eons. They insist on that in the interest of viewing all of salvation from the viewpoint of the decrees of God and especially this decree that Jesus Christ is first in order that in all things He might have the preeminence. He is not an afterthought to mop up Adam's mess. Jesus Christ is alpha and omega, the first and last: first in the counsel of God, the goal of all things as well, and in order that God might be all in all. The doctrine of the covenant of works, with its insistence that Adam could have earned heaven, overturns that whole viewpoint and does grave injustice to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the glory of His work, and the wisdom of God.

Not only is the covenant of works itself a wrong doctrine, but its implications for the covenant of grace are also dangerous. In all of its errors the covenant of works negatively affects the formulations of the covenant of grace, which is inevitable. The covenant with Adam was

formulated with a view to the covenant of grace. It implies that the covenant of grace is a pact, that it is merely a means to salvation, that it is conditional, and that it allows for the merits of mere men, merits that the FV has developed by its doctrine of justification by faith and good works. If God can condescend to allow Adam to merit by virtue of the covenant, why cannot He condescend in the covenant of grace to allow other mere men to merit? This is a question for those who argue strenuously for conditions in the covenant to consider.

Besides, to those who would promote the covenant of works against the FV, in battling against an error that teaches the justification of a man by faith and good works—man’s merits, as virtually all of the opponents of the FV admit—on the basis of a conditional covenant, it seems an odd defense to argue vociferously for a doctrine that teaches the merit of a mere man with God in a conditional covenant, a doctrine that on the admission of its own defenders is inseparably connected with the covenant of grace in Christ, affects its formulation, and is the lens through which it is viewed.

Herman Hoeksema states unequivocally what must be the result of a critique of the covenant of works: “we cannot accept the theory of the covenant of works, but must condemn it as un-scriptural.”<sup>80</sup> Amen!

### **The Covenant of Creation**

In its criticism of the covenant of works, the Protestant Reformed Churches have never denied a covenant of God with Adam. With the whole Reformed tradition these churches have taught on the basis of Scripture that there was a covenant of God with Adam. This is based on the fact that God’s dealing with the elect in Christ as the head of the new human race is in the covenant of grace. Thus also the first head must have been in covenant. This is based on Hosea 6:7, a favorite text of the Reformed to prove the covenant with Adam, and on Romans 5:12–21.

These churches insist that this covenant was not a covenant of works and describe that covenant as a covenant of creation.<sup>81</sup> This

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80 Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:312.

81 This is the name that Prof. David Engelsma suggests in his “Covenant of Creation with Adam.”

name is not merely a quibble about terms, but is a name that reflects a whole different viewpoint on the covenant of God with Adam that harmonizes with the rest of Reformed theology's teaching on the covenant, especially the truth of the covenant of grace.

With regard to the covenant of creation several elements are important.

First, as to its essence, it is a covenant. Therefore, it is not a pact, bargain, or agreement between the triune God and His man, Adam, but is Adam's relationship of friendship and fellowship with God his sovereign Lord. This does justice to the biblical idea of covenant.

Second, the covenant was given with Adam's creation. This covenant of creation is called that because it was given by God with the very creation of Adam out of the dust of the ground and was not added to his creation at some point after his creation.

Herman Hoeksema insists that, by virtue of his creation in the image of God, Adam was created not *for* covenant, but *in* covenant with God:

From the very first moment of his existence, and by virtue of his being created after the image of God, Adam stood in covenant relationship to God and was conscious of the living fellowship and friendship which is essential to that relationship. He knew God, loved him, and was conscious of God's love to him.<sup>82</sup>

That Adam knew God intimately and was consecrated wholly to Him in love is what the Reformed recognize as the reality of the image of God. Witsius states it this way:

Man, therefore, just from the hands of his Maker, had a soul, shining with rays of a divine light, and adorned with the brightest wisdom; whereby he was not only perfectly master of the nature of created things, but was delighted with the contemplation of the supreme and uncreated truth, the eyes of his understanding being constantly fixed on the perfections of his God.... He also had the purest holiness of will, acquiescing in God as the supreme truth, revering him as the most dread majesty, loving him as the chief and only good; and, for the sake of God, holding dear whatever his mind, divinely taught, conceived

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82 Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:315.



as pleasing to Him, and like to, and expressive of his perfections; in fine, whatever contributed to the acquiring an intimate and immediate union with him; delighting in the communion of his God, which was now allowed him; panting after further communion.<sup>83</sup>

That is the reality of the image as Adam came forth from the hands of his maker. Witsius also seems to indicate that, by virtue of the image, Adam was in covenant with God: “And thus, indeed, Adam was in covenant with God, as a man, created in the image of God, and furnished with sufficient abilities to preserve that image,” although Witsius later describes the covenant of works in great detail.<sup>84</sup>

This, too, is important. In the covenant, man was created for God and in fellowship with God, to love and to serve his creator, to be the king of creation, and to subdue it, guard it, and care for it. In Adam the whole creation was so created to have fellowship and friendship with its creator through the king of that creation, man. From this, Adam, and in him the whole human race, fell into sin. In that state all men—outside of Jesus Christ and His elect church—and their whole kingdom that they build in the power of sin will perish. The purpose of God for man evidenced in His creation of Adam in covenant with Him is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the last Adam, in its highest and most glorious form in the salvation of the elect church and the glories of His eternal kingdom in the new heaven and new earth. In this covenant God creates His people at the moment of their regeneration. This creation is not conditioned upon their work, or faith, or anything else.

There is in that first covenant an earthly glimpse at the glories of the new covenant of grace in the holy lives of God’s people subject to God in Jesus Christ their king by His word and Spirit, and ultimately in the new heavens and the new earth in the kingdom of perfection where righteousness dwells, Jesus Christ the eternal king reigns over all perfectly, and God is all in all.

Third, the command to Adam in the covenant of creation is not the condition that Adam had to fulfill in order to achieve an eternal inheritance in heaven, but is the part that God gave to Adam in the

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83 Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 29.

84 Ibid., 30.

covenant. The Reformed baptism form insists that in all covenants there are contained “two parts.”<sup>85</sup> While maintaining that justification in the covenant is gracious, on the basis of Christ’s merits alone, by faith alone, in which justification God imputes to the elect sinner the whole righteousness of Jesus Christ and accounts him righteous before Him, the covenant implies also that works are not outside consideration in the covenant. In all covenants, including the covenant of creation, there are contained two parts. Adam neither needed faith, nor did he need grace, and neither was present in that first covenant. In the covenant, God called Adam to love and to serve his creator, a love and service that he did not render either as a mercenary with God in the hope of heaven, or as the terrified labor of a slave, but the loving service of a son to his Father. He rendered it willingly and freely. He rendered it by virtue of the image of righteousness, knowledge, and holiness in which God had created him. In that covenant his work was important. It was his part in the covenant, not as a party with God, or as a condition, but simply as his part. It was the way of his covenantal life. So also in the covenant of grace with Jesus Christ, who recreates us after His image, as the Reformed baptism form makes clear that we are “admonished of and obliged unto new obedience.”<sup>86</sup>

### **The Covenant of God with Adam: A Useful Doctrine**

While denying that God made a covenant of works with Adam, why insist that there was a covenant of God with Adam in the Garden of Eden, a covenant of creation?

This is important because it is often charged against those who deny the covenant of works—also today—that this denial will lead to a misunderstanding of the work of Jesus Christ. In this connection many will quote Wilhelmus à Brakel:

Acquaintance with this covenant is of the greatest importance, for whoever errs here or denies the existence of the covenant of works, will not

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85 Form for the Administration of Baptism, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 258.

86 Ibid., 258.

understand the covenant of grace, and will readily err concerning the mediatorship of the Lord Jesus. Such a person will readily deny that Christ by His active obedience has merited a right to eternal life.<sup>87</sup>

The charge, then, is that to deny or tamper with the covenant of works is to tamper with the work of Jesus Christ, specifically the imputation of His active obedience to believers.

It is true that the covenant with Adam is of great importance. The history of dogma has demonstrated that the formulation of the covenant with Adam has affected, or is affected by, the formulation of the covenant of grace and the work of Christ. Yet the charge is not true that to deny the covenant of works as such means the eventual denial of the work of Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of a covenant of creation does justice to the biblical revelation that the relationship between the triune God and Adam was a covenant. Maintaining it is simply faithful to Scripture, and to the Reformed insistence that God's dealings with men are always in covenant.

The doctrine is of great importance for the truth of original sin, specifically original guilt. That God had a covenant with Adam answers the question of the justice of God's imputation of Adam's one transgression to the whole human race, that is, especially those who did not sin after the similitude of Adam's transgression (Rom. 5:14).

Original guilt is creedal with the Reformed:

Canons III/IV.2: *Qualis autem post lapsum fuit homo, tales et liberos procreavit, nempe corruptus corruptos; corruption ab Adamo in omnes posteros [solo Christus except] non per imitationem [quod Pelagiani olim voluerunt], sed per vitiosae naturae propagationem, justo Dei judicio, derivata.*<sup>88</sup>

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87 Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 1, trans. Bartel Elshout (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), 355.

88 Schaaf, *Creeds*, 564. Homer Hoeksema suggests the following literal translation: "Moreover, such as man became after the fall, such kind of children he also procreated, namely, a corrupt man, corrupt children; the corruption having been diverted from Adam into his posterity (only Christ excepted), not through imitation (as the Pelagians of old asserted), but through

It is the phrase “*justo Dei judicio*,” that is, “by God’s just judgment,” that teaches original guilt. All of the corruption of Adam and his seed came by God’s just judgment of Adam’s sin to his seed.

Since God’s dealings with man are in covenant, that means also that those dealings are through the representative head of the covenant. As he goes, so goes his covenant and all whom he represents. Covenants cannot be headless, or they are no covenant. This is true with regard to the first covenant, as Romans 5:14 makes clear. The passage establishes that Adam was the figure of Him that was to come. He was the type. He was the type as a covenant-head. Adam was a covenant-head. It was as a covenant-head that he sinned. It was in that original covenant head that God judged the whole human race, imputing to them Adam’s sin and, as a just judgment for that sin, binding them under the dominion of sin in total depravity.

Yet another implication of the FV’s denial of the merits of Jesus Christ and the imputation of those merits as the righteousness of the believer is that they must deny also the imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity, the original guilt of Adam’s sin imputed to all men. Such is the logic of Romans 5:12-21 that if Christ did not alone merit salvation for all whom He represented, then neither did Adam bring death, total depravity, and bondage to sin, upon the whole human race. The denial that Christ merited is the implicit denial, not that Adam could have merited, which Scripture never teaches, but that Adam lost everything he had for himself and for the whole human race, and that by God’s just judgment “all men are conceived in sin, and by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto, and without regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God.”<sup>89</sup>

The covenant with Adam is also important for the issue of headship in the covenant of grace. In the covenant with Adam, Adam was the head.

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the propagation of an evil nature, by the righteous judgment of God.” Homer Hoeksema, *Voice of our Father: An Exposition of the Canons of Dordrecht* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2006), 441.

<sup>89</sup> *Confessions*, 167.

He represented the whole human race. His headship determined those included in the covenant and excluded from the covenant. It included the whole human race. It excluded Jesus Christ, importantly. The same applies to the covenant of grace. Christ's headship is determinative for membership in that covenant. The members of that covenant are only those of whom He is the head, namely the elect, for, as the Apostle says, "if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed" (Gal. 3:29).

This is the implication of the Apostle in Romans 5:18 with the phrase "all men."<sup>90</sup> That phrase makes no sense apart from the understanding of Adam and Christ as federal heads. The transgression of Adam was imputed to all of whom he was the covenant head. Christ's righteousness is imputed to all, all of whom He is the head in the covenant of grace.

The same passage, then, establishes the great parallel between Adam and Christ. That parallel is not this, as is so often stated by proponents of the covenant of works, since Adam could have merited, then Christ could have merited. A recent contemporary example is Guy Waters, who wrote:

This means that if Adam by his disobedience brought eternal death, then his obedience would have brought eternal life. In other words, Christ's "obedience" and its consequence ("eternal life") parallel what Adam ought to have done but did not do.<sup>91</sup>

That parallel is repeatedly taught as nearly the very essence of the covenant of works. It is usually, too, qualified out of existence. Christ's was strict merit. Adam's was merit in the covenant, and some go so far as to add "by grace." That parallel is nowhere taught in Scripture. Where in Romans 5, the great passage on Adam and Christ, is that parallel so much as hinted at? Guy Waters must even admit that the passage stresses "disparity between Adam and Christ."<sup>92</sup>

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90 In the original, εἰς πάντας. The full reference is: "Therefore as by the offense of one *judgment came* upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one *the free gift came* upon all men unto justification of life" (Rom. 5:18).

91 *The Law is Not of Faith*, 230.

92 *Ibid.*, 230.

That parallel diminishes the unique person and work of Jesus Christ. It is a foreign theological construction that is imposed upon Scripture, and because of it the parallel, or “disparity,” that Scripture does teach is lost in the shuffle. Scripture teaches a parallel between Adam and Christ. It is rather negative, but it glorifies Jesus Christ and the grace and justice of God in Christ. Because Adam was a covenant head, you must see in him the covenantal headship of Jesus Christ. The headship is not one in which the respective positive merits of both are emphasized. Adam represented the whole human race (Christ excepted) and lost everything he had by virtue of his creation, including his glorious earthly life in the Garden, kingship over God’s whole creation, and the image of God. By Adam’s one sin the whole human race was judged guilty of committing that sin and by God’s just judgment was plunged into total depravity. The parallel that Scripture teaches is that just as by Adam’s covenantal headship the human race has all its misery, so also by Christ’s covenantal headship the new elect human race has its salvation. Just as Adam lost everything for those whom he represents, so Christ earned everything—righteousness, sanctification, peace, and heavenly glory—for those and those only whom He represents. Just as Adam lost his covenant with God, so Christ by His death confirmed the new covenant of grace, a covenant that is far better and far more glorious than the covenant with Adam, because its head is far greater and far more glorious than Adam.

Furthermore, that salvation was just. Salvation rests on the foundation of justice. It is a merciful salvation, it is a gracious salvation, but it is not granted at the expense of God’s justice. God revealed Himself to be a just God in the Garden. In the day that you eat, you will surely die. He was also just in His continuing Adam’s life in the Garden in the way of Adam’s obedience. He did not promise Adam a life that was in no way commensurate with the work performed. That is not justice. It might be thought at first glance to be exceedingly merciful—gracious, as the FV says—but there is an injustice that adheres to that that spoils any grace. God was just in His punishment of the sin of Adam in him and all his posterity. In maintaining the essence of that covenant in the new covenant of grace, first revealed

in the Garden in the mother promise, He is also just. The sinner's salvation is gracious, and it is also just. It rests on the foundation of the finished and complete work of Jesus Christ who earned it, and rightfully so by His incarnation, suffering, obedience, and death upon the cross by paying for our sins and earning a complete and perfect righteousness for us. And when the believer enters heaven it will be just, because of that work, not as a reward for his works of imperfectly obeying God's law in this life—even if one says that he did that by the power of God's grace. Grace is just. In Jesus Christ we can see that.

God also revealed Himself as gracious. In that first covenant, Adam could fall and did. He fell as the representative of the whole human race, Christ excepted. The covenant life of Adam was not conditioned on his obedience, but his continuance in that covenant life was in the way of his obedience, and that life could be lost. That fall of Adam, however, does not mean that the covenant was abrogated in its entirety. It was finished with respect to Adam's life in the Garden. But Adam, too, could not break the covenant so as to abrogate it. God maintained His covenant as to its essence. It is His covenant. He maintained the covenant as to its essence in the friendship and fellowship that He establishes with the new human race, His elect people, in Jesus Christ their new head, in the covenant of grace, a covenant that He immediately revealed in the Garden in the promise of the seed of the woman. By that covenant God raised that fellowship and friendship to a height and an intimacy that Adam could never do, a fellowship in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, the last Adam, who became a quickening Spirit. ●

## Herman Bavinck on Covenant and Election

David J. Engelsma

In the long-standing controversy over the doctrine of the covenant in the Reformed churches that God now brings to a head by the heresy of the Federal Vision, the relation of covenant and election is fundamental. The covenant theology of the Federal Vision, like the covenant theology of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (“liberated”), which the Federal Vision is developing, denies any relation between covenant and the eternal decree of election. Covenant must be “liberated” from the divine decree. Election only “oppresses,” “hampers,” and “enslaves” the covenant. The only relation between covenant and election is one of “tension.”

But purported critics of the Federal Vision evidently share this fear of and aversion to election, at least with regard to the relation of covenant and election. Either they remain silent about the relation of covenant and election, or they nervously warn against allowing election to govern the covenant. Or they so obfuscate the relation as to make it impossible for the theologian, much less the Reformed layman, to know what the relation is, or whether indeed there is one. One thing they never fail to make clear is that those who teach a close relation between covenant and election are on the furthest fringes of the Reformed tradition, if they have any place in the tradition at all.

Thus wounded in the house of its friends, the Reformed faith concerning the precious doctrine of the covenant of grace suffers grievously.

Defense and development of the Reformed doctrine of the covenant at the beginning of the twenty-first century demands a clear, orthodox understanding of the relation of covenant and election.

Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), held in high esteem as a Reformed dogmatician by virtually everyone, can help the Reformed churches in this regard.



### **Election Governs the Covenant**

Bavinck teaches as his own belief, the position of the Reformed tradition, and the doctrine of Scripture that election and covenant are closely related. Treating explicitly of covenant and election in his Reformed dogmatics, Bavinck writes that election is the source and fountain of the covenant. This is Bavinck's own figure: "The covenant of grace is the channel by which the stream of election flows toward eternity."<sup>1</sup>

Election governs the covenant; the covenant is God's execution in history of His elective will of salvation in eternity. "Election only and without qualification states who are elect and will infallibly obtain salvation; the covenant of grace describes the road by which these elect people will attain their destiny."<sup>2</sup> "The elect...[are] gathered into one under Christ as their head in the way of the covenant."<sup>3</sup>

Basic to this conception of the relation of election and covenant is the recognition of Jesus Christ as head of the covenant of grace, as Adam was head of the covenant of creation. For Bavinck, Jesus Christ is "head of the covenant of grace," as well as "its mediator." This means that "the covenant of grace has been made with Christ." In and through Christ, the head of the covenant, the covenant "reaches

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1 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3: *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 229. The editor of the English translation of Bavinck's dogmatics rightly gives this section of the dogmatics the heading, "Covenant and Election." Here Bavinck states, not only his own definitive theological thinking on the subject, but also what he considers to be the biblical and Reformed (and for Bavinck "Reformed" means creedal) doctrine concerning the relation of covenant and election. With specific reference to the relation of covenant and election, Bavinck explains the relation clearly, precisely, and thoroughly, if briefly. This passage is decisive regarding Bavinck's understanding of the relation of covenant and election. One may fill out this explanation from other places in Bavinck. But all efforts to weaken and even contradict Bavinck's doctrine in this passage by references to other writings of Bavinck, sometimes ignoring this passage—the *locus classicus* on the subject—are smashed, and must be smashed, on the rock of this passage.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 232.

out also to his own.”<sup>4</sup> “His own” are all those whom the Father has given to Jesus in the decree of election (John 6:37, 39; 10:29; 17:2, 6, 9, 11, 24).

In support of his teaching that God has made His covenant with Christ, as head of the covenant, and, in Him, with “His own,” Bavinck appeals to Galatians 3:29: “If ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed.”<sup>5</sup> This text depends on a preceding verse, Galatians 3:16, which teaches that God made the promise of the covenant to Abraham’s Seed, Jesus Christ.

### **Difference of Covenant and Election**

Of course election and covenant are different. Bavinck does not “identify” them. No Reformed theologian has ever “identified” them. When opponents of Bavinck’s teaching that election and covenant are closely related, as a fountain to its stream, charge those who confess this close relation with “identifying” covenant and election, what they really intend to deny, and to root out of the Reformed churches, is the teaching that election *governs* the covenant. Invariably, an examination of the mantra, “covenant and election are not identical,” will show that those who sound the mantra mean: “election does not govern the covenant.”

Election is the divine decree in eternity appointing Jesus Christ as head of the church and, in Christ, choosing a certain number of persons to redemption as the body of Christ. The covenant is God’s structured bond of union and communion with Christ and His people in history, in which living relationship God works out the salvation of the church and its members.

The difference that Bavinck emphasizes is that, whereas in election the members of the church are passive, in the covenant the Spirit of Christ makes the elect members of the church active. This activity includes that they “consciously and voluntarily consent to this covenant.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Bilateral Covenant**

This is what Bavinck means by the covenant’s becoming “bilat-

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4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 224.

6 Ibid.

eral.” He does not mean that a covenant that was originally established “unilaterally,” by God alone, now becomes dependent for its maintenance and perfection upon the will and work of the member of the covenant. This is indeed what many Reformed theologians mean by their teaching that the covenant is unilateral (one-sided) in its establishment but bilateral (two-sided) in its maintenance. This is to teach that, whereas the beginning of the covenant with a human is sovereign grace, the maintenance and perfection of the covenant are a cooperative effort of God and men. This is to teach that, whereas the establishment of the covenant depends solely upon God, the maintenance and perfection of the covenant depend upon the sinner. This is to teach that, whereas the beginning of the covenant and its salvation is God’s work, in the end the covenant and its salvation are the work of man himself.

Bavinck will have none of this. “The doctrine of the covenant maintains God’s sovereignty in the entire work of salvation.... Into that entire work of salvation, from beginning to end, nothing is introduced that derives from humans. It is God’s work totally and exclusively; it is pure grace and undeserved salvation.... This doctrine of the covenant...purely and fully maintains God’s sovereignty in the work of salvation.”<sup>7</sup>

God not only unilaterally establishes the covenant, but He also unilaterally maintains the covenant: “The covenant of grace...is indeed unilateral: it proceeds from God; he has designed and defined it. *He maintains and implements it. It is a work of the triune God and is totally completed among the three Persons themselves.*”<sup>8</sup>

When Bavinck speaks of the covenant’s becoming bilateral (after its unilateral establishment with a person), he means rather that once God establishes His covenant with a child, a woman, or a man, that person becomes active by the grace of the covenant and is commanded to be active. Bavinck tells us that this is what he means by the bilateral character of the established covenant:

It [the covenant] is destined to become bilateral, *to be consciously and voluntarily accepted and kept by humans in the power of God.... The*

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7 Ibid., 228, 229.

8 Ibid., 230; emphasis added.

*covenant of grace does not deaden human beings or treat them as in-animate objects.... It does not kill their will but frees them from sin.*<sup>9</sup>

By the covenant's bilateral character, Bavinck has in mind what orthodox Reformed theologians have taught as the "mutuality" of the covenant. The covenant is a bond of mutual love and fellowship between God in Christ and God's covenant friends. It is like the marriage of the Christian man and the Christian woman.

By the covenant's bilateral character, Bavinck has in mind what the Reformed Baptism Form teaches when it declares that the covenant of grace, unilaterally established, maintained, and perfected by the triune God, contains "two parts." Members of the covenant have a "part" in the covenant. Our "part" is "new obedience, namely, that we cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."<sup>10</sup>

By the covenant's bilateral character, Bavinck has in mind exactly what the Protestant Reformed Churches declare about the covenant of grace in their "Declaration of Principles" (concerning the covenant):

The sure promise of God which He realizes in us as rational and moral creatures not only makes it impossible that we should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness but also confronts us with the obligation of love, to walk in a new and holy life, and constantly to watch unto prayer.<sup>11</sup>

That the covenant friends of God undertake their "side" of the bilateral covenant, that they actively enter into the mutuality of the covenant (as a loved and loving wife in a good marriage), that they do their part, that they carry out their obligation in the covenant to love their covenant God—this is due to the sovereign grace of the covenant working in them.

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9 Ibid.; emphasis added.

10 "Form for the Administration of Baptism," in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 258.

11 "Declaration of Principles of the Protestant Reformed Churches," in *ibid.*, 426.

Bavinck thinks so. “Into that entire work of [covenant] salvation, from beginning to end, nothing is introduced that derives from humans. It is God’s work totally and exclusively.”<sup>12</sup> “The covenant of grace... re-creates the whole person and, having renewed it by grace, prompts it, freely and independently, with soul, mind, and body, to love God and to dedicate itself to him.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Harmony of Covenant and Election**

Covenant and election are different in important respects. They are not different in respect of sovereign grace. Covenant grace is as sovereign as is the grace of election. They are the one, saving grace of the triune God in Jesus Christ. And the grace of God in Jesus Christ is sovereign.

Neither are covenant and election different, in the judgment of Herman Bavinck, with regard to their extent. That is, for Bavinck the grace of election and the grace of the covenant are coterminous. The grace of the covenant is not wider than election. The covenant grace of God is for the elect and for the elect only. Bavinck expresses this fundamental harmony of election and covenant in these words: “The two [election and covenant] are not so different that election is particular while the covenant of grace is universal.”<sup>14</sup>

What Bavinck states concerning the particularity of both election and covenant applies to the physical, baptized offspring of godly parents. Evidently, Bavinck *intended* that his statement concerning the particularity of the gracious covenant apply specifically to the children of godly parents. One essential aspect of the particular covenant is the inclusion of the children of believers. “It [the covenant] is never made with a solitary individual but always also with his or her descendants. It is a covenant from generations to generations.”<sup>15</sup>

A few pages after he has insisted that the covenant, like election, is “particular,” at the end of his treatment of covenant and election, with explicit appeal to the distinction in Romans 9:6-23 between two

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12 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 229.

13 Ibid., 230.

14 Ibid., 229.

15 Ibid., 231.

kinds of children of Abraham, Bavinck will affirm that the covenant is established with the elect, and with the elect only.

According to Herman Bavinck, it is not true that, whereas election embraces only some of the physical offspring of Abraham, of Isaac and Rebekah, and of believing parents today, the covenant embraces all of the physical offspring without exception.

Covenant is not the welcome doctrinal instrument by which Reformed and Presbyterian theologians who detest the particularity of election may broaden and universalize the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. Covenant is not a doctrine with which to shove election far, far into the background of Reformed preaching and teaching, until finally it disappears altogether.

Election and covenant do not differ in this respect that, whereas election is particular regarding grace towards the children of believers, the covenant of grace is universal with regard to circumcised or baptized children.

That Bavinck means by the particularity of the covenant that the covenant of grace is established, maintained, and perfected with the elect, and the elect only, is evident, not only from the statement itself, but also from what immediately follows. Immediately, Bavinck declares that the covenant is “made with Christ [and]...his own.”<sup>16</sup>

Bavinck clearly sees that any extension of the grace of the covenant beyond the limits of God’s election necessarily implies the heresy of free will. If covenant grace is wider than election, *covenant grace is resistible*. Some towards whom God has a gracious attitude, desiring to save them, or upon whom God bestows grace as a covenant power, resist this grace, and go lost. Implied is that whether one is saved by covenant grace depends, not upon the grace itself (for many who are objects of this grace are not saved by it), but upon his own decision, his own will. Extending covenant grace more widely than election necessarily introduces the heresy of salvation by the free will of the sinner into the gospel of the covenant.

Repudiating the idea that election and covenant differ regarding the extent of their grace, Bavinck adds, in the same sentence: “that the former [election] denies free will and the latter [the covenant] teaches

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16 Ibid.

or assumes it, that the latter takes back what the former teaches.” The complete sentence reads as follows: “The two [election and covenant] are not so different that election is particular while the covenant of grace is universal, *that the former denies free will and the latter teaches or assumes it, that the latter takes back what the former teaches.*”<sup>17</sup>

### Unconditional Covenant

Neither are election and covenant different with regard to their unconditionality. As a Reformed theologian, Bavinck held unconditional election. As a Reformed theologian, Bavinck also confessed that the covenant of grace is unconditional. Because the issue of the unconditionality or conditionality of the covenant is controversial in the Reformed churches, and because the vast majority of Reformed theologians like to leave the impression that the Reformed tradition overwhelmingly has taught that the covenant is conditional, dismissing the doctrine of the unconditional covenant as a “radical” aberration, it will be profitable to hear Bavinck on the issue.

In the beginning, Reformed theologians spoke freely of “the conditions” of the covenant. But after the nature of the covenant of grace had been more carefully considered and had to be defended against [Roman] Catholics, Lutherans, and Remonstrants, many of them took exception to the term and avoided it.<sup>18</sup>

Bavinck continues: “In the covenant of grace, that is, in the gospel, which is the proclamation of the covenant of grace, there are

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17 Ibid.; emphasis added.

18 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3: *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 229. I insert the word “Roman” in the quotation. The translator erred. Neither here nor elsewhere in his dogmatics did Bavinck refer to the Roman Catholic Church as the “Catholic” Church. Here the Dutch original has the word “*Roomschen*,” that is, ‘Romish’ (see Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol. 3, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised and expanded ed., Kampen: Kok, 1910, 241). The Roman Catholic Church is not the catholic church of Christ. It is not even a catholic, or universal, church; it is a *Roman* church. This was the conviction of Bavinck.

*actually...no conditions.*” What Bavinck has in mind by “conditions,” as by the term “demands” (which he uses in the sentence just quoted as the equivalent—in the sentence—of “conditions”), he makes plain in his explanation. “For God supplies what he demands. Christ has accomplished everything...and the Holy Spirit therefore applies [everything].”<sup>19</sup>

Bavinck denies, absolutely, that the covenant is conditional *in the proper sense of the term “condition,” namely, a decision or work of a member of the covenant upon which the covenant and its salvation depend.* Bavinck denies, absolutely, that the covenant is conditional *in the sense that the member of the covenant must make a decision or perform a work that is decisive for the maintenance of the covenant.* Bavinck denies, absolutely, that the covenant is conditional *in the sense that by performing a demand a member of the covenant makes himself to differ from others who, like himself, are objects of the covenant grace of God.*

He [God] made it [the covenant of grace]...with the man Christ Jesus.... And in him, who shares the divine nature and attributes, this covenant has an unwaveringly firm foundation. It can no longer be broken: it is an everlasting covenant. It rests not in any work of humans but solely in the good pleasure of God, in the work of the Mediator, in the Holy Spirit, who remains forever. It is not dependent on any human condition; it does not confer any benefit based on merit; it does not wait for any law keeping on the part of humans. It is of, through, and for grace. God himself is the sole and eternal being, the faithful and true being, in whom it rests and who establishes, maintains, executes, and completes it. The covenant of grace is the divine work par excellence—his work alone and his work totally. All boasting is excluded here for humans; all glory is due to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>20</sup>

Whoever cannot say “Amen” to this, from the bottom of his or her heart, is no Reformed Christian.

Bavinck will speak only of the “conditional form” of the adminis-

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19 Ibid., 230; emphasis added.

20 Ibid., 225, 226.



tration of the covenant: “In its administration by Christ, the covenant of grace does assume this demanding conditional *form*.”<sup>21</sup> By a conditional form, Bavinck refers, among other constructions, to the biblical exhortations and admonitions that use the preposition “if”: “If thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God” (Deut. 30:10); “If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live” (Rom. 8:13).

By acknowledging a conditional *form* of the administration of the covenant, Bavinck does not give back with the left hand the error that he has just taken away with the right hand. A conditional form of the administration of the covenant is not the same as a conditional covenant. The conditional form of the administration of the covenant does not mean, for Bavinck, demands for a human work upon which the covenant depends, or for a human work that must make impotent covenant grace effectual in the case of the one performing the work.

The conditional form of the administration of the covenant rather refers to God’s dealings with “humans in their capacity as rational and moral beings...to treat them as having been created in God’s image; and also...to hold them responsible and inexcusable; and, finally, to cause them to enter consciously and freely into this covenant and to break their covenant with sin.”<sup>22</sup>

That for Bavinck this conditional form of the administration of the covenant does not mean a conditional covenant is confirmed by the fact that the very next sentence following Bavinck’s explanation of the covenant’s conditional form is the affirmation of the unilateral character of the covenant. “The covenant of grace, accordingly, is indeed unilateral.”<sup>23</sup>

A unilateral covenant is an unconditional covenant—a covenant accomplished from beginning to end, with regard to every aspect of it, by God alone. It is a covenant dependent from beginning to end, with regard to every aspect of it, upon God alone.

The covenant of grace is as unconditional as is gracious election.

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21 Ibid.; emphasis added.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

Bavinck's exposition and defense of the unconditionality of the covenant ought to give twenty-first century Reformed theologians and churches pause. Bavinck gives the lie to the popular notion that the doctrine of the unconditional covenant has no place in the Reformed tradition, or, at least, no place anywhere near the center of this tradition.

Bavinck suggests, on the contrary, that those who freely, indeed vehemently, contend for a conditional covenant have not very "carefully considered" the nature of the covenant of grace. Nor, evidently, are they concerned to defend the covenant of grace "against [Roman] Catholics, Lutherans, and Remonstrants." On the other hand, those theologians and churches who take exception to the term "conditions" (of the covenant), rather than being reproached as hyper-Calvinists, or ignored as beyond the pale, ought to be credited with having carefully considered the nature of the covenant of grace and with a zeal for defending the gospel of grace against its foes.

Most importantly, Bavinck indicates the seriousness of the issue of the unconditionality or conditionality of the covenant. At stake is the gospel of free, sovereign (that is, unconditional) grace itself. For the "gospel...is the proclamation of the covenant of grace."<sup>24</sup> The doctrine of the unconditional covenant is the good news of grace. The doctrine of a conditional covenant is the false gospel of salvation by the will and works of the sinner. That is, the doctrine of a conditional covenant is the Arminian theology of the covenant.

### **Covenant Membership**

God makes His covenant with the elect in Christ, and with the elect alone. The elect, and the elect alone, are members of the covenant. Bavinck teaches this in the statement, "The covenant of grace has been made with Christ...[and with] his own."<sup>25</sup> He reiterates and explains this when he comes to the matter of covenant membership at the conclusion of his treatment of covenant and election.

Bavinck sharply distinguishes two essentially different kinds of connection to the covenant of grace. There is the vital membership in

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24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 229.

the covenant itself of a true and living faith. This membership affords participation in the blessings of the covenant.

There is also, in radical distinction, a membership merely in the covenant's "earthly administration." This is the connection to the covenant of those who lack true faith. This membership does "not share in the covenant's benefits."

Here is Bavinck's statement of the distinction: "It is self-evident, therefore, that the covenant of grace will temporarily—in its earthly administration and dispensation—also include those who remain inwardly unbelieving and do not share in the covenant's benefits."<sup>26</sup>

There are those (Bavinck is thinking especially of baptized children of believers) who are "*in* the covenant," but not "*of* the covenant."<sup>27</sup> This is a strong statement of the qualitative difference between the two kinds of connections to the covenant. In the original language of his dogmatics, Bavinck uses two Latin expressions: "*de foedere*" (English: 'of the covenant') and "*in foedere*" (English: 'in the covenant').<sup>28</sup> Some (baptized children) are *of* the covenant. The covenant is the origin of their true, spiritual life; they are born again by the covenant promise. They share the essence of the covenant. They belong to the covenant. The covenant identifies them. The covenant determines their life, experience, and behavior.

Other (baptized children) are merely *in* the covenant. By natural birth to believing parents; by the administration to them of the sacrament of the covenant; by their training under the word of God in a godly home, a true church, and a Christian school; more or less by their outward conduct (at least for a while); and even by their profession of faith (which does not arise from the heart), they are closely related to the covenant, as closely as a human can be without being "of" the covenant. But they are never part of it. Nor is it ever part of them.

The difference is that between a genuine, healthy cell of the human body and a foreign substance in the bloodstream.

In accordance with these two distinct kinds of covenant connec-

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26 Ibid., 231.

27 Ibid., 232.

28 Bavinck, *Geref. Dog.*, vol. 3, 244.

tion, Bavinck speaks of “the external and internal sides” of the one covenant of grace.<sup>29</sup>

Regarding covenant membership, therefore, Bavinck denies that all the baptized offspring of believers are in the covenant in the same way. Indeed, Bavinck denies that all the children are members of the covenant. If some children have membership merely in the covenant’s “earthly administration,” they are not members of the covenant in its essence.

What determines and governs this twofold connection to the covenant is God’s predestination. When Bavinck distinguishes the two radically different connections to the covenant as belonging to the covenant, for some, and merely being “*in* the covenant,” that is, being in the “earthly administration” of the covenant, for others, he obviously has his eye on Romans 9:6. In this passage, the apostle distinguishes two kinds of physical offspring of Abraham. Some are merely “of Israel,” that is, in Bavinck’s words, they are in the “earthly administration” of the covenant. Others “are...Israel,” that is, in Bavinck’s expression, they are “of the covenant.” And in Romans 9:6-23, the apostle accounts for the two distinct connections to the covenant by appeal to eternal predestination: “that the purpose of God according to election might stand” (v. 11).

But Bavinck does not leave to implication, clear and necessary as the implication may be, that the two essentially different connections to the covenant “proceed from God’s eternal decree,” as the Canons, I/6 puts it. In explanation of the reality that some are merely “*in* [the earthly administration of] the covenant,” whereas others are “*of* the covenant,” Bavinck appeals, explicitly, to divine election.

Here on earth they [those who are merely in the administration of the covenant] are connected with the elect in all sorts of ways, and the elect themselves...can as an organism only be gathered into one under Christ as their head in the way of the covenant.<sup>30</sup>

Those who are connected to the covenant by vital membership

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29 Ibid., 232.

30 Ibid.

in the covenant itself—in the very essence of the covenant—are the elect, and election determines their covenant membership. That Bavinck should teach this is nothing strange. For he was a Reformed theologian. And the Reformed faith confesses that faith, which is the living bond of union with Christ and, thus, fellowship with the triune God—the covenant in essence—proceeds from God’s eternal election. “That some receive the gift of faith from God...proceeds from God’s eternal decree.”<sup>31</sup>

Those whose connection is merely the “external side” of the covenant, membership only in the “earthly administration” of the covenant, are, for Bavinck, the non-elect, the reprobate from eternity. This non-election, or reprobation, determines their exclusion from the covenant. That Bavinck should teach this is nothing strange. For he was a Reformed theologian. And the Reformed faith confesses that the non-reception of faith (which alone constitutes living, spiritual union with Christ and communion with God), whether on the part of a contemporary heathen in the depths of San Francisco, or on the part of a baptized child of godly Protestant Reformed parents, proceeds from God’s eternal reprobation. “That...others do not receive it [faith], proceeds from God’s eternal decree.”<sup>32</sup>

Herman Bavinck repudiates the covenant doctrine that refuses to relate covenant membership to predestination, that deliberately banishes predestination from consideration in the matter of covenant membership, that will not find the source of covenant membership in God’s election.

Bavinck condemns the covenant doctrine that teaches that all the baptized children of godly parents are in the covenant in the same way, at least originally, at baptism.

Bavinck exposes the doctrine of the covenant that rejects the teaching of two essentially different connections to the covenant as altogether outside and contrary to the Reformed tradition.

Bavinck not only approves of but also insists upon the distinc-

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31 Canons of Dordt, I/6, in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 582.

32 Ibid.

tion between two kinds of connection to the covenant, whether the distinction is called “internal/external”; “covenant/administration of the covenant”; or “of the covenant/in the covenant.”

How the distinction is phrased is of no great significance. The distinction itself is fundamental. To disallow the distinction is to fly in the face of the Reformed tradition; to reject the apostolic doctrine in Romans 9:6-23; and, necessarily, to introduce the Arminian heresy into the Reformed doctrine of the covenant.

This last, the theology of the Federal Vision is demonstrating clearly, and practicing with a vengeance.

### Conclusion

In light of Bavinck’s doctrine of the covenant, it is a mystery why contemporary Reformed theologians so violently react against a doctrine of the covenant that closely relates the covenant and election, and relates them in such a way that election governs the covenant. These theologians assail such a doctrine of the covenant as illegitimate. Their dismissal of the “identification” of the covenant and election (which is their pejorative way of describing a doctrine of the covenant in which election governs the covenant) leaves the impression, if it does not *intend* to leave the impression, that this doctrine of the covenant has had no place in the Reformed tradition. But every knowledgeable, honest scholar must acknowledge, at the very least, that the teaching that the covenant is governed by election has had a prominent, powerful, honorable place in the Reformed tradition.

And then we might be able to carry on a profitable discussion *why* prominent, orthodox Reformed theologians, including Herman Bavinck, taught the close relation of covenant and election.

And thus, under God’s blessing, there would be defense and development of the truth of God’s covenant of grace in our day. ■

# On the Way to Calvary: Isaac Does Not Need to Be Sacrificed

(Genesis 22:1-19)

by Jürgen-Burkhard Klautke  
(translated, from German, by Peter VanDerSchaff)

*A person may believe that he knows some of the Bible's texts very well. He has already heard a sermon or exposition of a text or read something about it. But when on another occasion, for instance in answering a new question, he is moved to read the ostensibly well-known passage once again, it can seem as if he had never before grasped the passage. So unusually, so breathtakingly new, the text hits a person.*

*Some time ago I occupied myself with a concept that is currently widespread among German theological faculties. It is taught that between the three so-called Abrahamic religions—among which the Christian faith is included with Judaism as well as with Islam—there is an essential identity. In this context I was confronted with the twenty-second chapter of Genesis. It is the well-known narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac. Before you read the following article, it would be beneficial to read Genesis 22 in a good translation of the Scripture.*

## **The Sacrifice of Isaac—The Focal Point of Genesis**

One could contest the point that the sacrifice of Isaac is *the* high-point of the book of Genesis; but it can hardly be denied that this chapter holds a key position. It appears as though the chapter, in the context of Genesis, functions like the narrow opening of an hourglass, as if the events that are narrated in the book culminate in this event—in a certain manner direct themselves to this event. At this junction, at the sacrifice of Isaac, one has the impression that the narrative broadens itself out again. As is well known, Genesis begins broadly. At the beginning the creation of the heavens and the earth is revealed

to us. To this is tied the fall into sin of Adam and Eve, which brings the entire creation into ruin. After the driving out of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the narrative has to do with humanity as a whole. We read about the flood, about the covenant of God with Noah, as well as the building of the tower of Babel with the ensuing confusion of tongues.

Beginning with Genesis 12 the Holy Scripture concentrates on fewer people. The narrative has to do with Abraham and those who moved with him out of Ur. To be sure, God promised at the time of Abraham's call that in Abraham *all* the peoples of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:3), but it is unmistakable: The following chapters deal with Abraham and with his family. We see how those connected with this chosen man were eliminated one by one: Abraham's father Terah died in Haran (Gen. 11:32); in the promised land his nephew Lot separated from him (Gen. 13:9); then God taught him that neither Eliezar would be his heir (Gen. 15:4) nor Ishmael (Gen. 17:18-20), rather, his heir would be Isaac (Gen. 17:21; 18:10).

When finally the son of promise is born, one might actually breathe a sigh of relief. The tension seems to have been resolved. But precisely at that time God demanded nothing less from Abraham than to bring Isaac as a sacrificial offering. Was not everything brought into question again by this command of God? After Abraham withstands this trial, the narrated events quickly broaden out again. Soon Jacob, the son of Isaac, has twelve sons, who, as is well known, become the heads of the twelve tribes of the people of Israel.

### **God's Incomprehensible Command**

But it is not only in the book of Genesis that the events narrated in Genesis 22 reach their apex. Also in the life of Abraham itself many different lines run through these events and receive their meaning through these events. For example: The command to Abraham with which the chapter on the sacrifice of Isaac begins, states: "Take your son...and go to the land of Moriah to a mountain which I will show you" (Gen. 22:2). The wording is strongly reminiscent of the call of Abraham, "Go out from your country from your family and from the house of your father to that land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1; Acts



7:3). The expression “that I will show you” appears only in these two texts in the entire Old Testament.

This similar-sounding instruction subtly demonstrates that the promise to show the land to Abraham did not find its fulfillment until Abraham arrived at the mount Moriah. The outward similarity in the two commands, however, brings the difference between them into the foreground. While God desired of Abraham in Genesis 12 that he give up his familiar roots and tear himself from his past, in Genesis 22 it was demanded of Abraham to release himself from his descendants, to say “no” to his future. The difference goes deeper still. In Genesis 12 God in no way demanded of Abraham that he kill his parents. In Genesis 22 this is exactly what was demanded of him in regard to his descendant. The father of faith was to lay his hand actively on his son.

Between these two events lay many years. Those were years in which an intimate trust developed between God and Abraham. When God the Lord visited Abraham in Mamre, He asked the rhetorical question, “Should I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?” (Gen. 18:17). One can say without exaggeration that a friendship had arisen between God and Abraham (Is. 41:8; James 2:23).

But precisely when one considers that friendship, the command of God seems all the more disconcerting: “Take thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, and offer him” (Gen. 22:2). Is not this word like a merciless blow with a fist in the face of Abraham? Is there not a clear demonstration here that God is the Completely Incomprehensible, the Wholly Other? Isn’t the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard right, when, in his work *Fear and Trembling*, in reference to this command of God to Abraham to offer up his son, he speaks of “the absurd”<sup>1</sup> and compares the relationship with this God to an irrational “jump”<sup>2</sup>

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1 Soren Kierkegaard, *Furcht und Zittern*, in: *Werkausgabe Band 1*. Cologne [Diederichsverlag] 1971, p. 44.

2 Ibid., p. 45. See also the footnote, pp. 52-53. In Danish is used, for the German term for “jump,” the term trampoline-spring. According to E. Hirsch, the translator of this piece, the word elicits thoughts of a circus performance: the “high jump from the steep jumping board...on to the high swing.” Cf. footnote 37, p. 156.

One thing is clear: In Genesis 22 God commands something that He had often forbidden, that is to kill (Gen. 9:6; Ex. 20:13). Precisely the killing of one's own child—which occurred among the Canaanites in the context of the fertility cults—was repeatedly, expressly forbidden by God (Lev. 18:21; Deut. 18:10)!

Not only the command of God in and of itself, but also the manner and way in which God gave Abraham this command seem designed to torture. If God had simply said, "Sacrifice thy son!" the severity of that command would have been hardly comprehensible. But God gave this command with precise, brutal detail: "Take thy son, thy only son, whom thou lovest, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him up there."

That instruction to kill the one who not only represented an assurance of life for the centenarian, but was the one on whom he had directed his strongest hopes for twenty-five years, and now that he had finally been born, was the focus of all his love—that instruction was terrible. But in this carefully worded command, God clearly intended to afflict deeply the heart of His friend. Why?

In addition, God desired from Abraham that he should not immediately offer up his son. Instead He ordered him first to undertake a days-long journey with Isaac, in order that they might reach the exact place that God had chosen for this deed. Why this additional torture?

John Calvin describes the matter this way: "He must go and not know where, and have no known destination. For God will not simply hold his head under water, but rather hold him throughout in such a fearsome abyss, that we cannot imagine a possible way out of it."<sup>3</sup> But the wound is worse yet. The command to kill Isaac did not only mean the suppression of every fatherly inclination. By no means did this order mean only the annihilation of Abraham's earthly future. The death of Isaac had not at all to do only with the survival of a family in a strange land. For Isaac was not just any child. Rather, he was the son of promise (Gen. 17:21).

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3 John Calvin, *Erste Predigt über das Opfer Abrahams*, 1. Juni, 1560. Quoted in John Calvin, *Abraham Predigten*. Translated by Ernst Bizer, Munich, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1937.

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews lays his finger on the fact that this order contradicted the promise of God, “By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, ‘That in Isaac shall thy seed be called’” (Heb. 11:17-18). Let us hear once again how John Calvin explained this fact to the congregation in Geneva: “When other people killed their children, that was nothing in comparison to this. For no one else saw in his child his own savior. But even though Isaac was not the savior of Abraham, Abraham knew nevertheless that from Isaac should come the Savior of the world. Where then should Abraham have sought all of his righteousness, all of his well-being, and all of his salvation, if not in the person of Isaac, that is, in the one from whom He should come? Will Isaac now die? Then the world is lost and the devil reigns and has won everything. Then is God the enemy of man and of all creatures.... It is determined that this Isaac should die by the hand of Abraham, of the Abraham who had received the promise of God.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Temptation**

The Holy Scripture calls what God demanded here of Abraham a temptation, or a “trial.” God tried (tempted) Abraham (Gen. 22:1). This word appears in the Holy Scripture in various contexts.

Satan is designated as the tempter (Matt. 4:3). When he tempts men, Satan seeks to destroy them (I Thess. 3:5). The same word appears in situations in which men try (tempt) other men. In this way the Queen of Sheba tested Solomon in order to find out if he was actually the wisest man in the world (I Kings 10:6-9). Then we encounter places in which men put God to the test. Hardly had Israel been led through the Red Sea than the people tempted God at Massah and Meribah (Ex. 17:2, 7). The temptation consisted in the fact that the people did not trust God’s goodness and His power. Further, we read that God tries men. For instance, God commanded His people when and how they were to collect manna (Ex. 16:4). When God tests men, He does not purpose to incite them to disobedience. Also, He does not have the falling away of His people in mind (James 1:13). It is, rather, God’s

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4 Ibid.

desire to strengthen the one who is led into temptation in the fear of God (Ex. 20:20).

It was this way with Abraham. Through his perseverance he was “strengthened in faith” (Rom. 4:20). Normally one would say, “Hoping and waiting turn some into fools.” But with those who are tried by God, that obviously does not hold true. They receive the promise precisely in the way of perseverance and patience (compare Heb. 6:11-15). In this way we are to understand Genesis 22.

### **The Starkness of the Narrative**

It strikes us how starkly the portrait unfolds. In the narrative we read nothing about Abraham’s inner convulsions or despondency. Isaac’s fear is not intimated with a single syllable. One guesses, naturally, at the father’s emotions and his soul’s agony during the three days. But the Holy Spirit obviously did not consider it necessary to tell us anything about this emotional upheaval. After God gave Abraham the command to offer up his only son whom he loved, it is reported, apparently without any commiseration or sympathy, “Then Abraham arose early in the morning...” (Gen. 22:3).

In the last two hundred years, during the Romantic era, and then also in Liberal theology, commentators loved to stylize the narrative of the offering up of Isaac into a stream of consciousness and would try to dramatize it. But the Scriptures do not do that. Would not all psychologizing come too far short of the fact that this history does not have to do with just any son, but with the “Son of Promise,” on whom the continuance of the history of salvation hangs?

The trial of Abraham was not some sort of process in inner enlightenment, as perhaps in this way: Abraham became carried away with the subjective impression that God wanted from him the sacrifice of his child (as he had observed among the Canaanites around him). But at the end he freed himself from this religious eccentricity by means of his inner struggles and arrived at the realization that God did not actually want this of him.

### **God Tests His Covenant**

The text has nothing to do with any such thing! Instead, the

trial of Abraham takes place in the realm of the covenant that God established with Abraham. When Abraham answered the call of God with a concise “Here am I” (Gen. 22:1), he placed emphasis on his obedience. Also, the saddling of the ass, the cutting of the wood for the sacrifice, and the setting out without knowing exactly where the journey would take him were all certainly his obedience to the command of God. This remained true as Abraham left his servant behind on the last stretch of the journey, loaded the wood on his son, and took the knife and the fire himself, and also as the patriarch stacked the altar, tied Isaac and laid him on the altar, and then gripped the knife.

That God desires this obedience from Abraham does not mean that Abraham performs a jump into the absurd. Rather, the test takes place in the context of the question of whether Abraham so fears God, that he will trust completely the promises that he was given, even when he does not understand how God will accomplish these promises.

We can even go a step farther. Because God alone had established His covenant with Abraham (see Gen. 15:7-21), the trial of the faith of Abraham consisted therein, in a certain sense, that God tested Himself. God tries here that which He Himself has given Abraham. The purpose of this temptation was that what God had up to this point worked in Abraham in secret would now come to light.

As the angel of the Lord called from heaven to Abraham and told him not to touch Isaac, he added, “Now I know that thou fearest God...” (Gen. 22:12). It would be wrong to want to interpret this expression as if the all-knowing God knew more after the trial than He did before. The difference between the time before the temptation and afterward lay in the fact that it is now made plain what God the Lord had worked in Abraham.

In the covenant that God established with Abraham there may be distinguished two sides: God and man. But when we speak of “two sides,” we may not understand this as if two parties stand over against each other like two parties to a contract. That would be a catastrophic misunderstanding! We say it once again: While the father of faith found himself in a coma-like throe, God walked alone between the sacrificial animals (Gen. 15:12, 17). The covenant is completely and exclusively anchored in that God of whom it is written that He calls those things that be not as though they were (Rom.

4:17). It was and is God alone, the Faithful One, “that calleth . . . , and will also (Himself) do it” (I Thess. 5:24).

After all, that is also the reason why we may hold fast to the promises of God, for God never allows it to happen that we are tried above our ability. Instead, He will with the trial also always create the way out (I Cor. 10:13).

That God’s covenant has two sides, but is anchored in God’s faithfulness, is also clear in the promise that God gave His friend after he withstood his trial. God swore (not in consideration of the work of Abraham, but) by Himself. “For because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the sand which is upon the seashore. . .” (Gen. 22:16-17).

### **Faith and Works**

When one compares this promise with the promises that the patriarch had received before his trial (Gen. 12:2 and 15:5), one can see that there are no differences in the content of these promises. Abraham did not receive a greater promise after the journey to Moriah than he had before! Nevertheless this promise is formulated differently than the earlier ones. There is now introduced an element of causality. “Because thou hast done this . . . therefore will I . . .” Actually God (here the name “Jehovah” is used, which designates God as the God of the covenant) commends here the deed that grew out of the looking away from oneself to God.

James stated, in reference to the offering up of Isaac, that Abraham was “justified by works.” Faith worked “with his works.” Yes, “by works was faith made perfect” (James 2:21-22). Often these expressions are seen as a contradiction of what the apostle Paul writes, namely, that man “is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:28). But there is no contradiction here. While the statement of the apostle Paul is directed against dead works, the statement of James is directed at dead faith.

Paul is confronting Judaism. From that standpoint, he is repudiating all seeking of salvation by one’s own works of the law. James addresses the question of the practical use of faith. He answers the question: What *use* is a faith that does not express itself in works?

(James 2:14). A faith that consists only in the belief that there is one God is a faith that the demons also have (James 2:19).

Genesis 22 also has to do with this practical use of faith. The question was not whether some quality existed in Abraham by which he could persevere before God and which God wanted to discover. Rather God's purpose was to reveal that he, whom God in His sovereignty had called (Gen. 12:1) and whom He had justified through faith alone (Gen. 15:6), so completely looked away from himself and placed himself on the promises of God that he was ready to let go of his own future.

The reason that Abraham walked the way to Moriah was not some irrational "jump" into the absurd, but that he, contrary to all outward appearances, threw himself on the promises of God. Trusting the promises of God was now more important to the father of faith than his own deliberations about the future.

For this reason, the New Testament teaches that Abraham did not *almost* sacrifice his son, but that he *actually* delivered up his son to God (Heb. 11:17; James 2:21). He did that in faith. That means that he determined within himself: If God wills that I sacrifice my son, then this same God will raise Isaac from the dead (Heb. 11:19). God granted to Abraham the ability to see beyond the present into eternity.

### **The Sacrifice of Abraham's Son According to the Koran and According to Judaism**

These days it may be worthwhile to take note of what Mohammed wrote about Abraham's work. We read:

When he (the son) was old enough to work with him, Abraham said, 'My son! I saw in a dream, that I will slaughter you for a sacrifice. Now behold, what do you say to that?' He said, 'Father! Do what you have been commanded to do. You will find, Allah willing, that I am one of those who are uncomplaining.' As both had commended themselves (to the will of Allah) and he him (Abraham his son) laid out with his forehead to the ground, we called out to him: 'O Abraham! Already you have fulfilled the vision of the dream! Most certainly, we reward the doer of righteousness for such.' Certainly this was the

manifest trial. And we released him (the son) with a great sacrifice. And we relayed his story to his descendants. Peace be upon Abraham! In this way we reward the doer of righteousness. He is (one) of our believing servants. And we told him concerning Isaac that he would be prophet, one of the doers of righteousness. Among their descendants there are some who are pious, but also some who (because of their obduracy) manifestly strive against themselves.<sup>5</sup>

It is not formulated as an overt command. Rather, Abraham “saw it in a dream” that he must slaughter his son Ishmael, who encouraged his father—the vision was concerning this son, as Isaac was only announced as a reward after the deed—to submit himself to the command of God. The Koran places Ishmael at the center: The son of the flesh spurs his father on to kill him because Ishmael can in this way show his patience and demonstrate that he is someone who will devote himself to God in submissiveness. Around this submissiveness turns that which is told in the Koran, upon which the reward follows. This is fully consistent with the heart of this religion’s name “Islam,” that is, “submission.”

While the Bible pictures Abraham as a believer, yes as the father of believers, it is not silent over his many weaknesses, missteps, sins, or the smallness of his faith. We think of the journey to Egypt that brought so much shame to Abraham (Gen. 12:10-12). The Koran pictures an Abraham who is in every way obedient to Allah. Other narratives of the Koran tell how Abraham always relied on the omnipotence of Allah<sup>6</sup> and distinguished himself in his uncompromising struggle against polytheism (idolatry and astrology).<sup>7</sup>

In the explanation of Judaism,<sup>8</sup> which presently exercises a not

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5 Sura 37, 102-113.

6 Sura 2, 258-260.

7 Sura 6, 74-81; 19, 41-47; 21, 51-72.

8 See for example: Jackie Metzger, [http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/lesson\\_plans/sacrifice\\_of\\_isaac.asp](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/lesson_plans/sacrifice_of_isaac.asp). Compare also on this theme: Brhard Greiner, Bernd Janowski; Hermann Lichtenberger, *Opfere deinen Sohn!: Das Isaak-Opfer in Judentum, Christentum und Islam*. Tübingen [Franke] 2007; Ed Noort, *Genesis 22, Human sacrifice and theology in the Hebrew Bible*. In: *The sacrifice of Isaac; the Aqedah (Genesis 22) and its*



insignificant influence on the Christian community, one notices that, completely contrary to the viewpoint of the biblical text, Isaac is pushed into the center. Isaac is construed as a prototype for the people of Israel, which God presents as a freewill burnt offering (Latin: *holocaustum*).

Perhaps one can compare what Judaism does with Isaac to the way in which Roman Catholicism wishes to understand Mary. For Roman Catholicism, Mary is the person who distinguishes herself throughout as the person who places herself at the service of God. Because Mary responded to the annunciation of the angel of the coming of the savior into the world: "...be it unto me according to thy word," she became the accomplice in the salvation of the world. The Savior was able to come because Mary gave her assent. Today also, in the Roman Catholic interpretation, every person must give his consent and declare his readiness to cooperate before God can begin a work with him.

It is clear that in this way, as much in Judaism as in Roman Catholicism, man is pushed into the center. While according to the Word of God, the honor belongs only to God, it is consistent with these two belief systems that it is only just and right that man comes away with a portion of the honor.

### **Isaac laid on the Altar—Christ Crucified**

But let us return to Holy Scripture. Has everything been said about the biblical narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac, when it is understood to mean that God desired of Abraham that he place his entire future in God's hand? Without doubt this understanding of the text would pull us in another direction than the Koran teaches, a direction that

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*interpretations*. Ed. by Ed Noort et al. Leiden 2002, S. 1-20. Lukas Kundert, *Die Opferung/Bindung Isaaks. Band 1. Genesis 22:1-19 im Alten Testament, im Frühjudentum und im Neuen Testament*. Neukirchen-Vluyn 1998 [Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neue Testament begründet von G.J. Bornkamm et al., Nr. 78; Lukas Kundert, *Die Opferung/Bindung Isaaks. Band 2. Genesis 22:1-19 in frühen rabbinischen Texten*. Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1998] Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neue Testament begründet von G.J. Bornkamm et al., Nr. 79.

perverts the narrative as if it taught the demand of a total submission, upon which the reward then would follow.

Nevertheless, the interpretation that God here desires of Abraham that he give up control of his own future does not appear to be sufficient.

If this were God's only purpose, God could have given the order to drive Isaac away, just as He did with Ishmael (Gen. 21:9-21) and as Abraham did later with the sons of his second wife, Ketura (Gen. 25:1-6). Later on, God could have led Isaac back to his father, and the salvation history could have then gone on.

If God wanted only to test whether Abraham believed in the resurrection, He could have allowed Isaac to die in order to be able to raise him from the dead.

But why this awful command: "Lay thy hand on thy son!"? Yes, God the Lord demanded of Abraham not, "Kill Isaac!" but rather, "Offer him!" (Gen. 22:2), or "Bring him as a sacrifice!" Sacrifice means nothing else than: Kill him for God!

This concept of the sacrifice was recognized already by the church fathers. They extracted from it the conclusion that the command to Abraham to offer up his own son was a symbolic reference to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on Calvary. In the command, "Take thy son, thy only son, whom thou lovest, and sacrifice him for a burnt offering," they heard the well known Word: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him shall not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

This interpretation has been recognized among Christians since the time of the early church. Actually, with this interpretation some of the expressions in this text become clear, which could not otherwise be understood. Here are a few examples:

In the command to Abraham to offer up Isaac, God specified that Abraham should take his *only* son. This phrase appears three times in the chapter (Gen. 22:2, 12, 16). One could object here that Isaac was not at all the only son. It is well known that Abraham was also the father of Ishmael.

The higher critical interpretation lapses into the thought that "only" here is not to be understood numerically. Rather, one must interpret

this in the sense of “unique,” “irreplaceable,” in the same way that David once spoke of his “only” soul (Ps. 22:21): In that God spoke here of “only,” He wanted to underscore that Abraham was to sacrifice his dearest son. To which it should be answered: It is certainly correct that the Hebrew word can have “unique” as a secondary meaning. But the primary meaning of the word is numerical (compare Prov. 4:3; Jer. 6:26; Amos 8:10; Zach. 12:10). We understand this expression properly only when we see it as a reference to the Father who actually gave up His *only* Son.

Moreover, it comes to us even more forcefully that God did not lead Abraham just anywhere. Rather, He directed him to the land of “Moriah,” and to a very specific mountain (Gen. 22:2). The mount Moriah is the place on which Solomon later built the temple (II Chron. 3:1). The land of Moriah is thus also the place in which was found the hill of Calvary.

Another noteworthy aspect of the text: After God gave Abraham His command, Abraham did not only rise early and saddle the ass. It is expressly stated “*that Abraham cut wood for the altar*” (Gen. 22:3). Normally servants were at the disposal of the patriarch for such work; and actually they are referred to in the same verse. But in this chapter the servants are represented purely as those who are “taken along.” Does the Holy Spirit, in pointing out that Abraham cut the wood himself this time, give us a reference to the fact that God the Father, from beginning to end, maintains the initiative in the giving up of His own Son? (I Pet. 1:19-20).

Also the phrasing of the statement “on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off” (Gen. 22:4) leads us to ponder. The striking part is not that Abraham required three days to travel the approximately 50 miles between Beersheba (Gen. 21:22) and Mount Moriah. The noteworthy thing is what is stated – Abraham *saw from afar* the place after three days. Why is that so important? Is it not more important when one arrives at a destination than to the point in time in which he saw it “*from afar*”?

An answer to the question of why it is reported that Abraham saw the mount on the third day *from a distance* (or: *from afar*) can probably be found when one understands that the Spirit of God purposes here

to build an expectation. The place for the sacrifice that God purposes in truth, the event that should actually be in view, lies yet in the far distance. Similarly, the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews points out that the promises given to the patriarchs did not direct them to that earthly country, but to the heavenly, which they saw *from afar* and which they embraced (Heb. 11:13-16).

Something else that is notable: Although the word “son” is used ten times in this text in reference to Isaac (Gen. 22:2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 16), Abraham chose a different word in Genesis 22:5. He spoke of the “young man.” What is noteworthy about this word in Hebrew is that it normally carries the connotation of “servant.” In this sense it appears in the same verse. Also the servants of Abraham are designated as “young men.” To some Bible translators, for instance those who compiled the Schlachter 2000-Translation [which the Consistory and the members of the BERG use], this concurrence came across as so strange that they translated the same Hebrew expression differently. (Author’s note: This same problem exists in the KJV. The Hebrew word “*naar*,” which is found twice in Genesis 22:5, is translated one time as “young men” and the other time as “lad.”) But in this instance that is regrettable, for it is possible that the word is meant to show that now, on the last stretch, the son has become the servant, as God the Father made His Son to be a servant (Is. 53:11; Phil. 2:7).

In view of the sparseness with which the Scriptures narrate this journey over its three days, the statement catches our attention that “Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son, Isaac” (Gen. 22:6). Clearly, we are to know that on the last stretch Isaac carried the wood himself. Why would it surprise that not a few of the church fathers saw a hint in this reference to the fact that our Lord carried His cross Himself to Hill of the Skull? (John 19:17).<sup>9</sup> Possibly Paul Gerhardt was thinking of this incident when he wrote in the third verse of his song *A Little Lamb Goes and Carries the Guilt*, “Yes, Father, yes from the bottom of my heart, lay the wood on, I will carry it for you....”

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9 For example: Melito of Sardis, *Fragment 9*, in: *Clavis Patrum Graecorum*. 1093. Compare also Origen, *Homillie VIII*, in: *Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca*, vol. II, pp. 171, 180, 181.

Also, the fact that Isaac addressed Abraham as “my father” (Gen. 22:7), and Abraham answered him with the appellation, “my son,” points, according to some church fathers, prophetically beyond the historic event to the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. Two times the text states, “they went both of them together” (Gen. 22:6, 8).<sup>10</sup> Here we may remember the statement that Christ made immediately before He made His way to Calvary, “I am not alone, because the Father is with me” (John 16:32).

Isaac’s question, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” (Gen. 22:7), a question that runs through the entire Old Testament, receives its final answer, according to the ancient church, in the proclamation of John of Baptist: “*Behold the lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29).<sup>11</sup>

When it is then narrated that Abraham laid the son, whom he had tied, on the altar (Gen. 22:9), one thinks of the expression of David in the most well-known psalm of lament: “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint...thou hast brought me into the dust of death” (Ps. 22:14-15). When we read twice in this connection that Abraham *did not spare* his son (Gen. 22:12, 16), this phrasing reminds us unmistakably of the similar expression of the apostle Paul, that God “did not spare” His Son (Rom. 8:32).

There are clear differences between Isaac and the Christ. The son of Abraham died only almost (not actually). He was spared at the last moment. In contrast, the Son of God died in fact.<sup>12</sup> Isaac did not need to be sacrificed. *The Ram* had to die in his place. It is not surprising that Christians of the first centuries found the vicarious death of Christ symbolized in the ram.<sup>13</sup> Some teachers of the early church went so far as to see in the *thicket* in which the ram was held fast (Gen. 22:13) a picture of the cross.<sup>14</sup>

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10 For example: Origen, *Homillie VII*.

11 For example: Ambrose, in: *Clavis Patrum Latinorum*. Turnhout 1961, p. 127. See for a detailed explanation of Ambrose: David Lerch, *Isaaks Opferung christlich gedeutet*. Tübingen 1950, pp. 49, 78-79, 95, 104-105.

12 For instance: Melito of Sardes, *Fragment*.

13 For instance: Origen, *Homilie VIII*. Caesarius of Arles, *Predigt 84*, in: *Clavis Patrum Latinorum*. Turnhout 1961, p. 1008.

14 For instance: Melito of Sardes, *Fragment 9 and 10*.

### God Will Provide

Naturally, in the typological interpretation, one may enter into the question of whether every one of the stated parallels is convincing: Have they really been inserted by the Holy Spirit in order to point to the Christ? Or have they not really been pulled out of the text in such a way that they reflect the fantasies of the interpreter?

But also apart from the typological hints, the narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac contains other indications that the Holy Spirit intends to direct our deliberations toward the sacrifice of Christ. We should think here of the prophetic statements of the text.

As Abraham took leave of his servants with his son, Isaac, he said, “We (!) will come again to you” (Gen. 22:5). The New Testament emphasizes that Abraham was not trying to fool his servants, to lie to them. Instead he said this on the basis of his faith in the resurrection (Heb. 11:19).

Another statement is, however, even more noteworthy. To Isaac’s question, Where is the lamb? Abraham answered, “My son, God will provide himself a lamb” (Gen. 22:8).

First, it seems to be that this statement refers to the ram that was slaughtered in the place of Isaac; but it is all the more surprising that Abraham made a similar statement *after* the ram was offered. “And Abraham called the name of that place ‘The Lord will provide’” (Gen. 22:14). In other words, after the ram had been offered, Abraham looked ahead to another sacrifice that God would provide. This statement apparently had such weight that it was remembered over the centuries by posterity, “...as it is said to this day, in the mount the Lord will provide (or, in the mount of the Lord it shall be provided).<sup>15</sup>

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15 In higher-critical theology the sacrifice of Isaac is held as a “saga,” and construed as the declaration of a place of cult worship. In that one nevertheless cannot explain the phrase “in the mount, where the Lord will provide” with this construction, one sees in this phrase a “corruption in the text,” which needs to be “re-worked.” For example, Herman Gunkel, *Genesis* 1910, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Here quoted from the unabridged edition: Göttingen [Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht] 1977, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition, p. 239. See for Gunkel’s understanding of “saga” his Preface loc. cit., S. V - LXXI. On this topic compare also: Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Volume, in: *Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament*. Neukirchen [Neukirchener Verlag] 1981, pp. 429-447, especially p. 433.

Actually, this word seems to be the culmination of the chapter. It is often implied in highly dramatic sermons, and great painters have also given the impression that the high point of the chapter is the calling out of the angel of the Lord, "Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him; for now I know that thou fearest God...." Doubtless this outcry is a liberating word, a word which resolves with one stroke the burden, the press, which this entire event imparts. The test of obedience is over! Abraham, you have passed the test! Your fear of God is manifest!

Nevertheless, the focus of this chapter does not appear to lie in verse 12 but in verse 14: "And Abraham called the name of that place the Lord will provide; as it is said to this day, In this mount will the Lord provide." Naturally, the question inevitably presents itself: What then will the Lord provide?

To which it must be answered, first of all: Because the Mount Moriah will one day be called the Temple Mount (II Chron. 3:1), the mount that is often called the Mount of the Lord (see for example Ps. 24:3; Is. 2:3; 30:29; Zech. 8:3), we are directed here to the innumerable sacrificial animals whose throats will be cut opened in this place.

In the same way that the ram was a substitute for Isaac, so that at the sight of the slaughtered ram, Isaac could say: "Certainly I should have been slaughtered upon the altar," so must every Israelite confess, when the priest slaughters his sacrificial animal, "Certainly I should have bled there."

But when Abraham, after (!) the sacrifice of the ram, proclaims that God will provide, the entire sacrificial service that will later take place on this mount is portended as a foreshadow. God the Father will provide for Himself another sacrifice, of which the ram caught in the thicket and the innumerable animals slaughtered in the forecourt of the Temple are only portents.

Although it is nowhere expressly stated, it does not seem so improbable that Abraham at that time, after he had offered the ram, saw the "day of Christ" (John 8:56).

This expression, "God will provide Himself" leads Abraham to Golgotha. It appears as if God intends to lead Abraham to exactly that conclusion. Beginning with the calling out from Ur, through the

subsequent call in Haran to move to Canaan, this journey came to its conclusion in its path to Moriah.

### **The Substitution of the Sacrifice**

When God said to Adam in the Garden of Eden, “For in the day that thou eatest [of the tree of knowledge of good and evil] thou shalt surely die” (Gen. 2:17), and the man nevertheless ate thereof, each one of us did forfeit his right to life.

Immediately before the exodus from Egypt, God sent the ten plagues. The last plague was the killing of the firstborn sons in the houses whose lintels and door posts were not struck with the blood of the Passover lamb (Ex. 11-12). Hardly had the people of Israel departed (they had not even yet left the land of Egypt), when God said, I claim all of your firstborn for Myself. In this context this could only mean: “Your children are not better than those of the Egyptians. Certainly I should also have killed them. But you may redeem them.” That means: buy them back, and, to be sure, by a lamb or through a symbolic sum of money (Ex. 13).

As we read this narrative we should tie all of these events to the sacrifice of Isaac. That which God demanded of Abraham in Genesis 22 is not on the level of the Canaanite fertility cults. Rather, this chapter leads our mind’s eye again to that which all mankind has earned in the fall into sin: death (Rom. 5:12-14; 6:23). The command to Abraham, “Go, offer your son for a burnt offering,” must be understood from the perspective of our first parents: In fact, Isaac can also not be sufficient before God. No one can suffice before God. If one does not take this into account, the command of God to Abraham becomes an appalling horror.

But now comes something that is full of wonder. Now comes that which surpasses all thought and contemplation: In the face of that reckoning, that bill, to which God directs us here and which has been unpaid since the fall into sin, He declares that He Himself will pay the reckoning and that with His own Son. Isaiah says it this way, “The chastisement of our peace was upon him” (Is. 53:5). That is the high point of Genesis 22: God will provide Himself a lamb—His own Son!

The secret of this narrative is not the message, as Islam teaches,



that we must subject ourselves completely to Allah in order to procure for ourselves a reward.

In order not to be misunderstood: The Bible also has to do with obedience. But it is an obedience that has a view to the promises of God, to faith. The required obedience has as its frame of reference the covenant, which is established by God.

The secret of the offering of Isaac does not consist in our becoming witnesses to the manner in which Isaac willingly gave himself up to be a burnt offering.

The incomprehensible wonder of this chapter consists in the substitution of the sacrifice. When God cried out to Abraham, "Lay not thine hand upon the lad," He gave that command because He had taken the offering of His own Son upon Himself. Because God had from the beginning of the world set aside His Son as a sacrifice, of which the ram in the thicket and all of the sacrificial animals offered up over the centuries in the temple court are only a dim shadow, must Isaac, must the sinner, not go to death.

God demonstrated here to His friend Abraham His all-comprehensive, infinite love. In addition, God pursued withal His purpose that Abraham would feel, just once, what it means to give up his own son. Just once he should feel that thrust through his heart, so that he would have an idea of the unconditional nature of the love of God. The father of faith should, this one time, have a hint of the pain that God the Father had since He had, from the foundation of the world, ordained His Son to the way of Calvary (I Pet. 1:19-20), so that neither he nor any of his children would think lightly of that which took place on Good Friday.

The severity and the inscrutable nature of God's command to Abraham finds its foundation in that which God did Himself. For that reason chapter 22 does not only portray a turning or focal point within the first book of Holy Scripture; rather, it takes us directly into the heart of salvation history: Abraham, take thy son, thy only son, whom thou lovest, and go to the land of Moriah and sacrifice him upon a mountain.... I will soon take My own Son. ●

## *Bound to Join:* A Review and Defense

***Bound to Join: Letters on Church Membership***, by David J. Engelsma. Reformed Free Publishing Association, Michigan, USA, 2010. Hardback, 184 pp. [Reviewed by Angus Stewart.]

“For my European brothers and sisters of the British Reformed Fellowship [BRF]”—this is the touching dedication at the very start of Prof. David J. Engelsma’s latest book, *Bound to Join: Letters on Church Membership*. The dedication also points to the origin of this work: e-mail correspondence with scattered Reformed believers in the British Isles and Europe about the distressing lack of faithful Reformed churches where they live, arising from discussions at the 2004 BRF Conference in England. The saints asked for instruction on this vital subject and Prof. Engelsma duly obliged.

### Contents

The “Introductory Letter” (pp. xiii-xvi) from a concerned sister in France, with its fifteen practical questions and statement of three “issues and scenarios,” sets the scene and gets the ball rolling. What should I do if there are no true churches near me?

In Letter 1, Prof. Engelsma begins with a brief presentation of the Reformed doctrine of the church and church membership. Here and elsewhere he makes it clear that he will be working from Scripture, the Reformed confessions (especially Belgic Confession 27-29 and including the Westminster Confession), and John Calvin (particularly his anti-Nicodemite writings).

Letter 2 answers a question from one of the correspondents in the European forum about the meaning of an “apostate” church. This in turn occasions the erroneous charge that the Protestant Reformed Churches believe that all churches that hold that God loves and desires to save the reprobate are apostate. Engelsma explains that this is not the case and answers a related question on the “Sum of Saving Knowledge,” often bound with the Westminster Standards (Letters

3-4). Back on the subject of false churches, Letter 5 explains the process of apostasy.

The next five letters quote and summarize John Calvin's call to professing French believers to form or move to Reformed churches (based on, e.g., Psalm 27:4 and Psalms 42, 43 and 84). This is a difficult word to scattered saints in the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries.

Suddenly two members of the forum revise their estimate of the British churches: they are not that bad after all! Engelsma responds to them in Letter 11. By appealing to the Reformed creeds (Belgic Confession 29, 33-35; Westminster Confession 27-29, pp. 66-67, 111-112), he demonstrates that Reformed saints cannot fulfill their "calling from God regarding church membership by joining a Baptist church" (p. 66).

Letters 12-14 deal with the call to join a true church even above family loyalties, in answer to question 10 in the "Introductory Letter" (p. xiv). This undoubtedly is a "hard saying," but Engelsma proves the point from the words of Christ in the gospel accounts, other Scriptures (Ezra 10; I Cor. 7:15), the confessions (Belgic Confession 28), and John Calvin (pp. 81-83).

Before his discussion of the three marks of the church, Engelsma gives a fine response to a question from one of the members of the forum who wondered if Christ's command to the faithful in the church in Sardis (Rev. 3:1-6) contradicted the professor's instruction (Letter 15). Engelsma begins his "explanation of the marks [of a true church] by clearing up misunderstanding and exposing erroneous notions about the marks" (p. 97). If only the four points he makes (pp. 97-104) were understood and practiced in the church world! What harm Christian people would avoid inflicting upon themselves, their families, and their friends! The first mark of faithful preaching (Letter 17) and the second and third marks of proper administration of the sacraments and the godly exercise of church discipline (Letter 18) are treated in turn. In this connection, Engelsma states that paedocommunion "is impure, a corrupting of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper" (p. 112). He warns, "The result of child-communion will be the heavy judgment of God upon the church that practices it, as the apostle warns in [I Corinthians 11:30-34]" (p. 112).

In answer to another question, Engelsma provides penetrating analysis of denominations, their biblical and confessional justification, as well as the effects of apostasy in denominations (Letter 19). The professor's conclusion is pithy and profound: "As patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels, appeal to church unity is the trump card of the false church" (p. 122; cf. p. 143). In Letter 20, Engelsma responds to the criticism that his instruction needs to be more "nuanced."

The false church's terrible reality is the subject of Letter 21. Our author gives us his definition:

...a false church [is] a religious organization professing Christianity that has so departed from the cardinal truths of the gospel, and with this departure has so corrupted the sacraments and perverted Christian discipline, that there is no presence of Christ in it at all by his Spirit, bestowing the grace of life, but rather a special presence of the evil spirit, Satan, working out the damnation of the members by a false gospel (p. 130).

In the next letter, Engelsma restates and clarifies his position against objections from a member of the forum. The professor states the wrong reason and the true ground for leaving a church:

One does not leave a church merely because one "does not agree with the consistory," or because the congregation did something that was not right, or because one is "uncomfortable" there, or, as often is the case, because the church "refused to recognize my gifts by electing me elder." Such grounds for leaving are not adequate. This mentality sins against the unity of the church. The ground for leaving a church is that the church seriously and impenitently errs concerning the marks of the true church (p. 142).

Letter 23 explains the development of false churches from church history (Romanism, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands [GKN], and the PCUSA). The last chapter urges joining a true church in the light of apostasy deepening as Christ's return approaches (Matt. 24; II Thess. 2; Rev. 13). It takes a well-deserved swipe at the World Council of Churches (p. 151) and specifies many raging heresies of our day.

Admittedly, the “Contents” page (p. vii) looks less than inviting—it merely lists the page numbers at which the 24 letters begin, without giving any idea of the subject they treat. However, as my summary of the book has shown, it would be very difficult to provide succinct chapter headings, especially given that Engelsma takes time to answer questions from the forum in the midst of his development of the subject. If the book were to be reprinted in the future, it might be helpful at least to provide headings for several “Parts,” e.g., Part I, covering letters 1-5, could be titled (something like) “True and False Churches,” Part II on “Calvin’s Call to Form or Move to True Churches” (Letters 6-10), etc. Perhaps also the “Contents” page could indicate that certain chapters were a response to a forum member’s question, e.g., “Excursus” or “Reply” on “The Church at Sardis” (Letter 15).

Helpfully, *Bound to Join* concludes with appendices containing two crucial creedal testimonies: Belgic Confession 27-29 (on the need to join a true church) and the Conclusion to the Canons of Dordt (on the seriousness of the Arminian heresy).

### 1) “But That’s Just Engelsma’s View!”

Both during and after the e-mail discussion and now since the publication of *Bound to Join*, Prof. Engelsma’s treatment of the necessity of joining a true church has provoked controversy. Many have been deeply appreciative, but some with whom I have corresponded—not just in the British Isles and the United States but also from further afield, such as Scandinavia and Africa—have opposed the teaching. One frequent response to the position that “outside the church there is no salvation” (Latin: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*) is “But that’s just Engelsma’s view!”

However, it was the fathers in the early church, such as Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) and Augustine of Hippo (354-430), the great theologian of grace, who coined and promoted the maxim “outside the church there is no salvation,” as Engelsma notes (p. 5).<sup>1</sup> J. N. D.

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1 Arthur Cushman McGiffert observes, “The difference at this point between Cyprian and earlier Christians was not that he asserted that no one could be saved apart from the church, for upon this there was general agreement from primitive days, but that he identified the church with a particular

Kelly, an acknowledged authority on patristic theology, states, “Cyril of Alexandria [d. 444] was voicing universally held assumptions when he wrote that ‘mercy is not obtainable outside the holy city.’”<sup>2</sup> The church fathers have been followed in this position by the historic Christian church in both West and East, which has seen *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* as a faithful summary of biblical teaching.

What about the great confessions of the Reformation? We turn first to the Belgic Confession (1561), a creed of the denomination to which Prof. Engelsma belongs and which he quotes frequently in *Bound to Join*. Article 28 is entitled “That Every One Is Bound to Join Himself to the True Church”:

We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and that 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.

Echoing the early church with its ark imagery, the *Second Helvetic Confession*, written by Heinrich Bullinger in 1562 and revised in 1564, also teaches *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*:

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institution" (*A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 2 [New York: Scribner's, 1933], pp. 30-31).

2 J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (USA: HarperSanFrancisco, rev. 1978), p. 403.

But as for communicating with the true Church of Christ, we so highly esteem of it, that we say plainly, that *none can live before God, which do not communicate with the true Church of God*, but separate themselves from the same. For as without the ark of Noah there was no escaping, when the world perished in the flood; even so do we believe, that without Christ, who in the Church offereth himself to be enjoyed of the elect, there can be no certain salvation: and therefore we teach that such as would be saved, must in no wise separate themselves from the true Church of Christ (17).<sup>3</sup>

The Second Helvetic Confession was accepted by Reformed churches not only in Switzerland but also in Scotland (1566), Hungary (1567), France (1571), and Poland (1578). In fact, it is one of the most widely accepted confessional statements among Reformed Christians throughout the world.

The Westminster Confession of the 1640s, on behalf of Presbyterianism in the British Isles, declared,

The visible church, which is also catholick or universal under the gospel, (not confined to one nation, as before under the law,) consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, and of their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, *out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation* (25:2).

From these confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we see that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* was creedal in the churches of the Calvin Reformation in Ireland, Scotland, England, the Lowlands, France, Switzerland, Hungary, and Poland. Since then, with this truth being taught in the Westminster Standards (in which the Westminster Confession is included) and the Three Forms of Unity (to which the Belgic Confession belongs), this has been the confessional position of Presbyterian churches in the British Isles and around the world and of the Dutch Reformed churches in the Netherlands and globally.<sup>4</sup>

3 Peter Hall (ed.), *The Harmony of Protestant Confessions* (USA: Still Waters Revival Books, 1992), pp. 214-215.

4 The other two creedal documents in the Three Forms of Unity also

Moving from the Reformed confessions to Reformed theologians, pride of place goes to that blessed son of France, John Calvin (1509-1564). What did he say? Engelsma himself tells us in *Bound to Join*, especially in Letters 6-10, which chapters include lengthy quotations from the Genevan Reformer. Moreover, most of Calvin's writings urging believers to join a true church have recently been conveniently collected in the book *Come Out From Among Them* that Prof. Engelsma frequently cites.<sup>5</sup>

This truth also occurs in other works by Calvin, such as his *Catechism of the Church of Geneva* (1545), designed for the covenant children of that great Reformation city:

*Master* - Why do you subjoin forgiveness of sins to the Church?

*Scholar* - Because no man obtains it without being previously united to the people of God, maintaining unity with the body of Christ perseveringly to the end, and thereby attesting that he is a true member of the Church.

*M.* - In this way you conclude that out of the Church is nought but ruin and damnation?

*S.* - Certainly. Those who make a departure from the body of Christ, and rend its unity by faction, are cut off from all hope of salvation

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have something to say in this area. In Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism, the answer to the question "What doth God require in the fourth commandment?" includes "that I, especially on the sabbath, that is, on the day of rest, diligently frequent the church of God, to hear his word, to use the sacraments, publicly to call upon the Lord, and contribute to the relief of the poor, as becomes a Christian." The Canons of Dordt teach that Jehovah's "supernatural operation" of grace in us is by means of "Word, sacraments, and discipline" and so we must not "tempt God in the church by separating what He of his good pleasure hath most intimately joined together" (III/IV:17). Likewise, God "preserves, continues, and perfects" His "work of grace in us" "by the hearing and reading of his Word, by meditation thereon, and by the exhortations, threatenings, and promises thereof, as well as by the use of the sacraments" (V:14).

5 John Calvin, *Come Out From Among Them: 'Anti-Nicodemite' Writings of John Calvin*, trans. Seth Skolnitsky (Dallas, TX: Protestant Heritage Press, 2001).



during the time they remain in this schism, be it however short.<sup>6</sup>

Philip Schaff points out that Calvin's Genevan catechism was written in French and Latin and was soon translated into Italian, Spanish, English, German, Dutch, Hungarian, Greek, and Hebrew, before adding, "It was used for a long time in the Reformed Churches and schools, especially in France and Scotland."<sup>7</sup>

Near the start of the first chapter of his treatment of the church in Book 4 of his *Institutes*, Calvin writes,

But because it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn even from the simple title "mother" how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels [Matt. 22:30]. Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. *Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation, as Isaiah [Isa. 37:32] and Joel [Joel 2:32] testify. Ezekiel agrees with them when he declares that those whom God rejects from heavenly life will not be enrolled among God's people [Ezek. 13:9].* On the other hand, those who turn to the cultivation of true godliness are said to inscribe their names among the citizens of Jerusalem [cf. Isa. 56:5; Ps. 87:6]. For this reason, it is said in another psalm: "Remember me, O Jehovah, with favor toward thy people; visit me with salvation: that I may see the well-doing of thy chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the joy of thy nation, that I may be glad with thine inheritance" [Ps. 106:4-5; cf. Ps. 105:4, Vg., etc.]. By these words God's fatherly favor and the especial witness of spiritual life are limited to his flock, so that *it is always disastrous to leave the church.*<sup>8</sup>

6 John Calvin, *Treatises on the Sacraments: Catechism of the Church of Geneva, Forms of Prayer, and Confessions of Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Scotland: Christian Heritage, 2002), p. 52.

7 Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 2 (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1877), pp. 468-469.

8 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960),

A few pages later the French Reformer states,

...no one is permitted to spurn its [i.e., a true church's] authority, flout its warnings, resist its counsels, or make light of its chastisements—much less to desert it and break its unity. For the Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that *he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments*. He so esteems the authority of the church that when it is violated he believes his own diminished.... From this it follows that *separation from the church is the denial of God and Christ*. Hence, we must even more avoid so wicked a separation. For when with all our might we are attempting the overthrow of God's truth, *we deserve to have him hurl the whole thunderbolt of his wrath to crush us*.<sup>9</sup>

Theodore Beza (1519-1605), Calvin's successor in Geneva, held the same position, declaring,

Finally, we must necessarily confess, since outside of Jesus Christ there is no salvation at all, that anyone who dies without being a member of this assembly [i.e., a true church] is excluded from Jesus Christ and from salvation, for the power to save which is in Jesus Christ belongs only to those who recognize him as their God and only Saviour.<sup>10</sup>

This statement occurs in Beza's confession, a "very popular" document.<sup>11</sup> Nicolaas Gootjes argues persuasively that Guido de Brès utilised this part of Beza's confession in writing Belgic Confession 28.<sup>12</sup>

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4.1.4, p. 1016; italics mine. A few pages earlier (4.1.1, pp. 1012), Calvin also uses the biblical imagery of the church as our mother (Gal. 4:26), developed by Cyprian: "You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your Mother."

9 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.10, pp. 1024-1025; italics mine. Calvin also states that "no one escapes the just penalty of this unholy separation [from the true church] without bewitching himself with pestilent errors and foulest delusions" (4.1.5, p. 1018).

10 Quoted in Nicolaas H. Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources* (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker, 2007), p. 85.

11 Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession*, p. 72.

12 Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession*, pp. 85-86.

Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583) was a German Reformed theologian, born in Breslau (now Wrocław, Poland), who became the leading theologian of the Reformed movement of the Palatinate. As the principal author and interpreter of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), his exposition of “the holy, catholic church” (Q. & A. 54) is especially important. A treatment of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* concludes his discussion of this question and answer on the church:

Is there any salvation out of the Church?

No one can be saved out of the Church: 1. Because out of the church there is no Saviour, and hence no salvation. “Without me ye can do nothing” (John 15:5). 2. Because those whom God has chosen to the end, which is eternal life, them he has also chosen to the means, which consist in the inward and outward call. Hence although the elect are not always members of the visible church, yet they all become such before they die. Obj. Therefore the election of God is not free. Ans. It is free, because God chooses freely both to the end and the means, all those whom he has determined to save. He never changes his decree however, after he has chosen, and ordained to the end and the means. Infants born in the church are also of the church, notwithstanding all the cant of the Anabaptists to the contrary.

What then is it to believe the Holy Catholic Church? It is to believe that there always has been, is, and ever will be, to the end of time such a church in the world, and that in the congregation composing the visible church there are always some who are truly converted, and that I am one of this number; and therefore a member of both the visible and invisible church, and shall forever remain such.<sup>13</sup>

Caspar Olevianus (1536-1587) was another German Reformed theologian who had (at least) a hand in the formulation of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563). The following quotation makes clear that Olevianus was of the same mind as his teacher, Calvin; his friend, Beza; and his co-worker in Heidelberg, Ursinus:

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13 Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, repr. 1956), pp. 292-293.

When God provides our eyes with the sight of an assemblage which is a member of the H. Catholic Church, the mark having been shown of true prophetic and apostolic doctrine (under which are embraced lawful administration of the sacraments and training in all godliness, Matt. 28:20), we ought to unite with that assemblage. For as He is Himself our Father, it is His pleasure that the Church be our mother, Isa. 54:1-2; Gal. 4:27-28, 31. In her we are both born and brought up right to the end of our lives. God is pleased by the Church's ministry to quicken us by His Spirit, stamp remission of sins on our hearts and reshape us daily in the same unto His own image. On the other hand he who despises such an assemblage possessing the mark of a true Church, to wit truth of prophetic and apostolic doctrine—which happens when a man does not communicate in sound doctrine and in prayers and when he does not attach himself to the communion of saints through the visible witnesses of the Covenant, baptism and the sacred eucharist—cannot be sure of his own salvation. And he who persists in such contempt is not elect, Acts. 2:47.<sup>14</sup>

After commenting on the Apostles' Creed's article on "the communion of saints," Olevianus explicitly affirms *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*:

138 Q. How do you understand the possession of the benefits of Christ in this life?

I understand it as follows: just as there is no salvation outside the Church, which is the body of Christ, so also all true and living members of the Church now possess full salvation, that is, forgiveness of sins.<sup>15</sup>

German-Dutch theologian Peter van Mastricht (1630-1706) writes,

Query, whether any Christian, if he can, is bound to associate himself

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14 Quoted in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), p. 671.

15 Caspar Olevianus, *A Firm Foundation: An Aid to Interpreting the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. and ed. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), p. 98.

with any particular, fixed true Church. The Schwenkfeldians, Libertines, Enthusiasts and other fanatics, with whom also act the Socinians, say No. The Reformed recognise that there may be a hidden Church, since you cannot join any Church [i.e., because persecution is so fierce, no visible, instituted church can function]. But where you can, they lay it down that you simply must.<sup>16</sup>

The two quotes above from Olevianus and van Mastricht are taken by Heinrich Heppe, a nineteenth-century German theologian and church historian, to be representative of the orthodox Reformed tradition.<sup>17</sup>

Richard Muller, the foremost figure in this field today, in his *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, states that this is the standard position of the successors of the Reformers:

***Extra ecclesiam non sit salus:*** *Outside of the church there may be no salvation;* a maxim from Cyprian (*Epistles*, 73.21) often cited by the scholastics, who accept it as true with the provision that the church is identified as the *communio sanctorum* (q.v.), or communion of saints, and by its marks, Word and sacrament (see *notae ecclesiae*). The maxim is also frequently given as *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* or *Salus extra ecclesiam non est*.<sup>18</sup>

Nineteenth-century Dutch theologian J. J. Van Oosterzee (1817-1882) writes,

Indeed, the “*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*” is here the holy truth; men must belong to the little flock, if they will upon sure grounds solace themselves with the promise of salvation. The community of the saints

16 Quoted in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 671.

17 Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 671.

18 Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), p. 112. By the word “scholastics” in the quotation above, Muller is referring not only to Reformed but also Lutheran theologians, as Muller’s Preface makes clear (pp. 7-15).

is *saving*, not because everyone [who is a member of the visible church] is saved, but because he may be assured of his salvation, who knows himself a living member of the *corpus mysticum*.<sup>19</sup>

Staying with the continental Reformed tradition but moving to the United States, we have the comments of R. B. Kuiper (1886-1966) in his work on the church, *The Glorious Body of Christ*:

In the first place, Scripture teaches unmistakably that all who are saved should unite with the church. The view that membership in the visible church is requisite to salvation has no basis whatever in Scripture. When the Philippian jailer asked what he should do to be saved, Paul said only: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." The apostle did not command him to join the church. However, when he did believe he was at once baptized (Acts 16:31-33). As soon as the Ethiopian eunuch confessed Christ he likewise was baptized (Acts 8:36-38). So were all who were converted at Pentecost. Now according to Paul's words, "By one Spirit are we all baptized into one body" (I Corinthians 12:13), baptism signifies reception into the church. It is clear that in the days of the apostles it was universal practice to receive believers into the visible church.

What could be more logical? He who believes in Christ is united with Christ. Faith binds him to Christ. He is a member of Christ's body, the invisible church. But the visible church is but the outward manifestation of that body. Every member of the invisible church should as a matter of course be a member of the visible church.

Extremely significant in this connection is Acts 2:47—"And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." Not only does the Lord Christ require of those who are saved that they unite with the church; He Himself joins them to the church. And the reference is unmistakably to the visible church. Does it follow that he who is outside the visible church is necessarily outside Christ? Certainly not. It is possible that a true believer because of some unusual circumstance may fail to unite with the church. Conceivably one may, for instance, believe in Christ and die before receiving baptism. But such instances

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19 J. J. Van Oosterzee, *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. John Watson Watson and Maurice J. Evans (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1878), p. 709; italics his.

are exceptional. The Scriptural rule is that, while membership in the church is not a prerequisite of salvation, it is a necessary consequence of salvation. Outside the visible church “there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXV, Section II).<sup>20</sup>

Peter Y. De Jong (1915-2005), like R. B. Kuiper, was a conservative theologian in the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Below is De Jong’s lengthy exposition of Belgic Confession Article 28’s statement that “out of it [i.e., the church] there is no salvation”:

This sounds utterly foreign to most Protestant ears. To many it smacks of Romanism, which makes salvation dependent upon its recognized hierarchy as mediators between God and man. Now nothing is farther removed from the Reformed convictions than such a construction of these words. This is a perversion of the Biblical doctrine of the church. The true unity of the Christian congregation may never be equated with organizational oneness. In God’s word emphasis is laid upon our spiritual fellowship with Christ, which comes to expression in sound doctrine and pure worship. This insistence, however, may not tempt us to champion the notion that the external and visible form of the church is of little account. We learn to know God’s church only in and through its historical manifestation. More than that, the Bible warns against trusting our subjective judgments while disregarding and even despising the work of the Holy Spirit in the church of all ages. Always the individual and social, the personal and communal aspects of our salvation in Christ are interwoven in New Testament teaching. They do not exist side-by-side, in isolation from each other. To be a Christian means to have fellowship with the living Christ and in the same moment with his people. To break this fellowship lightly, on the basis of personal prejudices and insights, is to imperil our salvation. How else could we hear the word of the living God, except through the preachers whom he has sent? And how could such preachers receive their commission, except by the church which believes and lives by the word of God? Aptly does J. S. Whale comment, “Certain it is that for St. Paul, and for New Testament Christianity, to be a Christian is

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20 R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1967), pp. 111-112.

to be a member of a living organism whose life derives from Christ. There is no other way of being a Christian. In this sense, Christian experience is always ecclesiastical experience. The gospel of pardon reaches you and me through the mediation of the Christian society, the living body of believers in whose midst the redeeming gospel of Christ goes out across the centuries and the continents.”

Now we can understand why Luther, Calvin and their contemporaries expressed themselves so clearly and circumspectly on the point of the church.

They refused to identify the true church with any specific ecclesiastical organization. Wherever the word is purely preached, there is the church. Constrained by the Spirit who indoctrinates us into the truth as it is in Christ, those who are saved live in fellowship with each other. Apart from Christ there is no salvation. And He is pleased to communicate His grace in connection with the means which He has instituted and preserved in this world. To separate oneself from the assembly where the rich Christ is proclaimed in obedience to the Scriptures is a heinous sin involving most serious consequences. “Hence it follows,” so Calvin warned at this point, “that a departure from the Church is a renunciation of God and Christ. And such a criminal dissension is so much the more to be avoided, because, while we endeavour, so far as lies in our power, to destroy the truth of God, we deserve to be crushed with the most powerful thunders of his wrath. Nor is it possible to imagine a more atrocious crime, than that sacrilegious perfidy, which violates the conjugal relation that the only begotten Son of God has condescended to form with us” [*Institutes*, 4.1.10].

All this is plain language.<sup>21</sup>

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21 P. Y. De Jong, *The Church's Witness to the World* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Paideia/Premier, 1960), part 2, pp. 242-243. In the third paragraph from the end of this quotation, De Jong refers to Martin Luther, who clearly affirms that there is no salvation outside the church, either explicitly or implicitly, in many of his theological writings. In Luther's *Large Catechism* (1529), as part of his exposition of the Apostles' Creed's "I believe...an holy, catholic church," he declares, "But outside of this Christian church (that is, where the gospel is not) there is no forgiveness, as also there can be no holiness." Luther's *Large Catechism* is a normative text of the Lutheran Reformation movement which was included among the Lutheran confessional writings in the Book of Concord (1580).



Turning to the Presbyterian tradition, Scottish theologian David Dickson (1583-1663), the author of the first commentary on the Westminster Confession, included the following in his remarks on chapter 25, "Of the Church":

**Question 4.** Is there any ordinary possibility of salvation out of the visible church?

No; Acts 2:47

Well then, do not the Enthusiasts, Quakers, and Libertines err, who affirm, That any man may be a true Christian, and be saved, though he live within no visible church?

Yes.

By what reasons are they confuted?

*1<sup>st</sup>*, Because the Lord Jehovah in his visible church (ordinarily) commands the blessing, even life for evermore, Ps. 133:3. *2<sup>nd</sup>*, Because the visible church is the mother of all believers, Gal. 4:26. By Jerusalem which is above, I understand the true Christian church which seeketh its salvation, not by the first covenant of the law, namely, by the works of the law, but by the second of the gospel, namely, by the merits of Christ embraced by a true faith; which hath its original from heaven, by the powerful calling of the Holy Ghost. *3<sup>rd</sup>*, Because they that are without the visible church are without Christ, Eph. 2:12. *4<sup>th</sup>*, Why are men and women joined to the visible church, but that they may be saved? Acts 2:47. *5<sup>th</sup>*, Because they that are without the visible church are destitute of the ordinary means of life and salvation, Ps. 147:19, 20.<sup>22</sup>

Nineteenth-century Scottish Presbyterian Hugh Martin (1822-1885), in his fine commentary on Jonah, declares, "The Gentiles, as a whole, as nations, were obviously given over in the meantime to the reign of spiritual death, cast out beyond the pale of that *visible church, within which alone salvation is ordinarily revealed*."<sup>23</sup>

Martin's slightly younger contemporary A. A. Hodge (1823-1886),

22 David Dickson, *Truth's Victory Over Error* (Burnie, Tasmania: Presbyterian's Armoury Publications, 2002), p. 155.

23 Hugh Martin, *The Prophet Jonah* (Great Britain: Banner, repr. 1966), p. 4; italics mine.

American Presbyterian and representative of “Old Princeton,” had this to say on Westminster Confession 25:2:

But our Confession intends in these sections to teach further that ordinarily, where there is the knowledge and opportunity, God requires every one who loves Christ to confess him in the regular way of joining the community of his people and of taking the sacramental badges of his discipleship. That this is commanded will be shown under [Westminster Confession] chapters xxvii.-xxix. And that when providentially possible every Christian heart will be prompt to obey in this matter, is self-evident. When shame or fear of persecution is the preventing consideration, then the failure to obey is equivalent to the positive rejection of Christ, since the rejection of him will have to be publicly pretended in such case in order to avoid the consequences attending upon the public acknowledgement of him.<sup>24</sup>

From all this, it is evident that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* is not “just Engelsma’s view!” This is the explicit teaching of several major Reformed and Presbyterian creeds (the Catechism of the Church of Geneva, the Belgic Confession, the Second Helvetic Confession, and the Westminster Confession) and the churches in Europe and around the world that have maintained them,<sup>25</sup> Luther’s Larger Catechism of the Lutheran churches, and many theologians in the history of the Christian church—including some of the greatest—such as Cyprian, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Luther, Calvin, Bullinger, Beza, de Brès, Ursinus, Olevianus, the Westminster divines, David Dickson, van Mastricht, Van Oosterzee, Hugh Martin, A. A. Hodge, R. B. Kuiper, and P. Y. De Jong. Moreover, scholars of historical Protestant theology, such as Heinrich Heppe and Richard Muller, testify with one voice that this is the orthodox Reformed (and Lutheran) view. In this, the Reformers and their successors are following the teaching of the church fathers, as per patristic scholars, such as J. N. D. Kelly.<sup>26</sup>

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24 A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1958), pp. 314-315.

25 Rare are the (faithful) Reformed churches in the last five centuries who have not subscribed to at least one of these four creeds.

26 Later I shall refer to the preceding quotations to make various points in different connections.

Keith Mathison summarizes well the historic Reformation teaching (over against that of modern evangelicalism):

Unlike modern Evangelicalism, the classical Protestant Reformers held to a high view of the Church. When the Reformers confessed *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, which means “there is no salvation outside the Church,” they were not referring to the invisible Church of all the elect. Such a statement would be tantamount to saying that outside of salvation, there is no salvation. It would be a truism. The Reformers were referring to the visible Church, and this confession of the necessity of the visible Church was incorporated into the great Reformed confessions of faith.<sup>27</sup>

It should also be noted that many of the above quotations—especially those of Olevianus, Dickson, Kuiper, and De Jong—provide scriptural proof and give biblical arguments to show that “outside the church there is no salvation” is not “just Engelsma’s view” or even merely the Reformed view; it is the teaching of the Word of God! *Bound to Join* itself makes this point more fully.

## 2) “But That’s the Romish View of the Church!”

Another objection to Prof. Engelsma’s instruction that “outside the church there is no salvation” is “But that’s the Roman Catholic view of the church!”

Is Engelsma a crypto-Romanist? Has the British Reformed Fellowship, through its conferences and e-mail forums, been giving a platform to a popish preacher? Has the Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA) been printing books by a Romanising theologian? Was the chair of dogmatics at the theological seminary of the Protestant Reformed Churches held for twenty years by a man with Romish views on the church?

All who have read Engelsma’s many articles and books or heard him preach and teach know that he is a sworn enemy of Roman Catholicism, root and branch—as Holy Scripture, the Three Forms of

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27 Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), p. 268.

Unity (e.g., Heidelberg Catechism, A. 80's condemnation of the Roman mass as "a denial of the one sacrifice and sufferings of Jesus Christ and an accursed idolatry"), his denomination, his church vows, and his conscience demand of him.

Moreover, if the teaching that "outside the church there is no salvation" is Romanism, then the same opprobrium that some would heap on Engelsma must also be piled on the Reformed confessions, as well as the churches and saints who have held, and still do maintain, them. It would be strange indeed if the Belgic Confession, with its "outside the church there is no salvation," were to teach the papal view of the church in Article 28, only to condemn Rome as a "false church" in the very next article. If Westminster Confession 25:2 teaches Romanism, why in the same chapter does it call the Pope "antichrist" (25:6)?

The Reformers were converted from popery by God's sovereign and irresistible grace. They knew the nature of the beast and fought against it with might and main by the sword of the Spirit. Calvin called the French Nicodemites to join a true church and flee the idolatry of Rome, for some of them dissembled, reckoning it was OK to join in papal worship. Bullinger and the other Reformed leaders understood Rome's doctrine of the church only too well. De Brès was martyred by this "false church" (Belgic Confession 29) that he had so faithfully opposed. The Westminster divines knew that their great confession was not *teaching* popery but *attacking* it with the Word and gospel of Jesus Christ!

The confusion of some arises because the Reformed and Presbyterian churches on the one hand and Romanism on the other both state *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. But the similarity is merely formal. Likewise, Protestantism and Roman Catholicism both claim to believe the inspiration of Scripture; the Holy Trinity; creation; the two natures of Christ; our Lord's virgin birth, crucifixion, burial, bodily resurrection on the third day, and ascension into heaven; the Deity and personality of the Holy Spirit; the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church; infant baptism; the general resurrection of the dead; the final judgment; heaven and hell. But if you begin to study Rome's views on these subjects and understand how they fit in her whole system of false dogma, you will see that the "agreement" between the Refor-

mation and Romanism on these issues is only formal and superficial, masking deep and irreconcilable theological differences.

First, the question is, Outside *which* church is there no salvation? The Reformed teach it must be a “true church” (Second Helvetic Confession 17), a “holy congregation” (Belgic Confession 28) wherein “the true religion” is confessed (Westminster Confession 25:2). In other words, it must possess the marks of a true church, as the Reformed and Presbyterian creeds (Belgic Confession 29; Second Helvetic Confession 17; Westminster Confession 25:4) and theologians teach (see especially the quotes above from Olevianus, De Jong, and Muller), and not the marks of the false church (Belgic Confession 29), borne by the Roman Catholic assemblies, which are “no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan” (Westminster Confession 25:5).

Engelsma quotes French Confession 28, which is clear and antithetical:

In this belief we declare that, properly speaking, there can be no Church where the Word of God is not received, nor profession made of subjection to it, nor use of the sacraments. Therefore we condemn the papal assemblies, as the pure Word of God is banished from them, their sacraments are corrupted, or falsified, or destroyed, and all superstitions and idolatries are in them. We hold, then, that all who take part in these acts, and commune in that Church, separate and cut themselves off from the body of Christ (p. 132).

A second question is, *Why* is it that “outside the true church there is no salvation”? Rome’s answer would include the necessity of union with the pope, “the successor of Peter”; the mediation of her ecclesiastical hierarchy; and her whole sacramental system, with grace being given *ex opere operatum*, especially through priestly baptism and the physical eating of the worshiped wafer in the mass.

The Reformed answer is very different. It rests upon a biblical understanding of what the true church is and does. Since the true church is the body of Christ, the kingdom of God, Jehovah’s flock, the temple of the Holy Spirit, etc., how could there be salvation to those who needlessly remain out of it? Can those detached from Christ’s body or living apart from God’s kingdom really be in com-

munion with Jehovah? A faithful church preaches the pure gospel of salvation; administers the two Christian sacraments; practises biblical church discipline; worships the Lord in spirit and in truth; offers prayer to the Triune God through the only mediator, Jesus Christ; and enjoys the communion of the saints. This is precisely what the child of God needs! Why would a true believer not want this and do all he could to join and remain in such a church? Once one grasps the nature and work of the church, it is easy to see why there is no salvation outside a true church. Moreover, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* is not something extra to the biblical and Reformed doctrine of the church; it flows from the very nature of the church and what it does.

The quotes from the Reformed confessions and authors above—especially those from Dickson, Kuiper, Olevianus, and Calvin—develop the matter further. Engelsma also explains the ground for Belgic Confession 28's statement that out of the true church there is no salvation:

...the means of grace and salvation have been given by Christ to the instituted congregation and are enjoyed only by the members within the church. Christ, the living, life-giving Christ, is in the church as the savior. As there was salvation only in the ark, so there is salvation only in the instituted church. There are other reasons everyone must be a member of the church institute.

One reason is that one glorifies God by joining the congregation in worship of the triune God and in proclaiming and confessing Christ. First Timothy 3:15 highly commends the local congregation as “the pillar and ground of the truth.” Shall we live apart from that which alone upholds the truth of God in the world?

Further, according to I Timothy 3:15, the congregation is the “house of God.” God lives there as the covenant God of friendship with his people. Outside the house is no fellowship with God (p. 4).

Clearly, Engelsma's view is not Roman Catholicism; it is orthodox, biblical, and creedal Reformed doctrine.<sup>28</sup> But those who call his

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28 Cf. Michael J. Glodo: "Therefore, Calvin's view of the Church [which is also Engelsma's view] is not Romish, speculative or cultural. It is biblical. And so the confession is thoroughly biblical that 'The visible Church...is

teaching—and that of the Reformed faith—Romish thereby reveal that they have understood neither Reformed nor Roman doctrine, in that they confuse the two. Moreover, they reveal that their position on this point is not Reformed but nearer to those of the false churches. As Dickson and van Mastricht point out (above), the Schwenkfeldians, Libertines, Enthusiasts, Quakers, Socinians, and other fanatics are the ones who deny the necessity of joining a true church. On the other hand, as van Mastricht states, where it is possible to join a true church, the Reformed “lay it down that you simply *must*.”

It is tragic, as De Jong notes, that “many” Protestants think this Reformed doctrine is Romish.<sup>29</sup> Many factors could play a part in this: ignorance of the biblical and Protestant teaching on the church; the rampant individualism of society and Christianity today; the high cost of joining a faithful church, especially if it is some distance away; etc.

Right at the beginning of his instruction, in Letter 1, Engelsma recommends “that all read, or reread, Calvin’s treatment of the church in the first part of book 4 of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*” (p. 3). In his second letter, he draws our attention to *Come Out From Among Them: ‘Anti-Nicodemite’ Writings of John Calvin* (p. 8), before quoting it extensively, especially in Letters 6-10 and 13. In the Preface, Engelsma introduces his instruction with these words, “I urge the reader to read [Belgic Confession 27-29] before beginning to read the letters” (p. x). Besides, he quotes Luther, the French Confession, etc., on the church.

Thus there is no excuse for any who have actually read Engelsma’s

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the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation' (Westminster Confession of Faith, 25.2)" (*Sola Ecclesia: The Lost Reformation Doctrine*, "Reformed Perspectives Magazine, vol. 9, no. 39 [23-29 September, 2007]).

29 John R. Muether rightly states that "the Reformers embraced the centrality of the Church without the sacerdotal errors of Rome." He also observes, sadly, that this "high and necessary view of the Church will inevitably be mistaken for sacerdotalism in our low-church evangelical subculture" ("A Sixth Sola?" *Modern Reformation*, vol. 7, no. 4 [July/August, 1998], p. 28; cf. p. 24).

*Bound to Join* to charge him with Romanism! It is as clear as the noonday sun that the professor stands firmly in the Reformed tradition. Some readers of (or perhaps only “dippers” into) the original e-mail correspondence or the book would be well served with following Engelsma’s recommended reading—and perhaps also reading other Reformed writings on the church, such as the ecclesiology sections of solid works of dogmatics or systematic theology—before returning to *Bound to Join* with a less jaundiced eye and a more biblically informed mind.<sup>30</sup> Equipped with a strategic grasp of the subject of the church gained through such literature, the reader is best positioned to grapple with the more specific—and vital—issue of joining a true church.<sup>31</sup>

### 3) “But That’s a Denial of Justification by Faith Alone!”

Others have charged Engelsma not only with a Romish ecclesiology but also with a heretical soteriology, more specifically, that he denies justification by faith alone! This is alleged, mind you, against one of the main opponents of the Federal Vision (with its at-

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30 One could also check out this on-line page of Resources on the Church ([www.cprf.co.uk/churchresources.htm](http://www.cprf.co.uk/churchresources.htm)).

31 Some may reckon that this call to read, and think biblically, about the church is very difficult, being “too much like hard work!” Part of the blame for this lies at the door of the false and departing churches that give little or no teaching on the doctrine of the church, and/or much of what they do say is false. But it also needs to be underscored that the Christian life is hard and requires exertion and perseverance, like running a long distance race (Heb. 12:1). The kingdom of heaven is obtained by “violence” (Matt. 11:12), and it is only “through much tribulation” that we finally enter it (Acts 14:22). Christ taught that following Him involves hating one’s family and one’s own life, bearing one’s cross, counting the cost, and forsaking all (Luke 14:26-33). Our Lord calls us to the difficult but blessed work of searching the Scriptures (John 5:39), and the Bereans are our example in this (Acts 17:11). By meditating on God’s law “day and night” (Ps. 1:2), we “grow” “in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (II Peter 3:18) and so become “men” (or mature) “in understanding” (I Cor. 14:20). Thus we are able to “try the spirits” (I John 4:1), including what the spirits or preachers say about the church (its blessedness, its preaching, its sacraments, its discipline, etc., and the necessity of joining it).



tack on justification by faith alone), yea, its most penetrating critic, for Engelsma traces the Federal Vision (FV) to, and attacks it in, its theological root: a conditional covenant! The interested reader can turn to Prof. Engelsma's pamphlet "The Unconditional Covenant in Contemporary Debate" (published by Trinity Protestant Reformed Evangelism Committee in 2003), or book *The Covenant of God and Children of Believers* (published by the RFPA in 2005). Moreover, the fifty or so e-mails, Engelsma sent to the BRF forum (2007-2009) in defence of the scriptural and Reformed truth of justification by faith alone, the article of a standing or falling church, are to be reworked into a book to be published by the RFPA (DV). Furthermore, *Bound to Join* itself clearly and antithetically affirms justification by faith alone (pp. 68, 106-107, 149, 156-159).

Moreover, if teaching *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* makes Engelsma a purveyor of the heresy of justification by faith and works, there go the Reformed confessions, the Reformed theologians, and the Reformed churches. The same could be said concerning Luther, *Luther's Larger Catechism*, and orthodox Lutheran theologians. Thus even the Reformation itself is heretical!

Then Belgic Confession Articles 22-23 on justification are overturned by Article 28 on the church. Likewise, Westminster Confession 11 is overthrown by chapter 25. The same goes for the writings of Luther, Calvin, Beza, Olevianus, etc. Apparently, the modern critics have spotted a contradiction in the faith of the Protestant Reformation that the Reformers and their successors did not notice!

Observe too that Belgic Confession 28 states that "it is the duty of all *believers* [i.e., those (already) justified by faith alone], 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."

Church membership is not a good work compromising justification by faith alone, any more than are loving one's wife or honouring the Lord's Day or partaking of the Holy Supper or praying out of gratitude to God. These things are the fruit of our salvation. As has been well said, justification is by faith alone but not by a faith that is alone, for from it spring all manner of good works. As R. B. Kuiper

put it above: “The Scriptural rule is that, while membership in the church is *not a prerequisite of salvation*, it is a *necessary consequence of salvation*.” Likewise, Ursinus states, “I am one of this number [of those truly converted]; *and therefore* a member of both the visible and invisible church, and shall forever remain such.”

This is what we have in Acts 2 on the occasion of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the preaching of the first Christian sermon, and the birthday of the New Testament church. Some three thousand people believed in Christ and so were justified—by faith alone! (Acts 2:37-41). Then they “were baptized” and “added” to the church (v. 41). These new disciples “continued steadfastly in [1] the apostles’ doctrine and [2] fellowship, and in [3] breaking of bread, and in [4] prayers” (v. 42). Also [5] they supported each other materially (vv. 44-45). Verse 47 continues, “And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

Joining the church did not compromise or deny justification by faith alone any more than did water baptism or any of the other five “good works,” such as fellowship and prayer.

But if someone *claimed* to believe in Christ alone for salvation but refused to join the church or support his poorer brother financially or did not continue in apostolic doctrine, this person is not making a credible profession of faith (John 8:31; I John 3:17). What right has such an one to profess to be a brother or sister or be received as such by others?

In short, those who are united to Christ by faith alone unite themselves to His body, the church; those who are in the invisible church join the visible church; true saints seek the communion of the saints in the holy church!

#### **4) “But That’s an Attack on Marriage and the Family!”**

A fourth charge against Engelsma’s instruction on the necessity of joining a true church is that it undermines and attacks marriage and the family. What a veritable plethora of terrible heresies there are in *Bound to Join*—concerning the church, justification, and now marriage and the family! All between the covers of a book of only some 180 pages!

Engelsma is no stranger to taking flak for his forthright teaching on marriage (which is at the heart of the family). In his *Standard Bearer* editorials, various pamphlets (“Marriage and Divorce,” “The Lord’s Hatred of Divorce,” and “Until Death Us Do Part”), and his RFPA books, *Better to Marry* (1993) and *Marriage, the Mystery of Christ and the Church* (rev. 1998), he has defended the covenant bond of marriage between one man and one woman “till death us do part.”<sup>32</sup> Here he was attacked from the left, as it were, for making *too much* of marriage. Now, for *Bound to Join*, and perhaps for the first time, he is criticized for making *too little* of marriage!

Let us hear the professor begin his treatment of this subject:

I come now to the extremely difficult and painful matter of one’s relationship to his or her own family, when this family is not one with him or her in the faith and in the conviction of faith that he or she must belong to a true church. The rule is that membership in a true church and the right worship of God in a true church prevail over the earthly family relation. Also family must, when necessary, be sacrificed to the calling to worship the triune God and Father of Jesus Christ rightly (p. 72).

The professor goes on to explain that this may involve separation from family and spouse in order to join and attend a true church (pp. 72-76).

Some negative responses from the European forum reached Engelsma before he wrote his next installment. Indeed, this was the most controversial aspect during the professor’s e-mail instruction. Here Engelsma especially responds to “Dr. Fierce” (pp. 78f.), a name he gave to his most “hostile correspondent” (p. 78, n. 1).

How does Engelsma defend his teaching? First, he appeals to Scripture on the difficulty of the Christian life (Matt. 10:32-39; 19:27-30; Luke 14:25-35; Phil. 3:8; pp. 71-72, 81) and our calling as pilgrims (Heb. 11:13-16; p. 72).

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32 *Bound to Join* even contains some good instruction on the lifelong bond of marriage (pp. 73-74, 114-115, 122).

Second, he quotes Christ's famous words specifically teaching that we must follow Him, even before family (pp. 72, 84):

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26).

He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me (Matt. 10:37).

And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life (Matt. 19:29).

Engelsma notes we must obey God rather than man or woman (Acts 5:29; p. 74). He adds, "We require this of the Muslim who converts to Christianity. Why should it be different among Christians?" (p. 73).

Third, the professor appeals to Belgic Confession 28, which declares,

We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and that out of it there is no salvation...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 were against it, yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment.*

As Engelsma notes, loss of life or liberty is a higher cost than loss of contact with an unbelieving family member (p. 72). Belgic Confession 28 is the calling of all Christians of "whatsoever state or condition" they may be, including married or single.

Fourth, Engelsma proves with lengthy quotes that his doctrine is the same as that of Calvin, the great Genevan Reformer (pp. 81-83). He adds, "If my advice was wicked, so that it can be summarily dismissed as a troubling of God's people, so also was the instruction of Calvin" (p. 83).

Fifth, Engelsma turns the tables on his critics, showing the dead-end position of those who contradict this teaching:

It is easy enough to denounce my instruction with the emotional charge that I break up marriages and families.... But note well that rejection of my advice (which was that of Calvin) in this matter implies that one rather instructs a believer, "Stay outside a true church! Your wife comes before your worship of God and before confession of Christ! There is salvation outside the true church, apart from the preaching and the sacraments!" Let one take this position who dares (p. 83; cf. p. 89).<sup>33</sup>

**(5) "But Engelsma Is Hardhearted!"**

In a sort of last desperate attack, some have criticized Engelsma as hardhearted or heartless. Not content to malign his instruction as merely his personal opinion or as a Romish doctrine that attacks the church, justification by faith alone, and marriage and the family, the poor man is also regaled as lacking in compassion!

Engelsma is no stranger to such criticisms. In his exposition of the book of Ruth and in connection with her forsaking family and country for the church and covenant of God, he writes,

How suspect is the faith professed by many church members today!  
Their professed faith will give up no one and nothing for the sake of  
Christ, least of all a blood relative. Friendship with an unbelieving son

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33 Some who put house or spouse, land or family, job or children, or anything else above joining a true church have found themselves outside a true church for many years, even decades (cf. Mark 10:29; Luke 14:26). This has been the bitter experience of some who intended to be without a true church only for a while but the years swiftly passed! What assurance can those who neglect and despise the church institute have that they will be part of the church triumphant? Dutch preacher Herman Veldkamp asks, "How many have allowed their souls to perish because they regarded clothes, a home, and a comfortable salary as primary, despite the Biblical teaching that such things are secondary, that they are given to us if we first seek God's Kingdom?" (*The Farmer From Tekoa: On the Book of Amos* [St. Catharines, Ontario: Paideia, 1977], p. 136).

or daughter is more important than friendship with God. Their faith esteems the love of a husband or wife to be worth more than the love of God in Jesus Christ. Of one who today is willing to leave father and mother or a son or daughter for the sake of the covenant, this alleged faith cries out, “*You are hardhearted! You are not loving! You are un-Christian!*” This dubious faith of many professing Christians stubbornly holds on to the old friends, the old ways, the old pleasures of spiritual Moab, regardless of the unique friends, unique ways, and unique pleasures of the covenant. It is a dead faith.<sup>34</sup>

As the professor points out, “You are hardhearted!” is the same charge hurled at Calvin by the Nicodemites (pp. 8, 77-78, 82). It is Belgic Confession 28, not Engelsma, which declares that we must join a true church “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.” Yea, it is the Lord Jesus Himself, not the professor, who lays down costly terms for Christian discipleship (Matt. 10:32-29; 19:27-30; Luke 14:25-35). If Engelsma is too hard, then the same criticism must be made of Calvin, the Belgic Confession, and even our Savior Himself! Ultimately, this is a complaint against the goodness of the triune God (cf. Matt. 25:24; Luke 19:21).

Right from the start of *Bound to Join*, Engelsma acknowledges the deep and heartfelt concerns of the scattered sheep (pp. xv, 1). On the first page of the Preface, he describes the “informal meeting” to discuss church membership, “called by the group” of saints at the 2004 BRF Conference, as “distressing, indeed heartrending” (p. ix).<sup>35</sup> Repeatedly, he explains that he undertook to write about joining a faithful church because his brothers and sisters specifically asked him to do so (pp. ix, 80, 86-87, 160).

Engelsma acknowledges—as does the Westminster Confession (25:2) and, following it, David Dickson, Hugh Martin, and A. A.

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34 David J. Engelsma, *Unfolding Covenant History, Volume 5: Judges and Ruth* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 2005), pp. 195-196; italics mine.

35 “Did this in Engelsma seem hardhearted? Hardheartedness should be made of sterner stuff!”—to paraphrase Mark Anthony in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (Act III, Scene II).

Hodge—"there is no salvation outside the institute [church] *ordinarily*" (p. 5; italics his).<sup>36</sup> He gives as an example a believer being "wickedly confined to a dungeon or prison by the foes of the saints" (p. 5). A biblical instance would be the penitent thief on the cross. Earlier in this review article, R. B. Kuiper was quoted giving another example: "It is possible that a true believer because of some unusual circumstance may fail to unite with the church. Conceivably one may, for instance, believe in Christ and die before receiving baptism."

It is in Letters 12-14, as one might expect, given that they were the most controversial chapters when this instruction was first given, that the professor is most pastoral. He acknowledges that leaving family for the sake of Christ and His church is "extremely difficult and painful" (p. 72). Any Christian faced with the option of leaving his or her unbelieving spouse or remaining without a true church should not immediately desert him or her. "He must, of course, patiently and lovingly explain his calling to her, as he works and prays to bring her to Christ" (p. 73). Later, Engelsma writes,

The actions of a believer...seeking to fulfil his or her calling to join a true church may not be taken hastily, but only after sufficient time of pleading with the unbelieving mate and of prayer to God has made plain that the unbelieving mate will not permit the believer to be a member of a true church and will not accompany the believer to a place where he or she can be a member of a true church (p. 75).

In seeking to join a true church, the Christian must also be concerned for the salvation of his children and his fellow saints, since the Word of God teaches us to think covenantally and generationally (e.g., pp. 5, 9, 35, 160). Above all, he must be ruled by zeal for the glory of God: "This, even more than our own salvation, motivates the believer to be a member of a true church, whatever the cost and difficulty" (p. 58).

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Glodo: "We must also note with care *Westminster's* qualification of 'ordinarily.' But this term qualifies the doctrine in terms of what God may be pleased to do *apart* from his prescriptions to us, not what *we* may choose to do to vary from them" ("*Sola Ecclesia*": italics Glodo's; cf. Muether, "A Sixth Sola?" p. 26).

It is not hardhearted of Engelsma or anyone else to follow the Word of God and teach its doctrines, even the ones with rough edges, refusing to “smooth” them down (Is. 30:10). Jesus calls it greatness in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:19). It is hardheartedness to resist the Word of God and tenderheartedness to humble oneself before it, repent, and obey it (II Kings 22:19).

Sometimes a good defense—if such this is—can be, in effect, a good attack. Yet sometimes, even a good defense cannot placate an inveterate opponent. No matter what you say, you always meet with “But ...!” Remember the apostle Paul’s plaintive question: “Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?” (Gal. 4:16).

In signing off his last letter, Engelsma writes, “I trust my instruction has been profitable to some” (p. 160). It has been. For several people I know, it has been a factor or a confirmation in their moving house to join a true church—some of them even left their own country. All of them are glad they did so. And what a great witness they are to a watching world (which is amazed that they should think Christ and His gospel so precious) and to church members in danger of taking the privileges of church membership for granted! May *Bound to Join* be used by Jesus Christ, the head of the church, to stir up others!

The CPRC Bookstore in Northern Ireland has bought several boxes of *Bound to Join*. It is the most faithful, sustained, and thorough treatment of the subject; the best book on the need to join a true church since Calvin’s anti-Nicodemite writings in the sixteenth century. Its message needs to get out and be discussed widely. This truth must be appropriated and obeyed, after duly counting the cost (cf. Luke 14:28-32). This book is desperately needed in the British Isles and continental Europe, where understanding of the doctrine of the church is weak and few live as members of a faithful Reformed congregation with Christ and His church central in their lives (cf. pp. x, 1, 66-69). This need is shared in the other continents of the world, including N. America.<sup>37</sup>

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37 In one sense, N. America may even need this book more, because of the influence of Harold Camping and his bizarre hermeneutics and heretical eschatology and ecclesiology. Since 1994, Camping alleges, God’s Spirit



On average, people move house every seven years. Getting married, upsizing when God grants children, a new job, downsizing when one's children leave, the desire to be nearer one's (grown-up) children or grandchildren or to help care for elderly relatives, retiring to the sea or countryside or warmer climes—all these and others are reasons why people move.

What of moving home to join a good Reformed church? Many of God's children have become the sons and daughters (so to speak) of Ruth the Moabitess.<sup>38</sup> In the days of the Reformation, saints from Spain and Italy moved north to join Reformed churches, such as the Turretin family from Lucca, whose son, Benedict, and grandson, Francis, were to adorn the church of Geneva, as theological professors

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has left all instituted churches. Thus Camping not only declares "outside the church there *is* salvation," he maintains "*only* outside the church there is salvation," for "*inside* the church there is *no* salvation"! Whereas Engelsma's book's title is *Bound to Join*, Camping insists that all are *bound to leave* all visible churches! For more on Camping's attack on Christ's church, see James R. White, *Dangerous Airwaves: Harold Camping Refuted and Christ's Church Defended* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2002) and Martyn McGeown, "Harold Camping Refuted: The Necessity of Membership in the Church (Institute)" ([www.cprf.co.uk/articles/campingrefuted.htm](http://www.cprf.co.uk/articles/campingrefuted.htm)).

38 For more on Naomi's sin (leaving the true church for economic and family reasons), God's chastisement of her for this, and her repentance, as well as Ruth's faith in moving to Israel, the covenant community, and ultimately becoming an ancestress of King David and the Lord Jesus Christ, see Engelsma, *Judges and Ruth*, pp. 164-169, 192-199. Jonathan Edwards, in his sermon on "Ruth's Resolution" (Ruth 1:16), observes, "Ruth forsook all her relations, and her own country, the land of her nativity, and all her former possessions there, for the sake of the God of Israel; as every true Christian forsakes all for Christ.... 'Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline thine ear; forget also thine own people, and thy father's house [Ps. 45:10]'" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 [Edinburgh: Banner, repr. 1974], p. 664). Matthew Henry has some fine remarks on Ruth 1 in his famous Bible commentary. Also check out the free on-line audios and videos of "Moving House for God's Church," a series of six sermons I preached on Ruth 1 in early 2011 ([www.cprf.co.uk/audio/OTseries.htm#ruth1](http://www.cprf.co.uk/audio/OTseries.htm#ruth1)).

and successors of Calvin.<sup>39</sup> Reformed saints in France, some of whom had earlier dallied with Nicodemite ideas, moved to join true churches in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and elsewhere, in part through the anti-Nicodemite writings of Calvin. Later many Protestants from the British Isles and continental Europe moved to America for freedom of worship. This was the case with the ancestors of some members of the Protestant Reformed Churches. The Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Northern Ireland has members who moved house and even country to join. Such could be said of many Reformed churches over the centuries.

If you, dear reader, are not a member of a true church, let me plead with you to redouble doubly your efforts to join one!<sup>40</sup> An internet, or virtual, church is not enough. Shall not we who will inherit many mansions in the next world be prepared to move house in this world for the sake of Christ and His church? “Where there is a will, there is a way”—even more is this true for the people of God. Our Lord commands us, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God” (Matt. 6:33). He calls us to pray in faith, for the triune God opens doors for His people (I Cor. 16:9; Rev. 3:7-8) and gives us the godly desires of our renewed hearts (Ps. 37:4). “Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen” (Eph. 3:20-21)! ●

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39 Cf. James T. Dennison’s biographical sketch in Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 3 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), pp. 639-642.

40 Cf. Angus Stewart, “Joining a True Church” ([www.cprf.co.uk/articles/unityofthechurch.htm](http://www.cprf.co.uk/articles/unityofthechurch.htm)).

## Book Reviews

*God's Twofold Love: The Theology of Jacob Arminius (1559-1609)*, by William den Boer. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010. Tr. Albert Gootjes. Pp. 342. 86.95 euros (cloth). [Reviewed by David Engelsma.]

Of a few theological works it can be said that they are required reading for the Reformed minister and professor. This is one. It indicates, and helps to bring about, a sea change in the Reformed judgment of the theology of Jacob Arminius. It is the purpose of the book to revoke the condemnation of Arminius' theology by the Synod of Dordt.

The reason is that, as the author thinks to have demonstrated, the theology of Arminius had a "Reformed character." The basic tenets of Arminius' theology "remain well within the scope of Reformed theology." Contrary to the common and longstanding charge by the Reformed churches, "God's sovereignty and grace" were not harmed by Arminius' theology "in any way." Arminius was not guilty of conditioning grace and salvation upon the free will of the sinner. Rather, "the freedom of the will to receive the gospel...is entirely dependent on God's liberating grace." So far is it from being the case that the

theology of Arminius was (and is) heretical that Arminius' criticism of the one-sided emphasis on God's sovereignty by such Reformed theologians as Calvin, Perkins, and Gomar was "a valuable contribution to the theology of that time."

Appealing to the warning of Lord's Day 43 of the Heidelberg Catechism against bearing false witness (an ironic appeal in view of Arminius' insistence that the Catechism and the Belgic Confession needed revision), den Boer pleads for an end to the Reformed criticism of Arminius as a heretic and of his theology as a heresy. The book is the rehabilitation of Jacob Arminius.

### **The Problem of Dordt**

What then of Dordt and its Canons? Ah, this is the problem for the Reformed churches and theologians in the twenty-first century who, despite their formal avowal of the Canons of Dordt, find themselves in agreement with the conditional universalism

of the theology of Arminius that the Canons condemn and are offended by the unconditional particularism that the Canons teach.

Different Reformed churches and theologians have resorted to different tactics to solve their problem in recent years. Some years ago, a Reformed denomination in the Netherlands approved a gravamen against Dordt's doctrine of predestination in the first head, centered on Article 15's doctrine of reprobation.

More recently, Abraham Kuyper's Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (*GKN*) consigned the whole of the Canons, along with the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession (which teach the same unconditional particularism as do the Canons, as Arminius well knew and, therefore, agitated for their revision, especially Article 16 of the Belgic Confession, on predestination) to the realm of mere historical curiosities.

In North America, the Christian Reformed Church stripped the Canons of their doctrine of the sovereignty of God in salvation in three synodical stages. In 1924, the Christian Reformed Church adopted the doctrine of the "well-meant offer of the gospel," affirming a

conditional, resistible, saving grace of God in the gospel, a grace that does not have its source in, nor is governed by, the eternal election of a definite number unto salvation.

The second stage was that church's approval of the doctrine of universal atonement in the 1960s. The Calvin Seminary professor Harold Dekker, who publicly advocated the doctrine that Christ died for all men, appealed in support of the doctrine to the 1924 decision on the "well-meant offer."

The third stage, in the early 1980s, was the Christian Reformed Church's response to the gravamen of one of her theologians, Harry Boer, against the Canons' doctrine of reprobation in the first head, a gravamen that had radical implications also for the Canons' doctrine of election, as Boer did not fail to point out. The synod of the Christian Reformed Church rejected the gravamen. But it did so by deceptively imposing upon Article 15 of the first head of doctrine of the Canons an explanation that the article does not have, cannot have, and in all the history of the Reformed churches has never been thought to have. This explanation denies the sovereignty of God in repro-

bation (which was, of course, the object of Boer's objection) and, because of the intimate relation between election and reprobation, also the sovereignty of God in election.

At present, the Christian Reformed Church is working at solving its and its theologians' problem with the sovereign, particular grace taught in the Three Forms of Unity by a revision of the Formula of Subscription. The church and her officebearers will no longer be bound by the creeds.

Many Reformed theologians in North America openly hold the Canons in contempt (along with their vow at the signing of the Formula of Subscription) by preaching and teaching the conditional universalism of the theology of Arminius. God loves all without exception; Christ died for all without exception, at least in some sense; in the preaching of the gospel the Holy Spirit desires the salvation of all without exception—*conditionally*. Regarding Dordt's particularism, originating in the eternal decree—the election of a “certain number of persons” and the reprobation of the others—they are silent.

den Boer's solution to the

problem of Dordt is to urge a serious reevaluation of the Synod of Dordt and its Canons. “There is all the more reason for renewed—or simply new—investigation of the Remonstrant conflicts and the Synod of Dordt.” The critics of Arminius in the years preceding the synod and the synod itself failed to carry on the kind of open, sympathetic discussions with Arminius and his allies that were necessary. The synod did not appreciate the real, genuinely biblical concerns and motives of Arminius.

If den Boer has his way (I am being neither facetious nor frivolous in the slightest), a synod of theologians from many Reformed churches in Europe and across the world will meet in solemn assembly, preferably in Dordt. In light of the recent analysis of the deepest motives and principles of the theology of Arminius by den Boer and other Reformed scholars and in the charity that thinks the best of everyone, the future Synod of Dordt will declare the Canons of Dordt null and void. The ground will be that the 1618/1619 synod did not grasp and, therefore, did not do justice to Arminius' legitimate and valuable theological concerns. Perhaps it will not

adopt the five points of the Remonstrance. But it will decide that the theology of Arminius, rightly perceived and presented, is Reformed.

It is by no means inconceivable that such a synod is called and that it takes such action.

### **The Hague Conference**

The scholarship of *God's Twofold Love* is impressive. The book is a thorough, careful, penetrating study of the theology of Arminius in its depth and breadth, from the original Latin and Dutch sources. It quotes Arminius' own writings extensively. There is also interaction with a wide range of contemporary thought on the subject of the book.

One informative, fascinating section of the book is den Boer's investigation and review of the Hague Conference of 1611. At this conference six Remonstrant and six orthodox Reformed theologians (the Counter-Remonstrants) debated the five Arminian articles of the Remonstrance. Arminius himself was not one of the delegates, of course, having died in 1609. The importance of the conference was that it set the stage for the proceedings at the Synod of Dordt.

At the Hague Conference, the Remonstrants objected to the Reformed doctrine of predestination, whether conceived as supralapsarian or as infralapsarian. Both were objectionable to the Remonstrants because both teach the unconditional election of a certain number of persons to salvation. Both supralapsarian election and infralapsarian election have faith following election as its fruit. The Remonstrants insisted that God chose believers to salvation. The Remonstrants, following their master, affirmed that the objects of election are those who are foreseen to believe by grace. This, they argued, preserves the grace of election. Nevertheless, the objects of election are believers. Faith precedes election, if not as the cause of election, then certainly as determining election.

As they did throughout the controversy, including their brief appearance before the Synod of Dordt, the Remonstrants attempted to concentrate their attack on Reformed orthodoxy specifically on the doctrine of reprobation. The Counter-Remonstrants refused to allow the Remonstrants to make reprobation the main issue. The Counter-Remonstrants held the Remonstrants to the issue

of unconditional election, that is, election that is not conditioned by (foreseen) faith. In an intriguing statement, the Counter-Remonstrants said that

we would have tolerated the Remonstrants' view on it [that is, reprobation], if only they had been willing to admit that God out of pure grace and according to his good pleasure has elected to salvation those whom it pleased Him to save without any consideration of their faith as an antecedent condition.

The orthodox Reformed theologians saw the basic issue between the Reformed faith and the theology of Arminius to be nothing less than the Arminian denial of salvation by grace alone.

On the basis of their [the Counter-Remonstrants'] interpretation of the Remonstrant doctrine of grace, they argue that the latter call the *sola gratia* into question. The issue is 'whether or not it is only the grace through which the commencement, continuance and consummation of all good works are worked in man, that works faith and repentance in man.' For them,

resistible grace implies a denial of the *sola gratia*. For them, holding to resistible grace and rejecting unconditional predestination amount to teaching free will, and free will cannot be reconciled with the *sola gratia*.

### **The Love of Justice**

den Boer presents the theology of Jacob Arminius as rooted in two fundamental principles. They are God's love of justice and God's love of all humans. Hence, the "twofold love of God." God's twofold love is "the foundation of religion." God's love of justice is primary. In the theology of Arminius, the divine righteousness is the main perfection of God, and the perfection that controls all of the work of salvation. "Arminius' approach to God's justice resulted in an entirely unique theology."

Contrary to accepted thinking, therefore, the theology of Arminius is not driven by opposition to divine sovereignty or by zeal on behalf of the freedom of the human will. In his article, "Defense or Deviation? A Re-Examination of Arminius's Motives to Deviate from the 'Mainstream' [note well the quotation marks—DJE] Reformed Theology," in a recent

book that reexamines the Synod of Dordt, den Boer writes that Arminius did “not aim at the elevation of human dignity, freedom or autonomy at the cost of God’s position and the grace-character of salvation” (*Revisiting the Synod of Dordt [1618-1619]*, ed. Aza Goudriaan and Fred van Lieburg, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2011, 38). No doubt, den Boer would ascribe this misunderstanding also to the Synod of Dordt.

God’s love of righteousness forbids that He love and choose anyone to salvation except on the basis of Christ’s antecedent death. The death of Christ (for all humans without exception), therefore, precedes election in the eternal decree. This is what Arminius meant by his teaching that Christ is the foundation of election. Love of righteousness requires that God elect only those foreseen to be righteous by their faith in Jesus Christ. It also rules out that God appoint any to damnation except on the basis of God’s foreseeing their refusal to believe on Christ, when Christ is well-meaningly offered to them. Any other doctrine of reprobation would make God unjust, and the “author of sin”—a charge that the Remonstrants hurled against the

Counter-Remonstrants morning, noon, and night.

It is the divine love of justice, or righteousness, that also explains Christ’s death for all humans without exception and the Arminian doctrine of resistible grace. For God to “offer” (the favorite Arminian term for the external call of the gospel) salvation to men and women for whom Christ did not in fact die, so that salvation would be a real possibility, as well as God’s sincere desire, for them, would be gross injustice on God’s part. Similarly, for God to demand faith of those who lack the ability to believe, which only (resistible) grace can give them, would be unjust of God. On the other hand, for God to “coerce” (as the Remonstrants viewed the work of irresistible grace) some to repent and believe, apart from their own independent, decisive willing, would be contrary to God’s love of justice.

Justice, for Arminius, requires such freedom for man as allows him to believe, or not believe, sin or refrain from sinning, on his own and of his own volition. That is, the divine love of justice establishes the free will of the sinner. This will is, and must be, aided by grace, to be sure. Without grace,



the will cannot choose to believe. But the will of the sinner who is saved is not, and may not be, moved irresistibly and infallibly by the Holy Spirit.

Unconditional predestination and irresistible grace, which necessarily imply a special operation of the Holy Spirit only in the elect, according to the Remonstrants leads infallibly to the supposition that God is hypocritical in his offer of grace, and is not just when He punishes sin.

The justice that God loves, and that is fundamental to all the doctrine of salvation, according to the theology of Arminius, has one other necessary characteristic. It is comprehensible to the mind of man. Arminius rejected the confession of Calvin and others that God's justice, particularly the justice of unconditional reprobation, is incomprehensible to humans. Although den Boer does not put it this way, it was the thinking of Arminius that if God's having mercy on whom He wills to have mercy and hardening whom He wills to harden seems unjust to us, it *is* unjust—unjust for God Himself.

The issue of the incompre-

hensibility of God's justice in predestination was an important aspect of the controversy. When the orthodox Reformed responded to the charge that unconditional reprobation impugns the justice of God by appealing to the incomprehensibility of the divine justice, at least for the present, they were not using a clever ploy to escape a difficult argument. They were responding exactly as the apostle himself responded to the same charge, in Romans 9:20: "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?" Arminius' insistence that God's righteousness must be comprehensible to the mind of man, the Reformed called "rationalism."

#### **Arminian Subtlety**

One is struck, almost frightened, by the subtlety of the theology of Arminius. At the heart of his heretical theology is the doctrine of free will. The salvation of the sinner depends upon the sinner's will, or decision, to believe on Christ, and to keep on believing to the moment of death. All of salvation, from election to perseverance, is conditioned by the sinner's will to believe. The application and efficacy of the cross of Christ depends upon

the will of the sinner. The sinner's regeneration depends upon his will. Whether a regenerated sinner perseveres to everlasting salvation depends upon his will.

But how extraordinarily, even exquisitely, subtle is Arminius' doctrine of free will! How it seemingly honors, even extols, the grace of God! Arminius flatly denies that fallen man has a free will, capable of believing (although the will of fallen man is capable of a certain movement towards God). Grace is necessary. God gives grace to sinners to enable them to believe. Grace then inclines, urges, and persuades the will to believe on Christ. When a sinner does believe, the theology of Arminius praises the grace of God for this believing, for without grace believing had been impossible.

Is not this a gospel of salvation by grace?

All appearance and protestation to the contrary notwithstanding, it is not, for it is not a gospel of salvation by grace *alone*—by grace that is not assisted by the cooperating will; by grace that is not dependent in the end upon the sinner's will; by grace that is irresistible, that is, sovereign.

The prevenient, helping, inclining, urging, and persuading

grace of Arminius' theology is never irresistible. Sinners can resist the grace of the Holy Spirit. In the end, whether a sinner believes and is saved depends upon—*his own will*.

Arminius himself would go so far as to say that all that the sinner must do is not resist. Merely this! Grace does all the rest. Grace even assists the sinner's not resisting.

Nevertheless, in the end, all of the salvation of the sinner depends upon—*the will of the sinner not to resist*. Apart from this apparently trivial matter, grace cannot save. Suddenly, the role of the human will in salvation according to the theology of Arminius is seen to be, not trivial, but decisive. And the apostolic judgment upon this gospel comes immediately to mind, "[Salvation] is not of him who wills." The apostle does not add, "but *also* of God who shows mercy." Rather, the contrast is absolute, and stark: "*but* of God who shows mercy" (Rom. 9:16).

Subtle as the theology of Arminius is (and the presentation of it by den Boer does full justice to the subtlety), its contradiction of every truth confessed by the orthodox theology of grace is unmistakable. The theology of

Arminius teaches the election of foreseen believers, who are foreseen to believe decisively by their own will (“by accepting the offered grace with the help of common grace, a person can make himself worthy of election”); a death of Christ for all humans without exception, which accomplished only the possibility of the salvation of all, without assuring the salvation of any; a freedom of the will of the fallen sinner to choose the good, though not the good of Jesus Christ and salvation in Him; justification on the basis of the act of believing; resistible grace; and the possibility of the loss of true faith and thus the perishing of saints, who once were united to Christ and saved.

den Boer candidly acknowledges the distinctive Arminian doctrines and their differences from the doctrines confessed by Dordt. He makes no effort to disguise, or deny, Arminianism, or, as he would prefer, Remonstrantism. His argument is that these distinctively Remonstrant doctrines, if conceived as flowing from the divine love of justice and from the divine love of all humans, can and ought to be viewed, charitably, as falling within the boundaries of the Reformed faith.

### **Judgment of the Theology of Arminius**

There is no need for one who reviews the book to reevaluate the theology of Arminius as this theology is presented by den Boer. Dordt has judged the theology of Arminius. Dordt’s judgment is right. It is also binding on all members of Reformed churches that have the Canons as their creed, especially on the officebearers, including this reviewer. We have sworn that we are heartily convinced that Dordt’s judgment of and on the theology of Arminius is true, and the truth of Scripture. We have promised the churches of which we are members and the God of these churches that we will not reevaluate the theology of Jacob Arminius differently than Dordt has done, publicly or privately.

den Boer’s presentation of the theology of Arminius does elicit certain comments on this theology.

First, although Arminius’ high regard for divine justice is not to be faulted—who can esteem the righteousness of God highly enough?—Arminius construed the righteousness of God in such a way as grievously to denigrate the love of God. God

did not love and choose the elect because they were righteous (in a decree of the cross preceding the decree of election). But God loved and chose the elect when they appeared as sinners, or, according to a certain supralapsarian conception of the decree of election, when they appeared as not yet created or fallen. Even in this supralapsarian conception the objects of election do not appear as already righteous in the cross of Christ. In His love, with which He chose the elect in Christ, not as those already righteous, but as those whom He would justify in the infinite greatness of His love, God gave Christ to the cross for them (in the decree). This magnifies the love of God and the grace of election, without doing any damage to righteousness. Divine love satisfies divine justice in the giving of the Son to the cross.

The orthodox Reformed faith exalts the love and grace of God, as the theology of Arminius does not. What is wonderful about a love that chooses righteous persons, and then righteous persons who themselves have obtained their righteousness by their own will?

Second, in close connection with this, the theology of Armin-

ius disturbs the biblical order of the decree that elects and the decree that gives Christ as the Savior of the world. Simply put, the theology of Arminius reverses the relation between election and the cross of Christ. Arminius makes the decree to give Christ as crucified Savior the first decree. The decree of election follows, as though God can and may elect to salvation only those for whom Christ has died to make atonement (never mind that, according to Arminius, the cross of Christ did not accomplish the satisfaction of divine justice for anyone).

But the Bible and orthodox Reformed theology have the Savior proceeding out of the love of God for the world. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16). Electing love produces the Savior. The Savior is not the basis of electing love. The cross depends on the divine love, and not the divine love upon the cross. "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). The text does not read: "Christ commends his cross to us, in that, because he died for us, God loves us."

Although the love of God cannot ignore or contravene divine justice, indeed, rather magnifies itself by the full satisfaction of divine justice at the cost of the death of the Son of God, the love of God for us is gracious: “the election of grace” (Rom. 11:5). It is a love for the unlovely, the unworthy, the guilty, the shameful in themselves. As He justifies, so He loves, the ungodly, not the righteous. His love does not find us righteous; it certainly does not base itself on our righteousness; it constitutes us righteous.

Nor does this order dishonor Christ as merely the executor of the decree of election, as Arminius charged. For God elected the church in Christ (Eph. 1:4). Christ is *the* Elect. He is first in the counsel of God, as the head and husband for whom the church will be chosen. And as the head and husband of the elect, He will then be appointed (we are speaking of an order in eternity, an order that is not temporal, but an order that is both biblical and important, nonetheless) to execute the decree of election on behalf of the elect.

Third, despite making the righteousness of God the chief perfection of the Godhead and the fundamental principle of his

entire theology, Arminius was, in fact, guilty of culpable outrage on that perfection. The revelation of the righteousness of God is the justifying of the guilty sinner by imputation of the obedience of Christ, especially His atoning death on the accursed cross (Rom. 3:23-26). Arminius corrupted this revelation and thus showed himself an enemy of the righteousness of God in especially two ways. He denied that the cross of Jesus Christ fully satisfied the justice of God with regard to the guilt of anyone. This is outrageous. This is blasphemous.

And he denied that God declares His righteousness by imputing the righteousness that He Himself has worked out in the cross of Christ to guilty sinners *by means of their faith alone*, so that the righteousness of the justified is God’s own righteousness, freely granted as a gift. Arminius denied justification by faith alone. He denied this supreme revelation of God’s righteousness by teaching that the sinner’s own act of believing is accepted by God in the place of the righteousness that the sinner lacks. Arminius taught justification on the basis of the work of believing. In the words of the Canons:

[Arminius taught] that God, having revoked the demand of perfect obedience of the law, regards faith itself and the obedience of faith, although imperfect, as the perfect obedience of the law, and does esteem it worthy of the reward of eternal life through grace (Canons of Dordt, II, Rejection of Errors/4).

Here then are notable theological ironies—some of the most delicious in the history of Christianity. Arminianism, which is heralded as the message of the love of God (by virtue of its wide extent—for everybody) in contrast to unloving Calvinism, in actuality disparages the love of God (as merely an affection for those regarded as righteous and, therefore, eminently worthy of love, to say nothing of the impotence of the Arminian love of God). And the perfection of God that is the foundation of the entire Arminian gospel—righteousness, Arminianism, in fact, devastates, by a cross that did not satisfy and by a justification that declares the inherent righteousness of man.

Fourth, Arminianism, that is, the theology of Arminius himself, is conditional. It is conditional from beginning to end. It is per-

vasively conditional. No aspect of it is unconditional. Conditionality is its essence and hallmark.

Both Arminius and den Boer recognize this. They recognize also that conditionality contradicts grace. Therefore, they attempt to distinguish the conditionality of the theology of Arminius from the conditionality, say, of the Jewish legalism and self-righteousness condemned by Jesus in the gospels and by Paul in Romans and Galatians; of Pelagius; and of Roman Catholic theology. The conditionality of the theology of Arminius is “evangelical,” that is, a gospel conditionality, a conditionality that is in harmony with grace.

When Arminius deals with the order of election and faith, he admits that faith is not an effect of election, but a necessary condition foreseen by God in those who will be elected. Arminius reproaches his opponents for representing his notion of conditionality in a hateful (*odiosus*) way. They do this by passing in silence over on the role of God, from whose goodness and gift also Arminius admits that faith derives. Faith is indeed a condition, but it is an *evangelical*

condition; that is, God in his grace ensures that this condition is fulfilled [the emphasis is den Boer's].

Where have we heard this before? Where are we hearing this today?

As a rose is a rose is a rose, however, so a condition *in the proper sense of something in the sinner upon which God and His grace depend* is a condition is a condition.

The objection of Reformed orthodoxy, which is the biblical gospel's condemnation of the false gospel, is against God's depending on man, against God's will to save being contingent on man's will to believe (or even on man's will not to resist), against God's sovereignty in salvation being replaced by the sovereignty of the sinner.

But where today is this objection found, and sounded—and pressed?

If a synod should meet at Dordt in a few years, to nullify the Canons, will there be a Reformed church in all of Europe, indeed, in all the world, that will wholeheartedly and uncompromisingly defend Dordt—defend sovereign, particular grace; defend Dordt's confession of sovereign predestination, reprobation as well as election; defend the sheer unconditionality (that is, graciousness) of salvation?

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***Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations***, by Martin Goodman. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. Pp. xiv + 598. \$35, hardcover. [Reviewed by Nathan Langerak.]

The foremost of the army had forced their way in, and since no one opposed them, were ransacking everything in the

usual way. They dragged Vitellius [the new Roman emperor—NJL] from his hiding place and when they asked

him his name (for they did not know him) and if he knew where Vitellius was, he attempted to escape them by a lie. Being soon recognized, he did not cease to beg that he be confined for a time, even in prison, alleging that he had something to say of importance to the safety of Vespasian. But they bound his arms behind his back, put a noose about his neck, and dragged him with rent garments and half-naked to the Forum. All along the Sacred Way he was greeted with mockery and abuse, his head held back by the hair, as is common with criminals, and even the point of a sword placed under his chin, so that he could not look down but must let his face be seen. Some pelted him with dung and ordure, others called him incendiary and glutton, and some of the mob even taunted him with his bodily defects.... At last on the Stairs of Wailing he was tortured to pieces with exquisite refinement and then dispatched and dragged off with a hook to the Tiber (418).

This is the gripping account of the death of the Roman Emperor Vitellius during the heady, conspiracy-laden days of AD

69. Nero had committed suicide rather than be killed by the discontented Praetorian Guard, and by that cowardly act had thrown the empire into confusion. In quick succession throughout 68 and 69 three different generals laid claim to the imperial purple. Now in 69, Vespasian, through his general Antonius Primus, solidified his claim to the throne by a bloody battle at Cremona near Rome, the sack of Rome itself, and the brutal murder of Vitellius and his supporters.

In the context of this bloody *coup d'etat*, the author of the book, *Rome and Jerusalem*, argues that the new emperor chose to justify his claim to the throne on the basis of his military record against the Jews:

A different justification for the regime's seizure of power was needed to render the *coup d'etat* palatable to a Roman populace which, as we have seen, had clear ideas of what gave status to political leaders. The new emperor chose to base his claim to the purple on his military services to the Roman state through the defeat of the Jews (419).

[Vespasian] had stayed in Alexandria, far away from



the shedding of Roman blood through which his supporters, especially Antonius Primus at Cremona in October 69, won him power. Such civil bloodletting was not an auspicious start to a new reign. Vespasian's image urgently needed the gloss of foreign conquest—the surest foundation of authority for a Roman politician—for him to be portrayed in the capital as warrior hero and saviour of the state. Vespasian delayed his own journey to Rome until summer of 70, in the meantime instructing his son Titus, left behind in Judaea, to win the war as rapidly and comprehensively as possible, regardless of the cost (419).

Titus was obedient to his father and prosecuted the siege with “speed and vigour” (17).

It was that “speed and vigour” that led to the brutal sack of the other city in the story, Jerusalem. The author includes some of the lurid descriptions of the siege and sack of Jerusalem from the account of Josephus, including the fascinating accounts of the intrigue among the Jewish factions in the city who were simultaneously fighting the Romans and each other and of the suffering,

starvation, and cruelty within the city that were the results of the rebellion and an efficiently prosecuted Roman siege.

But why was the temple destroyed? According to Josephus,

At this moment, one of the soldiers, awaiting no orders and with no horror of so dread a deed, but moved by some supernatural impulse, snatched a brand from the burning timber and, hoisted up by one of his comrades, flung the missile through a low golden door.... Titus was resting in his tent after the engagement, when a messenger rushed in with the tidings. Starting up just as he was, he ran to the Temple to arrest the conflagration.... Caesar, both by voice and hand, signaled to the combatants to extinguish the fire; but they neither heard his shouts, drowned in the louder din which filled their ears, nor heeded his beckoning hand, distracted as they were by the fight and their fury.... As they drew nearer the sanctuary they pretended not even to hear Caesar's orders and shouted to those in the front of them to throw in the firebrands. The insurgents, for their part, were

now powerless to help; and on all sides was carnage and flight. Most of the slain were civilians, weak and unarmed people, each butchered where he was caught. Around the altar a pile of corpses was accumulating; down the steps of the sanctuary flowed a stream of blood, and the bodies of the victims killed above went sliding to the bottom.

Vespasian's need for a Roman military victory to turn away the attention of Rome's population, edgy from civil war, changed a routine, punitive police action into a full-scale military campaign to destroy Jerusalem. The careless act of a single soldier precipitated the total destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem. According to the author,

The destruction of Jerusalem in 70 was the product of no long-term policy on either side. It had come about through a combination of accidents, most of them unrelated in origin to the conflict: the death of Nero, leading to Vespasian's bid for power in Rome and Titus' quest for the propaganda coup of a rapid conquest of Jerusalem, and the devastating effect in the

summer heat of a firebrand thrown by a soldier into the Temple of God (423).

Should such an explanation of Jerusalem's demise surprise us? I think not.

An archer once drew a bow at a venture, and the arrow unfailingly found the precise chink in Ahab's armor (I Kings 22:34).

The book centers around the question, why did the conflict between Rome and Jerusalem come to a leveling of Jerusalem and a razing of the temple, which was never rebuilt? Having traced exhaustively many different possible explanations and rejecting them all, the author comes to the conclusion that the prosecution of the Jewish Wars by the Romans was a personal decision of a new emperor to enhance his image with *Senatus Populusque Romanus*. Vespasian's political calculation was right, and his effective policy for enhancing his imperial image by promoting his success in the Jewish war and by refusing to allow the Jews to rebuild was followed by his successors in the Flavian dynasty, particularly his sons Titus and Domitian (419, 442–43), and was continued by his successors down

to the defeat of Bar Kokhba in 135.

Yet, even the author acknowledges that there are aspects of this history that are inexplicable. He points out that the Roman treatment of the Jews in this war—even considering their rebellion—was entirely different from their treatment of any other people. He points out how “outrageous” it was in ancient times for the Romans to refuse to allow the rebuilding of the temple (442). It was virtually inconceivable. Yet the ban stood. The author comes to the conclusion that circumstances converged to produce this outcome. The temple was never rebuilt because of Roman prejudice and the need of later emperors to draw on the success of Rome against Judaism.

While these explanations may be, and in light of his impressive research probably are, the immediate explanations of the destruction of Jerusalem and the razing of the temple, the answer of Scripture is far deeper. The Lord of history was finished with Jerusalem, with the temple, and with all the outward types. In their destruction he would give one more type to His church, a type of the world’s end.

This viewpoint, cast into the context of Roman political intrigue, particularly the necessity of image enhancement by a newly ascended Roman emperor, Vespasian, the fluid shifts of battle, and revengeful spirit of soldiers attacking a besieged city, sees that all things, from the careless toss of a firebrand to the imperial policy of worldly emperors, are in the Lord’s hands. They are determined by Him. They are carried out by Him for His purpose.

Of this end of the typical Zion the Lord had prophesied. The author quotes the prophecy of Jesus in Luke 19:43, “And when he was come near, he saw the city, and wept over it.... For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will cast a trench about you, and compass you round, and keep you in on every side” (18). He treats the Scriptures not much differently than he treats Seutonius, Tacitus, or Josephus. He views the Lord’s words as having been fulfilled when Titus ringed the city with a stone wall manned by armed guards in order to starve the rebels.

The preterist does virtually the same thing and treats the sack of Jerusalem as exhausting the precursory signs. In this the preterist is wrong. That does not

mean, however, that the destruction of Jerusalem is not instructive for our understanding of eschatology. It is the event that Jesus prophesied and is recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. The prophecy of Jesus was fulfilled typically in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. It is the Lord's own authoritative instruction regarding the signs of His coming and of the end of the world, an end over which the Lord of history is sovereign.

A further benefit of the book is that in the course of treating the main question of the book, the author provides a magisterial review of the two cultures that underlie both the gospel history and the subsequent apostolic history of the church, particularly the mission work of the apostle Paul. The gospel took place in time and in a particular circumstance. The early church existed in that same time and circumstance. This book lays out that time and circumstance.

Martin Goodman is marvelously suited to such a study. He is erudite, thoroughly conversant in both Roman and Jewish antiquities, and a clear writer. The book includes the impressive list of his credentials:

Martin Goodman has divided his intellectual life between Roman and Jewish worlds. He has edited both the *Journal of Roman Studies* and the *Journal of Jewish Studies*. He has taught Roman History at Birmingham and Oxford Universities, and is currently Professor of Jewish Studies at Oxford. He is a Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford, and of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies.

His suitability to the task comes out in the book's many good maps and several plates full of interesting illustrations and pictures, as well as the book's eminent accessibility for the general reader. Avoiding all the technical encumbrances that usually hinder a book of this nature, the author patiently explains every facet of the subject he covers, and in a lively way brings the civilization that is now 2,000 years removed from us closer to us so that we can understand it better.

He puts in context some obscure references in Scripture to men like Judas the Galilean, and Theudas, and the Egyptian (Acts 5:36–37; Acts 21:38).

He vividly describes the ancient world in which the Christian

church lived her life and carried out her mission work, a work that he points out was unique in the ancient world: "This sense of mission set Christians apart from other religious groups, including Jews, in the early Roman empire.... Christians in the first generation were different, espousing a proselytizing mission which was a shocking novelty in the ancient world" (493).

Perhaps with the passage of time and with the familiarity that breeds contempt, or at least disinterest, the novelty has worn off. But let not the shocking nature—the uniqueness—of this task elude us. The king of His church, who decreed that Jerusalem and the temple be leveled by the hands of the Romans, is busy gathering His church, the new temple and new Jerusalem, from every tribe, tongue, and nation under heaven, in order that they might be gathered to Him in the new Jerusalem that descends down out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband.

Among the many interesting tidbits of the book, the author proves that the founding in 130 of *Aelia Capitolina*, a Roman colony—something of a miniature Rome that the empire established in various places—on the

site of Jerusalem was Hadrian's provocative act that precipitated the violent, final Jewish revolts in 132–135 under Bar-Kokhba.

That final revolt was protracted and brutal, with as many as half a million Jews perishing in the fighting, and the war taxed the very best of the Roman generals and Legions. It was the last gasp of a semi-independent Jewish state until modern times.

Hadrian from the beginning of his reign signaled his intent to reorganize the empire. He did that also in Judea, chiefly through the founding of *Aelia Capitolina*. From the territory of *Aelia Capitolina* the Jew was excluded on pain of death. By this action Hadrian signaled that he deliberately intended the province of Judea to enter the Roman Empire as pagan, and not at all Jewish (461). It was Hadrian's answer to the Jewish revolts of 70 and 115–117, slow in coming, but final in its result. With that act the temple could never be rebuilt because Rome would never remove a colony once established. In the eyes of the Roman state, the Jews ceased to exist as a separate nation in their own land (471).

God laid the ax—the Roman ax—to the tree. ■

***The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity***, by Andreas J. Kostenberger and Michael J. Kruger. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010. 250 pages. \$17.99 (paper). [Reviewed by David Engelsma.]

Influential in Christian scholarly circles and, therefore, increasingly accepted in the churches is the perverse notion of Walter Bauer, now popularized by Bart Ehrman and others. The Bauer-Ehrman thesis is that Christianity was originally a multitude of utterly diverse and contradictory beliefs, loosely associated with the figure and teachings of a Jesus of Nazareth. Over time, powerful church authorities ruthlessly suppressed all the disparate, competing “Christianities,” save one. This one faith, the church lords established as orthodoxy, especially by declaring it in the ecumenical creeds, but also by outlawing as “heretics” those who deviated from this arbitrarily adopted orthodoxy.

One of the effective methods of establishing the one faith, while demonizing all the others, was the calculated arrangement of the New Testament canon. Powerful bishops included certain books in the New Testament canon and excluded others (which had

as good a claim to canonicity as those included) according to their determination of what they wanted the Christian faith to be.

Another way of highhandedly and scandalously wickedly privileging orthodoxy was the falsification of the content of the books of the New Testament. “Armed with Bauer’s hypothesis, Ehrman argues that these conflicts between heresy and orthodoxy led early Christian scribes to intentionally change the text to fit their own theological agenda.”

The purpose of this assault by Bauer and Ehrman on the foundations of the Christian faith is to annihilate the very idea of truth, specifically the truth of Christianity, and to advocate “diversity”—a plurality of contradictory beliefs, and the tolerance of them all. “Diversity, the ‘gospel’ of our culture, has now assumed the mantle of compelling truth.”

Originally, heresies—heaps of them, of every imaginable sort; all contradicting the rest—were the real orthodoxy. Today, there

is only one heresy: orthodoxy, with its intolerance of all other beliefs.

In the words of the authors of this incisive exposure of a powerful, pervasive, modern threat to the Christian faith and life, the Bauer-Ehrman theory comes down to this: “diversity becomes the last remaining orthodoxy, and orthodoxy becomes heresy, because it violates the new orthodoxy: the gospel of diversity.”

The Bauer-Ehrman thesis is part of the project of postmodernism: the annihilation of truth.

In a scholarly way, Kostenberger and Kruger expose the Bauer-Ehrman thesis as invalid. The Bauer-Ehrman thesis rests on assumptions, rather than evidence, whether from the Bible itself, church history, or text-criticism. From all three of these sources, the authors demonstrate that Christianity was originally the one, true faith of orthodoxy. It was assailed by heresies from the beginning, but from the beginning it condemned them. There was no tolerance of “diversities.”

The canon was not manufactured by unscrupulous churchmen late in the day, but was widely accepted throughout the early church long before the decisions

of synods made the recognition of the canon official.

On Ehrman’s own text-critical basis, his charge of a deliberate tampering with the text of the New Testament Scripture, so as to produce a document favoring orthodoxy, is disproved.

The book is a scholarly refutation of some of the most devastating arguments that unbelief can raise against the Christian faith. Thus, it serves, not as a confirmation of faith concerning the orthodox gospel, for faith rests on the witness of Scripture to itself as the word of God in the compelling power of the Holy Spirit. Faith is impervious to the attacks by the criticism of unbelief. Faith is impervious to the Bauer-Ehrman thesis.

Whether Kostenberger and Kruger do justice to faith’s reception of Scripture as the word of God by the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer and, therefore, to faith’s absolutely certain and utterly unshakable confidence regarding the gospel of the New Testament is a question. There is something lacking in their defense of the faith regarding the authenticity of the New Testament text.

The wealth of manuscript evidence at our disposal (both in quantity and date) gives us good reasons to think that the original text has not been lost but has been preserved in the manuscript tradition as a whole. Given the fact that the vast number of textual variants is “significant,” and given that our text-critical methodology can tell which “significant” readings are original and which are secondary, we can have confidence that the text we possess is, in essence, the text that was written in the first century.

Rather, the book serves to expose the sheer falsity of the attacks on the faith.

The worth of the book is its revelation of the all-out attack on the very foundations of the Christian faith from within the camp (Bauer was a 20th century German theologian; Ehrman is a contemporary professor of religion in North America). The Bible is a corrupt document. The Christian faith that rests on it is the invented instrument of carnal power, formed and wielded by power-hungry ecclesiastics.

Diversity of beliefs and practices and tolerance of all beliefs,

as of no belief, are the new orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Not because they are reality—objective truth—(for there is no reality according to the lords of Western culture in the twenty-first century), but because the men and women in power today decree it, with specious arguments and veiled threats. And because the spirit of the age, which is the spirit of antichrist, approves diversity and tolerance.

The intriguing question is why the Bauer-Ehrman thesis commands paradigmatic stature when it has been soundly discredited in the past. The reason it does so, we suspect, is not that its handling of the data is so superior or its reasoning is so compelling. The reason is rather that Bauer’s thesis, as popularized by Ehrman, Pagels, and the fellows of the Jesus Seminar, resonates profoundly with the intellectual and cultural climate in the West at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Indeed, it is contemporary culture’s fascination with diversity that has largely driven the way in which our understanding of Jesus and early Christianity has been reshaped. If it can be shown that early Chris-



tianity was not as unified as commonly supposed, and if it can be suggested that the eventual rise of Christian orthodoxy was in fact the result of a conspiracy or of a power grab by the ruling political, cultural, or ecclesiastical elite,

this contributes to undermining the notion of religious truth itself and paves the way for the celebration of diversity as the only “truth” that is left. And thus the tables are turned.... ■

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***Our Worship***, Abraham Kuyper (ed., trans., Harry Boonstra), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009. Pp. lx + 366. (\$30.00, paperback). [Reviewed by Barrett Gritters.]

Abraham Kuyper’s *Onze Eeredienst* has finally been made available for English readers in a fine translation from the Dutch by the team of Harry Boonstra (editor), Henry Baron, Gerrit Sheeres, and Leonard Sweetman. In Dutch Reformed circles this work has been referred to and quoted often enough to please us—who do not read Dutch with the ease we desired—very much. Now we have access to everything “Father Abraham” wrote about liturgy. The team of translators has given us a smooth translation, and the publishers a quality paperback in a pleasing format. Everyone with an interest in the churches’ public worship, especially the history of Reformed worship in

the Netherlands, will want to read this book.

Originally, Abraham Kuyper wrote a lengthy series of articles in the weekly church magazine *De Heraut* (*The Herald*). The length of the series appears when Kuyper tells us in his foreword that *seventy* articles were written before his service as Prime Minister of the Netherlands, which began in 1901, and *fifty* after his party’s defeat in 1905. Thus, Kuyper wrote these after long service in the churches (he was born in 1837 and ordained in 1863), lengthy experience in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands, and thus with mature reflection on life in the *Gereformeerde Kerken*.

*Our Worship* is not the usual book on worship. Much broader in scope than a typical study of liturgics, it includes a sampling of almost everything ecclesiastical. There is a smattering of homiletics, a substantial amount of church polity, discussion of architecture and church art, even advice regarding church discipline and marriage ceremonies. The series editor describes the book's special character well: "It is a series of reflections, wonderments, musings, arguments, and insights written for a popular periodical by a colorful, intellectually curious, culturally engaged pastor, theologian, public intellectual, and sometime politician" (xii). But no one must suppose that the book lacks system or organization, or that Kuyper's writing is not orderly. The table of contents (sorely lacking in most old Dutch works) makes it easy to choose whatever topic one might want to read about.

The one major disappointment for this reviewer can be treated relatively quickly. The book is an abridgment rather than a full translation. One can appreciate the need to pare down the large work to a size reasonable for a publisher, to eliminate unneces-

sary repetition, excise old Dutch poetry, and remove unhelpful or unclear references. But removing Kuyper's dissertations on Roman Catholic worship has greatly reduced the value of the work in this reviewer's estimation. In today's world, when principles of worship are so important, and a polemic against improper worship doctrines is needed, this lack is a sore disappointment. And it did not help to hear that Kuyper's "lengthy dissertations on wrong-headed worship theories of practices in the Roman Catholic church" were apparently put in the same class as "how to vacate the church building quickly in case of fire, discussion of the size of and furnishing for the council room... (and) quotations of Dutch poems" (p. xxxvii). The editor's bias also comes through in some footnotes, one of which declares that Kuyper "shows his bias most flagrantly" when he discussed the place and role of mothers at the baptism of their children. (Kuyper was emphasizing the headship of the man in the family.) But neither the disappointing omissions nor the bias take away from the great value of the work. Editor Boonstra's team of translators, the publisher, and the Calvin Institute of Christian

Worship are to be commended for bringing this important publication back to life.

*Our Worship* begins with a well-written and interesting introduction by the editor, which includes a two-page outline of Kuyper's life, an overview of Dutch history with focus on the Reformed churches, and an explanation of Kuyper's method of dealing with each topic. This last brings out the greatest value of the book for students of Dutch Reformed liturgy: Kuyper chose "a topic and in the process of his argument reach(ed) back into the history of the church, usually to Reformation times" (p. xxx.) To understand the church's present practice in the light of her history is invaluable.

Minor topics of curiosity abound...at least topics that today would be considered by some to be insignificant. Kuyper also answers significant questions or raises topics most Reformed folk never considered. With some of his conclusions they may well disagree. The following, in no particular order, are some examples of both. Kuyper explains that the Reformed *Form for Baptism of Adults* is to be used only for adults who have at least one believing parent, and is inappropriate for

converts from Judaism, Islam, or paganism (p. 243). He suggests that the only proper method of sprinkling at baptism is one "dip" of the hand into the water, and not three, and provides reasons (p. 240); and that it is not necessary to "postpone" baptism so that the mother can recover enough to be present (p. 247). In connection with baptism, he offers practical advice to preachers: a long sermon at the occasion of baptism is hardly necessary, since the "exquisite explanation of the truth of the faith" in the *Form* is a "jewel" of a sermon in itself (p. 232). Kuyper judged it wrong that in his day the table for the Lord's Supper was no longer visible to many because of the size of some congregations (imagine congregations so large that there could be thirty infant baptisms in one service [p. 236], and where people stood on the back pews to see the sacrament [p. 81]). And it was "an inconsistency that we judge to be wrong" that the elders take the bread and wine to the people rather than the people assembling around the table (p. 23). Today we have a difficult time imagining that a janitor would need to put up signs to keep the people from spitting on the floor (p. 127). Of more

interest (for those not janitors) are Kuyper's explanation of the origin of "pre-service singspirations" (p. 100); his opposition to the *tussenzang*, a congregational song at the mid-point of the sermon (p. 204); his call for elders to conduct the Scripture reading in worship, so that the ministers realize that they are "not always the axle around which everything turns and moves" (p. 104); and his lament that some people came to church with such disregard for their neighbor (and with such a skewed understanding of reverence in the sanctuary) that they were "ice-cold" in their treatment of fellow worshippers:

It is unnatural for them not to be allowed to say anything to each other after having been separated for a whole week, or even to nod to each other or shake each other's hand. It often happens that you sit down next to someone you do not know, and do not shake hands, hardly looking at the person, and do not say a word. And when it is time to leave, it is as if you were exiting a streetcar—you are not even able to say what the brother, with whom you just worshiped, looks like (p. 100).

All these are interesting and worth knowing. But what makes *Our Worship* valuable is Kuyper's treatment of the major topics of worship.

Liturgics treats the *order* of the elements in a worship service. *Our Worship* begins with "Kuyper's Ideal Order of Worship" (p. xl.) It would have been helpful if the editors had indicated where this order comes from (as it is, it appears in the book even before Kuyper's *Foreword*). But it would be a profitable exercise merely to reflect on why Kuyper would *begin* with the Votum, *include* an exhortation to confession of sin and an absolution early in the service, and have the reading of the ten commandments at the *conclusion* of the service. What is the biblical/theological reason for the order of our present-day worship?

I have a special interest in Kuyper's call for an exhortation to confession of sin, public and formal congregational confession of sin, and a scriptural declaration of God's pardon (called an *absolution*). Kuyper gives historical grounds for his call to restore this part of worship in Reformed churches. An interested reader may find further discussion of

this matter in James Hastings Nichols' *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition*, where it is shown that Calvin, Bucer, à Lasco, Knox, as well as the Westminster tradition, all included a confession of sin and absolution in the worship. These were carefully distinguished from the Roman Catholic theology and practice. Kuyper explains why these elements may have been removed (intriguing reasons), and what he heard as justification for keeping them out, including that confession of sin takes place in the congregational ("long") prayer. Reformed preachers and elders today can profitably discuss this matter and, at least, remind themselves and the congregation of the importance of confession of sin as a congregational act of worship. I would welcome a careful and lengthier study of the matter so that the churches can be confident of their reasons not to include what the Reformers all considered fundamental.

There is more, much more. Those interested in music and arts will find Kuyper's interests and knowledge to be provocative. Kuyper complained that the new *Psalter*—unjustly foisted upon the churches—was objectionable,

but bemoaned that there were no members with the gifts to improve the old Psalter. He spoke of acoustics—for speaking more than singing, about paintings and stained glass, even about clergy attire. His sharp wit must have offended more than a few preachers who still liked to wear "tails." More important are his comments on musical accompaniment, and his surprising (to some) explanation that organs are a concession to poor singing. In northern Europe "the people as a rule sing neither in tune nor with accuracy, neither do they excel in melodious voices" (p. 56). Kuyper believed that unaccompanied singing was much preferable. Then he offered this timely counsel: "There is nothing objectionable about this organ music, provided that the church council make sure that the organists do not try to push themselves to the fore" (p. 56).

The value of the book is not limited to those who teach liturgy to seminarians, or to preachers with a yen for the academic or obscure. All the people of God can profit from a serious reading of it, even if it is a chapter selected here and there. Preachers ought to recommend it to their elders; it would make for a nice read early

on a Sabbath morning as they prepare for worship over their first cup of coffee.

I have added this book to the

required reading list for the seminary internship. The students' reports have been positive. Our churches should profit. ■

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**Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy**, by Eric Metaxas. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2010. Pp. xvi+591. \$29.99 (cloth). [Reviewed by David Engelsma.]

If ever resistance to civil authority could be excused, it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer's. If ever the attempt to assassinate the ruler of a nation could be justified, it was the attempt by Bonhoeffer and his fellow conspirators. Bonhoeffer resisted the monstrously evil Nazi Germany. He and his co-conspirators made an attempt on the life of the presage of the man of sin, the Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler.

On this resistance culminating in the attempt to assassinate Hitler, this splendid biography centers.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Protestant theologian and churchman who opposed Hitler and his Nazi Germany from the very beginning. Two days after Hitler became the "democratically elected chancellor of Germany" on January 30, 1933, Bonhoeffer gave a radio address in which he declared that the idea of leader-

ship embodied in Hitler's Fuhrer-principle—absolute lordship—is idolatry.

With Pastor Martin Niemoller and others, Bonhoeffer established the "Confessing Church" in Germany in separation from and opposition to the "German Christians"—the bulk of German Protestantism, that cravenly, shamelessly, and ardently played the whore to Hitler's beast.

For Bonhoeffer, discipleship after Christ (the subject of one of Bonhoeffer's famous books) demanded action against the wicked Hitler, who was destroying Germany, corrupting the church, and exterminating Jews. This action took form in 1944 in the attempt to assassinate Hitler by exploding a bomb near the German leader. By decree of Hitler himself, the German authorities executed Bonhoeffer by hanging in April, 1945.

Today, virtually all of Protestantism regards Bonhoeffer as a Christian martyr—one who died, honorably, for his confession of the lordship of Jesus Christ. Such is the regard for Bonhoeffer of this well-written, gripping biography: *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. The sub-title is *A Righteous Gentile vs. the Third Reich*.

### Theologian

Bonhoeffer's life is fascinating to the theologian. Bonhoeffer studied under renowned scholars: the notable liberal, Adolf von Harnack; the able historian of dogma, Reinhold Seeberg; the great Lutheran-scholar, Karl Holl; and the famous American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr. The theologian who had the most influence on Bonhoeffer's own theological thinking was Karl Barth. The two were friends. Barth authored the Barmen Declaration, manifesto and official confession of the German Confessional Churches. The Declaration rejected "the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the Church's vocation as well." It

rejected as well the notion that the church should become "an organ of the State."

Although the book offers no critique of Bonhoeffer's theology, it is apparent that the theology of that disciple of Karl Barth was a neo-orthodoxy that rejected the radical liberalism of von Harnack in Germany and of Emerson Fosdick in America; confessed the resurrection of Jesus from the dead; insisted on a life of costly discipleship after the risen Jesus, in contrast to "cheap grace"; and even preferred the preaching of the fundamentalists in America to that of the liberals, at the time of the fundamentalist/modernist struggle.

Of a sermon by the notorious liberal Harry Emerson Fosdick in the Riverside Church in New York, Bonhoeffer wrote:

Quite unbearable.... The whole thing was a respectable, self-indulgent, self-satisfied religious celebration. This sort of idolatrous religion stirs up the flesh which is accustomed to being kept in check by the Word of God. Such sermons make for libertinism, egotism, indifference. Do people not know that one can get on as well, even better, without "religion"?....

Perhaps the Anglo-Saxons are really more religious than we are, but they are certainly not more Christian, at least, if they still have sermons like that.

Later, that same Sunday, Bonhoeffer attended the services at which the fundamentalist McComb preached. To this sermon, Bonhoeffer responded positively. "Now the day has had a good ending.... The sermon was astonishing (Broadway Presbyterian Church, Dr. McComb) on 'our likeness with Christ.' A completely biblical sermon."

During a stay in the United States in 1930, to study at Union Theological Seminary, Bonhoeffer passed this devastating judgment upon liberal theology and preaching: "In New York they preach about virtually everything; only one thing is not addressed, or is addressed so rarely that I have as yet been unable to hear it, namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the cross, sin and forgiveness, death and life."

Typical of liberalism's penchant for condoning evil by blaming others (especially the United States) was Fosdick's defense of Hitler: "Fosdick was one of the most vocal proponents of appeas-

ing Hitler. He championed moral equivalency, which argued that the phenomenon of Hitler and fascism came into being because of the faults of America and its policies."

Bonhoeffer was a man of courage in a nation and in a church of cowards. Boldly, he rejected Hitler and National Socialism; boldly, he defended the Jews; boldly, he called the church to be the church; boldly, he urged his weak colleagues, not only in the false church of the "German Christians," but also in the Confessing Church, to take a stand; boldly, he returned to Germany from a safe haven abroad to work for, and suffer with, the Confessing Church; boldly, he allied himself with the conspiracy to kill Hitler; and, bravely, he went to his death early one morning in April, 1945. As his executioners led him away to the gallows, he said to his fellow prisoners, "This is the end, for me the beginning of life."

And then there is the haunting love of Bonhoeffer for the young woman to whom he was engaged, but whom he would never marry. His love-letters from prison are moving.



### Opponent of National Socialism

Bonhoeffer's strategic place at the center of spiritual, ecclesiastical, and physical opposition to Hitler makes this account of his life valuable, and gripping, also for its insights into Hitler, his henchmen, National Socialism, and the German nation that deified Hitler. One who has read much in the literature of Hitler, Nazi Germany, and World War II will learn more from this volume.

The chapter on Hitler's coming to power and the rise of the terrifying reign of the Nazis—the chapter on the “Fuhrer-principle”—is as incisive as any account I have read.

So the German people clamored for order and leadership. But it was as though in the babble of their clamoring, they had summoned the devil himself, for there now rose up from the deep wound in the national psyche something strange and terrible and compelling. The Fuhrer was no mere man or mere politician. He was something terrifying and authoritarian, self-contained and self-justifying, his own father and his own god. He was a symbol who symbol-

ized himself, who had traded his soul for the *zeitgeist*.

The author's description of Hitler and his philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is worth quoting at length.

Hitler must be called a Nietzschean, although he likely would have bristled at the term since it implied that he believed in something beyond himself. This clashed with the idea of an invincible Fuhrer figure, above whom none could stand. Still, Hitler visited the Nietzsche museum in Weimar many times, and there are photos of him posed, staring rapturously at a huge bust of the philosopher. He devoutly believed in what Nietzsche said about the “will to power.” Hitler worshiped power, while truth was a phantasm to be ignored; and his sworn enemy was not falsehood but weakness. For Hitler, ruthlessness was a great virtue, and mercy, a great sin. This was Christianity's chief difficulty, that it advocated meekness. Nietzsche called Christianity “the one great curse, the one enormous and innermost perversion... the one immortal blemish of mankind.”

Bonhoeffer resolutely opposed this demonic state. In a letter to an ecumenical churchman outside Germany, whom Bonhoeffer was urging publicly to speak out against Hitler and Nazi Germany for the sake of the true church in Germany, Bonhoeffer wrote, "It must be made quite clear—terrifying though it is—that we are immediately faced with the decision: National Socialist *or* Christian."

Eric Metaxas is gifted with a scintillating style. The election of the crude, blustering, lecherous Johann Heinrich Ludwig as the Nazi bishop of the church of the "German Christians" was as if "Gomer Pyle had become the archbishop of Canterbury." That exemplar of appeasement, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, finally declared war on Germany, when Hitler invaded Poland, because "someone lent Chamberlain a vertebra." Of the death of Reinhold Heydrich, second only to Himmler in the Nazi hierarchy in cold-blooded killing, Metaxas writes: "Heydrich was dead... the albino stoat...the architect of the Final Solution fell into the hands of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Hitler's clever propagandist, Joseph Goebbels,

is described as "the vampiric homunculus."

### **Martyr?**

To the book's thesis, however, the question must be put: Was Bonhoeffer's physical resistance to the government of Nazi Germany excusable? Was the attempt to assassinate the Fuhrer justified? Was Dietrich Bonhoeffer a martyr?

The question is not without practical significance. May Christians in similar circumstances today use force to overthrow a godless, persecuting state? May Christians, in the name of Christ, one day attempt the assassination of the Antichrist? Can resistance to civil government, and civil government that has come to power lawfully at that, ever be obedience to Christ—genuine discipleship—on the part of Christian citizens?

Scripture denies it. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation" (Rom. 13:1, 2). The only

account Metaxas takes of this plain prohibition of resistance to the state and, therefore, certainly of assassination of the head of state is a dismissal of the classic text. According to Metaxas, and, evidently, Bonhoeffer, one who applies Romans 13 in such a way as to condemn the resistance in which Bonhoeffer was engaged (the obvious meaning of the text!) is guilty of a “simplistic understanding of Romans 13.” Here, Bonhoeffer’s neo-orthodox denial of the inspiration of Scripture is evident.

Bonhoeffer himself indicated his awareness that the conspiracy to take the life of Hitler was sin. Early on, he asked leaders of the Confessing Church if they “would grant absolution to the murder of a tyrant.” Absolution is necessary only for sin. Discipleship after Christ neither needs nor requests absolution. Similarly, Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg, the Roman Catholic who placed the bomb at Hitler’s feet in the Wolf’s Lair on July 20, 1944, asked his priest, “Can the Church grant absolution to a murderer who has taken the life of a tyrant?”

The illegitimacy of Bonhoeffer’s resistance to Hitler and Nazi Germany is apparent from

the secretiveness and duplicity it required. Metaxas notes that Bonhoeffer was deeply involved in “the tangled huggermuggery of secret intelligence missions.” The way of Christ is not “huggermuggery.” The way of Christ is an open, bold confession, and an equally open, bold denunciation. It is the way, not of killing, but of being killed. This was Jesus’ own way before Pilate, Herod, and the godless, persecuting Roman world-power. There was no recourse to force and violence (John 18:33-37). I Peter 2:11-25 binds this way upon all Christians, always and everywhere.

It is not surprising that the resistance by Bonhoeffer and others failed miserably. When the bomb did not kill him, or even harm him seriously, Hitler hardened himself in his conviction that he was the man of Providence—the Messiah—for Germany. The result of the botched assassination was the execution of thousands, including men and women only remotely connected to the plot. Those who resist the powers receive to themselves divine judgment.

It was right that Hitler not perish by assassination. Hitler had to live to see his utter defeat and the complete failure of his

thousand-year “*Reich*.” He must die by his own hand—no hero, treacherously “stabbed in the back” by assassins, but an abject coward, as all bullies are, afraid to face the consequences of his evil deeds.

In his execution by hanging, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not a martyr. Rather, he suffered “as a murderer...an evildoer” (1 Pet. 4:15).

That is a shame. ■

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***On Being a Pastor: Understanding our Calling and Work***, by Derek Prime and Alistair Begg. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2004. 313 pages. \$17.99. Softcover. [Reviewed by Douglas Kuiper.]

Aiming to give the reader a better understanding of the calling and work of the pastoral ministry, this book treats a broad spectrum of matters, including the sense of call to the ministry; what kind of man the minister must be; what the real work of the ministry is; the necessity of prayer, a devotional life, and study in order to carry out one’s calling; the principles and practice of pastoral care; the conducting of the worship service; leading meetings; the pastor’s family life and leisure times; and the perils and privileges of the office.

This book is recommended both for the seminary student who anticipates the joys and struggles of the pastoral ministry, and for the pastor who may have lost sight of what his work really is.

Both style and content make this book an “easy read”—one that could profitably be read during one’s leisure time. I read much of it during my “before bedtime” reading sessions, and it could be as profitably read by the beach this summer.

The present book is a revised and expanded edition of Derek Prime’s earlier work, *Pastors and Teachers* (1989). Prime served as pastor for over 30 years, including a lengthy pastorate at Charlotte Chapel in Edinburgh, Scotland, during which time Alistair Begg served as his assistant. Since 1983, Begg has pastored Parkside Church in Cleveland, Ohio. This revision and expansion of Prime’s earlier work includes taking on Begg as coauthor.

After making a point, Prime

and Begg each give a personal reflection on that point from their own experience. The book's value is enhanced both by these personal reflections, and by the fact that they come from two different men with two different personalities. The structured and organized pastor will relate more to Prime; those equally as diligent and disciplined, but less structured, will identify more closely with Begg. At times Prime will present a high standard for us to follow; Begg will freely admit he has not attained it. Prime gives us the goal; Begg reminds us of the reality.

Several warnings for prospective and current ministers are certainly timely, such as warnings against neglecting prayer (69), against professionalism (knowing the Scripture intellectually and applying it to others, but not to self (88), against the twin perils of pride and despair (147), and against laziness (297).

Some pieces of advice are also well heeded, such as delegating what can be delegated, including pastoral work in a larger congregation (191 and 237ff.); basic principles of pastoral care (153ff.); and maintaining complete confidentiality (233). The need to spend sufficient time

studying is emphasized. In this connection the reader is treated to an apt quote from Thomas Goodwin: "The reaper is equally paid even for the time in which he sharpens his sickle" (121). That is, the minister must not feel that he only earns his reward when he is busy caring for pastoral or administrative duties; he must understand that he has been called to study, and is paid for studying.

The wise reader will know how to apply the advice to his own circumstances. In giving advice regarding preaching to children in the congregation (142), Prime and Begg have in mind a "children's talk" within the service. We could as easily apply it to catechism, and also be reminded of the need to address the children within the congregation in our sermons.

We pastors must be sensitive to problems that our wives might face, including loneliness, temptations to jealousy, and the burden of confidentiality (276).

Short but apt is the conclusion, in which the authors remind us of the privilege of our calling, and the joys that faithfulness brings. Some of these we enjoy this side of the grave; but even greater joys await us after death, and after the resurrection.

God grant that we pastors find joy in our ministry, and one day hear His pronouncement, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.” ■

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*A Faith That Is Never Alone: a Response to Westminster Seminary California*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin. La Grange, California: Kerygma Press, 2007. Pp. xix+397. \$24.95 (paper). [Reviewed by David Engelsma.]

In this book, leading advocates of the Federal Vision defend their doctrine of justification against some of its critics. The advocates are John H. Armstrong, Don Garlington, Mark Horne, Peter Leithart, Rich Lusk, P. Andrew Sandlin, and Norman Shepherd.

The book is a response to the weak and ineffective criticism of the Federal Vision doctrine of justification by the faculty of Westminster Seminary in California in their book, *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry* (P&R, 2007).

Appropriately, the defenders of the Federal Vision dedicate the volume to Norman Shepherd, “persevering advocate for a faith that is never alone.” The adjectival phrase is Federal Vision jargon for “stubborn proponent of a faith that does not justify by itself alone, but also by the good

works performed by the one who has faith.”

#### **Familiar Defense**

By this time, the defense of their doctrine of justification by the men of the Federal Vision is familiar. Their adversaries are burdened with a scholastic “law/gospel” disjunction inherited from an overwrought Luther. The insistence on justification by faith alone misreads Romans 3 and 4, as well as the entire book of Galatians. The reference in Romans 3:28 and in Galatians 3:6-14 is not to the good works of the believer, but to works of outward conformity to Old Testament laws peculiar to the Jews. The works excluded by the apostle from justification are deeds that separated Jews from Gentiles.

Refuge from criticism of their doctrine of justification by faith and works is sought by the con-

tributors to *A Faith That Is Never Alone* in the seemingly orthodox confession, “justification by a working faith.”

That sinners are justified by their good works, or will be justified by their good works in the final judgment, not by faith alone, is proved by the men of the Federal Vision from Romans 2:13: “For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified.” The meaning of this text, according to the Federal Vision, is that in the final judgment, which will be the decisive justification, the verdict “Righteous in the sight of God”! will take into consideration and be based on, at least in part, the good works of the believer himself.

### Main Issue

With regard to the main issue in the controversy, which the men of the Federal Vision themselves identify as the doctrine of a conditional covenant, the men of the Federal Vision usually *assume* a conditional covenant. Occasionally, they triumphantly discover the *term* “condition” in the writings of Reformed theologians of the past. Even then, they are forced to acknowledge that these theologians, for example,

Turretin, taught that salvation is “unconditional” in “an important sense” (84). It is exactly in this “important sense,” namely, depending solely upon the sovereign grace of God, that the Federal Vision *denies* the unconditionality of the covenant and its salvation. What Turretin meant by the conditionality of the covenant, which Turretin describes, in any case, as an “improper” use of the word “condition” (83), he indicates in the quotation that Mark Horne adduces in support of the Federal Vision doctrine of conditionality: “condition *and means*” (emphasis added; 84).

At other crucial places in their argument on behalf of a conditional covenant, the Federal Vision writers blithely identify “condition” and “obligation” (207). Contending for a conditional covenant, Andrew Sandlin states that salvation is “not without obligation or condition” (207).

“Obligation” is one’s duty in a relationship, for example, a Christian wife’s duty to be a help to her husband. “Condition” is radically different. It is an act of someone in a relationship upon which the relationship depends for its continuation and happy

outcome, so that if this someone fails to perform the condition the relationship fails and is terminated. Exactly this is the sense of “condition” in the Federal Vision’s doctrine of a conditional covenant. God graciously establishes His covenant with all the baptized children alike. But the covenant is conditional *in the sense that its continuation with a child and the happy outcome of everlasting life in Abraham’s bosom depend upon acts that the child must perform, so that failure to perform the condition results in the severing of the covenant union with Christ and eternal damnation—which, according to the Federal Vision, is actually the case for many baptized children.*

Surely, Andrew Sandlin knows the difference between an obligation and a condition. It is the obligation of a wife who professes to be a Christian to be a loving help to her husband, not a brawler. God demands it. But her loving help is not a condition to the marriage, as though her failure to be a loving help breaks the bond, giving to the longsuffering husband the right to marry another. The husband of the brawling woman who fails to carry out her obligation, may live

on the housetop. He may not divorce her and remarry, as though the obligation were a condition.

On second thought, Andrew Sandlin may very well confuse obligation and condition, especially regarding earthly marriage and the related biblical covenant. Sandlin, like most of the men of the Federal Vision, is an ardent Christian Reconstructionist. And the Christian Reconstructionists regard virtually all the obligations of Christian marriage as conditions, failure to perform which are a ground for divorce and remarriage (see Ray Sutton, *Second Chance: Biblical Principles of Divorce and Remarriage*, Dominion Press, 1988 and my critique in my *Marriage, the Mystery of Christ & the Church: The Covenant-bond in Scripture and History*, RFP, rev. ed. 1998, 223-229). It follows that they also regard obligations in the covenant as conditions. Therefore, the covenant is as shaky and uncertain as are marriages among them.

The pious, practical purpose of the men of the Federal Vision with their doctrine of justification by good works is to escape the evil of antinomism. It is the same pious, practical purpose that motivated opponents of



the apostle Paul's doctrine of justification to object that Paul made "void the law through faith" (Rom. 3:31) and that Paul was responsible for men's "continu[ing] in sin, that grace may abound" (Rom. 6:1).

### **Decisively by Works**

To call this defense of the Federal Vision doctrine of justification familiar is not to say that the book lacks worth. The book confirms (if there are still those who need to have it confirmed) that the Federal Vision is heretical in its doctrine of justification, and clarifies the heresy. Even the least discerning and most loving of members of Reformed and Presbyterian churches must acknowledge that the Federal Vision is heretical in its doctrine of the central gospel-truth of justification.

Norman Shepherd dismisses the essential word "alone" in the orthodox confession "justified by faith alone" as "this Lutheran gloss" on Romans 3:28. By interpreting and then translating Romans 3:28 as containing the word "alone," Luther "tweak[ed] the inspired word of God" (65). Shepherd neglects to inform the reader that this "Lutheran gloss" is official, authoritative, binding dog-

ma for all members of Reformed churches having the Heidelberg Catechism as their creed, including the Rev. Norman Shepherd. "How art thou righteous before God? *Only* by a true faith in Jesus Christ" (Q. 60).

Shepherd's problem is not with Luther's "tweaking" of Romans 3:28. His problem is with Romans 3:28, particularly the words "without the deeds of the law." Luther, Calvin, and the Reformation creeds understood the words "without the deeds of the law" to refer to *all* the works of the believing sinner, including the good works he does by the Holy Spirit.

Shepherd does not understand these words this way. With specific reference to the words "without the deeds of the law" in Romans 3:28, Shepherd writes: "They are not simply any and all good works." Rather, according to the theologian of the Federal Vision, these works, which are excluded from justification, are only works that belong to the "old covenant, the Mosaic covenant delivered to Israel on Mt. Sinai." The works excluded from justification by Romans 3:28 are only those works that would bar the Gentiles from the possibility of salvation (67).

Shepherd shrewdly lets the reader draw the conclusion: justification is by faith and by the good works that believers perform in obedience to the moral law.

That the Federal Vision doctrine of justification is righteousness by good works, not by faith alone, the men of the Federal Vision make plain by their interpretation of Romans 2:13: “For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified.” Shepherd explains the text thus:

[Paul] says in Romans 2:13 that in the Day of Judgment “it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.” This is...justification by faith, faith that is genuine, faith that works, faith that expresses itself through love. We are not justified by dead faith (faith without works)... We are justified by living and active faith (66).

According to Shepherd, in the decisive justification of sinners at the final judgment, the divine verdict will take into account the works of the sinners themselves. Their righteousness, which makes them worthy of eternal life, will include their own obedience.

Rich Lusk states bluntly the doctrine of justification that Shepherd, to his great discredit, is always at pains to teach subtly. “[Our good] works [are] a *condition* of final justification” (emphasis, Lusk’s; 342). “The works that justify at the last day are the works that flow out of a faith that has already received initial acceptance” (343). According to Lusk, James teaches that “faith and works justify conjointly,” in the sense of being the instrument of God’s declaration of pardon and righteousness in the final judgment. “Final justification is by faith and works together” (354). And faith must yield the palm to works: “In the final installment of our justification, there is a very real sense in which works will be the *decisive* factor” (emphasis, Lusk’s; 318).

#### “Shuffling” Righteousness

The men of the Federal Vision are critical of imputation—the act of God the judge that is fundamental to justification. The development of Rich Lusk’s assault on the Reformers’ and the Reformation creeds’ explanation of imputation is fascinating, and instructive. Were the issue not so serious—an assault on the

heart of the gospel!—this development would be hilarious. Lusk launches his attack on the Reformed, indeed Protestant, doctrine of imputation by questioning the Reformers' understanding of imputation. The Reformers were poor exegetes. In fact, according to this spokesman of the Federal Vision, transfer of the merits of Christ is "not *exactly* what Paul means when he speaks of imputation" (emphasis, Lusk's; 125).

"Exactly" is a weasel-word, obscuring for the moment Lusk's intention of denying altogether that imputation is the transfer of Christ's merits to the account of the believer. The next paragraph makes Lusk's intention clear, and develops the attack on imputation in the Reformers and in the creeds. Stating the Federal Vision's view of imputation, Lusk declares: "Imputation does not describe a *transfer* of righteousness from Christ's account to ours; rather it is how God "*reckons* us, or *considers* us, in union with Christ" (emphasis, Lusk's; 126). Imputation is no longer "not exactly" transfer; it is not the transfer of merits at all.

But the development of his criticism of the Reformation's doctrine of imputation by the

theologian of the Federal Vision is by no means finished. A footnote informs us that the "'transfer' doctrine of imputation...ends up distorting Paul's meaning" (126).

From "not exactly" we have moved to distortion, in one paragraph.

But even this—the charge of distortion—is not enough to root out and destroy the Reformation's doctrine of imputation. A page later, Lusk unlimbers the heavy artillery. The doctrine of imputation is nonsense: "To take 'imputation' [in Romans 4:3, 5] in the sense of a 'transfer' makes no sense here" (127).

Lusk concludes that "it is *impossible* for imputation language to describe a transfer [in Romans 4:6-8]" (emphasis, Lusk's; 128). Indeed, "there is *no text* in Scripture where imputation language is used to describe a transfer of Christ's righteousness from his account to ours" (emphasis, Lusk's; 131).

From "not exactly," Lusk has developed his attack on imputation (as the divine, legal transfer of righteousness from Christ to the believer) to "impossible" and "there is no text," in the short space of fewer than eight pages.

And still this champion of the Federal Vision is not satisfied. There is something in the Reformation's doctrine of imputation that drives him to a frenzy. He must needs ridicule the doctrine: "Our righteous status is not a matter of God doing mental tricks or shuffling righteousness around heavenly ledgers; it is a matter of our concrete, personal relationship with Christ himself" (132).

Lusk may fend for himself on that awful day.

As for me, my one, urgent plea to Christ the judge at the final judgment will be, "Your honor, I plead that You 'shuffle righteousness around heavenly ledgers.' 'Shuffle' Your perfect righteousness to my account, even as in the lifelong obedience of Your earthly ministry, and especially in Your atoning death, God 'shuffled' my unrighteousness to Your account." In Christ's favorable, gracious answer to this plea will lie my eternal salvation.

### **Conditional Covenant**

Although the book mainly defends the Federal Vision's doctrine of justification by the good works of believers, it acknowledges that the root of the Federal Vision's doctrine of justification

is the doctrine of a conditional covenant. Lusk mentions "covenantal conditionality" as one of the doctrines that are "central" to the Federal Vision. Immediately, he notes that the implication of the Federal Vision's doctrine of a conditional covenant is "the possibility of apostasy," as indeed it is (110). Nor are the men of the Federal Vision at all hesitant to draw the implication, regardless of the fifth head of doctrine of the Canons of Dordt. True faith can "die," so that real, spiritual union with Christ is "lost," and, with it, the "corresponding benefits," including the grace of justification (154).

That this terrifying doctrine is the Arminian heresy of the falling away of saints with particular application to salvation in the covenant, condemned, refuted, and rejected by the fifth head of doctrine of the Canons of Dordt, Lusk ignores.

Sandlin, likewise, appeals to the conditionality of the covenant as the basis of the Federal Vision doctrine of justification.

The Bible emphatically teaches that man stands under obligation to meet certain conditions if he is to be saved

by grace and if he is to be justified in the Final Day.... Three obligations stand out clearly as conditions for man's salvation—faith, repentance, and submission to the Lordship of Jesus (206).

In Romans 3 and 4, according to the Federal Vision, Paul is not contrasting faith with *all* human works as the means of justification and salvation. "Rather, he is arguing that circumcision is a specious condition of justification while faith is a valid condition. Faith itself, like works, is a law, but it is not a law in which man may boast (Rom. 3:27-28)" (207). That is, the activity of believing is a human work obtaining righteousness for the hard-working sinner, and a work of the sinner upon which justification and salvation depend. In the face of Paul's rejection of all law-keeping as the way, or the least part of the way, of justification, Sandlin has the audacity to make "faith...a law." By faith *as law*, sinners are justified.

Conditions!

A conditional covenant!

This is the root of the heresy of the Federal Vision.

And this root, the faculty of Westminster Seminary in Cali-

fornia resolutely refused to take hold of in their defense of justification by faith alone, to which *A Faith That Is Never Alone* is the Federal Vision response. On the contrary, the faculty of Westminster California are as committed to the doctrine of a conditional covenant—the covenant doctrine of Schilder and the "liberated" Churches, Pieters and Kreulen, and James Arminius—as are the men of the Federal Vision. Their conception of the origin of the covenant of grace in eternity (in the book to which *A Faith That Is Never Alone* is the response, *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry*) is that of a business-like contract between the first and second persons of the Trinity, bristling with conditions. On their view, the covenant of God with Adam in Paradise was a conditional agreement—bargain, really—by which Adam conceivably could have "merited" (their term) for the entire human race the higher, better, heavenly, eternal life (by his work of not eating a piece of fruit) that the Son of God in human flesh created and merited only for some by incarnation, lifelong obedience and suffering, and atoning death.

And the Westminster men

are enthusiastic proponents of the conditionality of the covenant of God with His people in Christ. Writing the vitally important chapter, “Which Covenant Theology?” Michael S. Horton affirms “the obvious conditionality” of the covenant in Scripture.

Mainstream Reformed theology...has never said that there are no conditions in the covenant—or even in justification. Rather, it argued that the condition of justification is faith and that the conditions of salvation as a whole process are many: lifelong repentance and faith, sanctification, and glorification.

Horton supposes that he rescues grace from this mess of workspottage by declaring that “these conditions are fulfilled by the gifts that come to us through union with Christ” (*Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry*, 217). To a man, the advocates of the Federal Vision would express agreement with this assertion, namely, that the conditions of the covenant in some sense or other are fulfilled with the help of grace.

James Arminius taught the same. In his recent study of the theology of Arminius, Dutch

Reformed scholar William den Boer treats Arminius’ doctrine that “faith is not an effect of election, but a necessary condition foreseen by God in those who will be elected.” den Boer then notes that “Arminius reproaches his opponents for representing his notion of conditionality in a hateful (*odiosus*) way. They do this by passing in silence over on the role of God, from whose goodness and gift also Arminius admits that faith derives. Faith is indeed a condition, but it is an *evangelical condition*; that is, *God in his grace ensures that this condition is fulfilled*” (William den Boer, *God’s Twofold Love: The Theology of Jacob Arminius [1559-1609]*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010; latter emphasis added).

Indeed, Rome would not disagree. With regard to the whole of its doctrine of salvation, which is conditional from beginning to end, Rome loudly declares (especially when confronted by a defender of salvation by grace alone) that it is impossible for man to fulfill the conditions apart from the help of grace.

Is Horton ignorant, that down the ages to this very day there has been a powerful stream in the Reformed tradition confess-

ing an unconditional covenant, a stream opposing the doctrine of a conditional covenant, indeed a stream that claims to be the “mainstream”? Why does he not even mention this?

Is Horton ignorant, that in flat contradiction of his description of faith as the “condition” of justification and salvation the Canons of Dordt expressly deny that faith is a “condition” of election, affirming thereby that all of salvation, which has its source in election as the “fountain,” is unconditional (Canons of Dordt, I/9)?

Is Horton ignorant, that *in the context of the “new covenant of grace”* the same Canons of Dordt expressly deny that faith is a “condition” (Canons of Dordt, II, Rejection of Errors/2-4)?

No doubt, the oneness of the Westminster men with the men of the Federal Vision regarding a conditional covenant—the root of the Federal Vision’s doctrine of justification by works—explains an omission in the Westminster men’s defense of justification against the Federal Vision, an omission so glaring that R. Scott Clark is forced to acknowledge it at the beginning of *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry*. “No essay touches directly the

question of the relation between covenant and election” (23). This is telling, and astounding. For the relation of election and covenant is fundamental to the heresy of the Federal Vision, as it is fundamental to the controversy between the doctrine of an unconditional covenant and the doctrine of a conditional covenant.

Failure to criticize the Federal Vision’s covenant doctrine is one reason why the defense of justification by faith alone against the Federal Vision by the Westminster men is weak and ineffective.

### Scholarly Debate

The other reason is the nature of the defense. *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry* is a learned, scholarly debate by well-read men, who can produce a plethora of sometimes prodigious and often arcane footnotes referencing every authority under heaven, with other learned scholars, who are themselves no slouches when it comes to footnotes. The tone of the high-level, amicable discussion is set at the outset by R. Scott Clark: “We offer these essays with the thought that some readers might find also that that Calvinism is not dead, but offers a vital and persuasive



alternative to some of the views offered at present” (24).

That is, the gospel of salvation by sovereign grace is not dead. We are happy to hear it. Therefore, the gospel of salvation by sovereign grace (Calvinism), particularly justification by faith alone, is, in this book, kindly, gently, and, no doubt, well-meaningly offered as an alternative to the teaching on justification by Rome, Arminius, Richard Baxter, Newman’s Oxford Movement, the New Perspective on Paul, and, especially, the Federal Vision. Take your pick.

There is nothing of the zeal of Luther for grace, and against works, expressed by his declaration that the doctrine of justification by faith alone is the mark of a standing or falling church.

There is not the urgency of Calvin’s recognition that justification by faith alone is the hinge on which all religion turns.

The title of the book notwithstanding, there is not even the deep, passionate concern for the people of God—believers and their children—that reacts vehemently against a corruption of the gospel that robs them of assurance of salvation (all can lose faith and perish) and that places them be-

fore the judge on the world’s last day depending for justification and eternal salvation on their own imperfectly good works, rather than upon the perfect obedience of Christ in their stead.

Oddly lacking is the holy anger, and fearsome anathema, of Paul against every teacher, whether theologian, movement, or church, or indeed angel from heaven, that teaches contrary to the apostle’s gospel, particularly as taught in Galatians. I say “oddly,” because the anathema, the divine curse, of Galatians 1:6-9, is precisely directed against the perversion of justification by faith alone, apart from all works of obedience to the law of God—exactly the perversion of justification now being spread in conservative Reformed Christianity by the New Perspective on Paul and by their allies, the men of the Federal Vision.

That the Federal Vision takes dead aim at the gospel of sovereign, particular grace confessed by (mainstream) Reformed theology in the Canons of Dordt, Rich Lusk plainly indicates: “The ‘five points’ [of Calvinism] are schematized and tend to be artificial, as [they are] based on a systematic rather than a biblical theology” (391). So much for Dordt! So



much for the “five points”! So much for the gospel of sovereign grace!

### Storming the Redoubt

The chief weapon in the arsenal of the men of the Federal Vision for promoting their doctrine of justification is the theological proposition, “justification is by a working faith.” This proposition is also the redoubt in which they take refuge when their doctrine of justification is criticized by adversaries.

With this proposition, Norman Shepherd and his powerful allies on the faculty of Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia effectively spread their gospel of justification by works among countless thousands through the pastors and missionaries whom they trained. By this proposition, Shepherd kept his critics at bay for some seven years at Westminster.

This proposition is both the engine of offense and the fortress of defense for the men of the Federal Vision in the book, *A Faith That Is Never Alone*. A faith that is never alone is a faith that is always working. This is the faith by which the sinner must be justified: a working faith.

What the men of the Federal Vision mean by the proposition is that faith *works* for justification, that justification is by both faith and the works of a working faith, that is, that justification is by faith and works.

They bamboozle their would-be critics by a clever turn of phrase that might be interpreted as meaning that the faith that justifies by itself alone, apart from works, also always works.

The offensive weapon must be broken.

The redoubt must be stormed and demolished.

This does not take seven years.

It takes about five minutes.

Justification is not by a working faith! Justification, rather, is by a faith that does not work! Faith works, except in one supremely important arena and in one crucial situation: the judgment of the believing sinner by God. Then and there—in the matter of justification—faith absolutely refuses to work, refuses to work so much as one faint sigh of sorrow over sin. Justification is by a non-working and (with reference to Rome’s slightly different phrasing of the proposition) non-loving faith.

This is the teaching of Romans 4:5: “But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” The justified sinner is the one, and only the one, who, in the matter of his justification, does not work. He does not work the ceremonies of the Old Testament. He does not work the Old Testament *Torah* (law) as a barrier to the inclusion of Gentiles into the New Testament church. He does not work obedience to the ten commandments of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. He does not work the *works of faith* for justification.

Why should he? Jesus Christ has worked all the works in his stead and for him that God demands for his justification.

How dare he? Does not the Holy Spirit charge those who work for justification with “going about to establish their own righteousness” and with refusing to submit themselves “to the righteousness of God”? (Rom. 10:3)

“Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” (Rom. 10:4). Faith confidently rests on the work of Christ. Nor is this resting a subtle form of working—the work of not working. Resting is quitting working.

The faith that justifies, that is,

the faith that is the instrument of receiving the verdict “Not guilty!” is a knowing and trusting in Jesus Christ that shows up in the divine courtroom as the faith of an ungodly man—a man utterly devoid of any work of godliness (in the matter of justification), a man whose best good works are all polluted with sin and, therefore, ungodly (in the matter of justification), and a man with a totally depraved, ungodly nature, prone to the ungodly works of hating God and the neighbor.

#### **Advice with Teeth**

Here, therefore, is advice to the Reformed community of churches, friendly enough on the part of the one who gives it, but with the teeth of the epistle to the Galatians, including the anathema of Galatians 1.

Whenever a professor, minister, or ruling elder, though he be regarded in the congregation or seminary as an angel from heaven, teaches justification by a working faith, whether justification in the present or final justification in the future, admonish him for the Galatian heresy. If he refuses to repent, depose and excommunicate him for the God-dishonoring, soul-destroying

heresy of justification by works.  
 Make the ground this: he  
 teaches "justification by a work-

ing faith," a faith that is not  
 alone.




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***Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought***, by David VanDrunen. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. Pp. x+466. \$35 (paper). [Reviewed by David Engelsma.]

*Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms* engages, once again, in the never-ending quest by Reformed theologians for the answer to the questions, how does the church relate to the ungodly world, and what are the ground, motivation, nature, and guide of the Reformed believer's life in a society dominated by unbelievers, including the believer's use and enjoyment of the cultural products of the ungodly. Of particular concern is the right relation between the church and the state. The issue that the book addresses is that of Augustine's *City of God*; Kuyper's *De Gemeene Gratie* (English translation: *Common Grace*) and *Lectures on Calvinism*; and Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*.

It is the issue resolved in the Protestant Reformed Churches' clearly articulated and widely known position, expressed in

many writings, that the church and the Christian are in the world, but not of the world (John 17:14-16). Though fully and actively in the world, in every sphere and ordinance of creation, esteeming every creature of God as good, and nothing to be refused when received with thanksgiving (I Tim. 4:4), the Reformed Christian is spiritually separated from the world and hostile to it (as the world is hostile to the church and Christian, just as it was hostile to Jesus Christ). The reality of a common providence (not grace) enables the Christian to live peacefully and cooperate with unbelievers in everyday, earthly life—in matters of neighborhood safety; of business and labor; and of the order and security of the state. "[Do not] company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous,

or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world” (I Cor. 5:9, 10).

“This book is very much concerned with how ecclesiastical society and culture relates to the society and culture of the world more broadly.”

The latest Reformed theologian to take up the quest is a professor of theology at Westminster Seminary in California.

### **The Two Kingdoms Tradition**

The book is a learned, thoroughly researched, informative, worthwhile, well-written, and interesting study of the history of one answer to these questions about the church and Christian in the world in the Reformed tradition: natural law and the two kingdoms. By natural law is meant God’s inscription of his “moral law on the heart of every person, such that through the testimony of conscience all human beings have knowledge of their basic moral obligations and, in particular, have a universally accessible standard for the development of civil law.”

The doctrine of two kingdoms teaches that God governs the church and its activities, on the one hand, and the world of

ungodly men and their activities, including especially the state, on the other hand, in two different ways. The church, which is the spiritual kingdom, God rules as “redeemer in Jesus Christ.” The world of ungodly men, He rules “as creator and sustainer.” Another way of expressing the reality of two kingdoms is that Jesus Christ rules both kingdoms, but in different capacities. He rules the church as the Christ; He rules the ungodly world as the eternal Son of God.

VanDrunen contends that, until recently, the Reformed tradition has held that Christians live, and ought to live, in the various spheres of earthly life—life outside the church—including civil government, without any redemptive motive. They honor the distinction between the two kingdoms. Their purpose in the spheres of creation and with regard to cultural activities is only temporal.

### **Neo-Calvinism’s One (Transformative) Kingdom**

Of late, however, neo-Calvinists, including such familiar names as Henry Stob, Cornelius Plantinga, Albert Wolters, and Richard Mouw, urge that

there is only one kingdom—the redemptive kingdom of Jesus the Christ—and that Reformed Christians exert themselves to transform all of earthly life and every sphere of earthly life into the kingdom of Jesus Christ. For neo-Calvinism, “the foundation for cultural activity is not so much the creation order as it is being *preserved* as it is God’s redeeming the creation order and moving it toward its eschatological goal of a new heaven and new earth.” The vision of neo-Calvinism is fundamentally postmillennial. It speaks of the “Christianizing” of culture, of society, of the nation, of the world.

The theologian responsible for this shift in Reformed thinking was Abraham Kuyper. His disciple, Herman Dooyeweerd, developed Kuyper’s theology of the kingdom of Christ as a culture-redeeming and world-transforming power. The name of this theology of the kingdom of Christ is “Reformational.”

VanDrunen is skeptical of the “contemporary Reformed one-kingdom view in which the redemptive kingdom of Christ embraces all areas of life.” This was not the view of Calvin. Nor was it the view of other

“eminent thinkers and confessional documents of Reformed orthodoxy.”

VanDrunen is not so much critical of this world-transforming collapse of the two kingdoms into the one kingdom of Christ (*in history*) as he is eager to propose the traditional view of the two kingdoms as a better alternative. This is a serious fault of the book.

A Reformed critique in the twenty-first century of the ambitious project of neo-Calvinism must point out that Kuyper’s and his contemporary disciples’ redemptive and transformative efforts have resulted in a kingdom of Christ that shows all the features of Augustine’s city of this world. It approves and adopts every unbiblical, ungodly doctrine and practice that the world of unbelievers comes up with in opposition to the Christ of Scripture: an evolutionary explanation of origins; criticism of Holy Scripture, particularly in the dismissal of Genesis 1-11 as “myth”; tolerance as a supreme virtue, manifested in ecumenicity without regard for sound doctrine and even a positive estimation of non-Christian religions; the welfare, socialist, omnipresent, omni-intrusive, omni-competent,

and omnipotent State—antichrist; feminism, that denies the authoritative headship of the husband in marriage and that puts females on the pulpit, in the consistory room, and at synod; divorce for any reason and the subsequent remarriage, involving the utter destruction of the family; sodomy and lesbianism; the enthusiastic enjoyment of corrupt cultural products and depraved activities, for example, social dancing, the vilest and most violent movies, and rock music.

Lo, such a church, such a Christian college, such Christian ways of life are the world-redeeming, world-transforming kingdom of Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century! Lo, here is Christ!

The program of “Christianizing” culture, nations, and the world by common grace has been a colossal, disastrous failure. Why will not the twenty-first century Reformed scholars who revisit the great matter of the relation of church and Christian to the world recognize this? Are they not aware of the Free University, the now dead and defunct Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (*GKN*)—the churches of Kuyper’s *Doleantie*—and the quite un-redeemed and un-transformed city

of Amsterdam? Do they not know the spiritual condition of Calvin College, the Christian Reformed Church—the denomination that adopted Kuyper’s grandiose common grace project with both hands and deposed ministers and elders who pleaded for the antithesis—and the quite un-redeemed and un-transformed city of Grand Rapids?

The movement to transform the world of the ungodly proceeds on the basis of a rejection of the antithesis. And rejection of the antithesis has one result, and one result only and always: the transformation of the church into the kingdom of this world, upon which the wrath of God is now being poured out.

### **Critique of VanDrunen**

The author’s own, positive answer to the questions treated in the book is a very general and very brief call to reconsider the tradition of natural law and the two kingdoms.

This is far too vague a resolution of the vitally important, practical issue of the relation of church and world and of Christian and culture.

VanDrunen does promise a more detailed and full account

of his own contribution to the attempt “to define a biblically faithful, theologically rich, and practically effective approach to Christian involvement in the broader culture.” This is certainly necessary.

But already he has said enough to warrant some critique of his position.

First, Jesus the Christ, the Son of God *in human nature*, the man risen from the dead, is lord over all the creation, over all history, over all nations, over all states, and over all earthly spheres and ordinances. This is the truth of His resurrection, ascension, and sitting at the right hand of God. “[God] hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:22). Revelation 5 teaches that the “Lamb that was slain” now holds and opens the book of the counsel of God concerning all things that take place in New Testament history, including the rise and fall of the Roman empire, the godless world-power that typifies the kingdom of Antichrist. “Angels and authorities and powers” are already “subject unto [the risen and ascended Jesus Christ, sitting on the right hand of God]” (I Pet. 3:22).

It is not the case that Jesus rules the church as the Christ, but the world of creation, history, nations, and earthly life only as the eternal Son of God. Jesus the Christ, the man exalted in the resurrection, rules all things in two different ways. His spiritual kingdom—institutionally the church, the heart of every elect believer, and the Christian life of His citizens in every sphere and ordinance of earthly life—He rules by the grace of His Holy Spirit. The ungodly and their culture, including the state, He rules by the power of divine providence.

Nor does He rule the two kingdoms in these different ways in order that the kingdom of this world may accomplish some positive goal or other independent of Himself as the Christ and independent of the spiritual kingdom of church and elect believers. Colossians 1:13ff. teaches that God has ordained “all things” for Jesus Christ, the “dear Son” of God, “in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13, 14). “All things were created... for him...that in all things he might have the preeminence” (Col. 1:16, 18). The purpose and effect of Jesus’ rule of creation,

history, and nations are that “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

Second, VanDrunen’s acceptance of common grace, seemingly without much enthusiasm (to his credit), as the source and power of the Christian’s life in the world, outside the church, as also the source and power of the life of the unbeliever, is fatal to the antithesis. Christian and non-Christian live together and work together in the close, friendly “commonality” of a shared grace of God. From this conviction of cooperation in earthly life by a shared grace of God *must* arise the dream of building together the kingdom of God. The theory of a common grace of God as the explanation of the relation of church and world and of Christian and culture has brought Kuyper’s common grace disciples to the disgraceful world-conformity they all exhibit, defend, and even promote. If VanDrunen and his cohorts in the United Reformed Churches and at Westminster Seminary in California have not learned from this history, they are doomed to repeat it.

Third, although there is “natu-

ral law,” according to Romans 1 and 2 and other places in Scripture, natural law cannot be the basis of the Christian’s life in society, with regard to the spheres and ordinances of human life on earth. Canons, III, IV/4 confesses what VanDrunen has in mind with natural law and the related reality of conscience in humans.

There remain, however, in man since the fall the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment.

However, just as (fictitious) common grace is not the power of the believer’s life, anywhere, or ever, so also the reality of natural law is not, and may not be, the guide of the believer’s life in the world.

The Christian lives in marriage, the family, labor, education, the civil state, and recreation out of the new life of Christ, that is, by the power of the “special,” “saving” grace (to be redundant) of Christ. United to the risen



Christ, alive with the mighty, sin-overcoming, world-conquering, devil-defeating, death-defying, eternal life of Christ, filled with the Spirit of Christ, a new creature in Christ, the elect believer can no more live part of his life (and a significant part, at that: *all of earthly life in all the spheres and ordinances!*) by a pitifully weak and inferior “common grace” than a vibrant, gifted human can live part of his life by the instinct and energy of a worm.

And the believer lives in all the spheres of earthly life according to the revealed law of God in Holy Scripture. The ten commandments, with their further, detailed explication and application in the exhortations and admonitions in the New Testament, are the clear, sure rule, or guide—the *only* clear, sure guide—of the Christian life in the world. The Christian subjects himself everywhere and always to the lordship of Christ, whose he is body and soul.

Fourth, in the year of our Lord 2011 Reformed Christians can have little confidence that the ungodly will reckon with the natural law in things natural and civil. The enlightened, educated West cannot even distinguish the

physical difference between a male and a female and therein the will of God in nature itself that the male satisfies the sexual desire with a female, and the female, with a male (in marriage). Nor do the scourges of God upon the willful blindness of the West with regard to this fundamental natural law, consisting of AIDS and other shameful, painful, devastating, enormously costly sexual diseases, teach the West any wisdom concerning natural law.

VanDrunen is too optimistic about the positive functioning of natural law. Perhaps this is due in part to his consistent rendering of Romans 2:15 as though it read that the *law* is written in the hearts of the unregenerated heathens (whether in Africa or in New York City). The law is written in the hearts only of the born again children of God. This produces good understanding of the will of God, and obedience. What is written in the hearts of unbelievers is “the *work* of the law.” The work of the law is some knowledge, however obscure and confused, of the difference between right and wrong. The work of the law produces no love of the law, no desire to obey the law, and no ability to keep the law. On the contrary, as Romans

2:15 adds, the effect of the work of the law is a bad conscience, manifesting itself in accusing or excusing one another. The effect is not the doing of the law.

Natural law is not grace.

VanDrunen must take into account the latter half of Canons, III/IV.4, concerning natural law and conscience:

But so far is this light of nature from being sufficient to bring him [fallen, unregenerated man] to a saving knowledge

of God and to true conversion, *that he is incapable of using it aright even in things natural and civil. Nay further, this light, such as it is* [implying that it is not much after the fall—DJE], *man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God* (emphasis added).

We anticipate the volume that will follow. ■

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# **1611-2011**

## **Celebrating the 400th Anniversary of the KJV**

Friday, September 16, 2011

7:30 P.M.

***The Origin and History of the KJV***

Professor R. Dykstra

Saturday, September 17, 2011

9:00 A.M.

***A Critical Assessment  
of Some Recent Bible Translations***

Professor B. Gritters

Saturday, September 17, 2011

11:00 A.M.

***The Usefulness of the KJV for the  
Life and Worship of the Church  
in the Twenty-first Century***

Professor R. Cammenga

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