

Protestant *Reformed* Theological *Journal*

in this issue:

<i>Editor's Notes</i>	1
<i>The Homiletical Use of the Heidelberg Catechism: An Examination of the Practice of Systematic Preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism in the Dutch Reformed Tradition</i>	2
<i>Ronald L. Cammenga</i>	
<i>John Calvin's Integrated Covenant Theology (2)</i>	29
<i>Angus Stewart</i>	
<i>The State of the Reformed Faith in Germany, and What Our Church (the Confessing Evangelical Reformed Church) Stands For</i>	43
<i>Jürgen-Burkhard Klautke</i>	
<i>The Notion of Preparatory Grace in the Puritans</i>	58
<i>Martyn McGeown</i>	
<i>Book Reviews</i>	85

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Book Reviews

- 85 Barnes, Peter. *Galatians*
- 86 Blei, Karel. *The Netherlands Reformed Church: 1571-2005*
- 92 Currid, John D. *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*
- 95 DeJong, James. *Henry J. Kuiper: Shaping the Christian Reformed Church, 1907-1962*
- 98 deReuver, Arie. *Sweet Communion: Trajectories of Spirituality from the Middle Ages through the Further Reformation*
- 101 George, Timothy. *God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice*
- 104 Johnson, Gary. *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*
- 110 Lamb, Warren. *Faithful Journey*
- 112 McGowan, A.T.B. *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*
- 116 Oliphint, K. Scott. *Justified in Christ: God's Plan for Us in Justification*
- 122 Vennema, Cornelis. *Heinrich Bullinger and the Doctrine of Predestination: Author of "the Other Reformed Tradition"?*

Editor's Notes

You have in hand the November 2007 issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*. We hope and expect that you will profit from its contents, both the feature articles and the book reviews.

In this issue, the Rev. Angus Stewart continues his treatment of “John Calvin’s Integrated Covenant Theology.” Rev. Stewart indicates the contours of Calvin’s covenant theology and his impact on the future development of the doctrine of the covenant in the Reformed churches. We look forward to additional articles in this series in the future.

We welcome to the pages of PRTJ, Prof. Jürgen-Burkhard Klautke. Prof. Klautke teaches at the Seminary for Reformation Theology in Giessen, Germany. He is also an elder in the *Bekennende Evangelisch-Reformierte Gemeinde* (BERG) in Giessen. In March of 2006, Dr. Klautke spoke to the faculty and student body of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary on the topic, “The State of the Reformed Faith in Germany.” Dr. Klautke has kindly consented to our request to print his speech. His speech was informative, detailing the apostasy of the churches in Germany and the great struggles facing those who continue to hold dear the precious truths of the Reformed faith. In many ways, of course, those struggles are the struggles of every true church of Jesus Christ wherever such churches are to be found.

This issue of PRTJ also features an article by Mr. Martyn McGeown. Martyn is a second-year student at the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary. He is a member of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church of Northern Ireland. His article was initially a paper that he prepared for a Dogmatics course in the seminary. Martyn offers a critical analysis of the notion of preparatory grace in the teaching of the Puritans. In various Reformed and Presbyterian circles where there is a high regard for the Puritans, this same view of Preparationism is embraced, accompanied often also by a faulty view of conversion and the assurance (or lack thereof) of salvation.

The undersigned contributes an article on the homiletical use of the Heidelberg Catechism in the Dutch Reformed tradition. For generations, Reformed Christians, especially those of Dutch extraction, have grown up with regular Heidelberg Catechism preaching. The history of the practice, the controversy over the practice, objections to the practice, and the benefits of systematic Heidelberg Catechism preaching are treated.

It is our prayer that our readers will be informed, enriched, and edified by the contents of this issue of our *Journal*. Additionally it is our prayer that God will be glorified by what is written and what is read.

Soli Deo Gloria!

— RLC

The Homiletical Use of the Heidelberg Catechism: An Examination of the Practice of Systematic Preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism in the Dutch Reformed Tradition

by Ronald Cammenga

The Origins of the Practice of Heidelberg Catechism Preaching

The Heidelberg Catechism has not only been subscribed to but also preached in Reformed churches the world over almost from the time of its first publication in 1563. Besides serving as a confession and as an instructional tool for the youth—one of its main purposes, as stated by Frederick III in his preface to the Catechism—it also very soon became the text of sermons. That practice has continued down to the present. Sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism have been a regular part of the spiritual diet of Reformed Christians for decades, even centuries, in Germany, the Netherlands, the United States, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and in many other places around the world. Generations of Reformed Christians have lived out their seventy or eighty years listening to forty or more Catechism sermons every year. In a number of Reformed denominations, nearly half of the sermons delivered by preachers are Catechism sermons.

The Heidelberg Catechism was first published in January of 1563. Accompanying the publication of the Catechism was a preface written by Frederick III. Not only does this preface introduce the new catechism, setting forth the reasons for its composition, but it also indicates that from the beginning Frederick envisioned

the preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism in the churches of his realm.

We do herewith affectionately admonish and enjoin upon every one of you, that you do, for the honour of God and our subjects, and also for the sake of your own soul's profit and welfare, thankfully accept this proffered Catechism or course of instruction, and that you do diligently and faithfully represent and explain the same according to its true import, to the youth in our schools and churches, *and also from the pulpit to the common people* [italics mine, RC], that you teach, and act, and live in accordance with it, in the assured hope, that if our youth in early life are earnestly instructed and educated in the word of God, it will please Almighty God also to grant reformation of public and private morals, and temporal and eternal welfare.¹

It was undoubtedly with a view to facilitating the preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism that its questions and answers were divided into fifty-two Lord's Days. This structuring of the Heidelberg Catechism took place late in 1563, the same year in which the Catechism first appeared in print. The third edition of the Heidelberg Catechism was included in the Church Order of the Palatinate, which the Elector Frederick issued on November 15, 1563. It was in this third edition that the Catechism was organized into fifty-two Lord's Days.²

Not only did Frederick's new Palatinate Church Order contain the fifty-two Lord's Days of the Heidelberg Catechism, but it also included a special prayer to be used by the ministers after the catechism sermon.³ This is significant. The incorporation of this

1. Fred H. Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism: Origin and History* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1995), p. 152.

2. Philip Schaff in his *The Creeds of Christendom*, I, pp. 536ff. suggests an early date for the division of the Heidelberg Catechism into Lord's Days. Schaff writes that this division occurred at least as early as 1566. In fact, the division into Lord's Days is even earlier—1563.

3. N.H. Gootjes, "Catechism Preaching (Part I)," in *Proceedings of The International Conference of Reformed Churches, September 1-9, 1993, Zwolle, The Netherlands* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1993), p. 138.

special prayer in the Church Order is a clear indication that the Heidelberg Catechism was being preached in Heidelberg in 1563. The inclusion of the prayer was also very likely intended to underscore the Elector's desire, as well as the desire of the leaders of the church, that the Heidelberg Catechism be preached in the cities and villages throughout the Palatinate.

That the Heidelberg Catechism was being preached already in 1563, at least in Heidelberg, is indicated in a letter written by Zacharias Ursinus, the main author of the Heidelberg Catechism. In the letter, written in 1563, Ursinus complains that the authorities have added to his already heavy workload the preaching of the Catechism at the Sunday afternoon worship service.⁴ This letter shows that the Heidelberg Catechism was being preached even before the publication of the Palatinate Church Order towards the end of 1563. Early on, the distinction appears to have been made between the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism in the home by Christian parents, the teaching of the Catechism in the schools by the schoolmasters, and catechism preaching as a part of the official worship of the Reformed congregation.

Catechism Preaching in the Dutch Reformed Tradition

Among the Dutch Reformed, Heidelberg Catechism preaching is a long-standing practice. The Heidelberg Catechism was translated into Dutch already in 1563. In that year, Peter Dathenus translated the third German edition into Dutch for use by the refugee congregation in Frankenthal. In 1566 this translation was included in the Dutch Psalm book. This was the beginning of the practice of printing the Heidelberg Catechism, along with the other major Reformed creeds, in the back of the Psalter. The first documented use of the Heidelberg Catechism for preaching among the Dutch Reformed is by Peter Gabriel, minister in Amsterdam, in

4. Gootjes refers to this letter as cited by W. Hollweg, *Neue Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Lehre des Heidelberger Katechismus* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961), p. 137.

1566.⁵ It seems apparent that Gabriel was not alone in the practice, but one of several Dutch Reformed ministers who had begun at that early date regularly to preach from the Heidelberg Catechism in their congregations.

Several synods of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands encouraged the Catechism's use in preaching before the Synod of The Hague, in 1586, made preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism mandatory. Already as early as 1574 a question was put to the Synod of Dordrecht regarding the advisability of Catechism preaching. The synod responded to the question as follows:

The answer to the question of Walcheren whether it would be good that good homilies based on the Catechism be made is as follows: This shall be left as it is [that is, optional, RC], but it would be good if the ministers in an orderly manner take turns in the classical meeting to explain in summary form a question or two from the Catechism and in this way teach and sensitize each other and also learn to explain the Catechism thoroughly to the congregation in an orderly and edifying manner.⁶

The Synod of Dordrecht, 1578, encouraged the preaching of a sermon based on the Heidelberg Catechism in the afternoon service after the administration of the Lord's Supper.⁷

The Synod of Middelburg, 1581, was asked to produce an exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism as an aid to ministers in preparing Catechism sermons.

5. Gootjes, "Catechism Preaching," p. 145. Confer also Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1941), p. 277. Wayne Brouwer, "Preaching the Heidelberg," in *Reformed Worship*, no. 26, Dec. 1992, p. 38.

6. Quotations of the decisions of the Dutch Reformed synods are taken from Richard R. De Ridder's translation of the *Ecclesiastical Manual*, by P. Biesterveld and H.H. Kuyper (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1982). This quotation is found on page 75.

7. Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual*, p. 93.

Question: Whether it would be good to make some explanations of the Catechism in the form of homilies or something similar for beginners? Answer: Jeremias Bastingius and the Classis of Walloon are considering this and, working on the Catechism of our churches, shall bring together and shall produce not homilies but exegesis which, having been examined by the Classis of Brabant and Walloon, shall be distributed.⁸

This same synod was asked about the advisability of continuing the regular exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism at the afternoon service following the administration of the Lord's Supper in the morning. The synod left to the discretion of each congregation whether the Catechism would be preached, or an applicatory sermon based on an appropriate text of Scripture.⁹ What is significant is that the question put to the synod presupposes that the custom in the congregations was the preaching of a Catechism sermon at the afternoon worship service.

It was the Synod of The Hague, 1586, that was the first Dutch Reformed synod to make Heidelberg Catechism preaching mandatory.

Ministers shall on each Lord's Day, generally, in the afternoon sermons, briefly explain the sum of Christian doctrine contained in the Catechism, which at present is accepted in the Netherlands churches, in such a way that it may be finished annually, following the division of the Catechism itself, made for that purpose.¹⁰

The Synod of Dordrecht, 1618-'19, after carefully examining the Heidelberg Catechism, opposed any changes in the Catechism, changes for which the Remonstrants had been agitating. In its 148th Session, May 1, 1619, the Great Synod passed a resolution affirming that the Heidelberg Catechism

8. Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual*, p. 130.

9. Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual*, p. 123.

10. Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual*, p. 151.

... formed altogether a most accurate compend of the orthodox Christian faith; being, with singular skill, not only adapted to the understanding of the young, but suited also for the advantageous instruction of older persons; so that it could continue to be taught with great edification in the Belgic churches, and ought by all means to be retained.¹¹

Out of this conviction, the Synod of Dordrecht reaffirmed the decision of the Synod of The Hague requiring weekly Heidelberg Catechism sermons.

Ministers shall on each Lord's Day, ordinarily in the afternoon sermons, briefly explain the sum of Christian doctrine contained in the Catechism which at present is accepted in the Netherlands Churches, in such a way that it may be finished annually, following the division of the Catechism itself made for that purpose.¹²

Controversy over Heidelberg Catechism Preaching

Although the Dutch Reformed churches have a unique tradition of Heidelberg Catechism preaching, there have been a number of controversies within these churches over the practice. When the practice was introduced, as might be expected, there was not an immediate universal acceptance of catechism preaching, or uniformity in making use of the Heidelberg Catechism in catechism preaching. After the Heidelberg Catechism made its appearance, some ministers still preferred to use other catechisms in their preaching, as for example, the Catechism of Geneva. The Synod of Emden, 1571, deemed it fitting that in the French-speaking congregations, the so-called Walloon churches, the Catechism of Geneva would be taught; whereas in the Dutch-speaking churches, instruction would be given in the Heidelberg Catechism. It further declared that "...if there are any other churches that use another form of catechism conformable to the Word of God, they shall not be forced to change."¹³ Over time the Heidelberg Cat-

11. Van Dellen and Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary*, p. 279.

12. Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual*, p. 172.

13. Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Ecclesiastical Manual*, p. 43.

echism supplanted the other catechisms that were used for preaching. The Heidelberg Catechism won the day largely because of its warm, personal character, as well as its superior organization. When the Synod of The Hague made Heidelberg Catechism preaching a requirement in 1586, it was only officially sanctioning a practice that was widespread in the Dutch churches.

But apart from this natural period of transition, there were significant controversies over the practice of Heidelberg Catechism preaching that played out in the history of the Dutch Reformed churches. These controversies over Catechism preaching often surfaced at times when larger, doctrinal issues were convulsing the churches. Time and again concerns over Catechism preaching were raised in connection with reformation and secession movements. Neglect of Catechism preaching was viewed as symptomatic of spiritual declension on the part of those who opposed liberalizing tendencies in the churches. And secessionists generally reaffirmed their commitment to maintain regular Heidelberg Catechism preaching.

The Remonstrants (Arminians) agitated against Heidelberg Catechism in the years leading up to the Synod of Dordrecht, 1618-'19. When the synod convened it responded to this opposition of the Remonstrants, as well as to the frequent neglect of attendance at the second Sunday worship service, the service at which ordinarily the Heidelberg Catechism was preached. Van Dellen and Monsma summarize the synod's decisions in five points:

1. It reiterated the decision of the Synod of 1586 [The Synod of the Hague, RC] regarding Catechism preaching. Ministers who should fail to do their duty in this respect would be censured. Catechism sermons should be brief and understandable to the common people.
2. No Minister should neglect to maintain this service because the attendance is small. Though only the Minister's own family should be in attendance, he should proceed. This would be a good example.
3. The government was to be asked to forbid all unnecessary Sunday labor, and especially sports, drinking parties, etc., so that people might learn to hallow the Sabbath day and come to Church regularly.
4. Every Church should have its own Minister as much as possible and unnecessary combinations of two or more Churches should be

severed, or else the Catechism sermons should be maintained at least every other Sunday afternoon.

5. Church Visitors were charged to take close note of this matter regarding every Church. Negligent, unwilling Ministers had to be reported to Classis for censure. Confessing members who refused to attend the catechism sermons seemingly had to be censured also.¹⁴

The Synod of Dordrecht resisted the opposition of the Remonstrants and reaffirmed the practice of regular, weekly Heidelberg Catechism preaching in Article 68 of the Church Order that it approved. Besides requiring subscription to the Heidelberg Catechism on the part of all officebearers, the ministers must preach from, and the elders must see to it that the ministers preach from, the Heidelberg Catechism.

Also at the time of the *Afscheiding* (Secession) of 1834 the preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism was a point of contention. Not only was there neglect of Catechism preaching in the State Reformed Church of the Netherlands (*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk-NHK*), but ministers and professors of theology publicly criticized the Heidelberg Catechism.¹⁵ One church historian writes:

In the early part of the nineteenth century the national church of the Netherlands was spiritually in a very sad condition. The cold winds of German rationalism and French scepticism had laid a blight upon its faith. Modernism was supreme in the universities, where ministers were trained, and in most of the pulpits. The doctrinal standards, namely, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort, were the official creeds of the church, but they were without effect, and not infrequently were denied and derided.¹⁶

14. Van Dellen and Monsma, *Church Order Commentary*, p. 279.

15. Peter Y. De Jong, "A Darkness Over the Land," in *The Reformation of 1834: Essays in Commemoration of the Act of Secession and Return*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong and Nelson D. Kloosterman (Orange City: Pluim Publishing, Inc., 1984), p. 18.

16. Albertus Pieters, "Historical Introduction," in *Classis Holland: Minutes 1848-1858*, transl. by a Joint Committee of the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), p. 7.

The churches of the Afscheiding, in the main, returned to the practice of regular Heidelberg Catechism preaching, eventually adopting the old Church Order of Dordrecht of 1619, which required this. However, some of the Afscheiding leaders, most notably H.P. Scholte, were not as committed to the practice as others, favoring freedom in preaching the Catechism, as well as other matters prescribed by the Church Order.¹⁷

In the history of the formation of the Christian Reformed Church, the issue of Heidelberg Catechism preaching also played a role. Already before joining the denomination that would come to be known as the Reformed Church in America (RCA), there were tensions over the preaching of the Catechism. At its meeting of April 25, 1849, Classis Holland responded to a number of questions raised in a letter addressed to the classis by a certain J. Van de Luister. Van de Luister's fifth question had to do with the manner in which the Ten Commandments were read in public worship, whether in reading the Law one must mention the number of the commandment being read. His sixth question had to do with the necessity of Heidelberg Catechism preaching. The classis chose to give a single answer to both of these questions.

Answer: Questions that do not edify or profit, but provoke dispute and strife, should be rejected, as Paul teaches, in Titus 3:9. So we also think that the content of these questions serves merely to promote formalism. The service of God, consisting in Spirit and Truth, is not bound up with such a thing as to say, when one reads the Law: 'The First Commandment,' etc. Neither is it dependent on the question whether the Catechism is preached in the church, or whether it is taught to the church in catechetical classes; or whether one preaches only on subjects freely chosen. We find no commandment in regard to these things in the word of God, and thus ministers cannot be bound in the points named, on the basis of the word.¹⁸

17. Lubbertus Oostendorp, *H.P. Scholte: Leader of the Secession of 1834 and Founder of Pella* (Franeker: T. Wever, 1964), pp. 125ff. Scholte was a steadfast opponent of adoption of the Dordt Church Order by the Afscheiding churches.

18. *Classis Holland: Minutes 1848-1858*, p. 31.

That there continued to be tension over the issue of Catechism preaching among the colonists in Holland is indicated by an entry in the classis' minutes of October 14, 1851. The minutes take note of an accusation by a certain J. Boes against Rev. Van Raalte for not preaching the Heidelberg Catechism. In his response, Rev. Van Raalte assured the classis that he had no objections against the Catechism, indeed, that he had a "special love for the truth in the Catechism," and promised to "take all possible means, in his work on Sunday afternoon, to make the Catechism intelligible to his hearers."¹⁹

The minutes of Classis Holland make clear that concerns over a lack of Heidelberg Catechism preaching caused a number of colonists to question the wisdom of union with the RCA. This was undoubtedly fueled by reports of a lack of Catechism preaching by immigrants who had lately arrived in the colony, having traveled through and worshiped in RCA congregations as they made their way to the Michigan frontier. Rumors circulated in the colony that in the churches in the east "The ministers do not preach from the Heidelberg Catechism."²⁰ D.H. Kromminga reports that at a meeting held in the schoolhouse in Vriesland in 1851, a certain T. Ulberg reported, among other things, that during his stay in the east there was no Heidelberg Catechism preaching in Rev. Wyckoff's church.²¹

This lack of Catechism preaching was soon documented in the classical record. The minutes of September 5, 1855 contain a report of the denominational synod meeting submitted by J. Van de Luister and Rev. C. Van der Meulen. The report took note of the fact that these delegates "...found deficiency in the regular preaching of the Catechism, and also some laxity in discipline" in

19. *Classis Holland: Minutes 1848-1858*, p. 61.

20. Marian M. Schoolland, *De Kolonie: The Church That God Transplanted* (Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1973-1974), p. 211.

21. D.H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Tradition: From the Reformation Till the Present* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943, repr. 1961), p. 107.

the RCA.²² At its meeting of April 3, 1856 Classis Holland drafted a letter to the RCA synod that affirmed the classis' love, respect, and joy over the denomination's adherence to Reformed doctrine, discipline, and worship, but at the same time offered an exhortation to a stricter practice of preaching the Heidelberg Catechism and conducting family visitation.²³ The same minutes record the reading of a certain mission tract, published by the Synod of the RCA for use in mission fields in which the denomination was unknown. Obviously this tract was read in order to allay rising fears among the colonists, and especially among certain officebearers.

This [tract, RC] was read in Dutch by Rev. Van Raalte, from the contents of which it appeared that the old formula of subscription for signing (the confession) had been retained, as also that ministers are under obligation to preach the catechism, etc., by which, accordingly, all feel entirely satisfied, excepting brother Haan....²⁴

Increasing dissatisfaction over union with the RCA finally led to the separation of 1857 and the establishment of the Christian Reformed Church. A number of factors motivated the colonists who seceded from the RCA. One of those factors was clearly a lack of committed Heidelberg Catechism preaching in the mother denomination. The consistory of the Graafschap congregation expressed this in its letter to Classis Holland, in which it served notice of its separation. The letter begins:

We are obliged to give you notice of our present ecclesiastical standpoint, namely, separating ourselves from your denomination, together with all Protestant denominations, with which we thoughtlessly became connected upon our arrival in America. We are uniting ourselves with the Afscheidene Gereformeerde Kerk in the Netherlands, and exhort you herewith affectionately to walk in the same way with us.²⁵

22. *Classis Holland: Minutes 1848-1858*, p. 179.

23. *Classis Holland: Minutes 1848-1858*, p. 202.

24. *Classis Holland: Minutes 1848-1858*, p. 206.

25. *Classis Holland: Minutes 1848-1858*, p. 241.

In the letter the consistory goes on to enumerate its reasons for secession. Listed as the third of the reasons is “Neglecting to preach the Catechism regularly, (to hold) catechetical classes, and (to do) house visitation.”²⁶ The newly formed denomination began with a definite commitment to regular Heidelberg Catechism preaching. Its secession was also a return. Among other things it was a return to the time-honored tradition of the Dutch Reformed churches, as prescribed by the Church Order of Dordrecht: weekly Heidelberg Catechism preaching.

Current Practice in Various Reformed Churches

A number of denominations of Dutch Reformed extraction still today follow the practice of regular preaching on the Lord’s Days of the Heidelberg Catechism. The practice is enshrined in the church orders of these denominations. More or less faithfully, the ministers in these denominations carry out the prescription of their respective church orders and preach on the sum of Christian doctrine contained in the Heidelberg Catechism.

Article 68 of the Church Order of the Netherlands Reformed Congregations reads:

The Ministers everywhere shall briefly explain on Sunday, ordinarily in the afternoon sermon, the sum of Christian doctrine comprehended in the Catechism which at present is accepted in the Netherland Churches, so that it may be completed every year in accordance with the division of the Catechism itself made for the purpose.²⁷

Similar is Article 68 in the Church Order of the Free Reformed Church of North America:

At one of the services each Lord’s Day, the minister shall ordi-

26. *Classis Holland: Minutes 1848-1858*, p. 242.

27. K. DeGier, *Explanation of the Church Order of Dordt in Questions and Answers* (Kalamazoo: Book and Publishing Committee of the Netherlands Reformed Congregations, 1974), p. 98.

narily preach the Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism, following its sequence.²⁸

In its revised Church Order, the regulations relating to Heidelberg Catechism preaching in the Canadian Reformed Churches are contained in Article 52:

The consistory shall call the congregation together for worship twice on the Lord's Day. The consistory shall ensure that, as a rule, once every Sunday the doctrine of God's Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism is proclaimed.²⁹

Also the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church in North America retains the requirement of regular preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism. Article 54b reads:

At one of the services each Lord's Day, the minister shall ordinarily preach the Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism, following its sequence.³⁰

The Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRC) is another denomination of churches committed to the practice of the regular exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism in the public worship services. Preaching the Heidelberg Catechism has been the practice of these churches from the time of their organization in the early 1920s. The practice is currently followed by all the ministers in all the congregations of the denomination. Article 68 of the Church Order of the PRC stipulates:

28. *Church Order of the Free Reformed Church of North America* (Vineland: Publications Committee of the Free Reformed Church of North America, 1985), p. 23.

29. W.W.J. Van Oene, *With Common Consent: A Practical Guide to the Use of the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches* (Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 1990), p. 246.

30. *Christian Reformed Church in North America: Church Order and Rules for Synodical Procedure* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1998), p. 16. This 1998 version of Article 54b is still in force in the CRC.

The ministers shall on Sunday explain briefly the sum of Christian doctrine comprehended in the Heidelberg Catechism, so that as much as possible the explanation shall be annually completed, according to the division of the catechism itself for that purpose.³¹

To ensure that the requirement of Church Order, Article 68 is being implemented, the classical church visitors are required to ask in their visit with the officebearers in each congregation: “Is the Heidelberg Catechism regularly explained in the services for divine worship, so that no doctrine is left untreated?” Other Reformed denominations have the same practice.

With a view to preparing men for the ministry, students in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary are required to prepare a number of sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism. One of the ten sermons preached for “Practice Preaching” in the course of the four-year seminary career is a sermon on an assigned Lord’s Day of the Heidelberg Catechism.³² In addition, of the *minimum* of nine sermons required during the six-month internship, senior seminarians are required to make at least three sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism.³³ These sermons are evaluated by the supervising pastor and the student’s faculty mentor. This serves as good and necessary preparation for a lifelong ministry in which fully one-half of the sermons the minister crafts will be Heidelberg Catechism sermons.

Various objections against Catechism Preaching

Over the years, numerous objections have been raised against preaching from creeds in general, and against Heidelberg Catechism preaching in particular. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was a very

31. *The Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grand Rapids: The Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2002), p. 27.

32. These sermons are preached before the faculty and student body, two faculty members and two students being assigned as critics of each sermon.

33. *Catalog of the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, 2005-2006), p. 13.

vocal critic of preaching from a creed. In his well-known volume on the art of preaching, *Preaching and Preachers*, Lloyd-Jones discouraged such preaching:

... on the whole I do not believe in preaching through a catechism. There are those for whom I have great respect who do this regularly; but I suggest that this is not a wise procedure....³⁴

One objection to catechism preaching that Lloyd-Jones offers is that, in his judgment, this type of preaching tends to foster a purely intellectual apprehension of the Christian faith. He objects to catechism preaching

... chiefly for the reason that it tends to produce a theoretical attitude to the Truth, an over-intellectual attitude to the Truth. It is not that I do not believe in teaching people the Catechism. I do. But my view is that this should be done at another time and in a different way. I would place this under the heading of instruction and deal with it in a series of lectures. But, still better, it seems to me, is to tell the people to read and study the Catechism for themselves and then consider it together in discussion groups.³⁵

What amounts to basically the same criticism raised by Lloyd-Jones is voiced by Donald Macleod in his contribution to the very worthwhile book *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century*. Macleod's opinion is that

... confessions and catechisms present doctrine abstracted from its existential context—the life-situation of Scripture—and thus obscure its practical relevance or tempt us not to apply it at all.³⁶

34. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, repr. 1975), p. 187.

35. Lloyd Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, p. 187.

36. Donald Macleod, "Preaching and Systematic Theology," in *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1986), p. 269.

Both Lloyd-Jones and Macleod are convinced that catechetical preaching promotes an intellectual and theoretical approach to the Christian life. In their view, it is virtually impossible in catechetical preaching to sound the warm and practical note of the gospel.

Besides this criticism, Lloyd-Jones raises a concern over catechetical preaching that it is too narrow in its focus. This narrowness of focus, in his judgment, is due to the fact that catechisms are not only incomplete in covering the expanse of biblical teaching, but also present their material with an emphasis derived from the time and circumstances out of which the catechism was written.

... these catechisms were produced by men and men who were concerned to emphasise (sic) certain things in their peculiar historical situation, over against certain things in their peculiar historical situation, over against certain teachings and attitudes. At their best, therefore, they tend to be incomplete, they tend to have a particular emphasis; and therefore they tend to leave out certain things.³⁷

Macleod expresses the same viewpoint. The minister ought not to preach from a creed, because “Even when creeds are inerrant (a claim that can be made for the Apostles Creed, for example), their proportion, balance, and selection of topics will not be that of Scripture.”³⁸

The Charge That Heidelberg Catechism Preaching Is Not the Preaching of the Word of God

Of all the objections raised against catechism preaching over the years, the most serious objection is that such preaching is not preaching of the Word of God. The other objections raise concerns, whether judged valid or not, over catechism preaching. This objection does more than raise a concern. It lodges a principle objection to the practice. The Reformed churches take this ob-

37. Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, p. 187.

38. Macleod, “Preaching and Systematic Theology,” p. 269.

jection seriously. For, if the objection is valid, the Reformed churches have been guilty of the most serious thing a church can be guilty of—not preaching the Word of God. Still more, they have been guilty of this grievous evil for over 400 years!

The Reformed have always denied this charge. And throughout their history they have always defended the practice of catechetical preaching, specifically the preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism. Their rejoinder has always been that preaching the Heidelberg Catechism *is* the preaching of the Word of God. They have insisted that sermons based on the Lord’s Days of the Heidelberg Catechism are as much the preaching of the Word of God as sermons based directly on a text of Scripture.

Lloyd-Jones raises this objection against the practice of catechetical preaching in *Preaching and Preachers*. He expresses the belief that “... the message should always arise out of the Scriptures directly and not out of the formulations of men, even the best men.” He goes on to say:

... it is surely *wrong* therefore to just preach constantly year after year on the Catechism, *instead of preaching the Word directly from the Scriptures itself*, with the Scriptures always open before you, and the minds of the people directed to that rather than to men’s understanding of it. [Italics mine, RC.]³⁹

This is Lloyd-Jones’ fundamental objection to the practice of catechetical preaching. In the end, such preaching is not the preaching of the Word of God. Lloyd-Jones’ position is that because the preacher does not have as his text a certain book, chapter, and verse(s) of the Bible, he cannot be preaching the Word of God. Preaching the Word of God, exegetical preaching—which to his credit is what Lloyd-Jones recommends—is accomplished only when a particular passage of Scripture is opened up in the sermon.

Macleod agrees with Lloyd-Jones. He raises the question,

39. Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, p. 188.

“Should we preach on catechisms or confessions as such?” His response is: “Our mandate is to preach the Word. To resort instead to expounding a human document is to confuse our people by blurring the distinction between what is normative revelation and what is to be judged by that revelation.”⁴⁰ Macleod’s position is clear. Preaching on a catechism is not preaching the Word, at least not what Paul had in mind when he said to Timothy, “Preach the word!” (II Tim. 4:2).

A somewhat surprising and refreshing response to the age-old accusation that preaching on creeds and catechisms is not the preaching of the Word of God is offered by Timothy George in a chapter entitled “Doctrinal Preaching,” in the *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*. He advises preachers:

Use confessions and catechisms to give a framework for doctrinal sermons. Some preachers, including even renowned evangelical ones, have been reluctant to follow this method. They prefer the sermon to arise directly from the Bible and not from human formulations, not even very good ones. However, it need not be either/or, after all, confessions and catechisms are derived from the Bible. They have no independent authority apart from the Bible, and they must always be tested by, and stand revisable in the light of the Bible. They are deeply anchored in the history of particular faith communities and can be a useful device for passing on the faith intact to the next generation.⁴¹

The Reformed have always rejected the charge that Heidelberg Catechism preaching is not the preaching of the Word of God. They have contended that, because its contents stand in full agreement with the Word of God—as every Reformed minister avows who signs the *Formula of Subscription*—and are an explanation of the Word of God, it can unhesitatingly be affirmed that Heidel-

40. Macleod, “Preaching and Systematic Theology,” p. 269.

41. Timothy George, “Doctrinal Preaching,” in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Duduit (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), p. 97.

berg Catechism preaching is preaching of the Word of God. Indeed, much of the Catechism is taken directly from the Scriptures: the articles of the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer, in particular. There are over 650 Scripture references throughout the 129 questions and answers of the Catechism. Copious Scripture references line the outside columns of each Lord's Day. The very purpose of the Heidelberg Catechism was that it should systematically set forth the fundamental doctrines of the Bible. All of Scripture has been consulted and its teaching on nearly every fundamental truth has been considered.

Defending Heidelberg Catechism preaching as the preaching of the Word of God, Van Dellen and Monsma write:

Sometimes it has been objected that Catechism preaching is the setting aside of the Word of God. It is claimed to be preaching of man's Word. This presentation is utterly false for every Lord's Day division of the Catechism is the summary of several Bible passages. Virtually therefore, the Minister who preaches on a certain Lord's Day division of the Catechism is preaching on several passages of God's Word.... When we preach a Catechism sermon, we are preaching the Word of God just as well as if we preach on a certain text or passage taken directly from the Bible. Only, in case of catechism preaching, one expounds and applies the Word of God according to a summary of that Word adopted by all the Churches and agreed to by all the members of our Churches.⁴²

Dr. P.Y. De Jong defends Catechism preaching as the preaching of the Word of God along the same lines:

No sermon—and on this all will have to agree—is simply a verbatim recitation of a large number of biblical texts. If this is what our Lord had wished, he would never have ordered his apostles to 'preach' and to 'teach.' Nor would he have said to them after speaking his parables, 'Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house

42. Van Dellen and Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary*, p. 277.

who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.’ In a similar vein Paul urged Timothy, ‘Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth,’ supplementing this with the command, ‘Preach the Word, be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage—with great patience and careful instructions.’ These and many other passages demonstrate that the gospel is to be explained and applied to those who hear.⁴³

The consensus of Reformed churches and Reformed believers is that Heidelberg Catechism preaching is the preaching of the Word of God. Out of this conviction the practice was introduced into the Reformed churches. Because of this conviction the practice has flourished in the Reformed churches for over 400 years.

Various Methods of Preaching the Heidelberg Catechism Proposed

An important question is how the Heidelberg Catechism should be preached—the method of Catechism preaching. Within the tradition of Heidelberg Catechism preaching, not all have been agreed on the proper method of catechetical preaching. Although they were united in promoting both the practice and benefits associated with the practice, there have been differences among Reformed churchmen in the method utilized in crafting sermons based on the Catechism.

This difference of viewpoint in regard to the manner in which the Heidelberg Catechism is preached was highlighted in the friendly exchange between Nelson Kloosterman and Randal Lankheet in the pages of *The Outlook* of January 1988. The exchange was occasioned by an article authored by Lankheet in the October 1987 issue of *The Outlook* entitled “Two Ways to Write a Catechism Sermon.” The two approaches to making Catechism sermons, the authors describe as the “catechism-text” and the “Scripture-text” methods. Lankheet favors the latter method:

43. P.Y. De Jong, “Comments On Catechetical Preaching,” in *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, vol. 2, number 2, Fall 1986, p. 159.

... in preparing a catechism sermon, the preacher first ought to locate a pertinent Bible text related to the particular catechism questions and answers for that week. He ought to study that Biblical text with all the tools at his disposal—lexicons, commentaries, sermonic helps, etc. From that study of the Biblical text, a sermon outline gradually will emerge. He then will incorporate the catechism materials into his sermon outline to explain the Bible text further or to assist in the application of that text to the faith and life of the church members. But the starting point and the outline of the sermon ought to rise from the Scripture text, not the catechism text.⁴⁴

Kloosterman takes issue with Lankheet's method of Catechism preaching and insists on the "catechism-text" method. He defends this method in light of the language of the Church Order, which requires that the minister shall preach "... the Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism."

... the content of the Catechism sermon is to be *the-Word-as-summarized-in-the-Heidelberg-Catechism*. That is to say: What is to be explained is the 'sum of Christian doctrine' confessed by the church in her Catechism.⁴⁵

Kloosterman goes on to fault Lankheet for presenting a false dichotomy between preaching Scripture and preaching the Heidelberg Catechism. Preaching the Catechism, according to Kloosterman, is the preaching of Scripture.

In an article entitled "Preaching the Heidelberg: A New Look at the Tradition of Catechetical Preaching," Wayne Brouwer identifies three main approaches to preaching the Heidelberg Catechism. He calls those three approaches: "1. Catechism as Homiletic Text, 2. Scriptural Exposition, and 3. Doctrinal-Topical."⁴⁶

44. Randal Lankheet, "Response to Rev. Kloosterman," in *The Outlook*, January 1988, p. 16.

45. Nelson Kloosterman, "Catechism Preaching: Assumptions and Methods in Catechism Preaching," in *The Outlook*, January 1988, p. 14.

46. Wayne Brouwer, "Preaching the Heidelberg: A New Look at the Tradition of Catechetical Preaching," in *Reformed Worship*, December 1992, pp. 38, 39.

According to the first method, the Catechism forms the text of the sermon. In the second method, “The preacher chooses a Scripture passage that seems to relate to many, if not most, of the theological propositions contained in a single Lord’s Day. He then prepares an expository sermon based upon that biblical text rather than directly upon the Catechism propositions themselves.”⁴⁷ Brouwer describes the “Doctrinal-Topical” method as follows:

The pastor extracts a single topic from the collection of ideas contained in a Lord’s Day and then designs a sermon that unfolds that topic in ways both relevant to the congregation and consistent with the theological heritage of the denomination. The sermon doesn’t pretend to be expository, though it may include the exegesis of one or more Scripture passages. Nor does it necessarily follow the Heidelberg Catechism’s development of a doctrinal statement. The primary emphasis is placed on sound homiletical development of the topic rather than on the exposition of either the Catechism text or the biblical text.⁴⁸

Although he observes that the latter two styles of catechetical preaching are more prevalent in Reformed churches today, he concedes that “... the Synod of Dordrecht clearly intended that the preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism should be in the form of didactic sermons explaining each of the theological propositions of a Lord’s Day in rote succession.”⁴⁹

The Proper Method of Preaching the Heidelberg Catechism

There can be no doubt that Brouwer is correct in his understanding of the intent of the Synod of Dordrecht. The language of the original Church Order, Article 68 is clear: “Ministers shall on each Lord’s Day ... briefly explain ... the Catechism....” The Catechism is to be explained. The Catechism is to be preached. The language of the Catechism is to be exegeted. Very really, the

47. Brouwer, “Preaching the Heidelberg,” p. 39.

48. Brouwer, “Preaching the Heidelberg,” p. 39.

49. Brouwer, “Preaching the Heidelberg,” p. 39.

particular Lord's Day or part of a Lord's Day is to be the "text" of the sermon. In his sermon the minister must deal with the word, phrases, sentences, and thoughts expressed in the Catechism.

In defense of this method of Catechetical preaching, J.J. Van Oosterzee writes:

By this we do not of course mean to say that every kind of preaching on the Catechism is desirable or useful. Everything here depends on the character of a preaching which has added to the history of Homiletics many a fair page, but also many a blurred and blotted one. One may preach on the Catechism merely for the pleasure of being able to contradict it; the moral dishonesty of this line of practice, however, where it extends to the essence of the Church's Confession, hardly needs pointing out. One may read out a section of the Catechism, and then proceed to preach wholly at large upon the subject embraced in this section, with the employment now and then of a word from the textbook; a compliance with the form, to the total perversion of the meaning of the requirement. One may also converse the Catechism, paraphrase it, dilute the precious wine of its teaching with copious draughts of water; a most effective way of sending the hearers to sleep, and attenuating still more the congregation usually present. One may, in the last place, fulfill in all conscientiousness the twofold requirement of delivering a discourse less oratorical, more didactic in its style, aiming most of all at the clearer presentation and confirmation of Christian knowledge; the contents, extent, and course of which are, so far as may be, determined by the nature of the subject and the peculiarity of the section now in its turn under review....⁵⁰

That it is the Catechism itself that ought to be preached is also the position taken by Homer C. Hoeksema. In a classroom syllabus entitled *Homiletics*, prepared for use in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, Hoeksema writes:

In view of the fact that increasingly this practice [of Heidelberg Catechism preaching, R.C.] is neglected in many churches, and in view of the fact that many ministers try in various ways to evade this duty, it is not amiss that we stress that the minister must preach on the

50. J.J. Van Oosterzee, *Practical Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878), p. 261.

Heidelberg Catechism itself, and must in his preaching expound the Catechism. He must not preach on a text from Scripture and merely refer to the Catechism in the course of his sermon. He must not merely preach on the truth on which the Catechism touches in a particular Lord's Day. But he must preach on the Catechism itself. He must read the Lord's Day as he reads his text before the sermon, and then he must proceed to preach a sermon on that Lord's Day. Anything less than this cannot properly be called Catechism preaching.⁵¹

Although the Catechism itself ought to be preached, this does not prohibit the judicious use of a text or passage of Scripture that supports the exposition of the Catechism. This certainly may and ought to be done. Concerning this, Hoeksema writes:

The minister must not forget to leave the impression with the congregation that even in Catechism preaching he administers the Word of God.... We make the point that this ought to be explicit in the preaching. It is a good custom, therefore, that at the beginning of the sermon the minister quotes a few pertinent texts and points the congregation to them as the basis of the instruction contained in the particular Lord's Day on which he is preaching. And while it is not always equally possible to be explicit on this in the course of one's sermon, the minister should certainly let his sermon as much as possible be controlled by the Scriptures. We may remark, too, that frequently it is appropriate as well as enriching to make room in the sermon for a brief explanation of this or that related passage of Scripture.⁵²

Van Dellen and Monsma concur:

It may be said in this connection that Catechism sermons should be so constructed that the congregation sees very clearly that the truths embodied in the Catechism are indeed but reproductions of God's own Word.⁵³

51. Homer C. Hoeksema, *Homiletics* (Grand Rapids: Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, 1975), p. 42.

52. Hoeksema, *Homiletics*, p. 43.

53. Van Dellen and Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary*, p. 277.

Always the Catechism ought to be preached in the light of Scripture. The contents of the Catechism are based upon and derived from Holy Scripture. The Reformed minister must demonstrate this to the congregation. Ultimately the faith of God's people must be made to rest in Jesus Christ *as He is revealed in Scripture*. Especially for the sake of the young, as well as recent converts to the Reformed faith, the minister ought to show that the various teachings of the Heidelberg Catechism are the teachings of God's Word. That they must see, and of that they must be convinced.

Benefits of Heidelberg Catechism Preaching

The tradition of Heidelberg Catechism preaching has been preserved in the Reformed churches because over the years those churches have enjoyed the benefits that have been the fruits of such preaching. Among other benefits, Gootjes identifies three outstanding benefits. In his judgment, Heidelberg Catechism preaching prevents preaching that is one-sided, assures the preaching of the whole counsel of God, and guarantees that the preaching is going to be doctrinal, not shallow moralisms.⁵⁴

Concerning the benefits of consistent Heidelberg Catechism preaching, Hoeksema writes:

The preacher, however, should not look upon Catechism preaching as an obnoxious obligation and a necessary evil. Nor should he allow either himself or his congregation to feel that Catechism preaching is burdensome and dry. The preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism is not only according to regulation, but ... is a blessing both for the congregation and the minister. It compels the minister to make systematic study of the truth of the Reformed faith and to apply it to the congregation. It opens the way for him to treat various subjects which he would otherwise probably rather easily avoid, but which he is now compelled to treat in connection with the Catechism. And in Catechism preaching the congregation has a guarantee that it will be instructed in the pure and complete doctrine of salvation. And we may emphasize that our Heidelberg Catechism, both because of its method and its content, is admirably suited for this purpose. Let

54. Gootjes, "Catechism Preaching," pp. 157ff.

neither the minister nor the congregation minimize the value of this Reformed custom, therefore.⁵⁵

Van Dellen and Monsma also point out the positive benefits of systematic instruction in the Heidelberg Catechism:

Now by preaching the truth of God constantly and systematically according to the summary of the Heidelberg Catechism the congregation of God receives regular instruction in all the fundamentals of the Christian faith as revealed in the Bible. It is true that apart from Catechism preaching a Minister might indoctrinate his congregation according to God's revelations. But Catechism preaching assures us that all Ministers will preach the whole truth of God, and that not according to their personal conceptions, but according to the common conception of all the Churches. We are safe in saying that if it were not for Catechism preaching, certain truths of God's Word would be seldom touched upon in our sermons. All Ministers are but men, and all men are apt to be one-sided and forgetful. The preaching of God's Word according to the summary of that Word found in the Catechism safeguards the Churches against the danger of partial and one-sided preaching. And at the same time it offers the Churches some security against unbiblical, erroneous presentations.⁵⁶

Further,

Catechism preaching ... is doctrinal preaching. We need doctrinal preaching. Every believer should be a well informed Christian. One who is not well informed as to the main teaching of Holy Writ cannot be a strong Christian. And especially in our day and age of shallow Christianity and self-conceived, self-constructed conceptions [the 1940s, R.C.], a thorough understanding of God's truth is very necessary. Besides, every doctrine of Holy Writ, rightly understood, is full of comfort for the believer. We need this comfort in this world of disappointments and conflicts.⁵⁷

Four main benefits of Heidelberg Catechism preaching may be identified. The first benefit is the grounding of the congregation in

55. Hoeksema, *Homiletics*, p. 41.

56. Van Dellen and Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary*, p. 277.

57. Van Dellen and Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary*, p. 277.

the doctrines of the Word of God. Heidelberg Catechism preaching assures that the faith of God's people is informed and that God's people know whom and what they have believed.

Not to be overlooked here is the grounding of the minister, especially the young minister, in the truths of the Reformed faith. Making sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism is beneficial for the minister himself. Closely connected to this first benefit, Catechism preaching assures that the whole counsel of God is preached in the congregation. The Heidelberg Catechism summarizes the fundamental doctrines of Holy Scripture. Preaching regularly on the Catechism assures that the congregation will be exposed to the breadth of apostolic teaching.

A third benefit of Heidelberg Catechism preaching is that it prevents preaching from becoming one-sided. Not only is there the danger that doctrines are neglected, but there is equally the danger that a man's preaching becomes imbalanced. He begins to ride certain hobby horses and to repeat various pet teachings. Regular preaching on the Heidelberg Catechism minimizes the threat of this danger.

And finally, regular Heidelberg Catechism preaching promotes the unity of the church. The fundamental basis for the church's unity is agreement in the cardinal doctrines of the Word of God, as the apostle makes plain in a passage like Ephesians 4. Heidelberg Catechism preaching promotes that doctrinal unity. It promotes unity within the congregation. It promotes the unity of the congregations of a denomination. It promotes the unity of the various Reformed churches the world over that are yet faithful to the time-honored tradition of Heidelberg Catechism preaching. And it promotes our unity and connection to the Reformed church of the past—something of vital importance for the church of our day.

In view of these benefits, may the practice of regular preaching on the Lord's Days of the Heidelberg Catechism be preserved in the Reformed churches. Where there has been laxity towards the practice, or where it has been abandoned altogether, may there be a return to the old and good paths. And may the great doctrines articulated in the Catechism be endeared to Reformed Christians today and in the future by means of such preaching. In that way may there continue to be in those churches a vibrant witness in the world to the truth of the gospel of Christ, as well as an enjoyment of the only comfort for living and for dying. ●

John Calvin's Integrated Covenant Theology (2)

by Angus Stewart

While Calvin is both clear and biblical in his treatment of covenant unity, covenant diversity, covenant hermeneutics, and covenant progression, we shall see, with the benefit of over four centuries since his death, that there is room for some correction and development as to his conception of the nature of the covenant.¹

Calvin on the Nature of the Covenant

It is undeniable that Calvin spoke of the covenant as a pact, compact, contract, or agreement. There may be various reasons or sources for this, including political, ecclesiastical, and lexicographical. First, medieval and sixteenth century political theory (of which Calvin was not unaware) included a development of the covenant as a contract between the rulers and the ruled.² Second, the Roman church spoke of the covenant as a compact.³ Third, the biblical lexicons of Calvin's day (wrongly) viewed the Hebrew and Greek words for covenant (*berith* and *diatheke* respectively) as meaning contract or agreement.⁴

1. As in part 1 of this series, all citations of the *Institutes* are from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960) and all citations of Calvin's commentaries are from the 22-volume Baker (repr. 1993) edition.

2. According to this contract (written or unwritten), the people could revolt against the powers that be, if they were tyrannical, contrary to Matthew 26:51-52, John 18:36-37, Romans 13:1-7, I Peter 2:13-17, and Revelation 13:9-10.

3. This idea of the covenant as a contract was used by many in the Roman church as a framework within which man merited with God (synergism).

4. Modern word studies point to God's covenant as a sovereignly disposed (*diatheke*) bond (*berith*) with His people in Jesus Christ (cf.

Peter Lillback, in a detailed treatment of Calvin's conception of the covenant, notes that he also uses the words "oracles," "way," and "fellowship" as synonyms for the covenant.⁵ In connection with the last of these terms ("fellowship"), Lillback rightly quotes the first three sentences of that section of the *Institutes* (book 2, chapters 10 and 11) in which Calvin most fully treats the covenant:

Now we can clearly see from what has already been said that all men *adopted* by God into the *company of his people* since the beginning of the world were *covenanted* to him by the same law and by the *bond* of the same doctrine as obtains among us. *It is very important to make this point.* Accordingly I shall add, by way of appendix, how far the condition of the patriarchs in this *fellowship* differed from ours, even though they *participated* in the same inheritance and hoped for a common salvation with us by the grace of the same Mediator (2.10.1, pp. 428-429).

After further references to the "Mediator," "inheritance," "grace," "mercy" and "peace," etc., of God's "spiritual" covenant in Calvin's writings, Lillback concludes,

... the essence of Calvin's conception of the covenant is the notion of

Moshe Weinfeld, "berith," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], pp. 253-255; Gottfried Quell, "diatheke," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], pp. 107-108; Johannes Behm, "diatheke," *Ibid.*, p. 134). The biblical lexicons of Calvin's day also let him down, when he mistakenly stated in his *Institutes*, "the word 'baptize' [*baptizein*] means to immerse" (4.15.19, p. 1320). See the thorough treatment of the Greek word *baptizein* in James W. Dale's four volumes: *Classic Baptism*, *Judaic Baptism*, *Johannic Baptism*, and *Christic Baptism and Patristic Baptism*.

5. Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2001), p. 134, n. 30.

the binding of God. This binding is God's own act of joining Himself with his creatures. Calvin writes, "Forgiveness of sins, then, is for us the first entry into the church and kingdom of God. Without it, there is for us no covenant (*foederis*) or bond (*conjunctionis*) with God" [4.1.20, p. 1034]. Thus the covenant is the means of union with God. It is the "bond" between God and man. [It is the] gracious self-binding of the infinite God whereby He condescends to enter into a mutual covenant with His fallen and unworthy yet sovereignly chosen people⁶

Lillback then notes the "multi-faceted" character of Calvin's idea of bond:

First, covenant and bond are used synonymously.... Thus the covenant is that which joins one to God ... or is one's union with God.... Second, there is a common bond in the Trinity itself [1.13.6, p. 128].... Third, Christ ... and the Holy Spirit ... are bonds in various respects.... Fourth, in the believer's salvation, faith is a bond.... Holiness is a bond.... There is a permanent bond between the double graces of the covenant ... and an indissoluble bond between election and adoption.... Fifth, there is a mutual binding in the communion of the saints ... and in the relationship between God and His covenant people.... Sixth, there is also a bond in the sacrament of the Supper and the Holy Spirit....⁷

Finally, Lillback shows how both God's "promise" and the gift of "adoption" into His "family" serve the covenant in Calvin's thought.⁸

A good example of Calvin's treatment of the covenant as a bond of fellowship in his commentaries occurs in his exposition of Psalm 102:12, which he translates, "And thou, O Jehovah! shalt

6. Lillback, *The Binding of God*, p. 137. Thus we have the reason for the first part of the title of Lillback's book on Calvin's doctrine of the covenant: *The Binding of God*.

7. Lillback, *The Binding of God*, pp. 138-139, n. 90.

8. Lillback, *The Binding of God*, pp. 138-141.

dwelt for ever; and the memorial of thee from generation to generation.” It is here quoted in its totality, with comments following:

When the prophet, for his own encouragement, sets before himself the eternity of God, it seems, at first sight, to be a far-fetched consolation; for what benefit will accrue to us from the fact that God sits immutable on his heavenly throne, when, at the same time, our frail and perishing condition does not permit us to continue unmoved for a single moment? And, what is more, this knowledge of the blessed repose enjoyed by God enables us the better to perceive that our life is a mere illusion. But the inspired writer, calling to remembrance the promises by which God had declared that he would make the Church the object of his special care, and particularly *that remarkable article of the covenant*, “I will dwell in the midst of you” (Ex. 25:8), and, trusting to that sacred and indissoluble *bond*, has no hesitation in representing all the godly languishing, though they were in a state of suffering and wretchedness, as partakers of this celestial glory in which God dwells. The word “memorial” is also to be viewed in the same light. What advantage would we derive from this eternity and immutability of God’s being, unless we had in our hearts the knowledge of him, which, produced by his gracious *covenant*, begets in us the confidence arising from a mutual *relationship* between him and us? The meaning then is, “We are like withered grass, we are decaying every moment, we are not far from death, yea rather, we are, as it were, already dwelling in the grave; but since thou, O God! hast made a *covenant* with us, by which thou hast promised to protect and defend thine own people, and hast brought thyself into a gracious *relation* to us, giving us the fullest assurance that thou wilt always dwell in the midst of us, instead of desponding, we must be of good courage; and although we may see only ground for despair if we depend upon ourselves, we ought nevertheless to lift up our minds to the heavenly throne, from which thou wilt at length stretch forth thy hand to help us.” Whoever is in a moderate degree acquainted with the sacred writings, will readily acknowledge that whenever we are besieged with death, in a variety of forms, we should reason thus: As God continues unchangeably the same—“without variableness or shadow of turning”—nothing can hinder him from aiding us; and this he will do, because we have his word, by which he has laid himself under obligation to us, and because he has deposited with us his own

memorial, which contains in it a sacred and indissoluble *bond of fellowship*.

First, we note that Calvin sees the vast gulf between the transcendent God—seated in “blessed repose” on His “heavenly throne” (this phrase occurs twice in the quotation above[x2]), dwelling in “celestial glory” and possessed of “eternity” (x2) and “immutability” (x3)—and “frail and perishing” man—“languishing ... in a state of suffering and wretchedness” and “besieged with death in a variety of forms”—as bridged by God’s gracious “covenant” (x3) alone.⁹

Second, Calvin describes this covenant as a “relationship” (x2) that is both “gracious” and “mutual ... between him and us.” This relationship is “a sacred and indissoluble bond” (x2), even “a sacred and indissoluble *bond of fellowship*.” Moreover, in this gracious and sacred relationship of fellowship, God “dwell[s] in the midst” of us (x2), His “own people” and “Church.”

Third, Calvin proves this with appeal to the covenant formula, “I will dwell in the midst of you” (Ex. 25:8), uttered in connection with the tabernacle and the ark and presented in various forms in the Scriptures. The Genevan Reformer calls this “that remarkable article of the covenant.”

Fourth, the “gracious covenant” is that which “produce[s]” heartfelt “knowledge” of God (cf. Jer. 31:31-34; John 17:3) and “begets in us the confidence arising from a mutual relationship between him and us.”¹⁰

Fifth, in the covenant “promises” (x2), God’s people have the “advantage,” “benefit,” “consolation,” “encouragement,” and

9. Cf. *Westminster Confession* 7:1: “The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which He has been pleased to express by way of covenant.”

10. Notice that for Calvin the covenant is fruitful, producing and begetting in His people saving faith, which consists of knowledge of and confidence in the Triune God (cf. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 21).

“good courage” that we are “the object of his special care,” so that He will “protect,” “defend,” “aid” and “help” us. Indeed, since Jehovah has “made a covenant with us,” He “giv[es] us the *fullest assurance* that [He will] *always* dwell with us.” Thus, for Calvin, the nature of the covenant demands and grants the preservation of the saints and our assurance of divine preservation in the covenant.

Sixth, the force of the third sentence of Calvin’s commentary on Psalm 102:12 ought not escape us. The psalmist, “calling to remembrance” God’s covenant promises, especially “I will dwell in the midst of you,” and “trusting to that sacred and indissoluble bond,” does not hesitate to portray all the godly, no matter what their earthly miseries may be, “as partakers of this celestial glory in which God dwells.” Resting in the indissoluble bond of the covenant, the believer knows that all God’s “suffering” people will dwell with Him eternally in heavenly bliss, nay, are *already* “partakers of this celestial glory in which God dwells” (cf. John 17:20-23; Eph. 2:6). The covenant assures us that God dwells in us and we will dwell with God both now and forever.

Seventh, Calvin sees this comfort of Jehovah’s dwelling in the covenant with us as generally known by Scripture-reading saints:

Whoever is in a moderate degree acquainted with the sacred writings, will readily acknowledge that whenever we are besieged with death, in a variety of forms, we should ... [trust in the immutable, covenant God] because we have his word, by which he has laid himself under obligation to us, and because he has deposited with us his own memorial, which contains in it a sacred and indissoluble bond of fellowship (Comm. on Ps. 102:12).

This knowledge of the nature of the covenant as an “indissoluble bond of fellowship” or God’s gracious “obligation” in which He has bound himself to us in Jesus Christ—what Lillback calls “the binding of God”—is what Calvin presents as the “benefit” and “consolation” of “the afflicted, when he is overwhelmed, and poureth out his complaint before the Lord” (Ps. 102:title). There is no abstract, cold covenant theology here!

The most biblical, clear, and comforting treatment of the nature of the covenant in Calvin's *Institutes* occurs, as one might expect, in his most extended treatment of the covenant in book 2, chapters 10 and 11. Within this section, Calvin makes his most penetrating remarks on the essence of the covenant in his first two arguments proving that God's "spiritual covenant" is "common" to the saints both before and after the coming of Jesus Christ (2.10.7, p. 434).

In his first argument, Calvin extols the "life" and "energy" of God's "imperishable" Word, which "quickens the souls of all to whom God grants participation in it." Through the Word, God's people in every age are "join[ed]" and "bound" to Him by a "sacred bond," so that they possess a "real participation in God." Enlivened and "illumine[d]" by this Word, the saints "cleave" to God and are "united more closely" to Him in the "blessing of eternal life." Thus we see Calvin explaining God's "spiritual covenant" as our being "join[ed]," "bound," and "united" with Him, so that we "cleave" to Him and enjoy a "real participation" in His blessedness (2.10.7, p. 434).

In his second argument, Calvin considers "the very formula of the covenant," which, he observes, is the same in every age: "For the Lord *always* covenanted with his servants thus: 'I will be your God, and you shall be my people' [Lev. 26:12]" (2.10.8, p. 434).¹¹ This covenant formula, Calvin notes, is frequently used in the Old Testament as a summary of all of salvation: "The prophets also commonly explained that life and salvation and the whole of blessedness are embraced in these words." He then quotes various texts from the Psalms, Habakkuk, Isaiah, and Deuteronomy as proof (2.10.8, pp. 434-435).

Calvin continues,

11. Higher critic Rolf Rendtorff has produced an interesting survey of the use of the covenant formula in the Old Testament, identifying three different forms of statements: (1) about *God*, that He is our God; (2) about *us*, that we are His people; and (3) about *God and us*, that He is our God and we are His people (Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, trans. Margaret Kohl [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998]).

But not to belabor superfluous matters, this admonition repeatedly occurs in the Prophets: we lack nothing for an abundance of all good things and for assurance of salvation so long as *the Lord is our God*. And rightly so! For if his face, the moment that it has shone forth, is a very present pledge of salvation, how can he manifest himself to a man as *his God* without also opening to him the treasures of his salvation? He is *our God* on this condition: that he *dwell* among us, as he has testified through Moses [Lev. 26:11]. But one cannot obtain such a presence of him without, at the same time, possessing life. And although nothing further was expressed, they had a clear enough promise of spiritual life in these words: “*I am ... your God*” [Ex. 6:7]. For he did not declare that he would be *a God to their bodies* alone, but especially to their *souls*. Still, souls, unless they be *joined to God* through righteousness, remain estranged from him in death. On the other hand, such a *union* when present will bring everlasting salvation with it (2.10.8, p. 435).

First, here we see again Calvin’s use of the covenant formula, “*I am ... your God,*” only this time Calvin elaborates more fully. For the church as a whole, the Lord is “our God” (x2); and to each individual son He is “his God” personally. Being our covenant Lord, Jehovah is a God to us in both our “bodies” and our “souls.” Second, having God for our God is the same as “dwelling” with Him and being “joined” to and “united” with Him. Third, Calvin also explains this covenant bond as seeing God’s shining “face,” knowing His “presence,” delving into “the treasures of his salvation,” and “possessing life”—a life that is both “everlasting” and “spiritual.” Fourth, Calvin states that it is almost “superfluous” to cite biblical texts in this regard, since the prophets “repeatedly” declare that God’s gracious covenant with us is the *summum bonum*: “we lack nothing for an abundance of all good things and for assurance of salvation so long as *the Lord is our God.*”

By this I do not mean to suggest, however, that union and dwelling with God was the only or even the dominant way in which Calvin spoke of the covenant. Such is not the case, for Calvin often used pact, compact, contract, or agreement as synonyms for the covenant. But the idea of covenant communion is there in Calvin, especially where he considers “the very formula of the covenant” (“*I will be your God, and you shall be my people,*”

2.10.8, p. 434), which he calls elsewhere “that remarkable article of the covenant” (“I will dwell in the midst of you,” Comm. on Ps. 102:12).

Development Regarding the Nature of the Covenant Since Calvin

Reformed theologians after Calvin, such as Francis Turretin and Charles Hodge, developed the idea of covenant as a compact or agreement in much more detail, dealing at great length with the contracting parties and the stipulations or conditions, etc. Yet, in the Reformed tradition, and especially in the teaching of Olevianus (1536-1587) in Germany and Cocceius (1603-1669) in the Netherlands,¹² the idea of covenant fellowship and friendship has always been present.

English Presbyterian Matthew Henry, commenting on the men of Ashdod's antipathy towards the ark (I Sam. 5:7), speaks of “[God's] covenant and communion with Him” as synonyms, for in the covenant God is our “friend.”¹³ Such occasional references to the covenant as union and communion could be multiplied from a whole host of authors. German Lutherans Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch write of God's “taking Abram into covenant fellowship with himself” (Gen. 15).¹⁴ They enlarge upon the nature of the covenant:

The covenant which Jehovah made with Abram was not intended to give force to a mere agreement respecting mutual rights and obligations—a thing which could have been accomplished by an external sacrificial transaction, and by God passing through the divided ani-

12. Cf. W. J. van Asselt, “*Amicitia dei* as Ultimate Reality: An outline of the Covenant Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669),” *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 21, 1 (March 1998), pp. 35-47.

13. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible, Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, repr. 1991), p. 391.

14. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume 1: The Pentateuch, Three Volumes in One*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1986), vol. 1, p. 212.

mals in an assumed human form—but it was designed to establish the *purely spiritual relation of a living fellowship between God and Abram*, of the deep inward meaning of which, nothing but a spiritual intuition and experience could give to Abram an effective and permanent hold.¹⁵

In his valuable book on the church, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, Christian Reformed theologian R. B. Kuiper begins the chapter “God’s Friends,” by stating,

The church consists of God’s covenant people. This is a way of saying that it consists of God’s friends. For the covenant of grace spells friendship between God and His own. In essence the covenant of grace was established when, immediately after the fall of man, God said to the serpent: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). Enmity with Satan implies friendship with God.¹⁶

After explaining the covenant (Gen. 17:7) in terms of friendship, with appeal to II Chronicles 20:7, Isaiah 41:8, and James 2:23, Kuiper continues,

The Psalmist equates the covenant of grace with friendship between God and His people in the words: “The friendship of Jehovah is with them that fear him; and he will show them his covenant” (Psalm 25:14, ASV). Inasmuch as the believers of all ages are Abraham’s seed (Galatians 3:7, 29), they are God’s covenant people, God’s friends.¹⁷

Kuiper further develops the church’s covenant relationship with God under the headings: “Sovereign Friendship,” “Intimate Friendship,” “Devoted Friendship,” and “Everlasting Friendship.”¹⁸

15. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, p. 210; italics mine.

16. R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), p. 330.

17. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, pp. 330-331.

18. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, pp. 331-338.

Some, while still working within the compact or agreement framework, have sought to bring out, more than has been customary, the idea that the covenant is a loving relationship of fellowship.¹⁹

John Murray goes further; he argues that the traditional covenant-contract theology “needs recasting.”

It would not be, however, in the interests of theological conservation or theological progress for us to think that the covenant theology is in all respects definitive and that there is no further need for correction, modification, and expansion. Theology must always be undergoing reformation. The human understanding is imperfect. However architectonic may be the systematic constructions of any one generation or group of generations, there always remains the need for correction and reconstruction so that the structure may be brought into closer approximation to the Scripture and the reproduction be a more faithful transcript or reflection of the heavenly exemplar. It appears to me that the covenant theology, notwithstanding the finesse of analysis with which it was worked out and the grandeur of its articulated systematization, needs recasting.²⁰

After surveying the views of various theologians who see the covenant as an agreement with contracting parties, conditions, and stipulations, Murray states,

There has been, however, a recognition on the part of more recent students of covenant theology that the idea of pact or compact or contract is not adequate or proper as the definition of *berith* and *diatheke* and admirable service has been rendered by such scholars in the analysis and formulation of the biblical concept.²¹

19. E.g., David McKay, *The Bond of Love: God's Covenantal Relationship with His Church* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2001). David McKay is a minister and professor in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland.

20. John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1954), pp. 4-5.

21. Murray then gives as examples works by Geerhardus Vos, Herman Bavinck, G. Ch. Aalders, John Kelly, David Russell, and Herman N. Ridderbos (Murray, *The Covenant of Grace*, p. 7, n. 15).

John Murray concludes his monograph,

... a divine covenant is sovereign administration of grace and promise. It is not compact or contract or agreement that provide the constitutive or governing idea but that of dispensation in the sense of disposition ... covenant is not only bestowment of grace, not only oath-bound promise, but also relationship with God in that which is the crown and goal of the whole process of religion, namely, union and communion with God.... At the centre of the covenant relation as its constant refrain is the assurance "I will be your God, and ye shall be my people."²²

O. Palmer Robertson also rejects the idea of covenant as a pact, believing it instead to be a sovereign bond between God and His people through the blood of Jesus Christ:

A long history has marked the analysis of the covenants in terms of mutual compacts or contracts. But recent scholarship has established rather certainly the sovereign character of the administration of the divine covenants in Scripture. Both biblical and extra-biblical evidence point to the unilateral form of covenant establishment. No such thing as bargaining, bartering, or contracting characterizes the divine covenants of Scripture. The sovereign Lord of heaven and earth dictates the terms of his covenant.... A covenant is a bond-in-blood sovereignly administered.²³

South African theologian Adrio König also views the covenant in organic terms:

Theologically, I define covenant as a gracious relationship of love between God and humanity.... He binds us to himself, giving us the right and responsibility to live in his love and to serve and glorify him in gratitude.²⁴

22. Murray, *The Covenant of Grace*, pp. 31-32.

23. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1980), p. 15.

24. Adrio König, *The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology: Toward a Christ-Centered Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 55.

This is how Anglican J. I. Packer defines “the life-embracing bedrock reality of the covenant relationship between the Creator and Christians” : “A covenant relationship is a voluntary mutual commitment that binds each party to the other.”²⁵ Packer roots this bond between God and us in the inter-Trinitarian communion of the Godhead. In answer to his own question, “Why does God ... desire covenantal fellowship with rational beings?” he answers,

...the nature of such fellowship observably corresponds to the relationships of mutual honor and love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit within the unity of the divine being, so that the divine purpose appears to be, so to speak, an enlarging of this circle of eternal love and joy. In highlighting the thought that covenantal communion is the inner life of God, covenant theology makes the truth of the Trinity more meaningful than it can otherwise be.²⁶

In the Protestant Reformed Churches the truth of the covenant as a bond of friendship and fellowship between God and His elect in Jesus Christ has been developed and maintained most fully, consistently, antithetically, and systematically. This has resulted in increased insight into and/or practical help regarding, for example, the living fellowship within the Holy Trinity, the covenant with Adam, Old Testament history, sovereign grace, infant baptism, Reformed worship, the unbreakable bond of marriage, Christian schooling, and the Christian life as one of God's friend-servants keeping His covenant.²⁷

This development in the understanding of the nature of the

25. J. I. Packer in his “Introduction” to Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, 2 vols. (Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, repr. 1990), vol. 1. There is no pagination for Packer's “Introduction.”

26. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*.

27. See, e.g., Herman Hanko, *God's Everlasting Covenant of Grace* (Grandville, MI: RFP, 1988); Herman Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed: Children in the Covenant* (Grandville, MI: RFP, rev. 1997);

covenant since Calvin's day ought not surprise us. It is now almost half a millennium since the Reformer's birth. Many have been the debates and disputes concerning the covenant. Through the centuries and the controversies, the Spirit of truth has led the church into a greater understanding of the nature of God's gracious covenant with us in Jesus Christ.

Next time, Lord willing, we shall consider Calvin's teaching on the blessings of the covenant. ●

David J. Engelsma, *Marriage, the Mystery of Christ and the Church: The Covenant Bond in Scripture and History* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, rev. 1998); Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 2000); David J. Engelsma, *Reformed Education: The Christian School as the Demand of the Covenant* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, rev. 2000); Homer C. Hoeksema and David J. Engelsma, *Unfolding Covenant History*, 5 vols. (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 2000-2005); Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace*, trans. Cornelius Hanko, ed. Herman Hanko (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 2003); David J. Engelsma, Barry Gritters, and Charles Terpstra, *Reformed Worship* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 2004); Ronald Hanko, *Doctrine According to Godliness* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 2004); Herman Hanko, *We and Our Children: The Reformed Doctrine of Infant Baptism* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, rev. 2004); Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2 vols. (Grandville, MI: RFPA, rev. 2004-2005); David J. Engelsma, *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers: Sovereign Grace in the Covenant* (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2005); Herman Hanko and David J. Engelsma, *Keeping God's Covenant* (USA: British Reformed Fellowship, 2006); David J. Engelsma, *Trinity and Covenant: God as Holy Family* (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2006).

The State of the Reformed Faith in Germany, and What Our Church (the Confessing Evangelical Reformed Church) Stands For

by Dr. Jürgen-Burkhard Klautke

I think it would be good to tell you a bit about my background first, so that you can better assess what I say.*

I grew up in a Christian home in the north of Germany, but my parents did not belong to a Reformed church. When I was a teenager, the literature I read was generally pietistic, and somewhat dispensationally orientated.

In 1974 I began to study theology at a seminary that had been founded a few years earlier in Switzerland. (Dominant at that time in Germany and German-speaking countries was the theology of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. The latter became known primarily for his program of demythologization.) This seminary was founded in 1970 in order to oppose the theological currents dominating the German-speaking theological faculties. It did not hold to any particular denominational confession, but it was what one would describe as “Bible believing.” However, there were some Reformed theologians teaching at this seminary. They came both from English-speaking countries and from the Netherlands. Through them I got to know Reformed theology for the first time.

When two professors asked me toward the end of my studies in Switzerland whether I would like to continue studying, it quickly

* Dr. Klautke spoke at the Protestant Reformed Seminary on March 22, 2006. This is the text of his address to the students, professors, and area ministers.

became clear to me that I had to continue in the direction of Reformed theology. The Netherlands was—geographically speaking—the nearest option, so that is where I chose to continue my studies.

First I went to the *Vrije Universiteit* (Free University) in Amsterdam. It was said about it in Basel, Switzerland that it was no longer faithful to Scripture, but one could certainly still study there. The area in which I wanted to specialize was that of Systematic Theology. Unfortunately, I soon came to realize that the theology there was at best that of Karl Barth. Prof. Berkouwer had lectured at this university for years, and his influence was still very strong there. But also Jürgen Moltmann's and Wolfhart Pannenberg's theology were highly respected in Amsterdam. In short, it was primarily German theologians with whom I became acquainted there. But I hadn't gone to the Netherlands to study German theology. I might as well have continued studying in Germany if I had wanted that.

Although I continued and completed my *doctorandus* in Amsterdam, I also looked around for an alternative direction in which to take my studies. After completing my exams, I switched to the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in Kampen. I changed also the area in which I wanted to continue studying. While I had studied Systematic Theology (Dogmatics) at the Free University in Amsterdam, I concentrated on the area of Christians Ethics at the Theological Seminary in Kampen. I made this change purely on theological grounds. The Free University criticized Scripture, and I was looking for a theological course where Holy Scripture is recognized as being the inerrant and infallible Word of God. I went to Kampen because I was convinced that criticism of Scripture was not practiced at the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Churches (Liberated). This was in the eighties of the last century.

I see, when I look back, that I learned much in Kampen. I am very grateful for the time that I could spend studying there. That does not mean that I agreed with everything that my professors taught. Nevertheless, I learned a lot there, and I am very grateful to my teachers, particularly to Prof. Douma, who coached me through my doctorate in theology.

In 1989 I got a call from an evangelical seminary in Germany to teach Christian Ethics and Reformed Theology. In 1997 I was asked to stand in for my doctor-father in Kampen, and so I lectured between 1997 and 1999 in Kampen on Christian Ethics. Besides this, I also gave some lectures at the Free Evangelical Theological Seminary in Germany.

By the end of the nineties a theological trend had arisen in the Free Evangelical Theological Seminary in Germany that finally led to my resignation. The trend included ideas about church-growth, as represented by Bill Hybels (“Willow Creek”) at that time and a little later also by Rick Warren. Two of my colleagues and I said that we did not approve of this development. We were forbidden to say anything against it. There was only one option left to us after that, namely, to leave the seminary.

A few churches had come into being in the mid-nineties. From now on, I will call them Confessing Churches. I was involved with these churches. They stood up against the theological currents that presided in the “State” church and also in the Free Churches of Germany. (I will say more about these theological currents soon.)

The question arose: Where could these churches get their pastors from? It was for these (and other) reasons that we decided to start a theological seminary of our own. This seminary was founded in the year 2000. We have eight students at the moment. Our seminary is called Seminary (Academy) of Reformational Theology.

I emphasize that we call ourselves Reformed (*reformational*). We see ourselves in the tradition of the Reformation. Our primary aim is to make sure that the Word of God is preached from the pulpits again, and that it is at the center of the service.

As of one year ago I also taught as guest professor at the Theological Seminary in Switzerland, at which I had begun my studies in 1974.

So much for my personal history. Perhaps I could add that I am married and have four children. Our oldest son spent four weeks in Hudsonville, Michigan, staying with the family of Prof. Gritters. He was also allowed to attend Covenant Christian High School. When he came back, he told us a lot about your great

hospitality. So my daughter wants to come here as well. God willing, she will come here in September and October for a month or so. I would like to say a big thank you for your generous hospitality.

My first contacts with the PRCA go back to the eighties, when I studied theology in the Netherlands. I bought myself the *Reformed Dogmatics* of Herman Hoeksema at that time. At the moment, one member of our church is translating Hoeksema's *Reformed Dogmatics* into German. I found another book of Rev. H. Hoeksema in a second-hand bookshop: *Het Evangelie - De jongste aanval op de waarheid der soevereine Genade*.

But the first real contact with the PRCA was forged by Carsten Linke, a brother in our church. He had discovered your churches on the Internet, he translated some articles into German, and he corresponded with brother Peter VanDerSchaaf by e-mail. The suggestion then came from brother VanDerSchaaf, whether we could establish closer contact with each other, upon which I wrote to Prof. Dykstra. After a fair amount of correspondence I have the privilege to be allowed to speak to you here.

1. The State of the Reformed Faith in Germany (in general)

I have already alluded to the theological situation in Germany—I could even say, in the German-speaking countries, and beyond, as far as I know. I can be very brief in answering this question: What is the state of the Reformed faith in Germany? There is none.

Let me explain what I mean.

If you told a German that you are Reformed, he would generally not understand what you mean. Should you meet someone who says he understood you, please be careful. My experience has shown me that he would understand you to be saying: "I am a follower of Karl Barth."

There is a group of independent Reformed churches near the border between the Netherlands and Germany that calls itself Old Reformed. These Old Reformed churches have approximately 7,000 members. Several years ago I was invited to speak at a young people's meeting of these churches. Outwardly everything appeared to be respectable. But I discovered that inwardly many

young people had drifted away from the faith that is supposed to shape their lives. I also noticed that many parents and even elders of these churches did not see it or want to see it.

What is the situation of the church in Germany?

Unlike the United States of America, we still have an official Protestant “State” church, which consists of so-called Lutheran and Reformed churches. But, sadly, humanism and syncretism effectively have the rule. So in effect it doesn’t matter whether the tradition is Lutheran or Reformed. As these churches are financed through taxes, they are relatively rich, but few people attend services there. Even today, two thirds of all Germans still belong to an official church (Roman Catholic or Protestant), but only about two to three per cent of these people attend church regularly. In all of Europe, church attendance decreases year by year. The attitude of an average European is: The time of Christendom has passed. People have gotten over it.

Let me illustrate this to you by means of a city in Switzerland. I’ll pick Geneva as an example, the city where the Reformer John Calvin lived and preached. In 2000 only 17% of the Genevans belonged to a Protestant church. And the ones who still belong to the (“State”) church, do not feel connected with her. For the vast majority, affiliation with a church is a mere tradition.

Today Europe is in the middle of a far-reaching break with tradition. This post-Christian Europe is not a heathen or paganistic Europe in the conventional sense of the terms. At least there were gods in paganism, but now a spiritual vacuum reigns. A sociologist once expressed it in the following way: The final instance is *the* single person. The normal European lives without any committed relationships. Answering the question: Why are you in the world? Fifty-three per cent of the Germans say: I want to enjoy life.

What is the situation with the theological faculties of the German-speaking universities? For this I will describe the theological faculty in Marburg. The university of Marburg was founded in 1527 by the then count Philip the Magnanimous [of Hesse]. It is regarded as the oldest Protestant university in the world. Two years after its foundation in 1529 this university was the scene of the “religious conversations of Marburg,” which took place be-

tween Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, and Philip Melancthon. Here the topic of the Lord's Supper was debated. As you know, this issue led to the breach between Luther and Zwingli.

Today the essential message of the theological faculty of the University of Marburg is as follows: The three so-called Abrahamitic religions (Christendom, Judaism, and Islam) actually teach the same ideas. These three religions are merely different ways to the same God. The syncretism taught at the University of Marburg is nothing exceptional, but corresponds to what is taught at most German theological faculties at the moment. Effectively we are experiencing the disintegration, the self-destruction, of Christianity to an extent that has never been observed before. In the "State" church, church-workers today enter into dialogue with all possible groups—with homosexuals, with lesbians, with pastors living in homosexual partnerships, and with prostitutes, but not with people who hold fast to Holy Scripture to the best of their knowledge and belief.

Christians who hold fast to Holy Scripture, the dogmas of the old church, and the confessions of the Reformation are called fundamentalist sectarians. One does not shrink from lumping them together with the Afghan Taliban or other Islamists.

Above all, a *feminist theology* prevails in the "State" church. To the question: "Who was Jesus Christ actually?" one hears the answer: "A human brother who wanted to set up a new kingdom of liberal brotherliness and sisterliness in the world." A lady theologian in Germany claims that Jesus was the first man of the human race who broke through the insanity of manhood.

As you know, homosexuality is condemned in the Old and in the New Testament. It is judged as a destruction of the order that God has assigned for this creation (Rom. 1:26-27). Today in the synods it is no longer discussed whether homosexuality is acceptable or not. Instead it is said that people in biblical times did not know about the possibility or ability of love between man and man or woman and woman. Homosexual couples are blessed in church meetings that cannot be distinguished from conventional weddings between a man and a woman.

Holy Scripture as the infallible, inerrant Word of God has been

abolished. That is exactly the opposite of the thoughts and confessions of Reformers like Luther and Calvin. For the Reformers, the teaching about Jesus' work of salvation was doubtless the very heart of the gospel.

Already around the end of the nineteenth century, German theologian Adolf von Harnack wrote his widely known book *What Is Christianity?* In this book he taught that not Jesus Christ, the Son, and His work of salvation, but God, the loving Father, is the center of the gospel. For this theologian it was a myth that the Son of God had to die the atoning death of the cross. That was the old liberal theology.

Today we are living in the postmodern era. Here, likewise, Christ's work of reconciliation is denied, and Christianity is adapted to the spirit of the age. And today this rejection of the reconciling work of Christ is feministically-orientated. In Germany we witness today a matrifaction of God: "God as mother." This is combined with a deification of the earth as "our great mother." In this context one speaks also of a gaia-centric theology. This word includes the Greek noun "*gaia*" (earth). The earth is shifted in a naturalistic sense into the center of theological thinking.

This gaia-centric theology wants to abolish the distinction between God the Creator and His creation. It wants instead to establish a universal naturalism. Here "liberation" does not mean to be free from the bondage of sin, but it means harmony and consciousness of solidarity between all people, animals, plants, the air, the oceans, the deserts, the mountains, and the valleys. Today an all-reconciling universalism is propagated.

For this postmodern theology, the divine is immanent in this world. It is the task of the Holy Spirit to renew the world. Nevertheless, this "spirit" does not come from God, but it is the maternal force working in the creation. Therefore this so-called "holy spirit" does not come from God but from the depths of the earth. One is informed that the effectiveness of this so-called "spirit of God" is hindered primarily by the understanding of God as a God who exists outside of this world and rules this world in a free and sovereign way. Man should no longer comprehend himself as created in the image of God but as a part of the earth. Taking the

place of the Savior is the redeemer *mother earth*, with its host of spirits and demons. People learn to identify themselves with this mother earth in Christian workshops.

It is no longer all about reconciliation with God, the Almighty, the Holy One, but about reconciliation with the circles (circulation) of nature. Instead of attempting to overcome this world through the hope for a new heaven and a new earth, they try to dip into nature.

It is from this position that these people criticize Holy Scripture. Thus a theologian writes: “Egypt, Babylonia, and India have still experienced the divine in the unity of man and animal. But the election- and covenant-theology of the Old Testament is just an expression of human arrogance. ... Whereas the contemporary myths of the Indians or Egyptians tried to capture the natural history of the world in huge spaces of time, the cosmos and its history in the Old Testament shrink into a history of a few thousand years.”

The statement on the first page of the Bible that God created the world in six days is rejected in this “theology,” but not because it contradicts a Darwinistic-orientated worldview. (Darwinism—with its struggle for life and its linear development of time—is thought to be a male-orientated philosophy.) The statement that God created this world in six days contradicts the view in which nature is regarded as a gigantic circulation (circle) of life and death. In this gaia-centric theology/philosophy it is not all about a hope that transcends death, but its highest value is the finding of a balance between life and death. Death is no longer understood as the wages of sin, but rather it is seen as an eternal circulation, which is viewed as a prerequisite (condition) for life.

Let me point out in this context that approximately a quarter of the Europeans believe in reincarnation, that is, in a rebirth within the eternal cycle of nature. This so-called gaia-centric theology is rooted in an animistic naturalism and a Chinese universalism. In fact, it is the negation of biblical Christianity.

As everybody knows, the prophets of the Old Testament stood up against naturalism. For example, the prophets Amos and Hosea resisted to the death this mixture between God, who had delivered His people from slavery, and the heathen Baals and Asherahs.

This gaia-centric theology denies the understanding (comprehension) of God, of man, of salvation as the Reformers treasured it.

As this theology is proclaimed today in Germany more or less openly from the lecterns and the pulpits, perhaps you can estimate roughly what the state of the Reformed theology in Germany is: It does not exist!

2. The State of the Reformed Faith in Germany (with regard to the evangelical world)

However, I still want to give a second answer to the question about the state of the Reformed faith in Germany.

So far, one might argue that what I am saying here is true of the theology at the liberal and postmodern faculties. But you might wonder: Are there really no Christians in Germany, that is, people who know Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord and who read their Bible daily? Is there not something of a Reformed faith there? Isn't anything of the Reformed faith available in these Christian communities?

In answer, I point out first of all that there are considerably fewer of these "free" churches in Germany than here in the US. The number of Christians is substantially lower. But, unfortunately, even there I must inform you of a disillusioning picture. In the free churches (congregations), confrontation with the world is no longer wanted. Instead, the search for compromises is more or less the norm.

Yes, it is true that gaia-centric theology is not propagated. (Presumably many have not yet heard the word.) Actually, feminist theology is not wanted either. But instead of these the gospel is put across as "seeker-friendly," "seeker-orientated." This means that Christianity is popularized. This popularization of Christianity looks quite different from the thoroughly liberalized version, but at the core it is always all about putting the gospel across "softly" to people.

On the one hand, plenty of activities are offered in the free churches. There are groups for all possible interests: children, teenagers, elderly people, women, men, addicts, foreigners. People gather in order to do handcrafts, to play, and to talk about all pos-

sible issues. All this is not about preaching the gospel to the people who gather there, but the emphasis is on making them feel comfortable. The proclamation of the gospel is to be carried out incidentally.

A specifically postmodern form of this method is as follows: The emotions of the people are stimulated in order to make them forget the stress of everyday life and make them feel good. Events that usually include loud music are organized. While the apostle Paul demanded: “Brethren, be not children in understanding” (I Cor. 14:20), here we see a (virtual) reinfantilization of man. Adult people in these so-called services behave like little children who give way to an apparently big urge for movement. Every attempt at being a responsible Christian is largely suffocated by emotional tenderness. I point out that this form of Christianity is absolutely connected to the matriarchal religiousness already mentioned. Here also God is pictured, so to speak, as the great mother-of-all who forgives everything and above all understands everything. If one actually wants to announce the gospel in this framework, it is stated as a rule according to the formula: “God loves you and has a plan for your life!” Here the omnipotent, righteous, holy God, who demands repentance, is not proclaimed anymore.

I remind you of the apostle Paul, who announced at the Aroepagus: “but now (God) commandeth all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30).

Instead of proclaiming this God, one begins to exert emotional pressure on the listener. One presses the emotionally struck one to repeat a prayer and then describes this as “conversion.” This so-called conversion is reflected in testimonies such as: Jesus has adopted (accepted) me, because I gave my life to Him. Man is in the center here. As a rule, there is no talk about God’s covenant of grace or about His election.

But one may say: “Emotions are a part of being human.” It is not a bad thing to appeal to man via the emotions.

To this I respond: The manner of the proclamation gives the impression that truth is not an important matter. After such a sermon, the person does not expect anymore that there is truth. He does not want to hear sermons aimed at repentance. Instead, he desires a dialogue that is free of any claim that there is *the truth*,

and that appeals more to feelings and experiences of one's own soul.

In preaching, one likes to take up *psychology*. The problems of man aren't seen anymore as stemming from his separation from God, but as psychological. The proclamation of the gospel is brought into the service of a therapeutic process. It is presupposed implicitly that the unhurt (emotionally healthy) person described by psychology is the same as the one who is saved by the gospel of reconciliation.

So the gospel and its fruit are infiltrated by psychology, its contents, aims, and methods. This happens when the preacher treats the person just as has become common in our culture: Man is not considered primarily as a person separated from God, a sinner, but as a victim either of his environment, his education, or his complexes and his genes. Or one thinks man can reorient himself with the instrumental help of biblical imperatives and psychological insights. Through this way (method) man can reach "inner healing" and also cure his broken relations.

This form of the "gospel" primarily tries to heal wounds and broken relations, so that one feels himself well again. If somebody has committed adultery, this is not so bad, because God understands, accepts, and forgives everything (like a loving mother).

But when the expectation of an "inner healing" is thus carried into the gospel, a wrong gospel is being preached. If one takes into consideration psychological categories in order to diagnose a person's problem and determine the target-setting of the "counseling," and if one expects to find the solution in psychotherapeutic steps, then one no longer preaches Scripture and the gospel but a Christian-lacquered psychotherapy. Here one takes on the psychological thinking and expectations of the listener. Far too many times the problem is misjudged as a question of feelings, when the real problem of the listener, in God's eyes, is his separation from God and his neighbor, not the question of whether he feels good or not. This is a man-centered and therefore wrong gospel.

There is still another form of so-called evangelization in these churches. Here, too, the focus is not on the proclamation of God's

authoritative Word according to: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.” Here one wants to evangelize *with the strength of one’s own life*. What happens in this method reminds me of D.F. Schleiermacher, the father of liberal theology. He held the opinion that a religious movement started out from Christ, which was passed on to the apostles and then to many generations after that. This movement will spread to others, and in this way Christianity will spread.

What we experience here is nothing else but a very dangerous form of natural theology.

Please do not misunderstand me. My criticism is not with the idea that Christians should lead an orderly life in the sense of Christian ethics. This goes without saying. But I regard as a basic characteristic of Holy Scripture that it describes the lives of people in quite a number of places from the negative side in order to magnify God’s mercy. The Bible does this with the lives of David and Paul. In David’s case, his sin and God’s forgiveness are a great comfort for all adulterers and those who have become guilty in some other way.

David says in Psalm 51:13-17:

“Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee. Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness. O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise. For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem. Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar.”

This is anything but human self-representation. The psalmist explicitly wants to extol *God’s justice* and teach the sinners *God’s ways*, so that they turn back to Him.

Or let us look at Paul. The apostle Paul points to himself as an example of God’s free grace. He does not expect his self-

representation to bring people to faith, but he explicitly expects the preaching of the cross to accomplish this. This word strengthens the faith of his listeners, a faith that is not based on human wisdom but on God's power (I Cor. 1).

Furthermore, the proclamation of God's Word takes place by a variety of other entire forms today. Many claim that the gospel is also announced through these.

These include show elements like theatre, pantomime, film, art, and most of all music. Especially the music, so popular today, shows again that it is not so much about contents but rather about human states. Within the last few years this emotional stimulation has become virtually an industry in itself. Here one falls back upon the marketing strategies of sales and advertising experts. All this is stimulated by the question: Which methods, which avenues, must to be taken so that the church gets more members? The gospel propagated here becomes an article of consumption, the primary concern of which is success in life.

We do not hear anything about heaven and hell, eternal salvation and eternal damnation. Instead, people who supposedly have been healed hop across the stage, and radiant converts present their newfound "life with Jesus." In fact, these forms of emotional "Jesus experiences" are based on a feminization and reinfantilization of Christianity. Here the word of the apostle Paul: "When I became a man, I put away childish things" (I Cor. 13:11) is flushed away with a lot of manipulative music and marketing strategies.

This too is an expression of the self-destruction of biblical Christianity.

Such is my second answer to the question about the state of the Reformed faith in Germany.

3. What does the Confessing Evangelical Reformed Church (BERG) stand for?

When *deism* arose in the seventeenth century, God was separated from the world. God only acted as a kind of watchmaker, who had set this world in motion and then left it to its fate.

In the eighteenth and primarily in the nineteenth century, after this philosophy had taken hold, the inevitable questions about

the historical development process became the focus of attention. The philosophies of Hegel and Darwin were merely different forms of this way of thinking.

Finally, then, historicism arose at the end of the nineteenth century: There was never a fixed truth and there had never been one. Everything is in flux. However, if there is not any truth outside of man, then—according to the people’s demand—the truth can be found only in man himself, that is, in the existence of man. Thus existentialism arose, the predominant philosophy in the twentieth century. This existentialism was still convinced that an individual human being could find the truth in himself—in whatever way. But at the end of the twentieth and in the beginning of the twenty-first century, man has given up asking for truth. Instead he flees into a state of intoxication.

For men’s attitude towards the Word of God this means that, beginning with deism, and then increasingly in the following centuries, man has had difficulties believing that the all-powerful God gave His word as a truthful, life-creating Word. It is this Word of God that, as “the seed of rebirth,” procreates man into life (I Pet. 1:23). Therefore it must be the task of Christ’s church—including our small church—to confess that God’s Word is the means by which He saves people. In other words, in the center of the service stands the Word of the sovereign God. Here the center of the gospel is the message that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself (II Cor. 5:19).

Such a proclamation is possible only via confrontation, not in a kind of conformity or even retreat into a religious idyll. The prophets in the Old Testament never saw themselves as assistants for the fulfilling of a need-orientated religiousness striving after quietness. They didn’t sell any wrong dreams and illusions, but they protested against a false religiousness.

The Confessing Evangelical Reformed Church wants to do the same. We want to keep to the Holy Scriptures as the inerrant and infallible Word of God, which is inspired and profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness (II Tim. 3:16). We do not want to be conformed to the world, but we want to be transformed by the renewing of our mind (Rom. 12:2).

Therefore we have called ourselves “confessing” and have adopted several creeds. First of all, the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563. We appreciate it for teaching us the marvelous Reformed doctrine.

In Germany we have quite a lot of “popular” Arminian heresies, for example the Pentecostal movement and the charismatic movement. Because of this we adopted the Berlin declaration of 1909, which refutes the errors of Pentecostalism. In addition to this, because of the theological situation in Germany, we have adopted the Chicago-Declaration of 1978, which confesses the inerrancy of Holy Scripture.

As I mentioned before, we belong to a small group of churches, called Council of Confessing Protestant Evangelical Churches. It is a working committee of independent congregations that seek to counter the growing apostasy within the German churches and confess again the infallible Word of God. The creed shared by all Confessing Churches is the Theological Declaration of 2000, which consists of 15 articles that oppose popular modern heresies.

This is—in short—what our church stands for.

In the context of a Christianity that can well be described as a growing Baalization, we must confront people with the sovereign God and His work of salvation in Christ based on the inerrant Word of God. Such a gospel will be “to the one the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life” (II Cor. 2:16).

A “renewal” of the church, a reformation, is not “feasible,” especially not through spectacular events or entertainment. On the contrary, the more that spectacular events are organized in order to get the “church life” going, the faster one approaches intellectual and spiritual bankruptcy.

This situation does not mean resignation, but the opposite. The gospel of Jesus Christ and His work of salvation are being proclaimed by all the wounds one suffers in life. This gospel is preached in the knowledge that faith in God is the victory that has overcome the world. ●

The Notion of Preparatory Grace in the Puritans

by Martyn McGeown

I. Introduction

Preparatory grace is a notion that crept into the theology of many of the Puritans. Although the Puritans insisted that man is totally depraved and unable to contribute anything to his salvation, “as early as 1570” some English theologians began to teach that the sinner “might somehow dispose himself for saving grace.”¹ By this they meant, generally (with some variation), that an unregenerate sinner could prepare himself for the grace of regeneration by a serious consideration of his sins in the light of God’s law. By careful self-examination the sinner could and ought to stir himself up to loathe his own sinfulness and to desire mercy, and by a judicious use of means (especially attendance upon the preaching of the gospel) he could put himself in the position of being a likely candidate for the new birth. Most of the Puritans who advocated such views insisted that *God* prepares the sinner in this way. They were loath to suggest that man can do this *unaided* by the Spirit. However, they also taught that this preparatory grace was often present in reprobates, so that preparation for regeneration did not necessarily lead to salvation in the end.

II. Early Puritan Preparationists

A. William Perkins (1558-1602)

William Perkins, although he was an ardent predestinarian, was one of the earliest of the Puritans to be infected with this idea of preparationism. He taught that the Holy Spirit by the ministry of the gospel (and especially the law), prepares a sinner for re-

1. Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1966), p. 3.

generation. Perkins' massive work, *The Cases of Conscience*, was published posthumously in 1606. In a chapter entitled "What Must a Man Do That He May Come Into God's Favor And Be Saved?" Perkins writes that God usually guides the sinner through several stages before regeneration takes place:

God gives man the outward means of salvation, especially the ministry of the word, and with it he sends some outward or inward cross to break and *subdue the stubbornness of our nature* that it may be made *pliable to the will of God* ... this done, God brings a man to a consideration of the Law ... he makes a man particularly to see and know his own peculiar and proper sins whereby he offends God ... he smites the heart with a legal fear ... he makes him to fear punishment and hell and to despair of salvation in regard of anything in himself.²

Perkins therefore taught that, before regeneration, the stubbornness of the sinner's nature is subdued, his will is made pliable to God's will, and the dead sinner is made to see and experience the extent of his depravity. He then comes under a legal fear so that he despairs of salvation. However, insisted Perkins, these actions upon the sinner's nature, emotions, and will are not necessarily fruits of regeneration, for, he adds "these four actions are indeed no fruits of grace, for a reprobate may go thus far." They are only "works of preparations *going before* grace."³

Perkins did not teach that these preparatory steps are carried out by man, but by God, or with God's assistance. Perkins was prevented by his decretal theology from "flirting with any concept of meritorious preparation for conversion on the part of man."⁴ Man could not produce these good things in himself, but their outcome did depend in part on man. If both the elect and the

2. William Perkins, *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*, Book I, Chapter V, pp. 50-51; spelling of original modernized, italics added.

3. Perkins, *Whole Treatise*, Book I, Chapter V, p. 51, italics added.

4. Young Jae Timothy Song, *Theology and Piety in the Reformed Thought of William Perkins and John Preston* (The Edwin Mellen Press: Lewiston, NY, 1998), p. 132.

reprobate are the recipients of such common works of the Spirit, which do not necessarily issue in salvation, the implication is that man has a role to play. He must be careful not to suppress such works in him. An unregenerate man has a fully functioning will, but his will has been corrupted. Therefore Perkins insisted that regeneration affects the *goodness* of man's will, not the faculty of willing itself:

Regeneration does not change the operations of the human faculties themselves, but only 'the goodness thereof,' because the former remains unaltered while the latter was lost in the Fall. Insofar as the human faculties are concerned, therefore, one may speak of preparation for conversion ... insofar as the goodness of the will is concerned, however ... the sinner may never prepare himself for conversion as the will itself is in need of being 'born again.'⁵

Again to the question, 'whether the *natural* corrupted will can in any way prepare and dispose itself to his own conversion and justification,' Perkins replies: '...But the certain truth is, that the will cannot.'⁶

Perkins distinguished between different preparatory works. He did this by subdividing such operations into the "beginnings of preparation" and the "beginnings of compunction." The former he called "the ministry of the law." These beginnings of preparation, according to Perkins, are not gracious. They are common operations of the Spirit, which give no indication of whether God intends to save the sinner or not. Pangs of conscience, fear of punishment, horror over one's sins, and deep conviction could be merely foretastes of hell, not evidence of the grace of God working within the heart. On the other hand, the beginnings of compunction *are* gracious and lead to true conversion. The reprobate partake of the former, but only the elect of the latter works. This dichotomy "served not only to safeguard divine monergism in sal-

5. Song, *Theology*, p. 133.

6. Song, *Theology*, p. 134.

vation, but also to allow for man's active participation, however under the ministry of the law."⁷ Man could participate, but only as far as the law of God is concerned. By a careful consideration of the law of God he could *bring himself to see* his own guilt and misery under sin and in this way prepare himself to desire mercy. These works of preparation, which "bring under, tame and subdue the stubbornness of man's nature, without making any change at all," include "accusations of the conscience ... fears and terrors arising thence ... and the apprehending of God's anger against sin."⁸ However, adds Perkins,

although they go before to prepare a sinner for his conversion following, yet they are no graces of God, but fruits both of the law, being the ministry of death, as also of an accusing conscience.⁹

Perkins, then, believed that God "universally invites the sinner to 'prepare,' and then he particularly enables the elect to 'compose.'"¹⁰

In another work, *A Grain of Mustard Seed or the Least Measure of Grace That Is Or Can Be Effectual To Salvation*, Perkins urges the sinner to "labor to see and feel thy spiritual poverty" and "labor to be displeased with thyself."¹¹ If a man has "some little feeling of his wants [what he lacks], some weak and faint desire, some small obedience," writes Perkins, "he must not let this spark of grace go out." He gave this warning in a section of the same work entitled, "The Foresaid Beginnings of Grace Are Counterfeit Unless They Increase."¹²

Of all the advocates of preparatory grace among the Puritans, Perkins sought most to minister to the troubled consciences of

7. Song, *Theology*, pp. 136-137.

8. Song, *Theology*, p. 139.

9. Song, *Theology*, p. 139.

10. Song, *Theology*, p. 137.

11. William Perkins (Ian Breward [ed.]), *The Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics, vol. 3, The Work of William Perkins* (The Sutton Courtenay Press: England, 1970), p. 406.

12. Perkins, *Work*, p. 405.

believers. Notwithstanding Perkins' good intentions, it must be acknowledged that his doctrine did tend to distress the consciences of the weak. How shall I know if the works of the Spirit I perceive to be in me are fruits of "preparation" or "compunction"? If a reprobate can go a certain distance along this preparatory path, how may I know that I am not a reprobate, fooling myself into believing that I am on the narrow way, when I could very well still be on the broad way that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13)? It was not Perkins' desire to distress the weak, but to awaken the presumptuous out of his carnal security. He, therefore, sought to encourage the sinner who found the smallest sign of grace in himself to be of good courage. Perkins writes that "the will to become regenerate ... is the effect and testimony of regeneration begun."¹³ If a man can but desire regeneration he shows by this that he is already born again and is in a gracious condition. However, above we have seen that Perkins fails to apply this principle with consistency, for "some weak and faint desire, some small obedience" may, if the spark of grace be allowed to go out, be evidence only of "counterfeit grace." It must be conceded that this is better than some later theologians, who, as we shall see, taught that a sinner can *earnestly desire* regeneration and yet remain unregenerate and perish. Others urged sinners to pray to God for the grace of regeneration, but offered them little hope that their prayers would be answered. Perkins, in contrast, taught (albeit inconsistently) that the desires that a man has for faith may be viewed as the first signs of regeneration:

Mark then ... though as yet thou wantest [lackest] firm and lively grace, yet art thou not altogether void of grace, if thou canst unfeignedly desire it. Thy desire is the seed, conception or bud of that which thou wantest. 'If any man thirst, let him come to me and drink.'¹⁴

This certainly serves to neutralize some, although not all, of the poison contained in Perkins' doctrine of preparatory grace. It

13. Pettit, *The Heart*, p. 62.

14. Pettit, *The Heart*, p. 63.

offers the sinner some hope, but at the same time leaves the sinner doubting his spiritual status.

B. William Ames (1586-1633)

William Ames was a student of Perkins and, having emigrated to the Netherlands from England, became an advisor to the Synod of Dordt. Ames, too, emphasized the law's role in preparing the sinner for saving grace. John Eusden, the editor of a recent translation of Ames' *The Marrow of Theology*, provides some historical background. According to Ames, writes Eusden, "man's paramount task [in salvation] was to make himself spiritually ready."¹⁵ He could do this by repenting, by confessing, by offering "his unsure, ambivalent will to God in prayer that it might be informed and enlightened" and by "expos[ing] himself to the law and the prophets."¹⁶ Ames distinguished two kinds of repentance. One, found also in the unregenerate, "precedes faith in order of nature, as a preparing and disposing cause" and consists of terrors of conscience and anxiety caused by the law. The other, which follows faith and depends on it, "turns man away effectively and genuinely from sin."¹⁷ Only in the former sense can an unregenerate man repent, insists Ames. However, in practice it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between these two kinds of repentance.

In his famous work *Conscience With The Power and Cases Thereof*, Ames explains the stages necessary for "pulling a man out of the state of sin" and "into a state of grace." In a chapter entitled "How The Sinner Ought to Prepare Himself to Conversion," he writes:

... it is first of all required that a man seriously looks into the law of God and make examination of his life ... it is required ... a conviction of conscience ... a despair of salvation ... a true humiliation of

15. William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (The Labyrinth Press: Durham, NC, 1983), p. 50.

16. William Ames, *The Marrow*, p. 50.

17. Ames, *The Marrow*, p. 160.

heart which consists of grief and fear because of sin ... to put a man in a state of grace it is required that there be such an apprehension upon the gospel as whereby a man judges it possible that his sins should be forgiven ... an earnest desire to obtain that mercy which in Scripture is called a spiritual hunger or thirst.¹⁸

All of this, it ought to be emphasized, occurs *before* regeneration. The natural man can attain to this, and these preparatory actions may bear no saving fruit in the end.

Ames, writes Eusden, opposed the Remonstrants because he was disturbed by their anthropocentrism. He was unhappy with their “failure to give the sovereignty and working power of God a primary place in theology.”¹⁹ However, continues Eusden, “Ames, almost alone in the orthodox party, found that the Remonstrant insistence on man’s response in the drama of salvation was *a needed corrective* for Reformed theology.”²⁰ Because of this, Ames believed there was much that man could do to “prepare himself” for conversion, although in the final analysis conversion remained the work of God. He differed from “straight-arrow, orthodox theologians as Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641) and Johannes Maccovius (1588-1644)” and was not “completely orthodox” in the matter of predestination.²¹ In this, Ames departed from the orthodox position. He did not

follow the prevailing orthodox line and hold that man can do little or nothing. Maccovius, for example, insisted that man in his fallen state was incapable of preparing for faith and conversion. Any steps that

18. William Ames, *Conscience With the Power and Cases Thereof: The English Experience: Its Record in Early Printed Books Published in Facsimile* (Theatrum Orbis Terrarum Ltd., and Walter J. Johnson Inc.: Amsterdam & Norwood, NJ, 1975), Book II, Chapter 4, pp. 8-9.

19. Ames, *The Marrow*, p. 7.

20. Ames, *The Marrow*, p. 7, my italics.

21. Eusden hastens to add, “It is not being suggested here that Ames was an Arminian-within-the-gates, or a quasi-Remonstrant,” *The Marrow*, p. 7.

led to faith were associated with God's regeneration and could not be connected with man's efforts at salvation.²²

Although it would be unjust to group Ames with the Arminians (he very clearly opposed them²³), Ames' position is a dangerous concession to the Arminian errors of resistible grace and partial depravity. We can be thankful that Ames' views were not incorporated into the *Canons of Dordt*. Sadly, the leaven of Amesian preparationism would influence generations of theologians as his *Marrow* became required reading in the major theological schools in England, in the European continent, and in America.²⁴

C. Richard Sibbes (1577-1635)

Richard Sibbes, writes Pettit, was much concerned with the work of the Spirit. He preached much on the subject, but "with a minimum of concern for the rigors of dogma."²⁵ He spoke in the service of "spiritual warmth." In his sermons he sought to create a concern in his hearers for a change of heart. The purpose of theology is to "warm the heart," not impart "cold, scholastic, dogmatic" truth, he maintained.²⁶ Sibbes, differing from Perkins,

22. Ames, *The Marrow*, p. 50.

23. Eusden writes, quoting a biographer of Ames, "Ames plainly deserved our saying in his honor what the mothers of Israel once said in honor of David: 'Other theologians have slain their thousands, but Ames his tens of thousands!' Ames was thought to be something of a giant killer in theological debate," *The Marrow*, p. 7.

24. Eusden notes, "For a century and a half William Ames's *Marrow of Theology* held sway as a clear, persuasive expression of Puritan belief and practice. In England, Holland and New England nearly all those who aspired to the Puritan way read the book. No matter what their aspirations, undergraduates at Emmanuel College, Leyden, Harvard and Yale had to read the *Marrow* in Latin as part of basic instruction in divinity. In a burst of enthusiasm Thomas Hooker (1586?-1647) of Hartford once recommended the *Marrow* and another of Ames's works to fellow clergymen: 'They would make him (supposing him versed in the Scriptures) a good divine, though he had no more books in the world,'" Ames, *The Marrow*, p. 1.

25. Pettit, *The Heart*, p. 67.

26. Pettit, *The Heart*, p. 67.

makes no distinction between preparation and compunction. “Reprobates, he maintained, might immediately respond to the Spirit and so desire grace without excessive preliminary restraint.”²⁷

What is necessary is that the sinner not resist the Spirit’s work in creating holy desires in him. The “sweet motions” of the Spirit may be resisted, claims Sibbes. Those who obey the promptings of the Spirit and “turn towards God in obedience will receive the full benefits of the Spirit; those who resist are lost.”²⁸ For example there are those who “will cast water themselves upon those sparks which Christ labors to kindle in them, because they will not be troubled with the light of them.”²⁹ Others resist the knocking of the Holy Spirit:

The Holy Ghost hath often knocked at their hearts, as willing to have kindled some holy desires in them. How else can they be said to resist the Holy Ghost, but that the Spirit was readier to draw them to a further degree of goodness than stood with their own wills?³⁰

The sense in which the reprobate “resist the Holy Ghost” needs to be clarified. They resist Him as they resist *the preaching* (Acts 7:51). They resist Him by opposing preaching and persecuting preachers, but the inward gracious works of the Spirit in the heart are irresistible and particular to the elect. The inward works of the Spirit in the heart of the reprobate are not gracious. They harden the wicked in their sins.

Others refuse to entertain the “gracious motions” of the Spirit:

The Holy Ghost is given to them that obey, to them that do not resist the Spirit of God. For in the ministry of the Gospel the Spirit is given in some degree to reprobates ... they have the gracious motions offered them, but they do not obey them. Therefore the Spirit seizeth

27. Pettit, *The Heart*, p. 67.

28. Pettit, *The Heart*, p. 67.

29. Richard Sibbes, *Works*, vol. 1 (Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, repr. 1979), p. 73.

30. Richard Sibbes, *Works*, p. 74.

not upon them ... the Spirit is given to them that obey the sweet motions of it.³¹

Sibbes exhorts the sinner to “entertain” the blessed messengers of the Spirit; to “labor to subject [himself] to” the Spirit of Christ; to become aware of his sin and misery so that he becomes a bruised reed.³² Sibbes’ work *A Bruised Reed*, deals, among other things, with the subject of spiritual preparation. This bruising of the Spirit is something with which the sinner can cooperate. We must “join with God in bruising ourselves” and “lay siege to the hardness of our own hearts.”³³ To prepare for salvation the sinner is supposed to make his own heart tender so that it is more open to yielding to the Spirit.³⁴ Sibbes appeals to the example of King Josiah, who was commended for having a tender heart (II Chron. 34:27), but we must insist that Josiah was *already* a believer. God had *already regenerated* the king. That explains why he responded to the discovery of the law with heartfelt sorrow over his sins and the sins of the nation. This was no self-preparation of an unregenerate sinner but obedience by a child of God.

Sibbes’ doctrine savors too much of Arminianism, with its resistible grace. We can certainly agree with Pettit, who writes that “of all the preparationists Sibbes was by far the most extreme in terms of the abilities he assigned to natural man.”³⁵

III. Other Puritan Writers

Although Perkins, Ames, and Sibbes are the Puritans who wrote most extensively on the subject of preparationism, other Puritans make reference to the idea of preparatory processes in their writing and preaching.

John Owen (1616-1683) addresses the subject in the third volume of his *Works* in a section entitled, “Works of the Holy Spirit Preparatory Unto Regeneration.” Owen writes:

31. Pettit, *The Heart*, p. 67.

32. Pettit, *The Heart*, p. 68.

33. Pettit, *The Heart*, p. 68.

34. Pettit, *The Heart*, p. 70.

35. Pettit, *The Heart*, p. 73.

Ordinarily there are certain previous and preparatory works, or workings in and upon the souls of men, that are antecedent and dispositive unto it [regeneration]. But yet regeneration doth not consist in them, nor can it be educed out of them.³⁶

Owen explains that he means by this only a “material disposition” and “not such [motions] as contain grace of the same nature as regeneration itself,” employing the figure of wood: “Wood by dryness and a due composure is made fit and ready to admit of firing.”³⁷ In a similar way, then, the sinner’s heart is prepared (dried out) so that the Spirit can ignite it in regeneration.

In an obvious reference to Owen, Abraham Kuyper takes issue with this illustration:

Even the representation still maintained by some of our best theologians, that preparatory grace is like the drying of wet wood, so that the spark can more easily ignite it, we can not adopt ... The disposition of our souls is immaterial. Whatever it may be, omnipotent grace can kindle it.³⁸

Owen clarifies what he means by this preparatory work. He writes of certain things “required of us by way of duty in order unto our regeneration.”³⁹ These are outward actions such as being physically present where the gospel is preached, and diligently concentrating on the word preached and receiving it as the truth of God.⁴⁰ The sinner may, through a diligent attendance on the means, be enlightened in some sense by the truth he hears, may be affected emotionally or intellectually by it, may be convicted of his sins, and may even undergo some reformation of character. These, writes Owen, are “good, useful and material preparations

36. John Owen, *Works*, vol. 3 (Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, repr. 1966), p. 229.

37. Owen, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 229.

38. Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, repr. 1973), p. 291.

39. Owen, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 229.

40. Owen, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 230.

unto regeneration” but do not necessarily lead to it.⁴¹ Those who refuse to apply themselves in the use of means or who do not “sincerely improve” what they have received in these preliminary steps deserve to perish, and often do perish.⁴² Such “faint not merely for want of strength to proceed, but, by a free act of their own wills, they refuse the grace which is farther tendered unto them in the gospel.”⁴³

Other Puritans, by the advice they give to the unconverted, show that they believe that the unregenerate can indeed desire salvation. By this they mean more than the fact that the unregenerate can desire to escape hell. No serious-minded unbeliever who believes in the existence of a place called hell wants to go there. That does not mean that the natural man desires the spiritual blessings of salvation.

Thomas Manton (1620-1677) counsels the sinner to pray for grace, but gives him no guarantee of success:

There is a great uncertainty, yet pray; it is God’s usual way to meet with them that seek him . . . God is not engaged, but who knows what importunity may do? He may, and He may not, give grace; but usually He doth. It is God’s usual way to bless industry, and yet all they that labor have not an absolute certainty of success.⁴⁴

What a desperately gloomy message is this! How different from Christ’s promise: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened “(Matt. 7:7-8).

Joseph Alleine (1634-1668), in his *Alarm to the Unconverted*, makes appeals to the unconverted sinner that reveal how much power he ascribes to the sinner’s preparations. Sinners, he says,

41. Owen, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 234.

42. Owen, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 236.

43. Owen, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 236.

44. Edward Hindson (Ed.), *Introduction to Puritan Theology: A Reader* (Baker: Grand Rapids, MI, 1976), p. 100.

labor to get a thorough sight and lively sense and feeling of your sins
... strive to affect your heart with a deep sense of your present misery
... strike in with the Spirit when He begins to work upon your heart.⁴⁵

He adds, “Christ offers to help ... God offers to enlighten your mind ... God invites you to be made clean, and entreats you to yield to Him ... let Him do for you, and in you, what you cannot do for yourselves.”⁴⁶

William Guthrie (1620-1665), whose *The Christian’s Great Interest* was highly esteemed by John Owen, is less insistent on preparationism, although he also makes room for it in his theological system. He concedes that “we are not to speak of it ... as if none might lay claim to God’s favor who have not had this preparatory work.”⁴⁷ Sadly, Guthrie cuts the throat of assurance with comments such as these:

It will be hard to give sure essential differences between the preparatory work on those in whom afterwards Christ is formed, and those legal stirrings which are sometimes in reprobates.⁴⁸

I shall offer some things which *rarely* shall be found in the stirrings of reprobates, and which are ordinarily found in that law-work which hath a gracious issue.⁴⁹

That one qualifying word “rarely” speaks volumes. Guthrie cannot offer the anxious soul any infallible mark of regeneration because those marks can also be found (albeit rarely) in reprobates. What advice does Guthrie offer to the unconverted? In words very similar to Alleine’s, he writes, “work up your heart to be pleased with and close with that offer [of the gospel], and say

45. Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted* (Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, repr. 1978), p. 100.

46. Alleine, *Alarm*, p. 140.

47. William Guthrie, *The Christian’s Great Interest* (Banner of Truth: London, repr. 1969), p. 37.

48. Guthrie, *Interest*, p. 53.

49. Guthrie, *Interest*, pp. 53-54, italics added.

to God expressly that you do accept of that offer.”⁵⁰ Guthrie expostulates with objectors thus:

Or will any say, you cannot close with Christ? what is this you cannot do? Can you not hunger for Him, nor look to Him, nor be pleased with that salvation, nor open your mouth that He may fill it? Do not difficult the way to heaven, for it derogates much from all He hath done.⁵¹

So we see that Guthrie believed that the unregenerate sinner could make himself be pleased with the gospel “offer,” could hunger after Christ, and could therefore “close with” the Savior. However, such a sinner, pleased with Christ, and hungering after Him, may nevertheless perish.

Thomas Shepard (1605-1649), founder of Harvard University, differentiates between various kinds of grace. Reprobates may receive various graces but never attain to saving grace. A thorough law-work is essential: “When the Lord sows saving desires indeed, he ever sows them in a broken heart, which is thoroughly broken.”⁵² Hypocrites can be partakers of “awakening grace,” “enlightening grace,” “affecting grace,” but never, writes Shepard, “sanctifying grace.”⁵³ A man may profess to “hate sin,” “close with the Lord Jesus,” “love the people of God,” “seek the glory of God,” and be deceived. One wonders how a sinner in Shepard’s congregation could ever know that he is truly converted, for Shepard writes of such people “though they hate sin, yet it is unsoundly.”⁵⁴

An unsound conversion, writes Shepard, can be traced to humiliation under the law that was not sufficiently thorough:

Be sure your wound at first for sin be deep enough; for all the error in

50. Guthrie, *Interest*, p. 195.

51. Guthrie, *Interest*, p. 204.

52. Thomas Shepard, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* (Soli Deo Gloria: Morgan, PA, repr. 1997), p. 468.

53. Shepard, *Parable*, pp. 476-477.

54. Shepard, *Parable*, p. 481.

a man's faith and sanctification, it springs from that first error of his humiliation; if a man's humiliation be false, and weak, and little, his faith is light, and his sanctification counterfeit.⁵⁵

IV. Other Theologians

Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711) reveals a belief in preparationism. He speaks of "preparatory convictions"⁵⁶ and urges the unconverted to entertain hope because God "grants [them] conviction and a desire for repentance and salvation."⁵⁷ His advice is to attend diligently on the means. "You have reason to hope ... Wait, therefore, for the least movement of the Spirit, respond to it, and be careful you do not resist it."⁵⁸ However, such a desire, granted to some of the unconverted who use the means of grace, does not guarantee salvation. It is not a sign of regeneration, but *may* lead to it.

Presbyterian theologian William G. T. Shedd (1820-1894) ascribes regeneration itself to the Holy Spirit but allows man to have some "agency ... in the work of conviction which is preparatory or antecedent" to the new birth.⁵⁹ Shedd wants to be careful in distinguishing the Augustinian/Calvinistic idea of preparation from the Semi-Pelagian/Arminian/Synergistic version. The Calvinist, writes Shedd, means by it "conviction of sin, guilt and helplessness." The Arminian "denotes some faint desires and beginnings of holiness in the natural man."⁶⁰ This preparation, then, is not a "part of regeneration, but something prior and antecedent to it."⁶¹ Shedd next appeals to "common or prevenient grace." The sinner, writes Shedd, "moved and assisted" by this grace is able to perform certain duties. Shedd lists some of these common grace-

55. Shepard, *Parable*, p. 482.

56. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 2 (Soli Deo Gloria Publications: Ligonier, PA, 1993), p. 249.

57. à Brakel, *Reasonable*, vol. 2, p. 258.

58. à Brakel, *Reasonable*, vol. 2, p. 259.

59. William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2 (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1891), p. 512.

60. Shedd, *Theology*, vol. 2, p. 512.

61. Shedd, *Theology*, vol. 2, p. 512.

assisted duties: “reading and hearing ... serious application of the mind ... conviction ... illumination in regard to the requirements of the law ... distress of conscience and ... reformation of the outward life.”⁶² This is God’s normal mode of operation, except in infants:

Man gains spiritual life in an instant, though he may have had days and months of a foregoing experience of conviction and spiritual death. This is the ordinary divine method.⁶³

Furthermore, Shedd insists that the unregenerate have the “duty and privilege” to pray for the “convicting and regenerating Spirit.”⁶⁴ His proof is Luke 11:13. He reasons that since the Father has promised to give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him, when the unregenerate pray for the Holy Spirit of regeneration, God will grant that request (or to be more exact, “might possibly” grant it). But Christ is not teaching that the unregenerate can ask for the Holy Spirit. He is teaching that *believers* can be assured that God will grant *them* His grace and Holy Spirit, which they need to live a sanctified life. The teaching of Luke 11:13 and similar passages is summarized in Lord’s Day 45 (Q&A 116) of the Heidelberg Catechism: “God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with sincere desires continually ask them of Him, and are thankful for them.” Shedd then appeals to Ezekiel 36 and Joel 2 and claims that the ground for such a prayer is that the Holy Spirit is “promised generally under the Gospel”! If Shedd means by this that God promises every unregenerate person regenerating grace, we stand amazed, since the promises in the prophets are particular, and certain. God promises to give His people, and them only, a new heart. The unregenerate are *required* to pray for regeneration, writes Shedd:

No man has any warrant or encouragement to pray either for conversion or for sanctification, before he has prayed for regeneration.

62. Shedd, *Theology*, vol. 2, pp. 512-513.

63. Shedd, *Theology*, vol. 2, p. 512.

64. Shedd, *Theology*, vol. 2, p. 513.

Whoever, therefore, forbids an unregenerate man to pray for regenerating grace, forbids him to pray for any and all grace. In prohibiting him from asking God to create within him a clean heart, he prohibits him altogether from asking for the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵

In addition we note that David petitioned God to create in him a clean heart when he was *already* regenerate (Psalm 51:10). Never in the history of the world has an unregenerate sinner asked God for regeneration.

Shedd warns that the sinner must not be slack in this work of conviction:

The Holy Spirit can convict a sinner without his co-operation ... but this is not to be counted upon ... he [the sinner] must endeavor to deepen ... the sense of sin which has been produced in his conscience, or he is liable to be entirely deserted by the Spirit, and left to his own will, and be filled with his own devices. The sinner cannot co-operate in the work of regeneration, but he can in the work of conviction.⁶⁶

However, none of this makes God a debtor. This preparation does not make a man “deserving” of regeneration but a “*suitable subject*” for the exercise of God’s unmerited compassion in regenerating grace.⁶⁷ After seeking, desiring, preparing himself, and praying, the sinner may find that God leaves him in his unregenerate state. The sinner may not complain, because God is exercising His divine prerogative of sovereignty. The sinner, therefore, must “proceed upon a probability.”⁶⁸ In the end his desires may be denied.

The sinner may even prepare himself for regeneration by giving up heretical notions. If a sinner believes he is not a helpless sinner, denies that sin deserves endless punishment, or that the vicarious atonement is necessary, he is not, in such a state, pre-

65. Shedd, *Theology*, vol. 2, p. 514.

66. Shedd, *Theology*, vol. 2, p. 515.

67. Shedd, *Theology*, vol. 2, p. 516, italics added.

68. Shedd, *Theology*, vol. 2, p. 516.

pared for regenerating grace. “Such opinions,” writes Shedd, “must be given up and scriptural views must be adopted before the Holy Spirit will create a new heart.”⁶⁹ Even that may not be enough. If the “orthodox truth is held in unrighteousness,” that attitude must be changed too, so the sinner is better prepared.⁷⁰ After all that preparation, the sinner having become a “serious anxious inquirer”⁷¹ and one who is “endeavoring to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,”⁷² it is only “in the highest degree probable” for him, using common grace, to be saved.⁷³ Where is the comfort in that?

Herman Witsius (1636-1708) treats preparationism in *The Economy of the Covenants*. Witsius does not believe that a man can prepare himself for regeneration. Since the unregenerate are evil trees, they cannot produce good fruit (Matt. 7:18). Therefore, “unless a person can be thought to prepare himself for grace by sin,” preparationism cannot be admitted.⁷⁴ Preparationism, insists Witsius, is a semi-Pelagian doctrine. The semi-Pelagians taught that a sinner can come to grace

... by asking, seeking, knocking; and that, in some at least, before they are born again, there is a kind of repentance, together with a sorrow for sin ... a beginning of faith, and an initial love of God, and a desire of grace.⁷⁵

That certainly sounds like the teaching of some of the theologians that we have considered above. Witsius takes issue with the view of Perkins. Concerning his view he writes:

69. Shedd, *Theology*, vol. 2, p. 518.

70. Shedd, *Theology*, vol. 2, p. 518.

71. Shedd, *Theology*, vol. 2, p. 518.

72. Shedd, *Theology*, vol. 2, p. 528, italics added.

73. Shedd, *Theology*, vol. 2, p. 526.

74. Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity* (P&R Publishing: Phillipsburg, NJ, repr. 1990), p. 361.

75. Witsius, *The Economy*, p. 363.

But we really think they argue more accurately, who make these, and the like things in the Elect, to be preparations to the further and more perfect operations of a more noble and plentiful spirit, and so not preparations for regeneration, but the fruits and effects of the first regeneration.⁷⁶

Witsius concedes that operations of the Spirit may occur in the reprobate, but they are “no preparations for regeneration” either by their intrinsic nature or by God’s design, but these operations in the reprobate are “consistent with spiritual death,” and the reprobate, being deceived by these “actings which counterfeit spiritual life, are the more hardened in a real death.”⁷⁷ Having carefully differentiated between regeneration in the broader and narrower senses, Witsius concludes by rejecting any means for preparing a sinner for the new birth. “They are not preparations for the first regeneration, but effects of it,” because death is no preparation for life.⁷⁸

Witsius believes that there *is* a sense in which the Lord, by His providential dealings with the elect before their conversion, “prepares” them for their future spiritual life. He “preserves them from base and scandalous crimes,” and they are kept from the sin against the Holy Ghost. Such sinners may have grown up in an ecclesiastical environment, so that “many evident principles of divine truth are understood by the natural mind,” which serve the believer after he has been regenerated.⁷⁹ None of these “dispose man for regeneration,” but they are providential works of God, whereby, even before their regeneration, God works all things for the good of His elect. This is the same kind of preparatory grace to which Abraham Kuyper refers. Kuyper’s view is that the unregenerate elect are “the subject of divine labor, care and protection” even during their godless life before their conversion.⁸⁰ Witsius, however, like the Puritans, urges the one who will not

76. Witsius, *The Economy*, p. 363.

77. Witsius, *The Economy*, p. 363.

78. Witsius, *The Economy*, p. 365.

79. Witsius, *The Economy*, p. 366.

80. Kuyper, *The Work*, p. 284.

“profanely despise his salvation” to attend the means of grace, for there is a “brighter hope” for the one who listens to the preaching and cries to God for converting grace, than for the one who neglects the church altogether.⁸¹

V. Objections to Preparationism

We repudiate this doctrine as foreign to Scripture and the Reformed confessions. Although there is much to admire in the Puritans, on this issue we must part company.

A. The Unregenerate Do Not Hunger After Righteousness

The Scriptures teach that spiritual hunger will always be satisfied. There is no sinner who has ever hungered after righteousness who will go away empty into that place where he will not have as much as a drop of water to cool his tongue (Luke 16:24). Jesus promises as much in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness.” Why? Because there is a good chance, a fair possibility, a high probability, but no guarantee that they may be filled? No, the sweetness contained in the beatitude is this: “For they *shall* be filled” (Matt. 5:6). Preparationists take this sweet morsel of bread and cast it to the dogs (Matt. 15:26). Indeed, the point of this beatitude is that the one who is hungering and thirsting *is blessed*, that is, already regenerate. Such a hungering after mercy is not (contra Ames) a preparation for regeneration, but evidence of it. The Canons of Dordt deny that the unregenerate “can yet hunger and thirst after righteousness and life, and offer the sacrifice of a contrite and broken spirit, which is pleasing to God,” for the Fathers at Dordt, quoting Matthew 5:6, insisted,

to hunger and thirst after deliverance from misery and after life, and to offer unto God the sacrifice of a broken spirit, is peculiar to the regenerate and those that are called blessed (Canons, III/IV, Rejection 4).

81. Witsius, *The Economy*, pp. 371-372.

The unregenerate have *no hunger* for spiritual things. They see the Bread of Life as loathsome. They drink iniquity greedily like water (Job 15:16), but the Water of Life does not appeal to them. God does the wicked no injustice by not feeding them with the Bread of Life, because they have no desire for it. God creates, and satisfies, a desire for righteousness in the elect alone.

B. The Unregenerate Will Is Not Pliable to God's Will

Furthermore, the Scriptures do not teach (contra Perkins) that the reprobate have wills made “pliable” to the will of God. The will of man is totally depraved. Without regeneration the sinner cannot will or even *will to will* spiritual good. The Bible speaks of two kinds of men, and only two: the natural (unregenerate) and the spiritual (regenerate) man. There is no intermediate stage between these two states. I Corinthians 2:14 teaches that the natural man “receiveth not” spiritual things because he *cannot* know them. The carnal mind of the natural man is “enmity” against God. It *cannot* be subject to the law of God (Rom. 8:7). Of the one who does evil (the natural, unregenerate man), Christ says that he “hateth the light” and does not come to the light (John 3:20). The natural man does not understand, does not seek after God, does not do anything good (Rom. 3:11-12). The will before regeneration is powerless.

The Canons of Dort describe God's work of regeneration thus:

He [God] opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised; infuses new qualities into the will, which, though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and *pliable*; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree it may bring forth the fruits of good actions (Canons, III/IV:11, my italics).

The only pliable will is therefore the regenerate will. No unregenerate man has “a small obedience” or “faint desires.” In no sense is the will “subdued,” so that in some small way it wills good. No unregenerate man desires repentance, longs to believe in Christ, earnestly seeks after God, or is pleased with the gospel. Every unregenerate man, without exception, abhors Christ, repu-

diates repentance, and finds the gospel “foolishness” (I Cor. 1:18). Only God, by a mighty work of grace, which He works in His elect alone, can change that.

A small beginning of obedience is present only in the regenerate (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 44, Q&A 114). Faith, even if it is as small as a mustard seed, or is mixed with much unbelief, is a sign of regeneration, not grace-induced seeking in the unregenerate (Matt. 17:20; Mark 9:24). Seeking is only something the regenerate can do, because *all* seekers, without exception (of whom there are none by nature, Rom. 3:11), are *promised* that they *shall* find (Matt. 7:7; Luke 11:10).

C. Preparationism Makes Grace Common and Resistible.

The preparationists speak of “enlightening grace,” “awakening grace,” and “affecting grace,” in addition to saving grace. The reprobate, claim the preparationists, are frequently partakers of these types of “common grace,” but because they do not “improve” the grace, they justly perish. The Scriptures know of only one grace: saving, particular, efficacious grace. The grace of Scripture is irresistible.

D. Preparationism Complicates Conversion

Abraham Kuyper complains of those who teach that “certain moods and dispositions must be prepared in the sinner before God can quicken him.”⁸² The preparationist would object to the word “can” and substitute “will,” but the principle is basically the same. Kuyper argues that God can impart the new life of Christ to the most hardened sinner “devoid of every predisposition.”⁸³ Presumably, no Puritan would disagree with that. None would want to limit the omnipotence of God. But the Puritans represent the sinner as a long time under the “lash of the law.”⁸⁴ A long, arduous work of conviction of sin is necessary for most people to be regenerated and converted. This is not the way Scripture depicts

82. Kuyper, *The Work*, pp. 290-291.

83. Kuyper, *The Work*, p. 291.

84. Sibbes, *Works*, vol. 1, p. 44.

conversion. Where was the prolonged conviction of sin in the Samaritan woman (John 4), in Zacchaeus (Luke 19), in those converted on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), in the apostle Paul (Acts 9), or in the Philippian jailor (Acts 16)? In each of those conversions the Spirit convicted of sin, and granted repentance from sin, but there is no indication in Scripture that sinners lie for weeks, months, even years under the terrors of conscience. Yet, this seems to be the *sine qua non* in the Puritan doctrine of conversion. Thus, Shedd writes, “the Holy Spirit does not ordinarily regenerate a man until he is a convicted man, until ... he has become conscious of his need of regenerating grace.”⁸⁵ Surely, if he is a convicted man, he is already regenerated. If he desires regeneration, he has been born again. No unregenerate person desires regeneration. The Canons of Dordt (I, 16) do not lay so many obstacles before the sinner. There are those in the church who attend the means of grace, and who do not “strongly feel” the evidence of grace in them that they desire to feel. They ought not despair. The Canons are not speaking of the unregenerate, in whom there is no “living faith,” “peace of conscience,” “earnest endeavor after filial obedience” (Canons, I, 16), but of those in whom these graces operate but are not “strongly felt.” The Canons assume such to be regenerate because they show the signs of being spiritually alive. With true pastoral warmth the Canons encourage such a trembling child of God:

Much less cause to be terrified by the doctrine of reprobation have they who, though they seriously desire to be turned to God, to please Him only, and to be delivered from the body of death, cannot yet reach that measure of holiness and faith to which they aspire; since a merciful God has promised that He will not quench the smoking flax, nor break the bruised reed (Canons, I, 16).

If God has begun the work of salvation in a sinner (evidenced by a hatred of sin, and a desire after holiness) He will bring it to completion (Phil. 1:6). The bruised reed of Matthew 12:20 is

85. Shedd, *Theology*, vol. 2, p. 514.

simply the child of God who is broken-hearted over his sins, who is “poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3), who “mourns” over his sins (Matt. 5:4), and who “hungers” after righteousness (Matt. 5:6). In other words, he is “blessed” and a member of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:3-11). None of those spiritual characteristics are ever found in an unregenerate person. God will not snuff out that smoking flax, although much imperfection (smoke) remains in him.

E. Preparationism Destroys Assurance and Breeds Despair

The doctrine of preparationism is desperately depressing. It robs the child of God of his assurance. As Pettit states it,

if contrition and humiliation are not in themselves signs of grace ... how can one ever have assurance of faith? Far from being a comfortable doctrine, it was bound to lead to despair.⁸⁶

It must lead there. Do I have sorrow over my sins? Do I earnestly seek after Christ? Do I hunger and thirst after righteousness? Do I have a deep sense of my sin and a desire for deliverance? Do I believe in Jesus Christ and trust in Him alone for my righteousness? All of the above may be merely signs of “preparatory grace,” not regeneration itself. Reprobates may come that far.

Do I feel my need for salvation, and am I earnestly seeking to be found in Christ? (Phil. 3:9). If so, the Scriptures assure me that I am regenerate. The preparationists put obstacles in my way. Perhaps I am not humbled enough. Perhaps I have not experienced enough conviction. Perhaps I hate my sins, but only “unsoundly.” The preparationists depict unregenerate sinners lying at the feet of Jesus, pleading with Him to regenerate them. Although the probability is high that such sinners will be saved (a greater possibility than those who completely neglect the means of grace), yet they offer no guarantee:

Yet all were told, at the same time, that no matter how much they prepared, no matter how thoroughly they searched beneath the sur-

86. Pettit, *The Heart Prepared*, p. 19.

face of human appearances, God's mercy could be denied in the end. The prepared heart, while a necessary prerequisite to the conversion experience, was no guarantee of salvation.⁸⁷

Christ, however, teaches that "him that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37). He promises rest (not a possibility of rest) to those who "labor and are heavy laden" (Matt. 11:28), because the spiritual heaviness has been worked in them by the Holy Spirit. There are no heavy-laden, thirsty, willing sinners who will fail to receive the salvation that they seek. There are no sinners trying to come to Christ who fail to reach Him.

In New England, where preparationism was popular, candidates for church membership were required to "give detailed accounts of their conversion experience."⁸⁸ Candidates would have to relate how they were under deep conviction of sin for a prolonged period. This, not a credible profession of faith in the truth of God's Word, with a godly walk, was the qualification for church membership. This became an impossible burden, for not all (especially those who grew up in the church) have such a dramatic conversion experience that they can relate to the elders. So concerned were the Puritan preparationists, especially in New England, to keep hypocrites out of the church that they endangered the wheat while trying to pull out the tares (Matt. 13:29).

VI. Appeals to Scripture Considered

Surprisingly, the preparationist theologians do not make many appeals to Scripture in their writings on this subject. If we examine the instances where men are said to prepare their hearts to seek the LORD, we see that in all such cases the person in question was already a believer. For example, Jehoshaphat (II Chron. 19:3), Ezra (Ezra 7:10), and Job (Job 11:13) prepared their hearts. There is no question that a *believer* can prepare his heart to seek God.

In other cases men are *commanded* to prepare their hearts (I Sam. 7:3). That does not indicate that they have the ability or the

87. Pettit, *The Heart Prepared*, p. 19.

88. Pettit, *The Heart Prepared*, p. 160.

inclination of themselves to comply with such a command. The overwhelming evidence of Scripture is that man is dead in sins and unable to produce one good desire. One final appeal is made to Luke 1:17, “And he [John the Baptist] shall go before him ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” This text does not teach preparatory grace, but simply that God had prepared a people for Himself whom He would save in the fullness of time when Christ would come. John the Baptist would prepare the way for the Messiah’s coming.

VII. Conclusion

We must insist, with Scripture and the Reformed confessions, that man is powerless. He cannot prepare himself to receive Christ, he cannot desire Christ, and he cannot seek Christ. We must oppose any doctrine, no matter how venerable its advocates may have been, which posits any other species of grace than sovereign, irresistible, particular grace, rooted in election, and earned for the elect on the cross. If there is a grace of God for the reprobate, then it must have its origin outside of election, and it must not have been purchased on the cross. But that cannot be! Preparatory grace is, therefore, a deadly compromise, not only of Total Depravity, but also of Sovereign Election and Reprobation, and of Limited Atonement. Furthermore, since preparatory grace is allegedly resisted and rendered ineffective by the reprobate, the doctrines of Irresistible Grace and Perseverance of the Saints are compromised. Any doctrine that endangers these cardinal truths must be rejected by Reformed Christians root and branch.

We reject the convoluted theology of those who invent new categories and qualifications that change the very definition of grace. A “grace” that does not bring salvation is not grace at all (Titus 2:11). We therefore reject Thomas Shepard’s “awakening,” “enlightening,” or “affecting” grace.

There can be, prior to regeneration, no gracious work in the unregenerate, for the simple reason that regeneration is the *first work* of grace. It ought to be obvious that there can be no work prior to the first work.

In addition, it is intolerable cruelty to demand of people a dramatic conversion experience before they can be assured of their

salvation. Such obstacles may not be placed before believers who grew up in the church, who were taught to pray on their mother's knee, who were catechized and who therefore do not know a time when they did not believe in Jesus Christ. To demand of such that they describe a dramatic conversion experience before they are allowed to confess their faith is to grieve Christ's little ones. Nor may it be demanded on the mission field. It is enough when a person simply believes in Christ and shows evidence of that in a godly walk. To insist that every soul comes to Christ by means of a long and arduous process of conviction of sin (which is supposedly due to preparatory grace) is not biblical. It leads to doubting and lack of assurance. It makes true believers afraid to make confession of faith and come to the Lord's Supper. True conversion is a lifelong process, where the child of God daily turns from sin to God (repentance and faith) and experiences forgiveness at the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ. This is the Reformed doctrine of conversion as set forth in the Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 33).

Finally, we call attention to the fact that the Presbyterian tradition ought to reject preparationism on the basis of their own Confession. It is surprising that the notion of preparatory grace became so popular among the Puritans, since many of them helped frame the Westminster Confession, which teaches that "natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto" (10:3). ●

Book Reviews

Galatians, by Peter Barnes, Webster, New York: Evangelical Press. 364 pages (hardcover). [Reviewed by Herman Hanko.]

Evangelical Press, with plants in Darlington, England and Webster, New York, is publishing a set of New Testament commentaries. The commentary on Galatians is the fifth book of Scripture on which commentaries have been written. The author of this commentary is pastor at Revesby Presbyterian Church in Sydney, Australia. He also is lecturer in Church History at the Presbyterian Theological Centre in Sydney. He has written other books as well as this commentary.

The book has several important strengths. It includes a rather thorough evaluation and critique of the so-called Federal Vision and the New Perspective on Paul. A commentary on Paul's letter to the Galatians is the proper place to give such a critique, for no book in the Scriptures, other than Paul's epistle to the Romans, is as powerful a refutation of the heresy of making justification de-

pendent on faith and works as is this book. Barnes' critique is clear, concise, and uncompromising. It appears in different places in the book: it is found already in the Introduction and is continued in his analysis of Galatians 2:16, 17.

The commentary is easy to read, and Barnes' explanation of the text is characterized, for the most part, by sober and sound exegesis. I like his emphasis in his treatment of 1:8, 9, on the fact that there is only one true gospel that must be preached and not acceptable variations of it. The strength of this assertion is underscored by the author's criticism of the ministry of Billy Graham and of ECT (Evangelicals and Catholics Together—a document signed by leading conservative evangelicals, including J. I. Packer).

Another help in the commentary is the references to many other commentators. Guidance is given for locating additional help, to those who wish to make a more thorough study of Galatians than Barnes gives.

The commentary is brief, but

intentionally so, I think, because it is meant primarily for the layman who seeks guidance in his study of Scripture. Its very brevity, however, makes for some weaknesses. The exegesis is very skimpy and at times does not give an adequate explanation of the text. Key concepts are not developed in a positive way. These key concepts include terms such as redemption, God's promise, Christian liberty, the federal and organic headship of Christ, etc.—terms that occupy a crucial place in the great doctrines dealt with in this important book.

A rather striking example of Barnes' failure to develop the concepts of the federal and organic headship of Christ is found in his treatment of the expression "crucified with Christ," found in 2:20. He interprets the expression to refer to the Damascus Road experience (117).

I hope that his statement in connection with his explanation of Galatians 4:4 that pagan mythology is evidence of pagan anticipation of Christ's work is a slip of the pen. ■

The Netherlands Reformed Church: 1571-2005. Karel Blei. Translated by Allen J. Janssen. Grand Rapids, MI. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006. Pp. xiv-164. \$25.00 (paper). ISBN# 978-0-8028-3286-3 [Reviewed by Prof. Russell Dykstra.]

This book is part of "The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America" (No. 51), which has been a rich source of material on Reformed doctrine and history, both in the Netherlands and in America. As the title of the book indicates,

this is a history of the Netherlands Reformed Church from the sixteenth century, when the Reformed faith became a significant part of the Protestant Reformation in the Netherlands, to the present time. This is not a history of the Reformed churches or movement in the Netherlands. It is specifically a history of the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, or what is sometimes called the state church in the Netherlands (*NHK*).

The author, Rev. Karel Blei, is a leading minister in the *NHK*.

In his foreword, Dr. Allen Janssen writes of the high qualifications of the author for recounting the history of the *NHK*, especially the modern history.

Blei is himself an interesting and extremely well informed guide. He served as a pastor in the church prior to his appointment as general secretary. He is also a theologian of significant accomplishments, publishing on theological, historical, and ecclesiastical issue in the Netherlands. More broadly, he has served on the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches.

The first sixty-four pages of the book describe the history of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands when the Reformed churches were one group, and there were not two or more Reformed denominations in the Netherlands. The next twelve pages recount the history of the turbulent 1800s – the *Afscheiding* (Secession) of 1834 and the second separation from the state church connected with Abraham Kuyper (the *Doleantie* of 1886). The final eighty-two pages give an account of the *NHK's* history in the last century.

Blei writes well and the translation is very smooth. The book gives a good overview of the history of the Reformed church over the past 425 years. It is, however, a brief history, and the book does not examine in detail the doctrinal issues that were part of the controversies through the ages.

A more significant criticism of the book is the ambivalence towards doctrine. The author does not take a stand for the Reformed truth and evaluate various events in that light. The presentation of the teaching of Luther and Calvin is weak. The account of the Arminian controversy is not entirely accurate. Blei writes that “Arminius himself advocated the calling of a national synod by the government. The synod would have to express itself on the difference” (p. 30). This may be formally true, but Arminius’ call for a national synod always included a request to revise the confessions – a significant omission by Blei. The orthodox rejected these calls because they refused to consider that option. Blei’s sympathy with the Remonstrants is plain from the fact he adopts their complaint as his own when he writes: “Only three of the delegates of the

synod belonged to the party of the remonstrants. Thus there could hardly be a real discussion of the points of difference between the remonstrants and the counterremonstrants” (p. 31). That was the viewpoint of the Remonstrants. They insisted that the Synod of Dordrecht had been called in order to hold a discussion of differences. The Reformed churches maintained that the synod was called to sit in judgment of the views of the Remonstrants based on Scripture and the confessions.

Blei is very easy on the enemies of the truth. He writes of Descartes’ rationalism that “[d]ecidedly, Descartes did not intend thereby to attack or undermine Christian faith” (p. 38). Concerning “Groningen Theology” he writes, “This new theology did not intend to detract from the authority of the Bible, but principally set itself against any imposition of doctrine” (p. 63). Writing about the “intent” of these men and movements is an odd way of addressing the matter. The fact is that the philosophy of both did undermine the Christian faith and the authority of the Bible.

The viewpoint of the author is decidedly that of a minister

in the *NHK*. He is not friendly to those who left the *NHK*. His presentation of various secessions is not unfair, but he obviously has little sympathy, for instance, for the suffering endured by the ministers and people of the *Afscheiding* (Secession) of 1834. Nor can he disguise his critical attitude towards Abraham Kuyper and the *Doleantie*, who left in 1886.

That is understandable to a certain extent. Indeed, part of the value of the book is that the author is giving the history from the perspective of the *NHK*. Sadly, he is one with the *NHK* and obviously has no qualms with the path taken by his church. Thus the description of the history of the *NHK* in the last century is a history of spiritual decline and apostasy, leading to the death of his denomination. And Blei was a willing accomplice to this spiritual suicide.

The last century of the history has the most detail and is thus most profitable, even though it is sad to read. Numbers tell part of the story. At the turn of the twentieth century, almost half of the population in the Netherlands were members of the *NHK*. By 1930, that was down to a third of the Dutch

population, and the percentage of those who belonged to no church rose from 2.3 percent in 1899 to 14.4 percent in 1930 (p. 85). Worse times were coming.

The formation of the “*Gereformeerde Bond*” in 1908 indicates a concern among many in the *NHK* that all was not well. The “*Bonders*” wanted the church to be more confessional. The rest of the book indicates that the *Bond* never brought about a solid Reformed movement, nor did the *Bond* cause the *NHK* to adopt a Reformed position.

World War II was unspeakably hard on the Netherlands. It was also spiritually detrimental to the *NHK*. The harm began with cooperation with other churches. During the war, the *NHK* joined with seven other Protestant churches to express disagreement with various German activities in the Netherlands. This also involved consultation with the Roman Catholic Church.

Also during the war, a group of theologians (representing, we are told, all factions of the *NHK* except the *Bond*) produced a document entitled “We believe and confess.” Blei’s evaluation of it is that in it, “the influence of Barth’s thought comes

through” (p. 95). Hendrikus Berkhof was also heavily involved.

After the war, the synod finally agreed to revise the general rules of the church. The pressure for this had been building for years, even before the war. New rules were finally adopted in 1951. These rules would allow for a general synod of delegates sent by the churches, as opposed to men appointed to that position, serving as a synodical board. The church rules identified the *NHK* as the church of the people (*volkskerk*), so that all those born in the sphere of the church who did not expressly state that they did not want to belong to it, would be counted as members. These would be called “birth members,” and this continued the idea that the *NHK* is the state church of the Netherlands, even though not supported or controlled by the government. The rules defined the mission of the *NHK* to serve the people of the Netherlands. The twofold mission was the “spreading of the gospel” among “those who have been estranged from it” and the “continuing work for Christianizing of the life of the people” (p. 100).

The Reformed churches were much affected by the German attempt to exterminate the Jews and by the Reformed church members' efforts to save the Jews from physical death, but not from their unbelief. The Jews were considered to have a religion that stood on its own. There exists an "essential relationship of Christian belief with that of Israel" (p. 93). Thus the new rules deliberately refrained from speaking of any mission work towards the Jews, but only held out the hope of a "conversation" with the Jews.

The section of the new rules that is most telling, and most indicative of where the *NHK* would eventually end up, is Article X on the confessions. Some proposed the wording that the ecclesiastical gatherings would do their work "in obedience to Holy Scripture and standing on the soil of the confessional documents." The *Gereformeerde Bond* pressed for the words "in agreement with." But the *NHK* decided instead for an even weaker link – "in obedience to Holy Scripture and in communion with the confession of the fathers" (p. 102). In effect, the *NHK* had no confessional basis. Blei's justification for this is significant.

He writes (p. 102):

It is to be noted that Article X consciously talks not about the confession but about the "confessing of the church." "Confessing" is something current, something that must ever happen anew. The church "confesses ...always afresh...Jesus Christ as Head of the Church and Lord of the world," is how it is put. And confessing as a contemporary action is presupposed to be something other than a pure repetition of what was said at an earlier time. The truth cannot, so the thought that lies behind this notion, be fixed exhaustively in one particular confessional formula, no matter how classic. It must always be advanced anew, in new situations, in the face of new challenges. That too is articulated in Article X in the definition that the church confesses "in understanding of its responsibility for the present."

The road of apostasy would begin to slope even steeper. The *NHK* synod of 1955 adopted a document entitled "The Christian existence in the society of the Netherlands." In it the *NHK* specifically rejected the Kuyperian notion of "antithesis" while adopting (unwit-

tingly?) some aspects of his common grace theory. With regard to the latter, the report stated: “And there is a blessed unrest and uprising among non-Christians against that which is wrong, which arouses them to go in new ways, of which we should not dare to say that God’s good favor is absent” (p. 108).

The synod refused to endorse Christian education (109). By 1956 the synod was giving advice to the government on purely political matters, and this continued to occupy more (most?) of the *NHK*’s attention to the end of her existence (pp. 110-112). In the 1950s and 60s the *NHK* jettisoned the doctrine of sovereign predestination. Women were allowed into the special offices beginning in 1958, and in full parity with men by 1966.

Chapter 10 deals with the movement that ended with the elimination of the *NHK* – *Samen Op Weg* (Together on the Way). Again the statistics are significant. In 1900, 48.4 percent were *NHK*. By 1930, this had dropped to 34.5 percent. By 1998, the percentage of Dutch citizens who were members of the *NHK* was a mere thirteen. A full sixty-four percent of the

citizens declared themselves members of no church. The book describes the process of unifying the *GKN* (*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*), the *NHK*, and eventually the Evangelical-Lutheran Church into the Protestant Church of the Netherlands (*PKN*). It began in 1981 and was concluded in 2004.

In the final chapter, Blei tries to demonstrate that the Reformed influence (i.e., the *NHK*) is not gone in the Netherlands. It is a pathetic attempt. What in fact comes out is that the *NHK* members are now willing to live in a denomination that is influenced by Pentecostalism and by Baptist practices, denies the authority of the Bible, and “blesses” homosexual unions. Apparently, they are not even sure about God – male or female. The second to the last sentence of the book contains an odd and awkward reference to “the God of the covenant who does not leave God’s Self without witness in the history of the people of the Netherlands” (p. 158). The reason for this strange construction is that Blei obviously wants to avoid the pronoun “him” in reference to God.

The dreadful judgment of God has fallen upon this apostatizing church. May God yet give courage and strength of faith to the faithful in the Netherlands. ■

Calvin and the Biblical Languages, by John D. Currid. Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2006. Pp. 106. \$16.00 (paper). ISBN-10: 184 55021245. ISBN-13: 978-184 5502126. [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

Dr. John Currid is Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. In this work he not only demonstrates the important use that John Calvin made of the original languages of the Old and New Testaments, but also issues a clarion call to Reformed seminaries to remain steadfast in their insistence on the importance of a mastery of Hebrew and Greek by those who are being trained for the ministry, as well as a call to ministers of the gospel to make use of the original languages in their work with the text of Holy Scripture. Currid begins his book by documenting the decline in knowledge and use of

the original languages in the church prior to the Reformation. He demonstrates that the Reformation was a return to Scripture, an important aspect of which was a return to the study of the Scriptures in the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament.

Currid's focus is on John Calvin and the biblical languages. He demonstrates that Calvin was a "distinguished textual scholar" who was proficient in Hebrew and Greek. "Calvin may not have been an expert Hebraist and Greek scholar, along the lines of the contemporary Reuchlin or Scaliger, or the later Gesenius, but he had a thorough working knowledge of the Hebrew and Greek languages" (p. 29). Currid illustrates Calvin's language skills as exhibited in his lectures, his sermons, and his commentaries. In all three endeavors it is clear that Calvin used his biblical language skills, and interpreted and applied the teaching of Scrip-

ture on the basis of the original text. His commentaries are filled with references to the original Hebrew and Greek. In his commentaries Calvin works with the original text by way of extensive word studies, as well as grammatical and syntactical analysis. The commentaries are replete with examples of grammatical insights and fruits of etymological research.

Calvin's main calling was lecturer in the Academy of Geneva. Ordinarily his lectures were on books of the Bible. As was the custom of the day, he taught theology in connection with instruction on specific books of the Old and New Testaments. His method was invariably to read the text of his lecture in Hebrew or Greek, offer a very literal translation into Latin, after which he would often also provide a smoother, more colloquial translation, followed by his comments on the passage. Calvin's practice was to sight-read the text, whether Hebrew or Greek, without any linguistic aids. Such was the Reformer's mastery of the biblical languages.

Besides being a professor in Geneva's Academy, Calvin was also the senior minister in Geneva. It is estimated that

Calvin preached no fewer than 4,000 sermons. Significantly, at least 2,000 sermons were on the Old Testament. Fully half of his preaching was preaching on the Old Testament Scriptures. In this regard, too, Calvin is a model to Reformed preachers.

Calvin's sermons were expository—explanations of the text of Scripture. He preached without notes. He objected to read sermons. Calvin's commitment to extempore preaching did not mean that he came into the pulpit unprepared. His extant sermons show clearly the extent of his careful preparation before mounting the pulpit. But he came to the pulpit with only his Bible in hand, that is, his Hebrew Old Testament or Greek New Testament. And the sermons exhibit his wrestling with the original text in arriving at his understanding of the meaning and appropriate application. His preaching clearly "... demonstrates his considerable ability to work with the original texts" (p. 28).

The book ends with a plea—a timely and urgent plea. Currid lambastes the seminaries today that are deemphasizing and even abandoning biblical language requirements. "Many Protestant and Evangelical

seminaries do not require the biblical languages for the divinity degree, and many do not teach them at all, especially as regards the language of Hebrew. Some theological schools have retreated to the point of teaching the biblical languages online or simply offering a ‘tools’ approach” (p. 79). At the same time, it seems to be rare that ministers keep up their language skills after graduating seminary and entering the ministry. The minister often uses the excuse that he is too busy to take the time to labor with the original text in sermon preparation, and congregations and consistories do not always see the importance of it. “Preachers today often proudly say that they never make use of the language skills they acquired in seminary – having heard some of them preach, I have no doubt that they are telling the truth!” (p. 83).

This situation in Reformed and Evangelical seminaries and among ministers, Currid finds

inexcusable. Worse, he contends that the neglect of the biblical languages puts those who are guilty of this neglect in jeopardy of losing not only a distinctive feature of the Reformation, but of the heritage of the Reformation itself. “We need pastorscholars, men like Calvin and those whom he trained, to stand up and guard the sacred deposit that has been left to our charge” (p. 84).

This is a fine book, a book that this reviewer wholeheartedly recommends. The thesis of the book regarding the Reformer John Calvin’s estimation and use of the biblical languages is well-documented. The plea of the author is timely. One can only hope that Reformed and Presbyterian seminaries and ministers will respond positively to the plea. Currid is right. Retaining the biblical languages is inexorably bound up with retention of our Reformation heritage. ■

Henry J. Kuiper: Shaping the Christian Reformed Church, 1907-1962, by James A. De Jong. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007. Pp. xviii-270. \$34.00 (paper). [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

President-emeritus of Calvin Theological Seminary James A. De Jong has written an interesting account of the life and work of influential Christian Reformed minister Henry J. Kuiper. Because of the prominence of “HJK,” the book affords as well a fascinating look at the Christian Reformed Church during the years of Kuiper’s ministry, from 1904, when Kuiper entered what would now be considered seminary, until his death in 1962.

For most of his ministerial career, Kuiper was a leading, powerful churchman. He was deeply involved in the ouster of Ralph Janssen from Calvin Seminary in 1922. De Jong makes plain that Janssen was known to hold and teach higher-critical (that is, unbelieving) views of the Old Testament as early as 1906.

Kuiper also played a leading role in the deposition of Rev. Henry Danhof and Rev.

George Ophoff by Christian Reformed Classis Grand Rapids West in January 1925. In the deposing of the two ministers and their consistories and in the refusal by the classis to examine B. J. Danhof for ordination to the ministry (since at that time Danhof opposed the doctrine of common grace), “H. J. Kuiper’s hand on the tiller had guided the outcome” (58). Thus Henry J. Kuiper became part of the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches, which formed as the result of these depositions and Herman Hoeksema’s deposition by Classis Grand Rapids East of the Christian Reformed Church.

Kuiper defended and promoted the doctrine of common grace adopted by the Christian Reformed Synod of 1924 by preaching and then publishing three sermons on common grace. The title of the booklet was, “The Three Points of Common Grace.”

In connection with his account of Kuiper’s involvement in the controversy over common grace, and elsewhere in the book, author De Jong recognizes Herman Hoeksema with respect.

One of the effects of the struggle over common grace was a Christian Reformed synodical warning against worldliness and worldly amusements. Kuiper was a member of the committee that drew up the statement, and may very well have been the author.

Another significant denominational project spearheaded by Kuiper was the introduction of hymns into the songbook of the Christian Reformed Church, the *Psalter Hymnal*, published in 1934.

It was especially as editor of the official Christian Reformed magazine, the *Banner*, that Kuiper gave leadership to the Christian Reformed Church. Kuiper held this influential position, and prosecuted it vigorously, for twenty-seven years, from 1929 – 1956. De Jong examines the nature and topics of Kuiper's editorship. Kuiper's editorials were wide-ranging, from labor unions to spirituality. De Jong observes that the membership of the Christian Reformed Church paid "HJK" good heed. Kuiper formed the mind of the Christian Reformed Church as no single person has done since.

One cause that was dear to Kuiper's heart was the Christian

schools. Kuiper was instrumental in the founding of several Christian schools, including Chicago Christian High School, Grand Rapids Christian High School, and Reformed Bible Institute (now, Kuyper College). The account of Kuiper's involvement in the founding of Grand Rapids Christian High School contains a sentence that causes a pang in the heart not only of the Protestant Reformed reader but also of all who love the unity of Christ's church in her Reformed manifestation.

At the first graduation [of Grand Rapids Christian High School], in the spring of 1923, board president H. J. Kuiper presided. He gave the welcome and offered the invocation; Louis Berkof delivered the commencement address; and fellow board member and vice president, the Reverend Herman Hoeksema of the Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church, closed in prayer (95).

Kuiper zealously promoted the schools in the editorial column of the *Banner*. His first editorial was on Christian education. This occasioned a long and sharp exchange with the Rev. John Vander Mey. Vander

Mey defended the public schools. He did so, intriguingly, on the ground of common grace. De Jong summarizes Vander Mey's argument: "By God's common grace, many fine things happen in many public schools" (101). Kuiper, himself a defender of common grace, was forced to ward off Vander Mey's argument by accusing Vander Mey of "an unbalanced overemphasis on common grace" (99). Ironically, Vander Mey was the Christian Reformed minister who had been a thorn in the side of Hoeksema at Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church in the common grace controversy.

Those who live in the vicinity of Chicago will read with special interest the history of Kuiper's pastorate of Second Englewood, Chicago from 1913 to 1919 and the account of Kuiper's editorial involvement in the "Wezeman Case" in 1936.

Henry J. Kuiper was a "conservative" in the Christian Reformed Church. Especially toward the end of his ministry, he did battle with the up-and-coming "progressives/liberals" in the beloved denomination he had long led. The battle was definitely pitched in 1951 by the creation of two, opposing maga-

zines within the Christian Reformed Church: the *Reformed Journal* and the *Torch and Trumpet*. Kuiper's joining the editorial committee of the *Torch and Trumpet* in 1957, immediately after retiring from the *Banner*, was clear evidence that he saw danger threatening the Christian Reformed Church, unmistakable indication where in his judgment the danger lay, and a strong signal that he intended to fight.

What the danger to the Christian Reformed Church really was, and still is (although Kuiper would not have acknowledged it, any more than does author De Jong), James De Jong nevertheless suggests in a significant footnote: "Denominational dynamics from 1880 through 1980 [in the Christian Reformed Church] can be understood essentially in terms of the interplay and application of these two ideas." "These two ideas" are the antithesis and common grace (230). De Jong thinks that the two ideas are harmonious and that the threat to the Christian Reformed Church is a failure to "balance" them. But he acknowledges that from the later years of Kuiper's ministry to the present the antithesis has been losing out in the

Christian Reformed Church. The scales of the balance are tilting steadily to the side of common grace. “Religious leaders continued to remind it [the Christian Reformed Church], *though with increasingly less force and clarity*, that the religious antithesis placed it fundamentally at odds with ‘the

world’” (250; emphasis added by the reviewer).

This well-written and well-researched study of one of the Christian Reformed Church’s leading ministers is a worthy addition to “The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America.” ■

Sweet Communion: Trajectories of Spirituality from the Middle Ages through the Further Reformation, by Arie de Reuver, translated by James A. De Jong. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007. 303 pp. \$29.99. Softcover. [Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.]

It is good to read the original writings of men of centuries past who, in God’s providence and grace, had a great impact on His church. But the task is often made difficult for the English-speaking reader by the great number of such writings, and by the fact that they are not always available in English.

Books in which the writings of such men are studied and evaluated make the task easier. However, the drawback then becomes the fact that the reader, not having studied the original

sources, is less able to critique the author’s judgment regarding them.

Arie de Reuver’s book studies and evaluates the lives and works of seven men: Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas à Kempis, Willem Teellinck, Theodorus à Brakel, Guiljelmus Saldenus, Wilhelmus à Brakel, and Herman Witsius. Specifically, de Reuver selects one or more works of each man that set forth his teachings regarding Christian piety—Clairvaux’s tract *On God’s Love* and his sermons on the Song of Solomon; à Kempis’ *The Imitation of Christ*; Teellinck’s *The Key to True Devotion, Soliloquy*, and *The New Jerusalem*; Theodorus à Brakel’s *The Stages of the Spiritual Life*; Saldenus’ *The Road of Life*; Wilhelmus à Brakel’s *Reasonable Service*; and sev-

eral of Witsius' works, including his *Practical Theology* and *Grondstukken*, which, literally translated, would be *Groundpieces*.

The last five of these men lived in the seventeenth century and were representative figures of the Further Reformation (also known as Dutch Pietism, or *nadere reformatie*). De Reuver sets out to demonstrate the influence that Clairvaux (twelfth century) and à Kempis (fifteenth century) had upon them: "The main question that plays an explicit role in this study is that of the continuity or discontinuity of the Further Reformation's spirituality with that of the Middle Ages" (p. 19). The conclusion is drawn that the piety of the Further Reformation "has in common with Bernard's mysticism ... the strong emphasis on emotional love in the experience of communion with God" (p. 281), and has in common with à Kempis "a meditative devotional attitude" (p. 282).

Although De Reuver spends three pages introducing the Further Reformation (16-18), he offers no critical evaluation of it. He acknowledges his own sympathy for it, being a product of a pietistic environment.

The reader is left to make his own judgment regarding the movement.

Reading the writings of the various men forcibly underscores the great positive characteristic of the Reformed pietistic movement—its insistence that the faith by which we are justified is a faith that also sanctifies, so that the Christian must manifest in all of his life that he is a child of God.

Throughout the book, de Reuver seems sensitive to the charge that pietism led to a mystical emphasis on feelings apart from the Word of God, for he repeatedly asserts that the mysticism of these men was proper. Of Teellinck's mysticism he says, "It is a mysticism that does not give rise to faith, but one which springs from faith and is always tied to faith" (p. 160). De Reuver defends Theodorus à Brakel specifically regarding the question of "whether this brand of mysticism strives for a kind of contemplation that minimizes the Word and faith" (p. 197). Of the five Further Reformation pietists, he says: "Without exception they all promote a spirituality in which the heart experiences communion with God created by the word and Spirit" (p. 281). Yet, in

reading the section on Theodorus à Brakel, I was reminded that mysticism is indeed the danger of all pietist movements. Apart now from any indication of this in his writings, the biographical section of à Brakel noted that he was not convinced of his call to the ministry until “one night the heavens opened and a voice spake to him: ‘I have called you to this.’ That this was the voice of God, Theodorus never doubted” (p. 166). God uses events in His providence to convict a man of the call to the ministry; but He does not speak to that man with His voice from the heavens. This smacks of some extra-biblical revelation.

The thesis—to demonstrate that the views of Clairvaux and à Kempis influenced the Further Reformation—is simple, and the author easily accomplishes his purpose. But again, whether this influence of Clairvaux and à Kempis was for good or for bad, the reader is left to conclude on his own.

The connection between à Kempis and the men of the Further Reformation is particularly interesting. None can doubt that his *Imitations* was influential for centuries to come, on both pietists and others. But à

Kempis was a man of his times: “Thomas brokers catholic ideas that are characteristically *Roman Catholic*” (p. 102, emphasis de Reuter’s), that is, ideas that deny the sufficiency of Christ’s atonement and allow room for meritorious works. How could Reformed men later rely on his insights? De Reuver finds the connection between à Kempis and the men of the Further Reformation to be “a number of fundamental spiritual themes that cross confessional boundaries: heartfelt love of God, being humbled in one’s guilt for sin, dependence on grace and longing for the glories of heaven” (p. 101) and notes that they referred to à Kempis “critically ... and with corrections” (p. 102).

The book was not originally written in English but in Dutch. De Reuver is a professor in the University of Utrecht. The book was originally published in the Netherlands in 2002.

The translator, James A. De Jong, is past president of the Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, MI. Acknowledging it beyond his competence to recapture “much of the flavor and charm of the seventeenth century quotations,” he settles

“for modern (American) English orthography, syntax and idioms” (p. 11). This confessed difficulty is lost on the English reader. The translation reads well.

The book contains a few quotes in German. To the reader who speaks only English, the German quotes are meaningless page filler. I am sure that they appeared in German in the original Dutch publication also; but to translate these would have been helpful.

Also helpful would have been a consistent attempt to translate, at least once, the title of every original source. Sometimes this is done, but not always. Several of the titles in the third paragraph of this review are my translation from the Dutch. In at least one instance, that of Witsius’ *Grondstukken*, I would have appreciated having the translation given me. I

translated this literally, “Groundpieces,” with the assumption that the idea is “Foundations,” or “Fundamentals.”

The translation and publication was sponsored by the Dutch Reformed Translation Society. The book is added to the series “Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought.”

The book’s value is that it opens up for the English reader the ideas and writings of Dutch Reformed men, some of whom are perhaps not so well known in our circles (Teellinck and Saldenus), and others perhaps known but for different reasons (we know Witsius more for his work *The Economy of the Covenants* than for his pietistic writings).

A good summertime read for one interested in the piety of the Further Reformation. ■

God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice, ed. Timothy George. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007. Pp. 175. \$19.99 (paper). ISBN-10: 0801027659. ISBN-13: 978-0801027659. [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

The chapters in *God the Holy Trinity* consist of papers that were originally presented at Beeson Divinity School of Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. The writers presented their papers at a symposium entitled “God the Holy

Trinity: A Conference on Faith and Christian Life.” The contributors to this volume are Gerald L. Bray, Ellen T. Charry, Avery Cardinal Dulles, Timothy George, James Earl Massey, Frederica Mathewes-Green, Alister E. McGrath, J. I. Packer, and Cornelius Plantinga. These men and women represent very diverse theological traditions, including Roman Catholic, Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Holiness. This is the second book in the Beeson Divinity Studies series. More volumes are promised.

As is often the case in a book of this nature, contributions range from good to mediocre to bad. Some of the chapters are very worthwhile. Others are of little value. Some hold to and seek to enrich the biblical truth of the Trinity. Others depart seriously from the historic doctrine of the Trinity. Some chapters are clear and make the truth clear. Others are confusing and raise more questions than they answer. Some chapters hew the confessional line, including the ancient creeds and the great Reformation creeds. Others take no cognizance of the creeds and are little interested in conscious adherence to the creeds.

Alister McGrath’s contribution, “The Doctrine of the Trinity: An Evangelical Reflection,” is worthwhile. This is also true of Gerald Bray’s chapter, “Out of the Box: The Christian Experience of God in Trinity,” although it fails to differentiate clearly the triune God as Father in relation to us His people, and God the Father as the first person of the holy Trinity. J.I. Packer’s “A Puritan Perspective: Trinitarian Godliness according to John Owen” is very well done.

James Earl Massey documents the Trinitarian theology expressed in the African-American spirituals. In “Faith and Christian Life in the African-American Spirituals” he illustrates the witness to Jesus and to the Holy Spirit especially, but also to the Trinity, in this particular musical genre. What the spirituals exhibit, like so many popular hymns, is that they were christocentric and not theocentric. And thus many of them tended also to be trite and somewhat superficial.

Frederica Mathewes-Green devotes her chapter to an explanation of the details of *The Old Testament Trinity*, a painting made by the Russian monk Andrei Rublev in 1411. She

draws out elements of the painting and the symbolism attached to various elements in the painting in order to describe the various aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity. The chapter confirms Eastern Orthodoxy's commitment to iconography—dumb images rather than the lively preaching of God's Word.

Ellen T. Charry's chapter is marred by misinterpretation and misrepresentation of Augustine. She contends that according to Augustine the "... cross is decisive because it lures us into the beauty, wisdom, and goodness of God, in which we partake because we reflect the Trinity itself" (p. 137). "For Augustine, salvation is a therapeutic process of psychological and moral transformation that requires taking knowledge about God learned from Scripture and applying it to oneself" (p. 138). She faults Protestantism for diverging from Augustine. Especially is this so because "Protestantism separated justification from sanctification, identifying salvation with the former and considering the latter the appropriate grateful response to justification..." (p. 140). So much for the Reformation's recovery of Augustinianism. In Charry's opinion, the Protestant

reformers did not correctly understand Augustine, and the Augustine to which they returned was not the real Augustine.

The main purpose of *God the Holy Trinity* is to promote ecumenism by rallying around the most fundamental doctrine of all, the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, *God the Holy Trinity* is ecumenism with a vengeance. At the outset, in his "Introduction," editor Timothy George, while recognizing the serious theological differences that exist between the various contributors, avers that "we do recognize one another as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, and we stand together in our commitment to the historic Trinitarian faith of the church" (p. 13). Troubling, to say the least. That Protestants are willing to regard adherents of Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism as brothers and sisters in Christ defies explanation. No Protestant who subscribes to the Reformation creeds can possibly have that regard for those whom the creeds identify as members of the false church. No one who takes Rome seriously, Rome who today is not a whit different from the Rome of the Reformation, can possibly regard Rome's members, to say

nothing of her leaders, as brothers to whom the right hand of fellowship ought to be extended. Something is seriously amiss. As critical as the doctrine of the Trinity is, it is not the only doctrine that serves as the touchstone of orthodoxy. The measure of a theologian and of a church is not only their doctrine of the Trinity. *God the Holy Trinity* is an unsettling indication of the extent to which the modern ecumenical spirit, the spirit that downplays theo-

logical differences and underscores unity on the basis of the least common denominator, has infected Evangelicalism. Beeson Divinity School advertises itself as an evangelical and interdenominational theological school. If the leaders of such institutions continue to promote the false ecumenical spirit that is part of *God the Holy Trinity*, they will, not too far in the future, be encouraging reparation with Rome. ■



By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy P. Waters. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006. 219 pp. \$17.99 (paper). [Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.]

Twelve men contribute to this collection of essays in defense of the doctrine of justification by faith alone over against the teachings of the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) movement and the men of the Federal Vision.

In the foreword and introduction, David Wells and Guy Prentiss Waters lay the ground-

work for the essays that follow. Wells argues that Christian evangelicalism, which once held the doctrine of *sola fide* dear, is today divided into three factions: one, which still loves the doctrine of justification by faith alone; another, which does not explicitly deny this doctrine but does quietly ignore it and minimize its importance; and the third, which redefines terms and plays with words and thus completely sells the truth of justification by faith alone. Waters briefly describes the history and teachings of both the NPP and the Federal Vision, concluding that while these differ in a num-

ber of respects, they both deny justification by faith alone.

Five chapters deal with the issue of justification, the righteousness of Christ, which is imputed in justification, and the legal aspect of the imputation.

The first two chapters deal particularly with N. T. Wright's teaching regarding justification. Cornelis Venema summarizes N. T. Wright's view regarding the NPP and his doctrine of justification. He then demonstrates from the New Testament, and especially Paul's epistles, that Wright's view is wrong. Then T. David Gordon deals more specifically with Wright's view of the term "the righteousness of God." Whereas Wright argues that the term is not to be understood in a forensic sense, but refers to the faithfulness of God, Gordon argues from Paul's epistles that the term must be understood in a judicial sense.

The next two chapters deal with the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Reviewing the Arminian challenge to this doctrine in decades past, Richard Phillips shows that the NPP denies it today. He defends the doctrine by examining several texts that Reformed theologians have his-

torically used to teach the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. In addition to these exegetical reasons for zealously defending this doctrine, he finds another: "the honor and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ" (p. 97).

C. FitzSimons Allison demonstrates that Anglicanism has lost the right understanding of imputation that it once held; argues that objections to the doctrine proceed from a fear of antinomianism; and indicates that our culture, which speaks of God's love at the expense of God's justice, rather than seeing God's love in proper relation to His justice, fosters a disregard for the idea of imputation. In defense of imputation, he notes: "Imputation is the unanimous testimony of saints on their death beds. None pleads one's own infused righteousness before God but only the mercy of Christ" (p. 103).

To skip chapter 5 for the moment, in chapter 6 David VanDrunen defends *sola fide* in relation to the active obedience of Christ. VanDrunen argues that the idea of Christ's active obedience is basic to a Reformed understanding, and that the idea is dismissed by men both of the NPP and the Federal

Vision camps. From the Scriptures VanDrunen shows the need for Christ's active obedience on our behalf; and he argues that the term "the righteousness of God," as used by Paul, refers to this active obedience of Christ.

Three essays deal more particularly with the doctrine of the covenant, as it underlies the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

In chapter 5, T. David Gordon argues that the Auburn Avenue theology's covenant view is a necessary consequence of John Murray's view that God has but one covenant (Murray "rejected the traditional distinction between covenant of works and covenant of grace, wishing to construe all covenantal relations as gracious. He also redefined *covenant* as a relationship, not a contract or treaty," p. 119).

R. Fowler White and E. Calvin Beisner argue in chapter 7 that opponents of justification by faith alone do not openly deny the doctrine, but profess to believe it, while redefining its terms. They do the same regarding the doctrine of God's covenant. Noting this, White and Beisner endeavor to show that God's covenant dealings with

man always involved "two contrasting but compatible principles of inheritance—namely, personal merit (i.e., merit grounded in the heir's own works) and representative merit (i.e., merit grounded in another's works)," and that "these principles of inheritance have existed side-by-side through all of history (pre-fall and post-fall) until Christ, with the former always subserving the latter" (pp. 148ff.).

The next chapter contains John Bolt's response to three men who in their writings have opposed the traditional notion of the covenant of works: John Stek, Anthony Hoekema, and Herman Hoeksema. Stek and Hoekema did not want to speak of God's relationship with Adam as a covenant relationship, while Hoeksema believed this relationship to be covenantal, but argued that this relationship was not a legal pact, did not allow Adam to merit with God, and could not have resulted in Adam obtaining a higher level of glory if he obeyed. Bolt argues that we must emphasize both the legal character and the relational character of the doctrine of works. He claims that those who deny that God and Adam had a covenant relationship are wrong,

and that those who deny that this relationship was conditional in any sense are also wrong.

The final chapter and the afterword no longer engage the doctrinal issues for which the churches must struggle today, but still make interesting observations. Gary Johnson, in chapter 9, shows that while the term “evangelicals” historically included men of a Reformed background, it is now being used also for Roman Catholics and Mormons, who want to portray their denominations as those that properly teach the necessity of Christ for salvation. It leads Johnson to ask the question, tongue in cheek: “Will the real Jesus please stand up?”

R. Albert Mohler concludes by underscoring the challenge that true Reformed evangelicals face today: defending the doctrine of justification by faith alone among those who claim to be evangelical, but do not believe what evangelicals have historically believed.

In a collection of essays, any reader will find some more meaningful than others. Most of the chapters were educational. Some—including the chapters by Venema, Philips,

and VanDrunen—I found gripping, even edifying. The subject of Bolt’s essay piqued my interest so much that I could hardly wait to read it—although I did wait, for I read the chapters of the book sequentially. But the knowledge that his chapter was coming made me persevere through the book’s more difficult parts.

The book does, for the most part, answer the challenges to the doctrine of justification. Treating various aspects of the doctrine (God’s righteousness, imputation, Christ’s active obedience), the authors engage and exegete the Scriptures in answering the heretics.

The authors are convinced of the grave and mortal danger of the teachings that these men promote. Their teachings are exposed as being not new, but rather new forms of semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism. This is noteworthy: the book underscores that men who claim to be Reformed are teaching ideas that, if Reformed churches would adopt them, would bring us back to Rome.

The book’s great weakness is that it does not expose the doctrine of a conditional covenant as being the real basis of

the denial of justification by faith alone.

As noted above, the book does include chapters that deal with the doctrine of the covenant. The editors and essayists sense that the doctrine of the covenant and the doctrine of justification by faith alone are inseparably related. But what that relationship is, the book does not mention. The book does not mention that the doctrine of one, sovereign, unconditional covenant, which God establishes and maintains with His people in Christ, is the doctrinal foundation of justification by faith alone.

Reading the chapters by White and Beisner and by Bolt, one might forget that the book's purpose is to "answer the challenges to the doctrine of justification." Bolt makes no explicit reference to justification by faith alone. White and Beisner do make such explicit references, at the beginning and end of their essay, but not in the body. And the references amount to noting common threads between the two doctrines, missing a grand opportunity to demonstrate that they are actually two intertwined cords that are part of the same rope.

One might overlook this failure if he were to see that the book at least sets forth both doctrines accurately, in the light of Scripture. This book, however, gets right the doctrine of justification by faith alone, but not that of the covenant—not in the judgment of one who is convinced that God has one, sovereignly established and maintained, unconditional covenant with all His people in Jesus Christ.

In this respect, Bolt's chapter defending the doctrine of the covenant of works was not the most troublesome. It has its errors, yes. Bolt does not indicate whether his view of the doctrine of the covenant of works allows for, or excludes, merit on the part of Adam. And his representation of Hoeksema's view of the relation between covenant and election, as indicated on pages 179 and 180, is certainly not accurate: "Hoeksema's understanding of covenant is indistinguishable from election," and, for Hoeksema, "covenant and election are finally identical." Responding to defenders of a conditional covenant, my seminary dogmatics professor said it best: "In fact, no theologian or church has ever been so doctrinally dense

as to identify covenant and election.”*

But more troublesome is T. David Gordon’s insistence that God has a plurality of covenants—no fewer than 12 (including the covenants of redemption, works, and grace; and the various covenants of God with men in the Old Testament). He argues that the term “the covenant” (singular) is rarely used in the Bible, and when it is, usually the Scriptures identify the covenant to which the term refers. This prompted me quickly to search the KJV, in which I found 102 instances of “the covenant” (singular), 51 of “my covenant” (singular), 18 of “his covenant” (singular), and only three times where the word “covenant” is found in the plural. So I find it hard to swallow the argument that Murray’s view that God has one covenant with His people has generated the heretical views of Shepherd, Bahnsen, and Auburn theology.

White and Beisner’s chapter is troublesome because it argues that conditions played a role in the covenant administrations of God in the Old Testament. According to them, Adam in the state of perfection could merit eternal life by his obedi-

ence. The seeds of Noah, Abraham, and David enjoyed temporal, earthly blessings (accompanied by temporal curses) on the basis of the obedience of these men. These blessings were temporal and earthly only, and not everlasting and spiritual, because the obedience of these men was not perfect. The authors speak of the Mosaic covenant as “bilateral, conditional” (p. 160). White and Beisner are clear that the covenant of God with His people in the new dispensation is not conditioned on any works that we do, but is founded on the person and work of Christ. But the thoughts expressed in the chapter undermine the idea that God’s covenant with His people throughout history is one covenant; that it was always based on Christ; that all the blessings of that covenant were blessings bestowed by grace, not earned by works. Scriptures such as Romans 4:13-16 and others contradict the ideas set forth in this

* David J. Engelsma, *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers: Sovereign Grace in the Covenant* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2005), p. 176.

chapter—the blessings to Abraham and his seed were given by faith, and by grace, not of works, not even of Abraham’s works.

Because the book presents a wrong view of the doctrine of the covenant, it can answer the challenges to the doctrine of justification only to a point.

If God does not have one covenant with all His people in time and history, who can say that God’s covenant people

were always justified by faith alone?

If we will argue that God once allowed for personal merit on the part of men in His covenant dealings with them, how can we now stand strong against the notion of justification by faith and man’s works?

Defending the biblical teaching of one, unconditional covenant will make for a more consistent and solid defense of justification by faith alone. ■

Faithful Journey, by Warren Lamb. Enumclaw, WA: Pleasant Word (a division of WinePress Publishing), 2007. Pp. xiv + 241. \$17.99 (paper). ISBN-10: 141 4108223. ISBN-13: 978-141 4108223. [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

Faithful Journey is a unique retelling of the events of the book of Acts, including especially the establishment of the early apostolic church and the missionary labors of the apostle Paul. The book is in the form of a novel, containing portraits of the lives and times of the people who played leading roles in the history that is recorded in

Acts. The author follows closely Luke’s account, but adds elements of fiction in an effort to make the characters and events come to life. Written in the first person, the book presents the history of Acts from the point of view of those who were the main figures in this history.

Each chapter is named after the main character from whose point of view that chapter is told—the “I” of the chapter. Of the thirty-seven chapters of the book, seventeen are devoted to Saul/Paul. Multiple chapters are also devoted to Luke (five) and to Peter (four). Single chapters are devoted to John,

Caiaphas, Philip, Barnabas, Timothy, Priscilla, Apollos, Demetrius, Benjamin (fictitious name given to Paul's nephew), Lysias, and Festus.

It is clear that Warren Lamb has made a concerted effort at biblical and historical accuracy. Although he writes a fictional recounting of Acts, it is plain that Lamb honors the infallibility and authority of Scripture. There is no questioning or denial of the history recorded in the book of Acts. Lamb is committed to the truth that Scripture is the Word of God. In this regard, he is to be commended.

For the most part, *Faithful Journey* is a faithful retelling of the events of Acts and founding of the New Testament church. Given the fact that the book is a recasting of Acts in the form of a novel, it is not altogether surprising that in a few instances some of the accounts are overly embellished. Two examples of this are the account of the earthquake in Philippi (p. 124 ff.) and the account of the death of wicked king Herod (p. 81 ff.). Neither is it surprising that a reader may sometimes differ with the author (as this reviewer in fact does) with respect to his understanding of certain events. These minor disagreements de-

tract not at all from the worth of this work. *Faithful Journey* is a biblical novel well worth reading. The book is informative. Lamb acquaints the reader with the geography both of Palestine and the Mediterranean world. In addition, he does a nice job of weaving into the story the manners and customs of Bible times, something about which most could be better informed. The book also gives a good chronology of the life of the apostle Paul.

Faithful Journey is recommended both to students and teachers. Christian school teachers will profit from reading this novel and will undoubtedly be able to transfer their own personal enrichment to their classroom instruction in the book of Acts. Seminary students and professors dealing with the material of Acts will benefit from Lamb's novel. And anyone who is interested in reading a biblical novel along the lines of Paul Maier's *Pontius Pilate* will enjoy *Faithful Journey*.

The book is enhanced by a concluding "Historical Note," a "Chronology" of the major events covered in the book, and by an extensive list of "Character Names," a list of over one

hundred characters in the book of Acts, including a brief identification of each name.

Warren Lamb is a seasoned journalist with over thirty years of experience in the field of journalism, as well as a communications consultant. He and his wife, Barbara, are members of Aliso Creek Presbyterian

Church, a PCA congregation in Laguna Niguel, California. *Faithful Journey* is his first full-length novel. Anyone interested in learning more about Warren Lamb or interested in ordering *Faithful Journey* may consult the following website: www.faithful-journey.info. ■

Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology, ed. A.T. B. McGowan. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006. Pp. 365. \$26.00 (paper). ISBN-10: 083082829X. ISBN-13: 978-0830828296. [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

The Reformers of the sixteenth-century were instrumental in bringing about the reformation of the church. These same Reformers insisted that the church reformed must always be reforming (*semper reformanda*). In the mind of the contributors to this volume, the subsequent history of the churches of the Reformation has shown neglect of this ongoing calling in two respects. On the one hand, many Reformed and

Presbyterian churches have abandoned the key doctrines that were at the heart of the Reformation. On the other hand, there were those churches and denominations that fell into “a rigid confessionalism that cements the Reformation itself as a final codification of truth” (back cover). *Always Reforming* is intended to show the way between these two extremes, and thus move the church forward in her calling to be always reforming.

Contributors and contributions to *Always Reforming* are the following: Gerald Bray, “The Trinity: Where Do We Go from Here?”; Stephen Williams, “Observations on the Future of System”; Robert L. Reymond, “Classical Christology’s Future

in Systematic Theology”; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “On the Very Idea of a Theological System: An Essay in Aid of Triangulating Scripture, Church and World”; A. T. B. McGowan, “The Atonement as Penal Substitution”; Richard C. Gamble, “The Relationship between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology”; Henri Blocher, “Old Covenant, New Covenant”; Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “Union with Christ: Some Biblical and Theological Reflections”; Cornelis P. Venema, “Justification: The Ecumenical, Biblical and Theological Dimensions of Current Debates”; and Derek W. H. Thomas, “The Doctrine of the Church in the Twenty-First Century.”

The more profitable contributions to *Always Reforming*, in the judgment of this reviewer, are the pieces by Reymond, McGowan, Gamble, Venema, and Thomas. Reymond surveys the extensive New Testament evidence for Jesus’ deity, demonstrating conclusively, from several exegetical points of view, the united witness to the godhead of Jesus. He concludes his chapter by considering some of the weighty issues that Reformed theologians face in the area of Christology. Mc

Gowan’s contribution on “The Atonement As Penal Substitution” is well done. Over against all other theories of the atonement, he demonstrates that the classic Reformed doctrine of the atonement as penal substitution is the clear teaching of Scripture and the only answer to the real need of guilty sinners. Gamble discusses the relationship between biblical theology and systematic theology. He defends the position that biblical theology is the handmaid of systematic theology. Although there are issues regarding biblical theology and the basic approach of biblical theology, Gamble’s insistence on the importance of careful, honest exegesis as the foundation for all theology and his commitment to the full inerrancy and authority of Scripture are appreciated. Venema’s treatment of justification by faith alone and his insistence on the forensic nature of justification are to be commended. He also provides a good evaluation of Lutherans and Catholics together, Evangelicals and Catholics together, and the New Perspective on Paul. Thomas’ treatment of the doctrine of the church is to be commended. Much appreciated is his insistence on the im-

portance of the instituted church. Emphasizing that Reformed ecclesiology must be deeply committed to the traditions and confessions of the Reformed faith, Thomas bemoans the abandonment by Reformed and Presbyterian churches of their heritage of Psalm singing.

It is indicative of such rootlessness that *inclusive* psalm singing, for example, has been abandoned by evangelical churches and increasingly minimized in Reformed churches. It will be a tragic mistake to consider the adoption of contemporary worship's adoption of popular culture as value-neutral made in the interests of evangelism and communication. One relatively simple remedy for the church is to discover its own tradition in the singing of the psalms—a liturgical practice that links the people of God with three thousand years of historical practice. Weekly singing of the psalms provides a sense of continuity in an age of instantism and throw-away consumerism that breeds scepticism and egocentricity (p. 348).

One disappointing note, something so squarely in conflict

with the historical consciousness that Thomas calls for, is his chiding of Reformed and Presbyterian churches for their “refusal to allow the non-credobaptized admittance to the Lord’s Table...” (p. 349).

Kevin Vanhoozer’s contribution was, in the estimation of this reviewer, too long and overly philosophical. But there are more serious matters. For one thing, Vanhoozer criticizes those who view the content of Scripture as propositional truth, faulting both Charles Hodge and Carl F.H. Henry for this inadequate, as he supposes, view of Scripture.

... Hodge’s decision to read the Bible as a book of divinely revealed facts predisposes him to focus on the Bible’s content and to construe this content as propositional teaching. Such a focus on revealed content runs the risk of neglecting the larger canonical context and literary form of the biblical “facts”, perhaps the inevitable result of biblical empiricism (p. 137).

... the Bible is not merely an epistemological foundation—either a “storehouse of facts” (Hodge) or a deposit of propositional revelation

(Henry)—whose objective content human knowing subjects then process intellectually. Its epistemic primacy stems rather from its nature as the church's authoritative script [note that word "script," RC], the normative specification for interpreting what God is saying and doing in creation, in the history of Israel, and in Jesus Christ. It is a mistake to abstract Scripture from the drama of redemption and treat it as an autonomous holy object. Scripture is correctly grasped only when viewed *sub specie theodramatis*, that is, in relation to the events it recounts, displays and enjoins (p. 167).

... we speak not of propositional but *prepositional* theology. In particular, everything hinges on how we parse the Spirit's speaking, using the prepositions "in and through" the Scriptures (p. 169).

There ought to be little doubt that Vanhoozer's view of Scripture diverges from the classic and confessionally Reformed view of Scripture.

Second, what makes this divergence clear is Vanhoozer's insistence that Scripture is "multiperspectival" (pp. 178 ff.) and his designation of Scripture

as a "script," the "script" in the "theodrama" (pp. 173 ff.). This is not only a deficient description of Scripture, but an altogether erroneous description. For a script is a dead thing, in itself. It is not the script that is intended to be revelatory, but the acting out of the script. And because it is only a script, it may be changed by the actors under the inspiration of the moment. Whether they follow the script or not is not, after all, so very important.

And, third, Vanhoozer is infected with the false teaching of the pluriformity of the church.

Just as it takes four Gospels to tell the story of Jesus Christ, so it takes many interpretative communities and traditions fully to understand the Gospels (and the rest of Scripture). The church comes to a fuller understanding of its authoritative script to see what other local churches have made of it. In short, a Christologically centred and canonically bounded polyphonic tradition that includes Western and non-Western, ancient and contemporary voices best corresponds to the nature of the Scriptures themselves (p. 180).

And with regard to confessional theologies (e.g., Reformed, Lutheran, Anabaptist etc.), we can perhaps view these systems not as necessarily conflictual [beware of theologians who have a fondness for inventing new words! RC] but as complementary.

After all, it takes many systems (nervous, digestive, reproductive, cardiovascular, etc.) working together to maintain the health (*salus*) of the body (p. 180).

Recommended, but with serious reservations. ■

Justified in Christ: God's Plan for Us in Justification. Ed. K. Scott Oliphint. Great Britain: Christian Focus/Mentor, 2007. Pp. xxiv + 309. \$18.99 (paper). [Reviewed by Andy Lanning.]

Justified in Christ is a compilation of eight essays written by faculty members of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Also included in the book are a lengthy introduction by Sinclair B. Ferguson, an extensive bibliography by Alexander Finlayson, and a complete reproduction of John Murray's essay "The Imputation of Adam's Sin."

A book on the doctrine of justification written by faculty members of Westminster Theological Seminary is of great interest to Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Westminster

Theological Seminary (WTS) and the doctrine of justification have a history. For 18 years (1963-1981), Norman Shepherd taught Systematic Theology at WTS. For at least some of those years, he taught the heresy of justification by faith and works. Although there was a lengthy investigation of his teachings by the faculty and board of WTS, as well as by the Philadelphia Presbytery of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Norman Shepherd was never disciplined for his heretical teachings. When he was finally dismissed from WTS, the board issued a statement in which they refused to condemn his doctrine of justification as outside the bounds of the Westminster Standards. WTS failed to root out heresy concerning the most basic article of the Reformed faith.*

Since that time, Norman Shepherd's views on justification have spread far and wide in Reformed and Presbyterian churches in a system of beliefs that has become known as the "Federal Vision." Therefore, Reformed and Presbyterian churches take notice of a book on the doctrine of justification written by the faculty of WTS. We want to know, "What does Westminster Theological Seminary teach about justification today?"

Ferguson's introduction gives hope that the doctrine of justification is alive and well at WTS. He laments that there has been neglect of the doctrine in much of the evangelical world, as evangelicalism became more concerned with humans and their problems than with the Savior and His work. The authors of this book, Ferguson assures us, do not make the same mistake. Ferguson then gives a helpful outline of some of the main teachings of the New Perspective on Paul (NPP). When it comes to justification, the NPP teaches that justification is not by faith alone, but by faith and works. Ferguson informs us that the authors of this book have a "shared concern about the influence" of the NPP (p.

xiii). Apparently, this book will address head-on the heresy of justification by faith and works and will defend the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone.

But only apparently.

Some of the articles have nothing to do with the current controversy over justification. This includes the somewhat strange inclusion of John Murray's old essay "The Imputation of Adam's Sin." The essay itself is a careful and helpful exegesis of Romans 5:12ff. Murray gives a good explanation of how it is that the entire human race can be guilty for the sin Adam committed: Adam represented the race, and therefore his sin was imputed to the race. But exactly why this essay is included in the book is hard to say. An explanation of the purpose of republishing this essay would have been helpful, especially since the essay takes up a full third of the book.

Even more strange is the inclusion of William Edgar's

* For the history of this episode, see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, Tennessee: The Trinity Foundation, 2003).

new essay, "Justification and Violence: Reflections on Atonement and Contemporary Apologetics." This article is an attempt to use the doctrine of justification to stir up "true zeal for social action" (p. 148). For Edgar, justification is the way to address feminists' concerns about the oppression of women, concerns about violence and ethnic cleansing, and other social concerns. To say the least, it is disappointing to see a professor of a Reformed seminary setting an agenda of social action for the church, especially when he uses the precious doctrine of justification to do so.

Stranger yet is K. Scott Oliphint's article, "Covenant Faith." The title indicates that Oliphint will examine the role of faith in the covenant of grace, and relate the covenant to justification. That would be a worthwhile article, especially since Norman Shepherd and the Federal Vision take a particular view of the covenant as their starting point. They begin with a conditional covenant, in which faith and works are conditions to man's staying in the covenant, and work from there to conditional justification, that is, justification by faith and works. But Oliphint's essay has

nothing to do with the covenant of grace. Instead, it is a highly philosophical comparison of man's knowledge of God through general revelation and the believer's knowledge of God through saving faith. It is man's knowledge of God through general revelation that Oliphint calls "covenant faith." An article with such a title had the potential of getting to the heart of the controversy over justification. As it is, the article fails to address any key issues in that controversy.

The rest of the articles, however, at least address the controversy over justification. From them one is able to determine what WTS teaches about justification today.

If Ferguson's introduction gave hope that the doctrine of justification taught at WTS is sound, the article by Peter Lillback, current president of WTS, takes that hope away. Lillback's essay, "Calvin's Development of the Doctrine of Forensic Justification: Calvin and the Early Lutherans on the Relationship of Justification and Renewal," is a historical investigation into the doctrine of justification taught by Calvin on the one hand and the early Lutherans on the other hand.

Lillback's thesis is that Luther and Calvin differed in their understanding of justification. The difference was that Luther included regeneration and renewal in his doctrine of justification, while Calvin excluded renewal from his doctrine. Supposedly, Calvin alone emphasized the forensic nature of justification, while Luther tried to combine renewal and forensic justification. "In particular, we will consider how Luther and the early Lutherans included regeneration in their doctrine of justification, seeking to harmonize it with the forensic idea of justification. But we shall also see that Calvin's teaching on forensic justification emphasizes that the sinner is declared to be legally righteous before God as the Judge of sinners by faith.... We shall also see that Calvin came to view the merging of forensic justification with renewal, as found in the early Lutheran theologians, as a generally non-biblical way of describing the doctrine" (p. 53).

The term "forensic" describes justification as a strictly legal act of God. It is a term used for what goes on in a courtroom. God the righteous Judge imputes, or credits, the righteousness of Christ to His

people, and declares them to be righteous. Justification is not God's work of making His people holy and enabling them to do good works. There is such a work, but it is not justification; it is sanctification. Justification is strictly legal; it is strictly God's declaration that His people are righteous on the basis of Christ's work. The term "forensic" expresses that legal act, and guards justification from being confused with sanctification.

The term "renewal" describes God's work of regeneration and sanctification. It is His work of giving His people new life, nurturing that life, making them holy, and enabling them to live a life of good works.

Therefore, if Lillback's thesis is true that Luther included renewal in his doctrine of justification, it means that Luther confused justification and sanctification. In fact, this is Lillback's charge. "What would normally be considered justification terminology, Luther also employs in the domain of sanctification" (p. 75). In other words, Luther allowed works to have a place in justification, while Calvin did not.

This is a fascinating thesis! It is fascinating because those

who attack the doctrine of justification by faith alone usually teach exactly the reverse of this thesis. The normal charge is that it was *Calvin* who allowed for good works to play a part in justification, while *Luther* left no place for works in justification. In fact, Lillback himself has made that very charge in a previous book, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*. But now Lillback would have us believe that it was Calvin who taught forensic justification, and Luther who mingled justification and renewal.

Fascinating!

But absurd!

It is absurd to teach that either Calvin or Luther allowed for good works in their doctrine of justification. Luther and Calvin were united in their clear insistence that justification is by faith alone, and that the believer's works play no part in his justification. Apparently, Lillback himself feels the weight of this. His attempt to make Luther mingle justification and renewal is forced. The quotes he cites are unconvincing. In fact, Lillback must admit that there is "no lack of fo-

rensic oriented terminology in Luther's writings.... Thus Luther says, 'But here the question is, by what means we are justified and attain eternal life. To this we answer with Paul, that by faith only in Christ we are pronounced righteous...' (p. 72). The inescapable fact is that Luther taught forensic justification as vigorously as Calvin did.

It becomes apparent that Lillback likes to find the mingling of justification and sanctification wherever he can. It does not matter for him whether it was Luther or Calvin who allowed good works to play a part in justification. This becomes evident when Lillback argues at length that not only Luther, but sometimes also Calvin, mingled justification and sanctification. Citing Calvin's commentary on Titus 3:7, Lillback exults, "But astonishingly, Calvin himself at one point admits the possibility of regeneration being a part of justification!" (p. 62). And again, "But is not Calvin then guilty of potentially mingling together two distinct benefits of Christ's redemptive work? Calvin is conscious of this concern but believes that this is precisely what Paul himself is do-

ing in this text" (p. 63). Calvin's statements admittedly raise some questions, but there is a way to understand them that does not compromise the truth of forensic justification. When Calvin says that Paul mingles free pardon and renewal, he does not mean that Paul teaches that works are sometimes involved in our justification. Rather, he means that Paul mentions both justification and renewal at the same time, even though God's act of freely pardoning our sins on the one hand and God's act of renewing us to obey Him on the other are distinct acts. Calvin's doctrine of forensic justification is not compromised by his explanation of Titus 3:7, as Lillback implies it is.

Both Luther and Calvin taught forensic justification. Neither Luther nor Calvin mingled justification and renewal in such a way that works were allowed to play a part in justification. Lillback's determined effort to find otherwise in the Reformers is ominous.

After all, if the Reformers could allow for justification by faith and works, then Reformed and Presbyterian churches today may allow for it as well.

The rest of the articles in the book have similar weaknesses. This is not to say that the men never make soundly Reformed statements; they make many. This is not to say, either, that the articles are not valuable studies with helpful insights on interesting topics; they are. There are articles on the relationship between justification and eschatology, union with Christ and justification, the pastoral implications of justification, and more. But it is to say that at key points, allowance is made for works to play a part in justification. This guts the whole project, and compromises the truth of justification by faith alone.

So, what is the status of the doctrine of justification at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia? The seminary remains firmly rooted in its history. ■

Heinrich Bullinger and the Doctrine of Predestination: Author of “the Other Reformed Tradition”?

Cornelis P. Venema. Grand Rapids, MI. Baker Academic, 2002. 137 pages. \$22.00 (paper). ISBN# 0-8010-2605-9. [Reviewed by Prof. Russell Dykstra.]

Heinrich Bullinger and the Doctrine of Predestination is another in the series of books published by Baker entitled “Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought.” The goal of the project is to make available significant manuscripts of the Reformation such as Caspar Olevianus’ *Firm Foundation* (already published) and Theodore Beza’s *Table of Predestination* (still coming), as well as studies of Reformation and Post-Reformation topics. It is a worthy goal.

This volume purposes to set forth Heinrich Bullinger’s teaching on predestination, especially to answer the question whether Bullinger’s teaching marked a radical divergence from the rest of the Reformed tradition. Dr. Cornelis Venema explains the issue (p. 12):

J. Wayne Baker and others have argued that, contrary to the emphasis upon sovereign and unconditional predestination in the Reformed tradition stemming from John Calvin, the Rhineland Reformers, beginning with Zwingli and including Bullinger, authored another Reformed tradition. This tradition’s primary emphasis was upon a conditional covenant doctrine. Bullinger, it is argued, was the author of a Reformed tradition that repudiated the double predestinarianism of Calvin and advocated instead a single or conditional predestinarianism. Whereas Calvin and Geneva followed the tradition of predestinarian doctrine stemming from Augustine, Bullinger and Zurich were responsible for a quite different formulation of the doctrine of grace, one which by means of its covenant view lends more weight to the realization of God’s purposes in history. These distinct doctrinal positions of Calvin and Bullinger constitute the historical background to a divergence within subsequent Reformed theology between unconditional predestinarianism and conditional covenantalism. The tra-

dition of covenant theology, authored in significant measure by Bullinger, actually represents a substantial departure from historic Augustinianism on the doctrine of grace.

Dr. Venema examines Bullinger's teaching on predestination in four parts. The first considers Bullinger's teaching from 1536 to 1556, in which the most material is found in Bullinger's published sermons (*Decades*). The second part examines Bullinger's correspondence on predestination in the years 1551-1553. This correspondence was either with Calvin or about Calvin's teaching on predestination. This gives the opportunity to compare the theology of these two giants of the Reformation. The third study focuses on Bullinger's participation in two conflicts over predestination in the years 1560 and 1561. The first controversy involved Peter Martyr Vermigli and Theodor Bibliander in Zurich. The second was a conflict in Strassburg between the Italian Reformer Girolamo Zanchius and the Lutheran Johannes Marburg. In both of these controversies, Bullinger stood on the side of

those promoting a strong doctrine of predestination. Based on this, some have argued that later in life Bullinger adopted a stronger doctrine, more like Calvin's. Venema gives much evidence to discount that theory, especially by the fourth and final section of the study, Bullinger's doctrine of predestination in the Second Helvetic Confession. This is Bullinger's most mature thought, and in it, his teaching on predestination remains essentially the same as Bullinger's early teaching and writing.

One of the main features of Bullinger's doctrine of predestination is the "uncertain sound." He sometimes gives a solid description of the doctrine that seems to uphold the sovereignty of God and His decrees. In 1553, Bullinger writes to a certain Bartholomaeus Traheronus (p. 66):

Furthermore, predestination, preordination, or predetermination—that is the ordination of all things to a certain end by God from eternity. However, the Lord has primarily destined every man, and this is his holy and just counsel, his just decree. Now the election of God from eternity is

that he truly elects some to life, others to destruction. The cause of election and predestination is nothing other than the good and just will of God, undeserved in the salvation of the elect, yet deserved in the damnation and rejection of the reprobate.

The difficulty lies in the additional comments, which seem to weaken this description. Writes Venema (p. 67),

Bullinger rejected the position of those who spoke of a small number of the elect: “As a matter of fact, we prefer to insist upon these universal promises and to have a good hope for all.” This hope was based on the fact that we were not to inquire curiously into God’s secret counsel...but were to heed the revelation of God’s grace through Christ and the apostles. This revelation indicated that God was a “lover of man”...who desired the salvation of all.

Further, Venema records that Bullinger rejected talk of “God raising up vessels of wrath, and of God binding and hardening the heart of the unbeliever,” which was the language of John Calvin (p. 67).

What is plain is that Bullinger wanted to maintain a doctrine of predestination, but would sacrifice the absolute sovereignty of God for the sake of a more pleasant sounding doctrine that maintained some kind of good will of God to all. By so doing he contradicted the clear teaching of Romans 9 (vessels of wrath fitted for destruction) and II Corinthians 2 (the preaching is a “savour of death” to some).

In this connection, Bullinger also rejected the notion that God willed the fall of Adam. He feared the charge that this would make God the author of sin. But this is inconsistent with an eternal decree that grounds election in Christ, a truth Bullinger also maintained (p. 52). If God did not eternally decree the fall, He could not eternally elect some in Christ. Christ would have to be an afterthought of God.

If Bullinger weakens his doctrine of election, he is even weaker on reprobation. His description of predestination in the Second Helvetic Confession omits reference to reprobation.

Bullinger’s efforts to maintain both a weakened form of predestination and a certain desire of God to save all gave him

the very dubious honor of being appealed to by the Remonstrants in the Netherlands some year later.

As to the question faced by this book, whether or not Bullinger was the “author of the other Reformed tradition,” this introduces the doctrine of the covenant. Bullinger was the first of the Reformers to write a treatise on the covenant. Bullinger does not connect election with the covenant. He does use the term “conditions.” One finds in this treatise ambiguity that feeds debates about what Bullinger really meant. In the History of Dogma class that I teach, students are assigned to read Bullinger’s treatise on the covenant. Students regularly struggle with a lack of precision in this treatise. Much depends on what Bullinger means by “conditions,” whether he is using the term as Heyns and Schilder would use it, or as Francis Turretin did.

Venema’s conclusion is that Bullinger is not the author of a different Reformed tradition. This matter can be debated. I personally believe that the lack of clarity in the treatise on the covenant, together with Bull-

inger’s weakness on predestination, will cause the debate to continue indefinitely.

What is not right, however, is to attempt to show unity between Bullinger and Calvin by weakening Calvin’s teachings. Venema finds “language of conditionality” in Calvin (p. 109) and insists that “the mutuality of the covenant of grace is a theme that runs throughout Calvin’s treatment of the doctrine of the covenant.” He adds, “The fellowship between God and his people that the covenant expresses includes mutual responsibilities and obligations” (p. 110). He concludes that Calvin also taught a bilateral covenant. The problem is that “mutuality” is not the same as bilateral. Calvin was not using “conditions” in the sense of a prerequisite that man had to fulfill to realize the covenant. Calvin’s doctrine of the covenant was consistent with His doctrine of sovereign, double predestination. He did not teach a conditional, bilateral covenant. If that is in fact what Bullinger taught, then Bullinger is the author of another tradition. But that can be debated.

In conclusion, what is plain first is that Bullinger had a weak view of predestination. Sec-

only, it is well documented that the Remonstrants appealed to his teaching. In light of those realities, it is a conundrum to me that a Reformed Calvinist

would claim that the truly Reformed doctrine of the covenant of grace is to be found in Bullinger. ■

Book Notice

The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers: Sovereign Grace in the Covenant.

By the generosity of a sponsor who thinks the message of this book ought to be spread far and wide, the Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA) offers a free copy of *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers: Sovereign Grace in the Covenant*, by Prof. David J. Engelsma, to all who request it (one copy per person, while the supply lasts). The only cost is pre-paid postage: \$2.50 per book in the United States; \$4.00, in Canada. The book defends the Reformed faith against the covenant theology of the “Federal Vision,” examines the teaching of a conditional covenant from which the “Federal Vision” springs, and sets forth—positively—the Reformed doctrine of an unconditional covenant, that is, a covenant governed by eternal, gracious election.

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