



**salt shakers**  
joel 3:16 matthew 5:16

**Salt Shakers**  
**Special Report (II)**  
**The History of Reformed Covenant**  
**Theology – Conditional or**  
**Unconditional?**

*By Professor H. Hanko*

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## **Forward by Pastor Andrew Lanning**

In the following article, Prof. Hanko explains the doctrine of the covenant. The truth of the covenant is one of the most precious doctrines to learn, because it describes the relationship of fellowship between God and His chosen people in Jesus Christ. Even our earthly relationships are precious to us; how much more precious is the covenant relationship we have with God! Therefore, an article explaining the truth of the covenant is a welcome sight in this special report by the *Salt Shakers*.

However, not everyone is agreed on what the covenant is. There has been controversy for many years over important covenant issues. For example, who actually belongs to the covenant and enjoys fellowship with God? Only adult believers, or also infants of believers? All baptized church members, or only those chosen by God eternally in election? Or, for another example, how does the covenant relationship between God and man function? Does God sovereignly establish and maintain the relationship so that it depends on God alone, or must man cooperate with God in order to continue receiving the blessings of the covenant?

Different answers to these questions have produced two distinct camps. On the one hand, there are those churches that teach a conditional covenant. On the other hand, there are those that teach an unconditional covenant. The difference between these two camps is as vast as the difference between Arminianism and the Reformed.

In this essay, Prof. Hanko ably defends the Reformed doctrine of the unconditional covenant. He traces the history of the development of the doctrine, and then critiques the unbiblical doctrine of a conditional covenant.

An article such as this is timely for the church today. In our day, a gross covenant heresy called *Federal Vision* is sweeping Reformed and Presbyterian churches. The Federal Vision uses the conditional covenant as its platform for denying all of the major tenets of the Reformed faith. Eternal election, justification by faith alone, and Christ's meritorious good works on our behalf all fall prey to the Federal Vision's conditional covenant teaching. Reformed churches today that hold a conditional covenant, or those churches that wonder whether the doctrine of the covenant is all that important, do well to read this article and see where the teaching of a conditional covenant necessarily leads.

By God's grace, may the *Salt Shakers*, as well as CERC and the Protestant Reformed Churches, continue to teach an unconditional covenant of grace. Our prayer is that God will use this article to establish his church in the truth of his sovereign, covenant grace.

## **Preface**

I am writing this essay at the request of the staff of *Salt Shakers (SS)*, a magazine produced by the young people of covenant Evangelical Reformed Church (CERC). The staff has asked me to prepare for them a clear and concise description of the different covenant views that have made their appearance in the history of the Reformed Churches. This should include especially a clear statement of the differences between the views of those who hold to a conditional covenant and a covenant that is unconditional, with an analysis and a critique of such views.

The goal of the Staff of SS is, however, a limited one. The staff does not want an exhaustive study of the history of the doctrine of the covenant in Reformed and Presbyterian Churches. That goal could only be achieved by writing a book of many pages.

Nor does the staff want an exhaustive study of the history of the doctrine of the covenant among Reformed Churches, excluding the doctrine of Presbyterian divines.

Its purpose is more limited. Where Reformed Churches have been established there are actually two important views of the covenant that are so different that their theology clashes at fundamental points. While these differences are many and substantial, one difference stands out: it is the question of whether the covenant is unconditional or conditional. That question is so important that Reformed churches that differ on that question cannot find grounds to join together and cooperate in the work of the church.

Many have questioned whether that one difference of the conditionality or un-conditionality of the covenant is of sufficient importance to make union impossible. The staff of SS want that question explored. They want that question explored from a historical point of view, and from the point of view of today's circumstances, in which denominations who differ on this question meet in ecclesiastical discourse<sup>1</sup>.

In other words, the staff of SS want an essay that can guide people through the thickets of an important ecclesiastical doctrine, with the result that God's people may be faithful to the Scriptures.

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<sup>1</sup>discourse: formal discussion

## Early Teachings on the Covenant

Although the doctrine of the covenant is mentioned among the early church fathers, it was not until the time of the Reformation that this doctrine came to the immediate and urgent attention of the church. It was forced onto the church's agenda by the Anabaptists, who constituted a radical right wing of the Reformation. A group of men in Switzerland came to a startling conclusion: The evils in the Roman Catholic Church came because of the close relation between church and state. That relation also brought about the "evil" of infant baptism.<sup>2</sup>

The Swiss church that had been brought into existence by the work of Ulrich Zwingli saw in this denial of infant baptism an important departure from Scripture. With Biblical insight, it also saw that the doctrine at stake was the doctrine of the covenant. Anabaptism could only be refuted and infant baptism defended on the basis of the doctrine of the covenant. The beginning of covenant theology is found in the Swiss reformers.

Unfortunately, the Latin translation of the word "covenant" was *foedus*.<sup>3</sup> That Latin word means pact, treaty, agreement or contract. Because the church in the days of the Reformation spoke and wrote theologically in the Latin language, the meaning of "agreement" was accepted without question as the fundamental idea of the covenant of grace of which Scripture spoke.

It is always dangerous to take the secular meaning of a term that is also found in the Bible and apply to the Bible that secular meaning. An example of this is the word *logos*. In Greek, the word *logos* means "the spoken word as the expression of a rational idea in the mind". In Scripture Logos is a name of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of that danger, the idea of a covenant as an agreement between God and man persisted through the ages until the present. The covenant as an agreement is the basic idea underlying the so-called covenant of works so common in Reformed and Presbyterian theology. The idea is widely held in spite of the fact that there is no Scriptural basis for it whatsoever.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the Anabaptist position see, Herman Hanko, *Contending for the Faith: The Rise of Heresy and the Development of the Truth* (Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2010) 178-191.

<sup>3</sup> The Latin vulgate, which is the official Bible of Roman Catholicism, translates "covenant" with the Latin word *foedus*.

<sup>4</sup> See John 1:1-14.

In spite of this very common idea of the covenant of grace as an agreement, there were theologians in the post-Reformation history of the Calvin Reformation who taught the more Biblical view: the covenant is a bond of friendship and fellowship.<sup>5</sup>

One of these is Caspar Olevianus, a sixteenth century Reformed theologian, who, with Zacharius Ursinus, authored the beloved Heidelberg Catechism, a confession that is still part of the confessional basis of all Reformed churches. While still holding to the idea that the covenant was an agreement, he also taught that the covenant was a bond of friendship.<sup>6</sup> Bierma writes that Olevianus taught that “Christ the Bridegroom enters into ‘covenant or fellowship’ with the Church His bride by the ministry of the word and sacraments and through the Holy Spirit seals the promise of reconciliation in the hearts of the faithful.”<sup>7</sup> Olevianus even calls the covenant a *bund und Freundschaft* (a bond of friendship).<sup>8</sup>

Further, Olevianus identified the covenant with reconciliation and spoke of reconciliation as being engrafted into Christ and thus put into fellowship with Him.<sup>9</sup> Bierma further describes Olevianus’ view: “The covenant of grace or union between God and man is comprehended in the person of Christ, more particularly in the union of natures in that person. The covenant of grace or union between God and us is grounded first and foremost in Immanuel, the highest expression of the divine and human in union. Without this union there is no true Christ and without this Christ there is no true covenant or reconciliation with God”.<sup>10</sup>

While there were also other theologians throughout the development of the Reformed faith who held to the idea of the covenant as a bond of fellowship and friendship,<sup>11</sup> most well-known is Herman Bavinck, who strongly held to this idea of the covenant of grace as a bond of friendship. Bavinck had influence on Herman Hoeksema and may have been instrumental in shaping Hoeksema’s views of the covenant.

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<sup>5</sup> There will be opportunity to discuss this idea more fully later in this essay.

<sup>6</sup> Lyle Bierma, *The covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus, Doctoral dissertation (Duke University, 1980) in syllabus form only.*

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 100

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 110-111.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>11</sup> For other theologians see A. Algra, *Het Wonder van de Negentiende Eeuw (The Wonder of the Nineteenth Century)* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1965;) Egbert Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd over Verbond en Doop (A Century of Strife over covenant and Baptism)* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1946).

Whatever may be the case, Herman Hoeksema found in the Biblical doctrine of the covenant that it was a bond of friendship and fellowship. This was the heart of his covenant view. I shall speak of this a bit later.

Our main thesis in the essay is to demonstrate that the covenant of grace that God establishes with His people is unconditional, and not, as is so widely held, a conditional covenant whose establishment and continuation or maintenance is dependent on the fulfillment of conditions by man. It is clear that if the covenant is conditional, the covenant has to be an agreement. When two parties (in the case of the covenant, namely God and man,) reach an agreement, the agreement is based on promises made by both God and man, which when fulfilled are the conditions of the covenant. A covenant as a bond of friendship between God and man leaves no room for conditions.

### **The development of the Doctrine of the Covenant as an Agreement or Contract**

Because of confusion over the basic idea of the covenant (whether it was a contract or a bond of fellowship), two streams of thought were present in Reformed theology. I will treat the stream of thought that considered the covenant to be a contract between God and man first of all.

If the covenant of grace is defined in terms of a contract between God and man, how can the covenant serve as a basis for infant baptism? Infants cannot enter into a contract. That question arose early after the Secession of 1834.

In the controversy between the Swiss reformers and the Anabaptists, the Swiss reformers saw clearly that baptism was a sign of the covenant not only, but also that baptism was a sign and seal that God establishes His covenant with believers and their seed. If God establishes his covenant with believers and their seed, infants are also in the covenant. But how can they be, if they must first participate in a contract with God?

In the eighteenth century, the Reformed Church had drifted into apostasy. Because it was a State Church<sup>12</sup>, countless people who belonged to the church were unconverted, worldly and wicked. A movement arose among the people of God that was called *De Nadere Reformatie* (*The Further Reformation*) that was a protest against the apostasy in their churches.

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<sup>12</sup> A church in which the government had a great deal of control including the right to decide what religion it would promote.



These people frequently met outside the church in private homes to engage in Scripture study, prayer, singing and meditation on the word of God.

While the church to which they belonged (The Reformed [State] Church) insisted, because it was a state church, that every citizen in the land was also a member of the church and had to be baptized, these people, correctly, insisted that only those who were converted were genuine Christians. True people of God were not God's people by virtue of being a citizen in the land and an outward member of the church, but by virtue of an inner piety and godliness.

But the question had to be faced: How could one tell if he was truly converted? Many who claimed conversion were hypocrites. The answer was: One could be assured of conversion by some mystical and extraordinary experience in which God spoke directly to him.

This again raised the question of the baptism of infants, for infants cannot have such a spiritual experience. This was the problem the church faced.

### **The Basis for Infant Baptism in the Secession**

The problem was not completely solved by the reformation of the church in the Separation of 1834 (*de Afscheiding*); there were differences of opinion on the matter.

A man by the name of Hendrik DeCock, pastor of a Reformed Church in Ulrum, the Netherlands, was really the spiritual father of the Separation of 1834. This Separation led to the formation of an entirely new denomination. But he had a problem in his congregation. He had many adults in his congregation who were influenced by the "Further Reformation" and who never had any unusual experience from God, and who never made confession of faith because they considered themselves unconverted. They married and had children and could not have their children baptized, because they were not confessing members.<sup>13</sup> De Cock baptized babies, but really without any basis.

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<sup>13</sup> The pilgrims who landed on the shores of America in 1610 solved this problem by adopting a view called "the half-way covenant." Those who had historical faith but had not yet had a conversion experience were "half-way" in the covenant, and so could have their children baptized.

Another minister who also left the Reformed (State) Church in the Separation of 1834 was Hendrik Scholte. Although he was somewhat of a maverick<sup>14</sup> in the movement, he was correct on his view of baptism.

He wrote Rev. De Cock: “When I administer Holy Baptism to the children of believers, then I do this as unto *heirs of the Kingdom of God and of His covenant, unto members of Christ’s congregation* (italics are Scholte’s). And upon this ground I pray for the same blessings over them as over their parents. And declare unto them even as unto their parents *that God is their God*. I am completely one in this with the liturgical form of baptism. . . .”<sup>15</sup>

In a Provincial Gathering on March 8, 1837, Scholte submitted this: “All those who according to God’s promises belong to God’s covenant, that is, *all believers* (Italics are Scholte’s) and their children may and must be baptized. The believers must be recognized by the marks of Christians, that is, by *confession* and walk according to God’s Word. Everyone who shows these marks should be recognized and dealt with as a member of the church, and thus should receive the signs of the covenant for himself and for his seed. However, those who do not show such marks may not be recognized as members and must together with their children, be denied the Sacraments until their conversion.”<sup>16</sup> It is clear from this statement of Scholte that he insisted that children of believers had to be baptized on the grounds that these children were also members of the covenant of grace and thus also had to receive the sign and seal of the covenant. The clear conclusion was that infants of believers are saved as well as adults.

There was also disagreement in the camp of the men of the Secession over the question of the preaching of the Gospel. Some in the Dutch churches had come under the influence of the Marrow men in Scotland who had developed the idea of a general and gracious offer in the preaching of the Gospel in which God expressed His desire to save and gave grace to all who heard the preaching. This idea of a general and gracious offer of the Gospel had come into the Netherlands, because of the close contact between the Reformed church in the Netherlands and the Scottish Presbyterian churches.

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<sup>14</sup> maverick: one who takes an independent stand apart from others

<sup>15</sup> Quoted from Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth’s Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Jenison, Reformed Free Publishing Company, 2000) 12. This quotation originally comes from, Lubbertus Oostendorp, *H. P. Scholte: Leader of the Secession of 1834 and Founder of Pella (Franeker, Netherlands: T. Wever, 1964), 84.*

<sup>16</sup> Idem

When the question arose in the Dutch churches concerning the ground for infant baptism, the churches faced the problem that children of believers were not regenerated until later in life, if at all. It is not difficult to see that the idea of the Gospel offer was also applied by many to the promise of God in baptism. The sacraments are signs and seals of the promise proclaimed in the Gospel. These men who adopted the idea of a general and gracious offer, said that the promise of God was also the promise made at baptism. That promise came to all who were baptized just as the offer of salvation came to all who heard the Gospel. Each baptized child possessed that promise in fact.

That idea of a general promise in baptism fits in nicely with the idea of the covenant as a contract or agreement. No infant can enter into an agreement – obviously. And so the full realization of the covenant had to wait until a baptized child grew up. As an adult, he could agree to and keep the conditions of the covenant and thus enter fully into the covenant.

The result was that the notion of a conditional covenant was held by many within the Reformed Churches.

That question of the conditionality of the covenant became a major point of contention throughout the years following and remains such today.<sup>17</sup>

### **Election in the Covenant**

It is not surprising that the question of the doctrine of election should be introduced into the discussion. If the promise of the covenant is to all baptized children, and if that promise expresses God's willingness to save all the baptized children, if only they, when grown would fulfill the conditions of the covenant, how does election fit into the picture? Surely election is not determinative for membership in the covenant: it is the fulfillment of conditions that determines who are true members of the covenant.

David Engelsma, from whose book I shall quote at some length on this question, explains the solution that was proposed.<sup>18</sup> "In 1861, two ministers of the Secession churches, K.J. Pieters and J.R. Kreulen, introduced a radically different doctrine of the covenant into the churches. In a

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<sup>17</sup> See, Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd*; and Algra, *Het Wonder*.

<sup>18</sup> The following quotes are taken from David Engelsma, *covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition* (Jenison, Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2011).

book titled *De Kinderdoop* (Infant Baptism), they taught a doctrine of the covenant, particularly regarding the infant children of believers, that severed the relation of covenant and election.

“According to the doctrine of Pieters and Kreulen, God establishes the covenant of grace with all the baptized children alike, so that all alike are in covenant communion with God. . . . All the children are heirs of the covenant blessings. All the children without exception are heirs of the kingdom of God and His covenant in the sense that they possess this [kingdom and its riches] in the promise and one day would possess it in actuality, if they do not despise this promise by unthankfulness and thus disinherit themselves by unbelief.”<sup>19</sup>

There is no room for the doctrine of election in this view. But Kreulen and Pieters’ view took hold among many in the Reformed Churches, especially those of the Separation of 1834.

The ideas of Kreulen and Pieters came to America in the person of William Heyns. He was a Dutch immigrant who became professor of Dogmatics in Calvin Theological Seminary. He taught a whole generation of men who later promoted his views in the Christian Reformed Church; the effects of this teaching are still evident in the Christian Reformed Church today.

Heyns (1856-1933) followed the tradition of Kreulen and Pieters in his covenant views. In brief, Heyns taught that, although all baptized children received the promise of God, many of them became “covenant-breakers” because they rejected God’s promise.

He taught that the covenant was one-sided in its establishment, because God made the promise of salvation to every baptized child. But the covenant was two-sided in its realization, because it could not actually become a reality in a baptized child’s life unless he fulfilled the conditions attached to it.

Heyns also rejected the idea that election and justification by faith alone designated<sup>20</sup> those who belonged to the covenant, because **all** baptized children were in the covenant.

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<sup>19</sup> Engelsma is quoting from a book by Pieters and Kreulen, an abbreviated title of which is, *De kinderdoop volgens de Beginselen der Gereformeerde Kerk*. . . (Infant Baptism according to the Reformed Church) (Franeker: T. Telenga, 1861). The quote from Engelsma’s book is found on pages 11-12.

<sup>20</sup>designated: marked

Finally, Heyns spoke of a covenantal grace that was given to all baptized children that enabled them to make a decision for or against the covenant, which choice would make them either covenant-breakers or possessors of all the benefits of the covenant. It was a kind of common grace of the covenant.<sup>21</sup>

As a student, Rev. Herman Hoeksema studied under Heyns and learned his theology from him. Already in his student days he was not in agreement with Heyns' view of the covenant. He said to his professor, "I do not yet understand the whole idea of the covenant, but I know your view is wrong, for it is Arminianism introduced into the covenant." This is why Hoeksema devoted a great deal of his studies to a search as to what Scripture taught concerning the covenant of grace.

### **Teachers of Election in the Covenant**

Although many theologians followed the path outlined by Kreulen and Peters, there were many also who held to the importance of the doctrine of election as being determinative for membership in the covenant.

### **Bavinck on the Covenant**

In his important book, *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition*,<sup>22</sup> David Engelsma quotes at length from Calvin to show that Calvin insisted that the sovereign and eternal decree of election determined those who are graciously brought into the covenant and those who are excluded. He refers to and quotes from other Reformed theologians that held to the same view, including the well-known and highly respected theologian, Herman Bavinck.

Because of the constraints of space, I cannot refer in detail to those who stood in this tradition of applying the truth of sovereign election to the covenant of grace. The reader can read the book for himself.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See, William Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1926) 114-144, Jelle Faber, *American Secession Theologians on covenant and Baptism and Klaas Schilder, Extra-Scriptural Binding – a New Danger* (Neerlandia :Inheritance Publications, 1996) 47-48. See also, *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teachings of Dr. Klaas Schilder*, ed. By J. Geertsema (P & R Publishing, 1995) See for example page 28.

<sup>22</sup> Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> I quote Engelsma here because all the readers have access to his book while most do not have access to the original authors.

Herman Bavinck was opposed to the view of Kreulen and Pieters, as is to be expected. Bavinck, as we mentioned before, believed in a covenant that was a bond of friendship and rejected the idea of the covenant as a contract or agreement. He wanted an unconditional covenant, established and maintained by God alone.

A few quotes from Bavinck will forcibly show this.<sup>24</sup> Regarding the relation between election and the covenant, Bavinck writes; “Election only and without qualification states who are elect and will infallibly obtain salvation; the covenant of grace describes the road by which these elect people will attain their destiny.”<sup>25</sup> And again, “The elect . . . [are] gathered into one under Christ as their head in the way of the covenant.”<sup>26</sup> It is worth our while to note that this quote from Bavinck also proves that Bavinck held to the Biblical idea that Christ is the Head of the covenant, an idea many deny.

The terms “bilateral and “unilateral” are often used in connection with the covenant. “Bilateral” means that the covenant has two sides to it: God’s side and man’s side. Both sides cooperate in the establishment and the maintenance of the covenant. If the covenant is an agreement, it is bilateral. “Unilateral means “one-sided;” that is, the whole establishment of the covenant and its maintenance are God’s work alone.

Bavinck fought for a “unilateral” covenant. He writes, “The doctrine of the covenant maintains God’s sovereignty in the entire work of salvation... Into that entire work of salvation, from beginning to end, nothing is introduced that derives from humans. It is God’s work totally and exclusively; it is pure grace and undeserved salvation... This doctrine of the covenant... purely and fully maintains God’s sovereignty in the work of salvation.”<sup>27</sup>

Again Bavinck writes: “The covenant of grace . . . is indeed unilateral: it proceeds from God; he has designed and defined it. *He maintains and implements it. It is a work of the triune God and is totally completed among the three Persons themselves.*”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The following quotes are taken from David Engelsma, *covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition* (Jenison, Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Engelsma, *covenant and Election*, 163.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 164

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 165

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 165

Those who hold to a conditional covenant have always maintained as a key doctrine in their view of the covenant that all the children of believing parents receive the promise of the covenant – but only in an objective way. The actual subjective realization of the covenant depends on the fulfillment of conditions attached to the promise. Each baptized child also receives “covenantal grace” that enables such a child to embrace the promises of God or reject them.<sup>29</sup>

Engelsma writes in connection with this point: “Bavinck clearly sees that any extension of the grace of the covenant beyond the limits of God’s election necessarily implies the heresy of free will. If covenant grace is wider than election, *covenant grace is resistible*. Some toward whom God has a gracious attitude, desiring to save them, or upon whom God bestows grace as a covenant power, resist this grace, and go lost. Implied is that whether one is saved by covenant grace depends, not upon the grace itself (for many who are objects of this grace are not saved by it), but upon his own decision, his own free will. Extending covenant grace more widely than election necessarily introduces the heresy of salvation by the free will of the sinner into the gospel of the covenant. Repudiating<sup>30</sup> the idea that election and covenant differ regarding the extent of their grace, Bavinck adds, in the same sentence: ‘that the former [election] denies free will and the latter [the covenant] teaches or assumes it.’”<sup>31</sup>

### **Dr. Klaas Schilder**

Dr Klaas Schilder (1890-1952) was ordained a minister in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. He was born and raised in the tradition of the Separation of 1834 and adopted their distinct views – especially on the covenant. He was a minister in the latter 1900’s and so was engaged in the battles fought in that church over the doctrinal distinctives of those who were in the line of the Separation of 1834, and those who followed the teachings of Dr. Abraham Kuyper. In fact, he, along with some others, started his own paper, *De Reformatie (Reformation)*, to make his views more widely known. The controversy became very heated and the result was that the Synod of the Reformed Churches deposed Dr. Schilder from office in 1944.

This deposition of Schilder was wildly unjust. For one thing, World War II was being fought and Dr. Schilder was in hiding because of his opposition to the Nazis. He had been in a concentration

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<sup>29</sup> See later material on these points.

<sup>30</sup> Repudiating: rejecting

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 168-169.

camp, but had been released. He was hiding to escape arrest again at the time the Synod met. The Synod voted to depose him even though he was not at the Synod to defend himself. He even wrote the Synod asking them to wait until after the war, so that he could be present. But they paid no attention.

There was another grave injustice involved. No Synod may depose a minister; only a local consistory may do that, because Christ has given the authority to rule and to discipline to the body of elders, not to a broader ecclesiastical assemblies. Deposition is part of censure, and censure belongs to the elders in a congregation.

It was probably Schilder's mistreatment that was one reason for the attraction Schilder and Hoeksema had for each other. Hoeksema too was denied the floor of the Synod in 1924 to speak in his own defense on the question of common grace; and Hoeksema had also been deposed by a broader ecclesiastical assembly, the classis.

At any rate, one other point attracted Schilder and Hoeksema to each other. Schilder denied common grace, something that endeared him to Hoeksema, who had battled long and hard against this heretical doctrine.

The followers of Schilder formed a new denomination, which has gone under the name Liberated. The liberated churches have been established in many countries such as Canada, the United States, South Africa, and Australia. They all hold the same views of the covenant.

Schilder made two trips to the United States, one in 1939 and the other in 1947. The trip in 1939 was, more or less a get-acquainted visit. The trip in 1947 was far more important.<sup>32</sup> Schilder had made plans to come to this country to lecture and preach in the Christian Reformed Church. But when Schilder was deposed in the Netherlands, the Christian Reformed Church closed its churches to him. The Protestant Reformed Churches were more generous, although in the wrong way. The churches decided to open their pulpits to him so that he could speak and preach in the churches. Also conferences were held in which ministers and office bearers could come to know him, and he them.

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<sup>32</sup> On both trips Dr. Schilder stayed briefly in our home. I vividly remember him, but found it totally impossible to understand his Dutch not knowing any Dutch myself, but also baffled by his strange way of speaking.



This, I say, was a mistake. Already before Schilder arrived on these shores, the differences in covenant views were well-known. In spite of these differences, Schilder was welcomed as one who was Reformed. The fact is that he was not. His covenant views were wrong, contrary to Scripture and the confessions, and really nothing else but an introduction of Arminianism into the covenant. Reformed Churches throughout history have always jealously guarded their pulpits, aware that from them came the word of God, the chief means of grace. Those who held firmly and faithfully to the truth of Scripture were welcomed, but it was a danger to open pulpits to anyone who was not confessionally Reformed.<sup>33</sup>

The churches paid a price for this mistake. Many ministers and people were so attracted to the genial Dr. Schilder and to his views that they began to teach them in their churches and defend them in church papers. The result was controversy over Schilder's erroneous views of the covenant and the Reformed view of the covenant held in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

It was during this period that thousands of immigrants were fleeing war-torn Netherlands and seeking to make a new life in Canada and America. The question that faced these immigrants was this: Can immigrants from the Schilder Churches find an ecclesiastical home in the Protestant Reformed Churches? And would the leaders in the Netherlands advise these immigrants to join a Protestant Reformed Church?

The answer at first was, "Yes", and two Protestant Reformed Churches were organized in Canada. But the missionary that was laboring in Canada to gather these immigrants into Protestant Reformed congregations was constantly faced with the question of the differences in covenant views. The missionary, therefore, presented a request to the Mission Committee to ask Synod to draw up a statement to be used on the mission field that would define the Protestant Reformed views of the covenant.

The Synod appointed a committee to draw up such a statement, and with some minor changes that statement was adopted by the Synod of 1950.<sup>34</sup> It was called "The Declaration of

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<sup>33</sup> For a more detailed description of this history see, Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake*, 270-275.

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed history of the Declaration of Principles, see David Engelsma, *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the covenant: The Declaration of Principles* (Jenison, Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2013). A copy of this Declaration can be found in *Ibid*, 197-219.

Principles.” It was provisionally adopted by the synod of 1950, because it was submitted to the churches for their examination and judgment.

Because the defense of the covenant views of Dr. Schilder had become more vehement and wide-spread, the Synod of 1951 was inundated with protests and objections. Nevertheless, the Declaration was finally approved.

Dr. Schilder and the leaders of what now became known as The Liberated Churches were angry. They immediately called off all contact with the Protestant Reformed Churches and Dr. Schilder publicly repudiated any further contact with these churches in an article in *De Reformatie* with the title *De Kous Is Af (The Stocking is Finished)*.<sup>35</sup>

Dr. Schilder’s main objection to the Declaration was that this document was an additional confession that added to the Scriptural teachings concerning the covenant as found in the Three Forms of Unity. This was however, a cover-up: the Declaration is over 75% quotes from the confessions. But the teaching of the confessions is clear and unambiguous. It would be impossible to prove the Liberated position on the covenant from the confessions and few attempts have been made to do so.

The split in the Protestant Reformed churches in 1953 brought about a division between those who held to the Liberated view of the covenant and the Protestant Reformed view. Strangely, the actual occasion for the split came from statements spoken off the pulpit in First Protestant Reformed Church, not so much defending Liberated views of the covenant, but defending a conditional salvation in a much more general way.

Yet there is reason for this, for the covenant is such a central doctrine of Scripture that to make the covenant conditional is to make all salvation conditional. Subsequent history was to prove the truth of this.

### **The Differences Between the Views of the PRC and the Liberated**

A brief summary of the differences between the Liberated view of the covenant and the historically Reformed view will help to show that the two views are really oceans apart.

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<sup>35</sup> By this rather strange title, Dr. Schilder meant to say that the contact between his denomination and the Protestant Reformed Churches was like knitting together a stocking. But now, with the adoption of the Declaration of Principles, the cooperation had come to an end, and the knitting of the stocking together was halted.

The Liberated view of the basic idea of the covenant is that it is a contract or an agreement between God and man. The Reformed view is that the covenant is a bond of friendship and fellowship between God and His people in Christ Jesus.

The Liberated view is that the covenant can be identified with God's promise of salvation. The covenant is a temporary matter, a means to an end. When the promise is fulfilled in heaven, the covenant ceases to exist. The Reformed view of the covenant is that covenant fellowship with God through Jesus Christ is the very essence of salvation, and that the covenant God establishes with his people is fully realized in heaven when the tabernacle of God is with men and he is their God and they are his people, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes (Rev. 21:1-4).

The Liberated view of the covenant is that the truth of election, which is the heart of the Gospel, has nothing to do with the covenant and must not be made to relate to the covenant in any way. The confessional and Biblical teaching is that

God establishes His covenant eternally with Christ and in Christ with all the elect. Election, the first point of Calvinism, marks out those who are members of the covenant.

In Liberated theology Christ is not the Head of the covenant. Christ is moved to a peripheral<sup>36</sup> place in the works of God, where he is all but forgotten as far as the covenant is concerned. The Biblical teaching is that Christ is the Head of the covenant, its Surety and the Mediator of the covenant through his cross and resurrection from the dead.

Liberated theology teaches that the promise of God to establish his covenant is made to all baptized children who have the right to claim that promise for their own. It is a general promise, therefore, similar to the gracious offer of the gospel that proclaims that God loves all men, Christ died for all men, and God wants all men to be saved. Liberated teaching therefore, claims that God's promise is grace to all that receive that promise in baptism. God's promise is a general grace, and when men reject it, it is because that grace is resistible. Reformed theology teaches, and Scripture emphasizes that the promise of salvation in Christ is made only to the elect and that the grace conveyed through the promise is particular and sovereign. It is truly irresistible grace.

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<sup>36</sup> Peripheral: minor, irrelevant

Those who hold to the Liberated view of the covenant teach that the promise of the covenant is conditional. That is, that the full gift of the promise comes only to those who fulfill certain conditions. This is Arminian. The Biblical and confessional view of the covenant is that the covenant is completely unconditional. God establishes it, sovereignly taking into the covenant his own elect, and God maintains that covenant by his own sovereign grace.

Liberated theology holds that though every baptized child possesses the promise he may lose it when he comes to years of discretion by rejecting that promise. Therefore, though in the covenant, he can fall out of it. The Reformed teach the fifth point of Calvinism, namely the perseverance of the saints.

Liberated theologians insist that children, though in the covenant, must fulfill conditions to the covenant to receive its full blessedness. The Reformed teach, with Scripture and the confessions, that the elect children of believers are already heirs of the covenant, are incorporated into it and are to be treated as children of God.

This truth has great implications for covenant instruction. Children are not to be educated so that they may fulfill the conditions of the covenant in order to be finally saved; but are to be instructed in the ways of God's covenant because the Spirit works in them to apply covenant instruction to their hearts from infancy on.

These are significant differences, and are fundamentally the differences between the Calvinism of Dordt and Arminianism.

### **The Weaknesses of the Liberated View**

It is important that we understand why the Liberated view is to be rejected as Arminian. I understand that no thoughtful Liberated would admit to being Arminian; but the fact remains that the view of the covenant that he defends cannot be interpreted in any other way than as an introduction of Arminian theology into the Reformed faith.

To view the covenant as a contract between God and man, as is done by the defenders of a conditional covenant is to bring God down to the level of man. How can anyone who knows the greatness and infinite glory of him who makes the heavens His throne and the earth His footstool ever think of God and man making a deal together with mutual stipulations and conditions? All

the nations of the earth are as grasshoppers in God's sight. Man is nothing but a speck and sinful besides. It is degrading to God to speak of God and man entering into a contract.

The implications of Liberated covenant theology are that Calvinism in all its five points is denied. God loves all men, not only His elect. Christ died for all men, because God loves all and Christ earned salvation for all. Man is less than totally depraved because he has the grace from God to accept the promise – though he may reject it. Grace is resistible because all the baptized receive covenantal grace, that may be rejected and spurned. One who is in the covenant can fall away from grace and go lost.

The Arminianism of this view is evident from the fact that the Liberated teach that the promise made at baptism is a general and conditional promise. Liberated theologians may repeatedly insist that God fulfills the conditions of the covenant. But such protestations do no good. Prof Veenhof, a colleague of Dr. Schilder, introduced into the debate concerning the covenant the figure of a check. At baptism God gives to every baptized child a check on which is written: "Pay to the order of \_\_\_\_\_ the sum of salvation." The check is signed by God himself. The check is good and is worth exactly what it says: salvation. A baptized child however, can frame that check and hang it on the wall in his home. He then is only an outward member of the covenant and does not receive the check's value, that is, salvation. One receiving it may also tear it up and throw it away. He is a covenant-breaker. Or one may cash the check at the bank of heaven and receive what the check is worth<sup>37</sup>. It is a man's free will that determines whether a man receives the value of the check.

Even if we were to go along with the Liberated's erroneous concept of conditions for a moment, this view makes God out to be one who mocks at man—as I shall demonstrate. If I address 100 men with paralyzed legs as a condition to receive my promise of \$1000.00 on condition that they will come up on the platform to stand at my side, I am mocking them, for they cannot walk one step. I know they can't come up on the platform. But if I myself go down to them and carry them up on the platform, then their coming up to the platform is no longer a condition to receiving the \$1000.00, for I brought them up; they did nothing. So if God promises salvation to every one of the baptized children, and he knows they cannot even want that promise, for they

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<sup>37</sup> Prof. C, Veenhof, *Appel* (no publisher or date given).

are totally depraved, God mocks them, for God knows they cannot fulfill the condition of faith and obedience. If God fulfills the so-called condition by giving them the grace to accept the promise, then faith and obedience are no longer conditions but gifts of God.

That a conditional covenant is a deadly heresy has come out clearly in the wide-spread acceptance of what is usually called “The Federal Vision.” The Federal Vision teaches that all of salvation is conditioned on faith and obedience, and that justification is by faith and works. Contrary to Luther’s insistence that justification is by faith alone, and contrary to Luther’s strong statement that the truth of justification by faith alone is the “hinge” on which turns the whole church of Christ. The Federal Vision has introduced the old idea of the Roman Catholic church that works are necessary for justification.

As Engelsma shows clearly, the idea of a conditional salvation and justification on the ground of faith and works has its historical and theological roots in a conditional covenant.<sup>38</sup>

How can it be said that the doctrine of a conditional covenant is not important when it gives birth to a baby as totally heretical as The Federal Vision? The relation between a conditional covenant and The Federal Vision is clear. The truth of God’s everlasting covenant of grace is the heart of salvation. Scripture itself defines salvation repeatedly with God’s word to His people: “I will be your God and ye shall be my people.” But if that covenant is conditional then the whole of salvation is conditional. And this conditional salvation is the teaching of The Federal Vision and is the teaching of Rome.

It is really the main reason why Protestants of Reformed and Presbyterian stripe are making their way, hurriedly, back to the Roman Catholic Church.

### **The Blessedness of the Biblical and Reformed View**

I admit that it is hard for me to understand why one would want to exchange the warm, comforting and beautiful view of the covenant that is Reformed for a rather empty, cold and basically worthless view of a conditional covenant that is no more than a contract.

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<sup>38</sup> David Engelsma, *Federal Vision: heresy at the root* (Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2012). See especially chapter 2, 25-35.

The view of the covenant as a bond of friendship and fellowship between God and his people in Christ is as warm as we know friendship can be. It pulses with life and blessedness. It soothes the wounded spirit and brings joy unspeakable and full of glory to the saint. We are God's friends. We do not have to agree to a contract and make our own promises to be saved. That is cold, lifeless, and empty in the extreme.

That God alone is sovereign in all the work of the covenant and that there are no conditions to fulfill is so great a blessing that the poor sinner who knows his own worthlessness and powerlessness can now shout for joy in the blessedness that God graciously makes him an heir of the covenant.

### **A Brief Survey of Scripture's Doctrine of the Covenant**

The main teachings of Scripture and the Confessions concerning the doctrine of the covenant are these.

God is in Himself as the triune God a covenant God who lives in perfect, joyful and infinitely blessed fellowship with Himself.

For the glory and praise of His own infinite name, He reveals His covenant to His elect people. He reveals it, not simply by telling them about it, but by taking them into His own triune covenant life so that they become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). He makes known to them His secrets (Psalm 25:14).

Thus the covenant is a bond of fellowship and friendship between God and His people, which God sovereignly establishes with believers and their elect seed. It was typified in the Old Testament by the tabernacle and temple, visible signs that God and His people lived under one roof in fellowship with each other.

The covenant is established with Christ who is the Mediator, Head and Surety of the covenant and in whom all the elect are taken into the covenant.

Elect children of believers are sanctified as a general rule in infancy (Jeremiah 1:5). It is not exegetically sound to define sanctification as mere separation from the un-baptized world

without salvation, as the Liberated teach. Sanctification means, to make holy. That is its meaning in Scripture.

That infants born to believers are regenerated even before birth is clearly taught in Scripture. Luke 2:39-45, in describing the conception of Christ in the womb of Mary, speaks of the wonder that before John was born, he announced the arrival of Christ by leaping in the womb of his mother. Jesus reprimands the disciples for keeping mothers with babes from coming to him. Christ says of them that of such is the kingdom of Heaven. “And he took them in his arms and blessed them” (Matthew 19:14, Mark 10:14, Luke 18:16).<sup>39</sup> The Scriptures do not teach that, as Jonathan Edwards said, “our children are a nest of vipers.”

The covenant is absolutely unconditional in both its establishment and its maintenance. Although the elect believers have their own responsibilities within the covenant, it is God that worketh in them both to will and to do of his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13).

Those who insist the covenant is conditional plead that a conditional covenant preserves man’s responsibility. But one does not have to become Arminian and teach the doctrine of free will to preserve man’s responsibility. The Baptism Form speaks, quite correctly, of our part in the covenant. That part that we have is not a condition to the covenant’s establishment or maintenance; it is the joyful and willing response of the covenant friend of God by which he expresses his gratitude for such great and unmerited blessings.

Not all the children of believers are elect and saved (Romans 9:6). The historical manifestation of the covenant is like a riverbed through which flows the water of a river until the water reaches its goal when it no longer has need of a riverbed. But all are born in the historical manifestation of the covenant. As such, although they are not true members of God’s covenant, they come under covenant influences in parental guidance, Christian education, the care of the church, which baptizes them, teaches them catechism, and disciplines them.

The people of God experience covenant fellowship with God in this life, but receive the full blessedness of the covenant when the tabernacle of God is with men (Revelation 21:1-4).

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<sup>39</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this point, see, Herman Hanko, *We and Our Children: The Reformed Doctrine of Infant Baptism* (Jenson: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004).



**Proof for the Doctrine of an Unconditional Covenant in Scripture** (The confessional proof can be found in the *Declaration of Principles*, which see). Proof for the covenant as a bond of friendship:

- Enoch and Noah walked with God (Genesis 5:23, 6:9, Amos 3:2).
- Abraham was called the friend of God (James 2:23).
- In God's covenant God reveals to us His secrets as one would to a friend (Psalm 25:14).
- The formula for the covenant is expressed in Genesis 17:7 and found in many passages throughout both Testaments: God will be the God of His people and He will be their God.
- The tabernacle and temple were Old Testament types of the covenant: God dwelling with his people under one roof (Psalm 27:4-5, Psalm 84:1-4.) Christ's body is the true temple of God in which God dwells and the church is Christ's body (John 2:19-21, Col. 2:9, I Cor. 12:27).
- The covenant is said to be a family in which Christ is the Elder Brother and all the elect are sons and daughters (2 Cor. 6:16-18).
- The perfection of the covenant is described as God's temple with us and in terms of the covenant formula that God is our God and we are His people (Revelation 21:1-4).

Proof for the un-conditionality of the covenant:

- Genesis 15 teaches that God's covenant in its establishment was God's work alone without any conditions, for Abraham was sound asleep when the covenant was established.
- Psalm 89:19-37 speaks of God's covenant with David (typically) and with Christ and his children. It speaks of the fact that his children will break his law (30), and, although God will chasten them for their sins, He will maintain His covenant (33-38). Thus God alone maintains His covenant.
- In Ezekiel 16, God describes his covenant with His people as finding a dead and abandoned baby on the side of the road, whom He saves, makes alive, nourishes, and makes His queen. But she commits adultery. In verse 60 we have one of those great "Nevertheless(es)": "Nevertheless, I will remember my covenant with thee...."

Proof that not all children of believers receive the promise, but only those who belong to Christ the Head of the covenant:

- Romans 9:6, Galatians 3:16, 29.

Proof that election determines those who belong to the covenant:

- Romans 9:8-13

Visit <http://rfpa.org/collections/doctrine> for more material on the Covenant and other reformed doctrines.