

Protestant *Reformed* Theological *Journal*

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Editor's Notes

This issue of the *Journal* is the second of two issues devoted to the doctrine of God's covenant of grace. In this issue Prof. Russell Dykstra treats the vital relationship between the covenant and the kingdom. Prof. Barrett Gritters takes up the matter of covenant breaking and covenant breakers. And the undersigned considers God's covenant with Noah, evaluating the view that the Noahic covenant was a covenant of common grace. (Rev. Angus Stewart's survey and analysis of John Calvin's covenant theology, which he started in the previous issue, will be continued in our November 2007 issue.)

The doctrine of God's covenant is not just one doctrine among many other doctrines of equal importance in Scripture. But the doctrine of the covenant is *the* doctrine of Scripture, the central doctrine around which all the other doctrines are arranged, out of which they arise, and on which they are dependent. The Reformed faith has recognized this. For this reason, the doctrine of the covenant, already from the time of the Reformation, has been the distinguishing doctrine of Reformed theology. More than any other doctrine, the doctrine of the covenant has defined the Reformed faith.

At the same time, from the very beginning the doctrine of the covenant has been controversial. It has been a matter of controversy with those outside the Reformed faith who denied it and attacked it. But it has also been a matter of controversy among the Reformed themselves. The various controversies over the covenant within the Reformed churches have been highlighted in the articles appearing in this issue and in the preceding issue of the *Journal*.

Our prayer is that our readership will be profited by this issue of the *Journal*. It is our hope that you will be informed regarding old and new attacks on the biblical truth of the covenant. It is our added hope that you will be strengthened in your resolve to maintain the truth of the covenant, for the glory of the God of the covenant.

R.L.C.

The Covenant with Noah: Common Grace or Cosmic Grace?

Ronald L. Cammenga

Introduction

In the progressive revelation of the truth concerning the covenant, the history of God's establishment of the covenant with Noah is of special significance. The establishment of the covenant with Noah is not the first establishment of the covenant by God. The covenant was first established when God spoke the "Mother Promise" in Genesis 3:15. God's putting enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent implied the establishment of friendship between Himself and the seed of the woman. That is the covenant, the relationship of love expressed in friendship and fellowship between Himself and His people in Christ—the seed of the woman. The very first revelation of the promise of the gospel is couched in covenantal language and proclaims the salvation that is the covenant.

Although God's establishment of the covenant with Noah is not the first establishment of the covenant, there are a number of "firsts" connected with the Noahic covenant, as recorded in Genesis 6:18 and Genesis 9:8-17. For one thing, this is the first time that the term "covenant" (בְּרִית) appears on the pages of Holy Scripture. In Genesis 6:18, after announcing the destruction of all flesh and commanding Noah to build the ark, God's word to Noah was, "But with thee will I establish my *covenant*; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons' wives with thee." In distinction from the wicked world that would perish under God's just judgment, God had established His covenant with Noah. That God had established His covenant with Noah was both the explanation for and the assurance to Noah that he and his family would not perish in the impending deluge. The covenant and their place in the covenant was the assurance from the God of their salvation, as the apostle Peter expressly states in

I Peter 3:20. God's establishment of His covenant with Noah prior to the Flood was reaffirmed by God after Noah and his family left the ark and set foot in the new world. That reaffirmation of the covenant is recorded in Genesis 9:8-17.

Besides the first express mention of the covenant, the history of Noah is also significant for the first use of the covenant formula, "I will establish my covenant."¹ From the very first use of the term "covenant," the language used by God for the covenant's establishment was not "Let *us* establish a covenant," as though the covenant were a pact or mutual agreement between God and man. But the divine formula is "I will establish my covenant." Accompanying the first use of the term "covenant" is the insistence by God that the covenant is established sovereignly and unilaterally.

A third "first" worth pointing out is that it is in connection with the revelation of God's covenant with Noah that for the first time the word "grace" (חַן) appears on the pages of Holy Scripture. Genesis 6:8, "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord." Striking it is that the first use of the term "covenant" occurs in conjunction with the first use of the term "grace." Now clearly God's covenant promise to our first parents was a covenant and promise of grace. Of that they were keenly aware. Fallen mankind did not deserve deliverance from the serpent, whose friendship they had chosen over against God. God's grace was typified in His killing of the animals and clothing Adam and Eve with their skins. But it is in connection with God's establishment of the covenant with Noah that Scripture for the first time makes explicit mention of God's grace. As the history of the Flood makes abundantly clear, God's covenant and the salvation of that covenant are a gracious covenant and a gracious salvation.

Tragically, the great significance of God's covenant with Noah is often slighted. This is due to the fact that the Noachic covenant is generally construed as a covenant of common grace.

1. This language occurs in Genesis 6:18, as well as Genesis 9:9, 11, 17.

About this covenant of common grace it is said that it is a covenant that includes all men, elect and reprobate alike—as is the nature of *common* grace. The blessings of this covenant are only temporal blessings, not any spiritual blessings of salvation. This covenant is not a covenant established in the blood of the Mediator and Head of the covenant, the Lord Jesus Christ, but with Noah as the head and father of the human race. The blessings of this covenant being only temporal blessings, the nature of this covenant is that it is only temporary, a covenant that concerns only life in this present world. Although this covenant stands in a certain relationship to the covenant of grace, making possible, its proponents say, the realization of the covenant of grace, it is essentially different from the covenant of grace and must be distinguished from the covenant of grace.

Such a construal of the covenant with Noah, we are convinced, is not only to be criticized for its superficial exegesis of the biblical data recorded in Genesis, but it is to be criticized also for being seriously in error, in fact squarely at odds with the Bible's own teaching as to the nature of God's covenant with Noah. At the same time, the view that makes the Noahic covenant a covenant of common grace misses the rich significance of the revelation of the covenant that is associated with God's establishment of the covenant with Noah.

A Covenant of Common Grace

Abraham Kuyper, the father of common grace, was responsible for introducing into the Dutch Reformed churches the view that the Noahic covenant was a covenant of common grace. In his massive three-volume work on common grace, *De Gemeene Gratie*, Kuyper developed and defended this view.² The first one

2. Abraham Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1902-1905). Kuyper originally wrote what became his magisterial work on common grace as articles in the magazine *De Heraut*, of which he was for many years the editor. The articles appeared from 1895-1901. I quote from the fourth edition of Kuyper's work. All translations from the Dutch are my own. Kuyper's treatment of the covenant with Noah can be found in volume 1, pages 11-100 and pages 288-302.

hundred pages or so of the very first volume are devoted to an extensive treatment of God's covenant with Noah. Significantly, this is the point at which Kuyper begins his treatment of common grace. So decisive does he view God's establishment of the covenant with Noah for the teaching of common grace that this is his starting point.

The firm historical starting point for the dogma of common grace lies in the establishment of the covenant of God with Noah after the Flood. To this significant and decisive event, in the last instance, not enough attention is paid. One too quickly passes on to Abraham and the patriarchs, and consequently the weighty significance of the Noachic covenant at first is pushed into the background and then is almost forgotten.... We must therefore begin by again placing the great significance of the Noachic covenant in its clear light.³

For Kuyper, the great significance of the Noachic covenant was that it was a covenant of common grace. As a covenant of common grace, God's covenant with Noah, Kuyper insisted, was not particular, not with the elect in Christ alone. Rather, it was a covenant that included all men, elect and reprobate alike. None were excluded from this covenant and the blessings—for covenant always entails blessing—that were enjoyed by virtue of this covenant. The grace of this covenant is common to all. Kuyper entitles an entire section of his treatment of the covenant with Noah “Het Noachietisch Verbond niet particulier,” that is, “The Noachic Covenant Not Particular.”⁴ In God's covenant with Noah “... we do not stand before a covenant of particular grace, but before a covenant of common grace....”⁵

The grace that is shown here is not particular, restricted only to the elect and leading to eternal life, but *common*, extending to all that *have breath*, and leading to a *human* existence on *this* earth, under *this* dispensation.⁶

3. Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 11.

4. Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 19ff.

5. Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 22.

6. Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 86.

Its *content* lies exclusively in the sphere of *natural* life, has to do with *temporal* and not eternal blessings, and applies to unbelievers as well as to those who fear God....⁷

In keeping with his insistence that the covenant with Noah was a covenant of common grace that included all men, Kuyper devalued the spiritual significance of the Noahic covenant. The covenant with Noah was not, taught Kuyper, on a par with the covenant of grace. It was certainly not to be regarded as a historical manifestation of the covenant of grace, but was in fact a completely separate covenant.

Had men understood that this Noahic covenant is not saving, but aims equally at all the children of men, yea, even at all living creatures, they would not make the mistake of placing this covenant on a line with the other covenants; but it is mentioned apart, as a covenant of an entirely different sort....⁸

In distinction from the covenant with Abraham, which concerned the spiritual blessings of salvation, the covenant with Noah concerned only earthly, natural benefits.⁹ It was not a covenant the grace of which was for time and eternity, but whose grace was only for this present earthly life. Thus, Kuyper sharply distinguished the covenant with Noah from the covenant with Abraham, which covenant includes Christ and the saving benefits that are found in Christ.¹⁰ The covenant of common grace in certain respects served the covenant of grace in Christ, but it was not to be identified with that covenant. They are not one and the same covenant, but two distinct covenants.

Although Abraham Kuyper is to be credited with the teaching that the covenant with Noah was a covenant of common grace, a number of the main elements of his teaching regarding the Noahic

7. Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 26.

8. Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 34.

9. Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 23, 26, 28, 34, 94.

10. Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 11, 12, 33, 93.

covenant were by his time already present in the Dutch Reformed tradition. In certain key respects, Kuyper carried on the views of the Noahic covenant that others before him had articulated. This is true in particularly two respects. First, already before Kuyper there were those who expressed the view that the covenant with Noah was a covenant in some sense with all men, not with the elect alone. And second, there were those who reduced the covenant with Noah to a covenant of nature, temporal in its benefits, and distinct from God's covenant of grace in Christ.

Wilhelmus à Brakel, one of the leading theologians of the movement in the Dutch Reformed churches of the seventeenth century known as the *Nadere Reformatie*, is representative of this strand in the tradition. In volume 4 of his *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, he deals with the question whether the rainbow is to be regarded as a sacrament of the covenant of grace.

Question: Is the rainbow a sacrament of the covenant of grace?

Answer: One might be inclined to think that this is so, since it is called the token of the covenant (cf. Gen. 9:12-13). We answer negatively for the following reasons:

(1) It is a token of the covenant between God and the earth, all men (both good and evil), and all living animals which had been in the ark with Noah (cf. Gen. 9:9-17). The covenant of grace is only a covenant between God and believers.

(2) By means of the rainbow, the Lord did not seal any spiritual benefits in Christ, but temporal blessings only; this blessing being that there would be no more flood upon the earth. The covenant of grace, however, contains spiritual promises.¹¹

Clearly, à Brakel viewed the Noahic covenant as distinct from the covenant of grace. It was, in his judgment, a covenant with all men, not with the elect alone, and it was a covenant that "did not seal any spiritual benefits in Christ, but temporal blessings only."

11. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 4 (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1995), 384.

This was Kuyper's starting point and the teaching that he developed more fully in his view of the Noahic covenant as a covenant of common grace.

A large portion of the Dutch Reformed church, both in the Netherlands and in the United States, as well as American Presbyterianism, has been influenced by Abraham Kuyper's teaching concerning the covenant with Noah. In fact, there appears to be an almost unquestioning acceptance of Kuyper's explanation of the Noahic covenant as a covenant of common grace among the majority of conservative Reformed and Presbyterian theologians since Kuyper's day.

Herman Bavinck, Kuyper's contemporary and co-laborer, shared his basic assessment of God's covenant with Noah. Bavinck takes up the matter of the covenant with Noah in the third volume of his *Reformed Dogmatics*. Although he has a decided preference for the designation of this covenant as "The Covenant with Nature," it is plain that Bavinck is in basic agreement with Kuyper as to the nature of this covenant.

With Noah, therefore, a new period begins. The grace that manifested itself immediately after the fall now exerted itself more forcefully in the restraint of evil. God made a formal covenant with all his creatures. This covenant with Noah (Gen. 8:21-22; 9:1-17), though it is rooted in God's grace and is most intimately bound up with the actual covenant of grace because it sustains and prepares for it, is not identical with it. It is rather a 'covenant of longsuffering' made by God with all humans and even with all creatures. It limits the curse on the earth; it checks nature and curbs its destructive power; the awesome violence of water is reined in; a regular alternation of seasons is introduced. The whole of the irrational world of nature is subjected to ordinances that are anchored in God's covenant. And the rainbow is set in the clouds as a sign and pledge (Gen. 8:21-22; 9:9-17).¹²

Bavinck goes on to state that

12. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 218.

The grace of God, accordingly [that is, by virtue of God's covenant with Noah, R.C.], manifests itself much more forcefully after the flood than before. To it is due the existence and life of the human race; the expansion and development of peoples; states and societies, which gradually came into existence; religion and morality, which were not completely lost even among the most degenerate peoples; and the arts and sciences, which achieved a high level of development. Everything that after the fall is still good even in sinful humans in all areas of life, the whole structure of civil justice, is the fruit of God's common grace. . . . Humankind was led by this grace and under the dispensation of this covenant of nature before Christ and prepared for his coming.¹³

Bavinck goes so far as to say that by virtue of the Noahic covenant of nature, "One can indeed speak in a positive sense of mankind's education by God. A susceptibility for salvation was maintained and the need for it aroused."¹⁴

It is plain that Bavinck is in agreement with Kuyper regarding the main features of the covenant with Noah. The points of agreement would be especially the following:

1. It is a covenant that includes all men, not just the elect, but also the reprobate wicked.
2. It is a covenant the blessings of which are limited to this life.
3. It is a covenant distinct from God's covenant of grace with the elect in Christ.

The Christian Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof carried on the Kuyperian view of the covenant with Noah, although he gives some indication of an uneasiness with certain implications of Kuyper's view.

The covenant with Noah is evidently of a very general nature: God promises that He will not again destroy all flesh by the waters of a flood, and that the regular succession of seed time and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, day and night will continue. The forces

13. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 218.

14. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 219.

of nature are bridled, the powers of evil are put under greater restraint, and man is protected against the violence of both man and beast. It is a covenant conferring only natural blessings, and is therefore often called the covenant of nature or of common grace. There is no objection to this terminology, provided it does not convey the impression that this covenant is dissociated altogether from the covenant of grace. Though the two differ, they are also most intimately connected.¹⁵

G. H. Kersten, the spiritual father of the Netherlands Reformed denomination, also spoke of the covenant with Noah as a covenant of common grace.

... the ordinances of heaven are placed by God as by way of a covenant, and also that in the Noachian Covenant God has sworn to the whole world, "Neither shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen. 9:11; Isa. 54:9). Here we have no promise of grace unto salvation but only of *common grace*; here nothing is said of election as it is in the Covenant of Grace because the grace promised here concerns *all* men, indeed, even the cattle and the grass of the field and the ordinances of heaven. Hence we are not considering these covenants; they do not concern man's eternal state, and thus differ from the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace.¹⁶

So distinct did he view God's covenant with Noah from God's covenant of grace in Christ that Kersten did not even include it in his consideration of the historical manifestations of the covenant of grace.

Also in American Presbyterian circles it is common to view the covenant with Noah as a covenant of common grace. Although not using that designation, Wayne Grudem may be regarded as representative.

15. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 294.

16. G. H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics: A Systematic Treatment of Reformed Doctrine*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Netherlands Reformed Book and Publishing Committee, 1980), 234.

The covenant that God made with Noah after the flood (Gen. 9:8-17) was not a covenant that promised all the blessings of eternal life or spiritual fellowship with God, but simply one in which God promised all mankind and the animal creation that the earth would no longer be destroyed by a flood. In this sense the covenant with Noah, although it certainly does depend on God's grace or unmerited favor, appears to be quite different in the parties involved (God and all mankind, not just the redeemed), the condition named (no faith or obedience is required of man), and the blessing that is promised (that the earth will not be destroyed again by flood, certainly a different promise from that of eternal life). The sign of the covenant (the rainbow) is also different in that it requires no action or voluntary participation on man's part.¹⁷

Other Voices

Although the explanation of the Noahic covenant as a covenant of common grace became the settled opinion in most Reformed and Presbyterian churches, there were contrary voices raised. Kuyper himself acknowledged that his view of the covenant with Noah was not in agreement with a number of earlier Reformed theologians. He mentions specifically Pareus, Perkins, Maastricht, and Rivet.¹⁸ These earlier Reformed theologians viewed the covenant with Noah as a manifestation of the one covenant of grace established by God with the elect in Christ. Accordingly, the promises of the Noahic covenant were not merely promises that concerned man's earthly life, but in the end were promises that concerned eternal life and the blessings of salvation.

17. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 520.

18. Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 20. David Engelsma adds to this list Herman Witsius, and cites passages out of Witsius' *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man* in support of this. Engelsma also evaluates Kuyper's dubious appeal to John Calvin in support of his understanding of the covenant with Noah. See Engelsma's book *Trinity and Covenant: God as Holy Family* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2006), 130ff.

In the modern era, a number of Reformed theologians have demurred from the prevailing opinion that the covenant with Noah was a covenant of common grace. If not throwing the conception overboard entirely, they have at least taken exception to various aspects of the covenant of common grace view.

One such theologian is J. G. Vos. Vos treats God's covenant with Noah in his commentary on Genesis. To begin with, Vos insists that the covenant throughout Scripture, as in Genesis 6:18 and Genesis 9:8-17, concerns God's spiritual salvation of the people with whom He establishes the covenant, not merely temporal blessings in this life.

God's covenant is a religious bond between God and His people, by which they receive life and blessing. To be in covenant with God is the opposite of perishing. God established His covenant with Noah and Noah's family; therefore, they did not perish in the waters of the Flood. Those who are in a covenant bond with God are saved unto eternal life; those without this covenant relationship to God will perish eternally in hell.¹⁹

Vos goes on to insist upon the unilateral character of the covenant with Noah, repudiating the description of the covenant with Noah, as well as God's covenant generally, as a pact or agreement.

We should note that God took the initiative in establishing this covenant relationship. This is very strongly emphasized in the text we are considering: "And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you." This covenant was not established by God and Noah jointly. It was established by God acting alone. Noah was the recipient and beneficiary of this covenant, but he was not in any sense the originator or author of it. It is important to emphasize this because we live in a day when it is common to debase God and exalt man in religious thinking. Many people today talk of "making" a covenant with God, when in reality, of course, they can do no such thing. The idea commonly met with that God's covenant is a kind of "contract" or "bargain" or "agreement" between God and man is based on the notion

19. J. G. Vos, *Genesis* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant Publications), 161.

that God and man can be equal contracting parties to such an arrangement. The Bible, on the other hand, represents God as the establisher of the covenant and man as the recipient and beneficiary of it. God and Noah did not mutually discuss this matter and come to agreement on having a covenant with certain provisions; God imposed the covenant, and Noah accepted it.²⁰

The above quotation makes clear that Vos viewed the covenant established with Noah as a manifestation of the one covenant of grace. It also makes clear that Vos viewed the covenant with Noah as instructive for the truth of God's covenant generally. Important implications for the doctrine of the covenant more broadly considered are to be derived from the biblical account of God's establishing the covenant with Noah. One of the most significant implications that Vos draws out is the unilateral character of the covenant.

More recently this same implication from the account of the establishment of the Noahic covenant has been pointed out by Gerard Van Groningen.

Yahweh declares himself to be the unilateral source of the covenant to which he did not add any kind of condition. The verb *məqîm* (hiphil participle of *qûm*, to cause to stand or cause to continue firmly) stresses Yahweh's sovereign intention and monergistic action. It is Yahweh's covenant with his saved (from the flood) image-bearers and animated life placed under their dominion; they become the blessed participants and benefactors.²¹

One of the most outspoken critics of the Kuyperian view of the covenant with Noah was the Protestant Reformed theologian Herman Hoeksema. Hoeksema subjected every aspect of the traditional Reformed doctrine of the covenant to the searching criticism of Scripture and the Reformed creeds. One aspect of the tradition that he evaluated and corrected was the accepted view of the covenant with Noah as a covenant of common grace. The

20. Vos, *Genesis*, 161.

21. Gerard Van Groningen, *From Creation to Consummation* (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 1996), 151.

rather lengthy quotation that follows is taken from Hoeksema's work *Believers and Their Seed*. Originally written in 1927, fairly early in Hoeksema's ministerial career, the quotation demonstrates his rejection of Kuyper's view of the covenant with Noah, even though Kuyper is not mentioned by name.

However, this truth, that God establishes His covenant in the line of continued generations, is more clearly expressed after the deluge. We have already made it plain that in the covenant with Noah we confront essentially no other covenant than the one covenant of grace which was already announced in general terms in Paradise, which is presently established with Abraham and his seed, and which is maintained in Christ. Noah does not enter into the ark as the representative of the whole world as it is outside of Christ, but as head of the visible church. The church is saved in the ark; the world perishes in the flood. Presently that church comes forth again from the ark; and with that church the Lord God establishes His covenant. The fact that in this connection the covenant of God is revealed as embracing the whole creation does not change matters and is easily understandable in the light of the history of the flood. A covenant of friendship with the wicked world outside of Christ God, the Holy and Righteous One, certainly could not establish. The covenant is essentially always the same. For this reason, also here Scripture does not speak of "a covenant," but of "my covenant." That is: My one covenant, which is always the same, and which I establish with My people in Christ Jesus. And when, therefore, the Lord establishes that covenant with Noah, He says: "And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you" (Gen. 9:9). Also here, therefore, you have the same idea. When God establishes His covenant in the world, then He does that with believers and their seed.²²

Objections to the View that the Covenant with Noah was a Covenant of Common Grace

A number of weighty objections must be lodged against the

22. Herman Hoeksema, *Believers and their Seed: Children in the Covenant* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997—revised edition), 91.

view that God's covenant with Noah was a covenant of common grace, altogether distinct both in its recipients and promises from God's covenant of grace in Jesus Christ.²³

First, the account in Genesis makes plain that it is God alone who establishes the covenant. The covenant is no bargain or mutual agreement entered into by God and Noah. Repeatedly the language that is used is language that underscores divine sovereignty in the establishment of the covenant. Consistently the language that is used is “I will establish *my* covenant” (Gen. 6:18; Gen. 9:9, 11, 12, and 16). This is unilateral and unconditional covenant language. God alone establishes the covenant. The covenant that He establishes is His (“my”) covenant. It was not God and Noah who established the covenant, so that the covenant that was established was “their” covenant. God established the covenant, and therefore the covenant is His covenant. The very form of the Hebrew verb that is used throughout the passage, and for that matter is used throughout the Old Testament, for the establishment of the covenant emphasizes God's sovereignty in establishing the covenant. The Hebrew verb is the Hiphil of קָיָם, which in the Hiphil (the causative verbal pattern) means to cause to stand, to establish. The very form of the verb underscores the truth that God and God alone establishes the covenant. The covenant exists because He causes it to stand.

Second, the fact that the Genesis account speaks throughout of “my covenant” (Gen. 6:18; Gen. 9:9, 11, 15) and “the covenant” (Gen. 9:12, 16, 17), along with the fact that “covenant” is throughout singular, implies that the covenant established with Noah is a manifestation of the one covenant of God. This is the language used throughout Scripture to refer to the covenant of

23. For much of the material in this section I am indebted to Prof. Homer C. Hoeksema. He raised many of these objections in his course in Old Testament History in the Protestant Reformed Seminary that I attended in my student days. This material can also be found in Hoeksema's posthumous work, *Unfolding Covenant History*, vol. 2, chapter 3. This work is in the process of being published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association, Jenison, MI.

grace. That this language is used in regard to God's covenant with Noah indicates that the Noahic covenant, unique to be sure in certain features, was nevertheless as to its essential character of one piece with the covenant of grace established by God with His people in Christ.

Third, what confirms the view that the Noahic covenant is only a manifestation of the one covenant of grace is the fact that the covenant with Noah is referred to as a covenant "for perpetual generations" (Gen. 9:12) and "the everlasting covenant" (Gen. 9:16). Although the covenant with Noah does certainly concern this earth and the life of God's covenant people in the midst of this earth as they are gathered and as the covenant comes to manifestation in the history of the world, nevertheless the covenant with Noah is not essentially a temporal covenant whose benefits are limited to this earth. It is rather an everlasting covenant. Not only does that emphasize that *God* establishes and realizes the covenant, inasmuch as God alone is eternal, but that also underscores the truth that the blessings of the Noahic covenant are not just temporal blessings attached to earthly life. They are in reality blessings that originate in eternity past and extend to eternity future. They are nothing less, therefore, than the blessings of salvation, the spiritual salvation of God in Jesus Christ.

A fourth objection to the common grace view of the covenant with Noah is that it does not do justice to the original establishment of that covenant as recorded in Genesis 6:18. The proponents of common grace focus on the establishment of the covenant as it is recorded in Genesis 9:8-17, the account of the establishment of the covenant with Noah *after* the Flood. But what they fail to take into due consideration is the fact that the first establishment of God's covenant with Noah is recorded in Genesis 6:18 *before* the Flood. God's covenant with Noah after the Flood may not be divorced from His covenant established with Noah before the Flood. These, clearly, are not two different covenants, but one and the same covenant. The covenant was first established by God with Noah before the Flood, and then confirmed by God after the Flood. What Genesis 6:18 makes clear is that the Noahic covenant is not a merely temporal covenant with purely earthly benefits. Genesis 6:18 is the explanation as to why

Noah and his family will not perish in the Flood. Under the just judgment of God, the wicked world of Noah's day perished in the deluge, a just judgment of God that ended in the everlasting damnation of those ungodly. In contrast to the wicked world exposed to the awful judgment of God stood Noah and his family. What marked the difference between that perishing world, on the one hand, and Noah and his family, on the other hand? The difference was the grace of God. Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord (Gen. 6:8). According to that grace, God established His covenant with Noah. Clearly, the significance of God's covenant with Noah, therefore, cannot be reduced to that which is purely temporal and earthly—not, at least, if full justice is done to the light that Genesis 6:18 sheds on God's confirmation of the covenant in Genesis 9:8-17.

What strengthens the objection against the common grace understanding of the Noahic covenant, in the fifth place, is the subsequent reference to this history and covenant in Scripture. In three passages in the Old Testament, reference is made to God's covenant with Noah: Isaiah 54:9, 10; Jeremiah 33:20-22; and Hosea 2:18. In all three instances the covenant with Noah is compared to God's covenant with His elect people in Christ. In the Isaiah 54 passage the Noahic covenant is compared to "the covenant of my peace"; in the Jeremiah passage the Noahic covenant is compared to God's covenant with David, which covenant is ultimately with Christ, the great son of David, and all who are in Jesus Christ; in the Hosea passage the Noahic covenant is compared to God's covenant with Israel, according to which He will break the bow and the sword of their enemies and make Israel to lie down safely. That the Noahic covenant can be compared to God's covenant of grace in these passages of the Old Testament is possible, in the final analysis, only if the Noahic covenant itself is a manifestation of the covenant of grace.

In the sixth place, it simply is not true that the Noahic covenant is established by God with all men, elect and reprobate alike. This is at best to misread Genesis 9 and at worst deliberately to corrupt the teaching of the passage. Noah does not stand as the head of the whole human race in Genesis 9, although unquestionably the whole human race derives from him. But Noah emerges

from the ark as the head of the church, the church as it was manifested in that day, the church that had been saved through the watery destruction of the Flood. He is the prophet, priest, and king of the people of God who have been delivered, not merely *from*, but *by* the Flood. With the head and representative of the church, who stands therefore as a type of Christ Himself, God establishes His covenant. The whole history of Genesis 6-9 proclaims the truth, proclaims it loudly and clearly, that not all men are included in God's covenant. The covenant, the grace and salvation of the covenant, are particular, for some only.

The Cosmic Covenant

Not a covenant of common grace is the covenant God established with Noah. Rather, it is a cosmic covenant. Not common grace, but cosmic grace is the grace of God's covenant. This belongs to the unique positive truth that is revealed in the Noahic covenant.

The covenant with Noah emphasizes a number of outstanding features of God's covenant. It emphasizes that the covenant is a covenant of *grace*, for Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord, Gen. 6:8. It emphasizes that the grace of the covenant is *particular* grace—i.e., for the elect *alone*. It seems preposterous, in light of the history of the Flood, to claim that God's covenant includes more than just the elect in Christ. The covenant with Noah demonstrates that in the covenant it is God's intention to deal with *families*. God's covenant included Noah and Noah's family. The children of believers in their generations are included in the covenant. God's covenant with Noah also teaches the truth, the painful truth, but the truth that underscores *God's sovereignty* in the covenant, that not all the children of believers are included in God's covenant. There are Hams and there are Canaanites. This aspect of the covenant would be highlighted especially in the later history of Esau and Jacob. However, the history of God's covenant with Noah already bears this out.

But what especially the Noahic covenant teaches is that the scope of God's covenant is *cosmic*. The whole vast creation, in its organic unity, and under the headship of man (Noah), is taken up into God's covenant and is made to stand in a covenant rela-

tionship to God. The entire creation, destroyed in God's just judgment, also in His grace partakes of the blessedness and salvation of His covenant in the elect, of whom Christ is the Head. This is the most notable feature of the revelation of God's covenant with Noah. Writes Homer Hoeksema, "not the idea that the covenant with Noah is a covenant of common grace, but the beautiful and comforting truth that God's one and only covenant of grace is *cosmic*—this is the truth that is emphasized at the beginning of this period of Old Testament history."²⁴ God's covenant takes up into its scope the whole creation, the entire animate creation, including not only man but the animals: "every living creature" (Gen. 9:10, 12, 15, 16) and "all flesh" (Gen. 9:11, 15, 16, 17). Indeed, even the inanimate creation, that aspect of the creation that consists of the mountains and valleys, the plants and trees, is taken up into the covenant: "the earth" (Gen. 9:11, 13, 16, 17). In explanation of the cosmic character of the covenant as established with Noah, Hoeksema writes:

But as we have already pointed out, that covenant is cosmic in its embrace. It is cosmic not only in the sense that it embraces the *new* creation, so that the redeemed saints cannot exist without that new creation, though it is true that man and the whole creation belong together, but that is also true *now*. Man cannot exist without the earth. And God's covenant cannot be established and maintained and realized without a stage on which this can take place. On this fact falls the emphasis when God establishes his covenant with Noah and his seed. God's covenant people must have a place to dwell, to develop, to bring forth the covenant generations, and eventually to bring forth the great Seed. Thus, for the sake of his covenant people God assures them continued existence, promises that there will be no more flood, promises seedtime and harvest, and lifts the curse from the ground.²⁵

This is the particular significance of the covenant with Noah, that it teaches the cosmic character of God's covenant. The covenant takes up into its scope the entire creation—all with a view

24. H. C. Hoeksema, *Unfolding Covenant History*, vol. 3, 35.

25. H. C. Hoeksema, *Unfolding Covenant History*, vol. 3, 37.

to the covenant people, the elect in Christ. The grace of God's covenant is cosmic grace.

That God's covenant is cosmic in character was made plain by the ark. Because God's covenant is cosmic, Noah had to build the ark, an enterprise that took one hundred and twenty years (Gen. 6:3). Why the ark? Why an ark of three stories, with approximate dimensions of 450 feet in length (one and a half football fields), 75 feet in width, and 45 feet in height (Gen. 6:14-16)? Not merely for the salvation of eight people, Noah and his family. But the ark served the salvation of Noah, his family, and the animals—animals of every kind. Why? Because God's covenant is a cosmic covenant, a covenant that includes not just human beings, but the whole of His creation.

That it is, God revealed in the special sign of the covenant that He created for the confirmation of the covenant with Noah, the sign of the rainbow.

The Rainbow as the Sign of God's Cosmic Covenant

Of the many "firsts" relating to God's covenant that are taught in Genesis 6-9, there is also in this narrative the first mention of a sign or token of God's covenant. There will be other tokens or signs of God's covenant in subsequent history, most notably circumcision. But the first token of God's covenant is mentioned in Genesis 9. That token of God's covenant is the rainbow. That is what God says about the rainbow in Genesis 9:13: "And I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a *token of a covenant* between me and the earth." A token is a sign, something earthly and visible that represents and points to some spiritual truth. The rainbow in the cloud is a sign of God's covenant. The spiritual truth and invisible reality that the rainbow points to is the covenant of God.

Imagine how amazed and entranced Noah and his family must have been when, on coming forth from their confinement in the ark, they saw that first rainbow with its spectacular colors arching across the sky. They had never seen anything like it before; there had never before been a rainbow. Prior to the Flood it had never rained. That rainbow, said God to Noah and to the members of his family, is a sign of my covenant with you and with all

flesh. When you see the rainbow, you must think of my covenant with you, with your children, and with all the earth. As Henry Morris comments, “Just as the fossil-bearing rocks of the earth’s crust would continually remind us that God once destroyed the earth with a Flood, so the rainbow after the rain would remind us that He will never do so again.”²⁶

The rainbow is produced by the refraction and dispersion of the rays of the sun as the sun’s rays pass through droplets of rain-water. The rainbow appears after the storm, against the dark background of the black storm clouds. After the rumbling thunder and the flashing lightning have passed into the distance, the rainbow spreads its beauty across the sky. As the light of the sun passes through the falling rain of the receding storm, the white light of the sun is refracted into all the different colors of the spectrum, from red to violet.

The white light of the sun is refracted into *seven* distinct colors. Seven is the number of the covenant, the number of God (three) and the number of man (four) combined. The one white beam of sunlight symbolizes the covenant God, who is Light and in whom there is no darkness at all. He is the God of all glory and exalted majesty. That light is displayed and refracted in the seven colors of the rainbow that symbolize the manifold grace of God in the covenant toward His covenant people.

Every important truth regarding the covenant of God is symbolized in the rainbow!

The rainbow is a token of the fact that in the covenant God *saves* and God *promises to save* His people. The rainbow speaks of salvation. God has just saved Noah and his family, saved them from certain death and awful destruction in the waters of the Flood. He has saved them from death and destruction *under the wrath of God*. The message of the rainbow is that God will save His people. He will save us now, and He will save us eternally.

The rainbow is a testimony that salvation is *all* of God. Who creates the rainbow in the sky? Do men climb up on tall ladders

26. Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982, seventh printing), 229.

and paint pretty colors across the sky? Of course not, you say; that is ridiculous. God makes the rainbow, and in making a rainbow He does what no man can do. “*I do set my bow in the cloud*” (Gen. 9:13). Just so, it is God and God alone who establishes and maintains His covenant. There is no place in the covenant for man’s cooperation in the establishment of the covenant or conditions that man must fulfill for the establishment and maintenance of the covenant. The covenant is sovereignly and unilaterally established, as it is sovereignly and unilaterally maintained. To that truth the rainbow bears clear testimony.

The rainbow is a sign of *particular* grace. Those who beheld that first rainbow were Noah and his family. They alone of all the millions that had lived on the earth at that time saw that first rainbow. That underscores the truth that God’s covenant and the grace of God’s covenant are particular. Not all men are included in the covenant, but some only. Those some only, in the final analysis, are God’s elect. That, in the end, was the difference between Noah and the millions who perished in the waters of the Flood. Noah had been elected by God. One cannot separate election and covenant, the grace of God in election from the grace of God in the covenant.

And his family—that too. God’s covenant was with Noah and his family, his sons and their wives with him and his own wife. That it was not only the individual Noah, but Noah and his family who beheld that first rainbow testifies to the truth that the grace of God in the covenant is a grace shown to believers *and to their children*. That is the very nature of God’s covenant. Just as God’s covenant within Himself includes a Father and a Son, so God’s covenant with believers includes those believers and their sons and daughters.

The rainbow also points to the grace of God in the covenant as *antithetical* grace. For God sets His bow *in the cloud*. That cloud reminds us of God’s wrath breaking out in the destruction of the Flood. But the rainbow reminds us that in wrath God remembers mercy. It reminds us that the nature of God’s grace is always that it is antithetical. That is the grace of God’s covenant.

But especially does the rainbow point to the truth that God’s covenant is a *cosmic* covenant. Rightly understood, God’s cov-

enant is universal, embracing the entire creation. That is especially the symbolism of the arc of the rainbow. The rainbow spans the earth and reaches up to the heights of the heavens. The whole creation is included in the covenant of God—"all flesh." The beautiful and comforting truth is that God's covenant is cosmic. God establishes and realizes His covenant with His elect people—to be sure! But with them and with the whole creation in them and with which they are organically connected. In Genesis 9, the creation is included in God's covenant. It is included for the sake of His covenant people. This is why no flood will ever again destroy the earth. This is why the curse on the ground is lifted. It is for the sake of the covenant people and for the sake of God's covenant and its development.

For the sake of God's covenant. This is application that must be drawn from the history of Noah. The Christian must press everything in the creation into the service of God's covenant and into the service of the God of the covenant. This is how God's people must live in and make use of the creation. They enjoy all things and make use of all things with a view to God's covenant and for the sake of the covenant God. This was man's sin before the Flood! It was not so much his violence and immorality. It was that God was not in all his thoughts. He lived in God's world and made use of God's creation for himself. Everything stood in the service of man and the exaltation of man. This is the desperate wickedness of man apart from God's grace, covenant grace. This will be the characteristic, too, of the antichristian world before the final judgment, of which the Flood was only a type. The antichristian kingdom will center in man, will be the exaltation of man, everything in God's creation put into the service of man and man's ambitions. But with God's people, God's covenant people, it is different. The grace of the covenant makes the difference. According to that grace, everything is for the sake of God's covenant, for the glory of the covenant God.

The rainbow is a sign of God's covenant because in a very beautiful and powerful way the rainbow is a sign of Jesus Christ and the saving work of Jesus Christ. Even the colors of the rainbow point to Christ's saving work in the covenant and on behalf of the covenant people. There are seven colors in the rainbow.

The colors of the rainbow are represented by the fictitious character ROY G. BIV: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. Red—that is the first color, the overarching color on the top of the rainbow. There is a reason for that. And the reason is that the red of the rainbow points to and is a sign of the blood of Jesus Christ. God’s covenant is established in the blood of the cross. The covenant sign of baptism points to that, and so does the sign of the covenant in the rainbow.

Even the arc of the rainbow points to Jesus Christ. The arc of the rainbow spans heaven and earth, and unites heaven and earth. Just so, Christ came down from heaven to earth, was crucified, dead, buried, and is risen again into the heavenly heights. In His saving work He has united heaven and earth, and lifted this earth up to the heights of heaven. And He has done that by enduring the dark cloud of the storm of the judgment of God. The rainbow is always the rainbow *in the cloud*. That dark cloud descended on Calvary. But out of that dark cloud, the rainbow of God’s love, God’s mercy, God’s grace to His covenant people. In the rainbow we see Christ. Noah saw Him, and so must we.

That Noah saw Christ in the rainbow and in the covenant that God established with him is born out by the context. For everything that is recorded concerning the establishment of the covenant in Genesis 9 stands connected to what is recorded at the very end of Genesis 8. And what is recorded at the end of Genesis 8 is Noah’s building of that altar unto the Lord (literally, “Jehovah,” the covenant name of God), and sacrificing on that altar, which sacrifice “the Lord (Jehovah) smelled (as) a sweet savour” (Gen. 8:21). That altar, its sacrifice, and the sweet savour in Jehovah’s nostrils represented Jesus Christ. Everything in Genesis 9 arises out of and depends on that altar and on Jesus Christ. The covenant is established in Jesus Christ.

And thus, the rainbow was a sign for the confirmation of faith. Signs, especially signs of the covenant, serve that purpose. They are not only signs, but they are also seals. So also the rainbow. The rainbow was a sign for the confirmation of *Noah’s* faith. Noah needed that confirmation. Indeed, God had said that He would never again destroy the earth with a universal flood. But would not every dark cloud threaten destruction again? Would not doubts

and fears arise in Noah's mind due to the weakness of his faith? For what purpose, then, would it be to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth? Might it not all be in vain? In the rainbow, God confirmed His word to Noah. He would never again destroy the earth with a worldwide flood. He would remember His covenant, and preserve and keep His covenant people in the midst of the world.

We need that same confirmation of faith today. Everything seems to be against God's covenant! We have God's Word, of course, that He will establish, maintain, and preserve His covenant. He has promised that not even the gates of hell will prevail against His church and covenant people. But in His condescending mercy God has added to His Word, in order to confirm to us His covenant, a sign. That sign is the rainbow. Whenever you see the rainbow, be assured that God always remembers His covenant. He remembered it in Noah's day. He remembers it today. And He will remember it to the very end.

Three other times Scripture makes reference to the rainbow, once in the Old Testament and twice in the New Testament. In Ezekiel 1:28 the rainbow is seen surrounding the throne of God as He prepares for judgment. The rainbow as always is associated with judgment. The two references in the New Testament are in the Book of Revelation. In Revelation 4:3 John saw, in vision, a rainbow "round about the throne" of the one who sat thereon. And in Revelation 10:1 the Christ who pours out the vials of the wrath of almighty God upon the earth has a rainbow upon His head.

Never does He forget His covenant or His covenant people!
Always He maintains His covenant! To the very end!

In order to bring that covenant to its perfection in the glory of the new heavens and the new earth! ●

The Relationship of God's Kingdom to His Covenant

Russell J. Dykstra

God's covenant of grace and His kingdom of righteousness are prevalent biblical themes and significant theological concepts. Kingdom is stressed in both Testaments. First, the kingdom of Israel dominates the history in the Old Testament. The New Testament testifies that Jesus came into the world the first time announcing the gospel of the kingdom, and that He will come the second time to destroy the kingdoms of this world and establish the kingdom of God.

God's covenant is likewise on the foreground all through the Old Testament in that God deals with His people—from Adam on—in covenant relationships. In the New Testament, Jesus comes as Mediator of a better covenant—the theme of the epistle to the Hebrews.

Both of these concepts are significant in the life and theology of the church today. Much mission work is directed by a certain kingdom theology in which, it is asserted, the church is the instrument for building the kingdom—and all too often the emphasis is on the earthly and material. Christian colleges establish as a goal that their students be motivated and trained to redeem culture and subdue all spheres of life to the rule of Christ, thus, so it is maintained, building His kingdom.

Covenantal theology is also the subject of much debate today due to the heresies that are being introduced under the umbrella of a conditional covenant.

Because of the fact that the kingdom is a chief topic of eschatology, it is much discussed and debated in connection with the various views of the millennium. Many errors concerning the kingdom are promoted, and the errors of the premillennial dispensationalist also involve the covenant.

As such, the purpose of this article is not to address any of these controversies directly. Rather, the purpose is to discuss the

relationship that exists between the kingdom of God and His covenant of grace.¹

Both kingdom and covenant are works of God. The kingdom belongs to God who builds it. The covenant of grace is His—He determines and establishes it. Both are related to the church of God. Since the sovereign God eternally planned all events, people, and institutions, surely He determined a relationship between His kingdom and covenant, as well as the relationship of those to His church.

Dr. Samuel Volbeda, after briefly discussing “the three fundamental relations which God’s people sustain to Him,” namely,

1. A number of men in the Reformed tradition have written on this. The most direct work is that of Pieter Willem Dekker, *The Role of the Covenant in the Kingdom of God*, a Th.M thesis for the Department of Systematic Theology, Calvin Theological Seminary, 1988. Another helpful work is an unpublished paper of Dr. Samuel Volbeda, *Studies in Practical Theology*. It was a presentation at the Conference of Westminster Seminary Alumni held at Westminster Seminary August 24-30, 1939. This corresponds to the handwritten manuscript referenced by Dr. Fred H. Klooster in “The Kingdom of God in the History of the Christian Reformed Church” in *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church*, Edited by Peter De Klerk and Richard R. De Ridder (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983). The first twenty-eight pages of this forty-one page manuscript are devoted to the relationship between covenant, church, and kingdom. Meredith G. Kline touches briefly on the relationship between kingdom and covenant in his work *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), pp. 36-38. Herman Hanko includes a lengthy chapter on covenant and kingdom in his *God's Everlasting Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1988), pp. 197-222. Others touch on this indirectly as they discuss the relationship between the church and the kingdom. This would include especially Louis Berkhof, *The Church and Social Problems* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Sevensma Co., 1913) and Gerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church*, printed by the American Tract Society in 1903, and reprinted as *The Kingdom of God and the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1972).

covenant, church, and kingdom, describes “the interrelation binding these three several relations together” as follows:

They are after all three strands of one cord. For all these relations alike bind us to God: we are members at once of His covenant, of His church, and His commonwealth. And all the several children of God sustain every one of these three relations to God normally.²

That relationship noted by Volbeda is due to the fact that church, covenant, and kingdom are three views or aspects of the one work of God, the work of salvation in Jesus Christ. God saves His chosen people and makes them members of the body of Christ, citizens of Christ’s kingdom, and covenant children in Christ the Mediator. This is essentially one work, resulting in and revealed as church, kingdom, and covenant. This one work of God is so glorious that God determined these three realities to bring out the various facets of this salvation.

In addition, the relationship among the three is reciprocal, though not equally so, as we hope to demonstrate. These are interwoven realities. In some ways each serves the other two.

In order better to understand the beauty and order of God’s one work of salvation, there is value in seeking to understand the relationship between covenant and kingdom. The relationship that this article intends to demonstrate is this: While the covenant life is necessary for the kingdom, indeed *is* the life of the kingdom, the primary relationship is that the kingdom serves the covenant. God ordained the kingdom to serve as the structure for the people of God, establishing order with a view to the enjoyment of the life of the covenant.

Before any demonstration of the relationship is established, it is necessary to delineate these two important concepts, kingdom and covenant. The first to be examined is the kingdom.

2. Volbeda, *Practical Theology*, p. 9.

The Heavenly and Spiritual Kingdom

To grasp the biblical idea of the kingdom of God, we must understand, before anything else, that the kingdom is heavenly and spiritual. God's kingdom is not earthly; it is not material.

The promotion of an earthly kingdom of God has been a recurring problem throughout the entire new dispensation. It was the common view of God's kingdom among the Jews in Jesus' day. Jesus' own disciples looked for an earthly kingdom. The last question they asked Jesus just before He ascended into heaven was this: "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). They asked this in spite of the fact that in His public ministry Jesus had made it abundantly plain that His kingdom was not earthly, but heavenly.

The gospel according to Matthew emphasizes that Christ's kingdom is heavenly. This gospel was particularly written for Jews who were wrongly expecting the restoration of an earthly kingdom of Israel. In this gospel, the term "kingdom of heaven" is used over thirty times!

Two incidents recorded in Luke 18 are very instructive as regards the spiritual nature of the kingdom. In the first incident, Jesus rebuked His disciples for turning away mothers who had come to Jesus with their babies. His rebuke included this instruction: "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein" (Luke 18:16-17). It is a strange requirement indeed that everyone who enters the kingdom must become as a little child—if one is expecting a glorious earthly kingdom.

In that context we read that "a certain ruler asked him, saying, Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (v. 18). Eventually, Jesus' word to the man was the command: "Sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me." What follows is also enlightening. "And when he heard this, he was very sorrowful: for he was very rich. And when Jesus saw that he was very sorrowful, he said, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through a

needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:22-15). Jesus uses the expressions "have treasure in heaven" and "enter into the kingdom of God" to correspond to the words used by the ruler, "to inherit eternal life." Essentially they mean the same thing.

Consider that if Jesus were interested in people building an earthly kingdom, He would hardly have told the rich ruler to sell all that he had. He would have said rather: Get to work! Use your wealth and power to promote and establish the kingdom here!

Luke 17: 20-21 records an exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees concerning the kingdom. "And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you." A kingdom coming with observation is one that grows, takes over regions, institutions, and peoples. The kingdom of heaven is not like that. It is within, inside. The word the Spirit caused Luke to write for inside (ἐντὸς) is the exact opposite of outside, as Jesus used it in Matthew 23:26: "Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is *within* (ἐντος) the cup and platter, that the *outside* of them may be clean also." The kingdom is inside a person, in the heart of the regenerated one.

Further, Jesus stated straightforwardly that His kingdom is not earthly in His answer to Pilate's question, "Art thou the king of the Jews?" Jesus replied, "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence" (John 18:36).

After Pentecost, Jesus' disciples understood and taught the same. Peter describes how this earth is surrounded by fire, waiting to be destroyed, and the very elements will melt. But our hope is in the new heavens and new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness, according to God's promise (II Pet. 3:10-14).

Paul wrote often of warfare, but it is a spiritual warfare, with spiritual armor that is of no avail in either building or defending an earthly kingdom (Eph. 6:11-18).

Nonetheless, the plain teaching of Jesus and the rest of Scrip-

ture did not forestall repeated attempts to promote and even sometimes to establish an earthly kingdom. Throughout the new dispensation there have been chiliasts, who looked for Jesus to return and establish a kingdom on earth for one thousand years. The Radicals of the sixteenth century took over the city of Münster in 1534—proclaiming that they were setting up the Kingdom of God.

The last one hundred twenty-five years witnessed the development of several theologies of eschatology that promote an earthly kingdom. The premillennialists look for Christ to establish a kingdom, with His throne in Jerusalem. They contend that, after He raptures the church off the earth, Christ will come to reign as the king of Israel, which nation will have dominion over all the nations.

Various postmillenarian theories also promote an earthly kingdom. Postmillennialists look for the coming of a golden age of Christianity in which all the earth will be dominated by the gospel. This Christian kingdom will last, they maintain, until the antichrist arises (somehow) out of this Christian kingdom, and then Christ will come to destroy the antichrist and his kingdom.

Akin to that is the earthly kingdom promoted in the “social gospel.” This teaching was especially popular in the early 1900s, and though it waned in popularity with the tragedy of the world wars, it never truly died out. Walter Rauschenbusch, a main proponent of the social gospel, insisted that the church existed only to build the kingdom—clearly, an earthly kingdom.

Today, what is promoted as Reformed missions is also called kingdom work. This work consists of improving society. As noted, this has been the siren song of many Christian colleges—training their students to go out and Christianize the world. All these movements are seeking a better world, a more just and compassionate society. This reform, it is alleged, will reclaim the world for Christ and for the kingdom.

All this contradicts Scripture, which (as was demonstrated above) clearly and emphatically teaches that God's kingdom is not earthly but heavenly and spiritual.

Concerning the biblical concept of kingdom, Scripture and Reformed theology make a clear distinction between the kingdom

of grace and the whole creation as God's kingdom, ruled by His sovereign power. One distinct truth that the kingdom of God reveals is God's absolute sovereignty. Scripture testifies everywhere that God is King supreme over all that He has made. Psalm 29 describes God's rule over the whole of the creation, and explicitly states, "The LORD sitteth upon the flood; yea, the LORD sitteth King for ever" (v. 10). In Psalm 10 the believer sings "The LORD is King for ever and ever" (v. 16). Psalm 149 connects God's kingship with His being the Creator—"Let Israel rejoice in him that made him: let the children of Zion be joyful in their King" (v. 2).

The confessions maintain the same truth of God's sovereignty over all. The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 9, expounding the confession "I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," teaches: "That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (who of nothing made heaven and earth, with all that is in them; who likewise upholds and governs the same by His eternal counsel and providence...." In the next Lord's Day the Catechism speaks of God's providence as "the almighty and everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, He upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures."

Similarly the Belgic Confession, Article 13 (Of Divine Providence) states, "We believe that the same God, after He had created all things, did not forsake them, or give them up to fortune or chance, but that He rules and governs them according to His holy will, so that nothing happens in this world without His appointment." The Helvetic Confession speaks the same language in Chapter 6 on Providence—"We believe that all things in heaven and on earth, and in all creatures, are preserved and governed by the providence of this wise, eternal and almighty God."

God appointed His Son Christ Jesus as King over all that God has made. Just before His ascension into heaven, Christ announced to His disciples that all power (literally authority—ἐξουσία) had been given Him in heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18). This power is part of the reward from His Father. Because Christ, in perfect obedience, humbled Himself to the depths of hell in order to redeem God's elect, God exalted Jesus to the pinnacle of power and glory. God gave Him a Name above all names (Phil. 2:6-11). By

His sovereign power, the triune God raised Jesus from the dead, and “set him at His own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and hath put all things under his feet” (Eph. 1:20-22). Jesus rules over the heathen with a rod of iron (Ps. 2:9; Rev. 12:5; 19:15). Nothing thwarts the will of the King, Jesus Christ.

In light of that, all the talk about reclaiming the world for Christ or for God is foolishness. God does not merely claim the world; God upholds and governs the whole of the creation. God is supreme, and He rules over heaven and earth through Jesus Christ.

However, as the Bible normally refers to it, the kingdom of God excludes the reprobate, even though God rules sovereignly over every one of them. The ungodly are outside of God's kingdom. For the kingdom of God exercises a spiritual rule over the citizens. The rule of the kingdom is a rule of love and grace, which power operates in the hearts of the citizens.

Kingdom Defined

How ought that kingdom of God be defined? While theologians from the Reformation on wrote about the kingdom, they did not always give clear definitions. Calvin speaks of the kingdom of God as God's rule in His people. He writes:

God reigns when men, in denial of themselves and contempt of the world and this earthly life, devote themselves to righteousness and aspire to heaven. Thus this kingdom consists of two parts; the first is, when God by the agency of his Spirit corrects all the depraved lusts of the flesh, which in bands war against Him; and the second, when he brings all our thoughts into obedience to his authority.³

Gerhardus Vos' view expresses some agreement with this. The term kingdom of God in the Old Testament, he maintains, is “al-

3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co, 1957), 3.20.42.

ways His reign, His rule, never His domain.”⁴ Later he affirms that “the kingdom is indeed a community in which men are knit together by the closest of bonds.” But he maintains that this aspect is “but little emphasized.”⁵ Still later he maintains that to Jesus,

the kingdom exists there, where not merely God is supreme, for that is true at all times and under all circumstances, but where God supernaturally carries through His supremacy against all opposing powers and brings man to the willing recognition of the same. It is a state of things in which everything converges and tends towards God as the highest good.⁶

Louis Berkhof grants that “the primary significance of the expression, ‘Kingdom of God,’ is the reign, the kingship or the government of God.”⁷ However, he grants that the concept is described more concretely in Scripture. He writes:

The Kingdom of God is evidently the realm or sphere of life in which God rules, e.g., where Jesus speaks of entering the kingdom or of being cast out. It denotes the totality of the blessings and privileges that flow from the reign of God, when it is represented as a hidden treasure, a pearl of great price and a blessed inheritance. And finally it designates the condition of things that marks the triumphant culmination of the reign of God, as when believers are said to sit at meat in the Kingdom of Heaven. Underlying all these representations, is that of the rule or will of God, made effective in human lives. The fundamental thought is always that of the reign of God, established in human hearts and controlling human affairs, effective in forming an obedient people, constituting a new order of things, and enriching the subjects of the Kingdom with inestimable privileges and eternal blessings.⁸

4. Vos, *Kingdom and Church*, p. 26.

5. Vos, *Kingdom and Church*, pp. 82-83.

6. Vos, *Kingdom and Church*, pp. 85-86.

7. Berkhof, *Kingdom*, p. 15.

8. Berkhof, *Kingdom*, pp. 15-16.

Surely Samuel Volbeda and Herman Hoeksema are more biblical when they define the covenant in terms of a commonwealth, though with a definite emphasis on God ruling.⁹ For the kingdom of God is more than simply the *power* of the King. As is the case with any earthly kingdom, the kingdom of heaven has not only a King, but citizens and kingdom laws. The kingdom of heaven has its own language and customs. It is a unified kingdom, spiritually, even though physically it is scattered over the globe.

At the same time, it is right to emphasize the King of this kingdom. For in every kingdom, the king determines everything about it. His power, his character, his morals, his goals, his wisdom will determine the nature and extent of his kingdom. Since God is King of the kingdom of heaven, He determines the character, extent, indeed, everything about the kingdom.

The kingdom, therefore, may be defined as the spiritual commonwealth in which God is King, ruling over the citizens in their hearts. God has established His Son Jesus as ruler over this kingdom, under God.

Although it is true, as noted earlier, that Christ Jesus is sovereign over all, yet, as far as the discussion of the kingdom of God is concerned, Jesus is King over God's people. This is His kingdom of grace. This kingdom is established in the righteousness of the cross. By His suffering and death, Christ destroyed the power of Satan so that Satan cannot prevail against Christ. The citizens of the kingdom were redeemed and Satan has no legal claim to them. The citizens have a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20). Their righteousness is the infinite righteousness of Christ Himself, imputed to them by faith (Rom. 3:22-26). Christ Jesus determines the essential character of His kingdom—it is a righteous kingdom. The scepter of His kingdom is a scepter of righteousness (Heb. 1:8). He is the fulfillment of the type Melchizedek, whose name means “king of righteousness” (Heb. 7:2). In this kingdom,

9. Vos, *Practical Theology*, p. 9. Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1972), vol. 3, p. 518.

Christ demands that His subjects follow after righteousness—i.e., live in obedience to His righteous law.

The citizens of God’s kingdom are brought into this kingdom by God Himself, who delivers His people from the power of darkness and translates them into the kingdom of His dear Son (Col. 1:13). Jesus indicates that this translating is accomplished through regeneration by His Spirit (John 3:3-5). King Jesus teaches that citizens of Christ’s kingdom have spiritual characteristics. They are poor in spirit; they mourn; they are meek, merciful, and pure in heart. Citizens of God’s kingdom hunger and thirst after righteousness, are peacemakers, and patiently endure persecution for the sake of their King (Matt. 5:3-12).

Above all, they are obedient to the King. Anyone who disobeys the King is obviously a rebel. The citizens reveal that they belong by their obedience to the laws of the King. This they do, not by nature, for naturally they are prone to hate God and their neighbor. But the Spirit of Christ writes the King’s law upon the citizens’ hearts. Within each of them dwells the same Spirit and spiritual life that is in their King, so that they echo His words, “I delight to do thy will, O God: yea, thy law is within my heart” (Ps. 40:8). The King addresses His citizens thus: “Hearken unto me, ye that know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law” (Is. 51:7).

The law of the King is the very will of the King. That law or will is set forth in the whole of the Bible. The King’s law is holy, just, and good (Rom. 7:12). And the citizens are blessed in the way of obeying His righteous commandments (James 1:25).

These citizens have a language that belongs to the kingdom; it is the language of Scripture. They learn the language that enables them to know God personally and praise Him with understanding. Although non-citizens of the kingdom can learn the vocabulary and read the laws, they do not grasp the heart of the message, for the concepts of the language are spiritual, and it takes the mind of Christ and the Spirit of Christ to have the necessary spiritual understanding. Those outside the kingdom hear the citizens of the kingdom talk of love, and the non-citizens can only think of self-love and the lusts of the flesh. They do not understand the idea of self-sacrificing love. They hear of obedience,

but can only think of external compliance to laws in order to avoid punishment. They cannot understand obedience that arises out of love, out of the motive of love for the King. They have no idea what a "law of liberty" could be—it is foolishness to those outside the kingdom. Only the citizens grasp these truths of the kingdom and rejoice in them.

There is a certain culture in the kingdom of heaven. This culture seeks the glory of God. Every paragraph of its literature, every painting, and every song have the same goal, namely, that the King be glorified. For its citizens love their King more than life itself, and have no interest in developing anything except that it bring out the glory of Christ and serve His kingdom.

Thus the citizens are unified. They all have the life and Spirit of the kingdom. They are knit together in love for God and for each other.

Every Reformed theologian recognizes that this kingdom has a present reality and a future manifestation. It is now, and it is coming. The believer prays for the *coming* of the kingdom. He also prays, "For thine *is* the kingdom," which prayer indicates that the kingdom already exists.

The kingdom, considered eschatologically, is the promised reward of the believer. In the instruction on the final judgment (Matt. 25:31-46), Jesus speaks of all men standing before the Son of man, who is the King. To the sheep, the elect, the King/Judge speaks, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (v. 34). This is the final, glorious manifestation of the kingdom of Christ that will exist eternally in the new heaven and earth.

But the kingdom is also now. John the Baptist prepared the people with the warning, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). This was also the content of Jesus' preaching (Matt. 4:17) and exactly the same authoritative message with which Jesus sent out His disciples (Matt. 10:7). And Jesus Himself testified, "If I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you" (Luke 11:20). This is the kingdom in the manifestation of its power. This power of the king is manifest every day in the hearts and lives of the citizens of the kingdom. In this sense the kingdom of Christ is even now on the earth.

This brings out a second important element of God's revelation in His kingdom. The first, as noted earlier, is the absolute sovereignty of God. The second truth of God brought out in the doctrine of the kingdom, is the antithesis. The kingdom of Christ is antithetically opposed to the kingdom of Satan.

Besides the kingdom of Christ, there is also the kingdom of Satan. Jesus explicitly refers to this kingdom in Luke 11:18 (Matt. 12:26). Jesus speaks of Satan as "the prince of the world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Satan is "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2). His very name, Satan, means adversary. The saints are called to put on the spiritual armor of God "to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph. 6:11). "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (v. 12). This indicates that Satan has a host of angels at his disposal, and is at war with the saints. Revelation 12:17 also testifies that Satan, the dragon, makes war with the followers of Christ.

Satan's kingdom is a kingdom of sin, corruption, and death. All unbelievers willingly follow him, for they share Satan's hatred of God and desire to destroy God and His cause. Because the kingdom of Christ is a kingdom of righteousness, there is constant spiritual warfare between this kingdom and the kingdom of Satan. But the King reassures us that the "gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

That in brief is the kingdom of Christ as taught in Scripture.

The Covenant of Grace

Next it is necessary to define the covenant of grace. Since this concept is the focus of the special issue, as well as of many articles found in the *PRTJ* in the past, presentation of the doctrine of God's covenant of grace can be brief.

The covenant of grace may be defined as a relationship of love and friendship that God sovereignly establishes with His people in Jesus Christ. God's covenant is with believers and their children, and thus is continued in generations. In this relationship, God is, for the sake of Christ His Son, the Father of all those in His covenant. From eternity Christ is appointed the Mediator and Head of the covenant.

This covenant is unilateral. God sovereignly establishes His covenant, as is plain from the manner in which He established it with Abraham (Gen. 17:7)—“I will establish my covenant between me and thee....” In Genesis 15, God confirmed the covenant by passing symbolically between the divided animals—God alone passed between them. It is also maintained unilaterally, as God indicates in Psalm 89:34—“My covenant will I not break” (v. 34). (Psalm 89 will be examined in more detail to note the connection between kingdom and covenant.)

Of crucial importance is the right identification of “the seed” with whom God establishes His covenant. That seed is the elect. It is Christ, first of all, as the Spirit makes plain in Galatians 3, His interpretation of God's promise to Abraham to establish His covenant with Abraham and his seed. “Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ” (v. 16). There are children of believers born into the sphere of the covenant. However, God establishes His covenant with the elect children of believers, not with all children of believers head for head.

God makes these chosen ones to be His own—His family, and even, His wife. In the Old Testament, God promises: “I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the LORD” (Hos. 2:20; see also Ezek. 16). In this covenant relationship, God commits Himself to His people, promising that He is and will be their God, and that they are and forever shall be His people. The relationship is, therefore, not an agreement, but a friendship filled with love and delight. God causes His people to know Him and to experience His love for them. God delights in His people. They in turn bask in His unchanging love, growing in the blessed knowledge of God, living with, unto, and for Him.

Closely Related

Scripture indicates that the kingdom of God and His covenant of grace are related. God has eternally willed the existence of both, and determined that they should be inseparable.

The historical revelation and development of both kingdom and covenant indicate their accord. In the beginning, God, as King, created by His sovereign power. The vast creation was His

kingdom. At the same time, that creation was in covenant with Himself, as He revealed in the covenant spoken to Noah (Gen. 9:16—notice, “the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature upon the earth”).

God as King made man, His subject. God gave commands to His subject to eat of the tree of life and ever to shun the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The partaking of the tree of life points to a covenant relationship of friendship. In harmony with that, God formed man in His own image, so that immediately at his creation, man was in a covenant relationship of love and fellowship. God, the King, made man a king under God, ordering man to “have dominion” over His creation. In this creating work of God, therefore, the kingdom and the covenant are intertwined.

When Adam fell and lost the image of God, he lost the covenant relationship of love, and thereby the right to be king under God. But God restored Adam to covenant fellowship in Christ. The “mother promise” of Genesis 3:15 reveals this. God promised the Seed of the woman, a conquering King who would crush the head of the serpent. Already there God revealed the kingship of Christ. But as Bavinck rightly notes, “In this mother promise is contained nothing less than the announcement and institution of the covenant of grace.”¹⁰ God promised covenant life for all who are in the Seed, for God would make them His friends, so putting enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.

This divinely-maintained connection between kingdom and covenant is evident in God’s dealing with Abraham. God established His covenant with Abraham and his seed. But God also promised to give Abraham the land of Canaan—a picture of the kingdom of heaven.

God’s promises to Abraham are typically realized in Israel as God establishes Israel as a kingdom. But Israel is also God’s covenant people, and the heart of the nation and land is the temple, where God chooses to dwell with His people. The covenant existed within the kingdom of Israel, and only within the kingdom.

10. Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), p. 271.

Psalm 89 beautifully illustrates how God establishes His kingdom and His covenant together. In verse 3 God speaks: "I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant." God's covenant was with David, who was also the *king* of Israel. For God added the promise, "Thy seed will I establish for ever, and build up thy throne to all generations" (v. 4). The next section (vv. 5-17) extols the greatness of God, especially His power. Verse 18 establishes that God is the true King in Israel—"the Holy One of Israel *is* our king." In verse 20 the Psalm returns to David, where God declares, "with my holy oil have I anointed him." In verses 21-25 God promises to uphold and strengthen David.

However, these promises are not ultimately about David, for the Psalm was written after Solomon reigned. Verse 26 makes it plain that all this is typical, pointing ahead to Christ—"He shall cry unto me, Thou art my father, my God, and the rock of my salvation." And God responds, "Also I will make him my first-born, higher than the kings of the earth" (v. 27). Christ is the King appointed by God.

Once the kingship of His Son is established, God returns to the covenant. In verse 28 God affirms: "My covenant shall stand fast with him." Christ is King, and God's covenant is with Christ. The following verses speak of the fact that the seed of the King will break God's covenant, i.e., will be disobedient to God. God will discipline them, but, He promises, "My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips" (v. 34). Again, "Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not lie unto David" (v. 36). Concerning that covenant seed, God guarantees, "It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven" (v. 37). God's covenant is unbreakable and unconditional, for God maintains His covenant, not man.

Immediately after, in verses 37-51, the psalmist (Ethan) laments the condition of Israel after Solomon. He describes the decay of the kingdom and the defilement of the land. Clearly the kingdom of David and Solomon was not the everlasting kingdom. The unending kingdom belongs to Christ.

Thus it continued through history unto the coming of Christ. All the events of His coming reinforce the inseparability of the

kingdom and the covenant in Jesus Christ. The angel's announcement to Mary clearly indicated that her holy Son would be King, having the throne of His father David, and that of his kingdom there shall be no end (Luke 1:32, 33). In harmony with that, Zacharias understood that his special son was to be a forerunner of the coming Messiah, the King (Luke 1:76). Yet, when they sang their "songs," both Mary and Zacharias spoke the language not only of kingship and power, but also of God's covenant (Luke 1:72).

God reveals that Jesus is both the King of God's kingdom and the Mediator of His covenant. The book of Hebrews emphasizes the truth that Jesus Christ is Mediator of a better covenant. Hebrews 7 develops the typology of Melchizedek, a significant type of Christ. Melchizedek was the king of Salem (later called Jerusalem) and a priest of Jehovah. His name means "king of righteousness." After drawing out the implications of this type, the inspired writer returns to the doctrine of the covenant, saying, "By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament" (v. 22).

Now the section in which Jesus is called the surety of the covenant describes Jesus' work as priest. However, this is the priest who is also the King (7:12). The next chapter connects His priesthood and kingship again—(8:1)—"We have such a high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens." The throne points to His kingship. Yet shortly thereafter, Jesus is called "the mediator of a better covenant" (8:6). The better covenant described in this chapter is better because it is a covenant within God's people.

Notice how God unites both kingdom and covenant in Hebrews 8:10-12.

For this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people: And they shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.

God's promises to "put [His] laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts" point to the kingdom—God rules His people by His Word and Spirit in their hearts. Immediately God follows this with covenantal language—"I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people," and "all shall know me...." And both kingdom and covenant are based on the cross—"for I will be merciful...."

This close relationship between kingdom and covenant runs through the entire epistle. Christ is the Son of God, ordained to be King and ordained to be the Mediator of the covenant. By His suffering and death He redeemed His people, and being the surety of the covenant, Jesus thus established the covenant. At the same time, He is King of righteousness, who, having triumphed in the cross, ascends into heaven and sits at the right hand of His Father.

King and Mediator. Kingdom and covenant. Jesus is the "author of eternal salvation [thus covenant Mediator, RJD] unto all them that obey him" [as King, RJD] (Heb. 5:9). And because of "Jesus the mediator of the new covenant" (Heb. 12:24), we receive "a kingdom which cannot be moved" (v. 28).

The kingdom and covenant are knit together into eternity without end. The book of Revelation divulges that when Jesus Christ comes in judgment He will destroy the kingdom of the antichrist (Rev. 11:15). Christ will rule for ever and ever as King in His Father's kingdom.

At the same time, the final chapters of Revelation also emphasize God's gracious covenant. Revelation 19 describes the wedding feast of the Lamb and His Bride, the glorified church. That banquet clearly points to the covenant fellowship that is the essence of the covenant of grace.

When the vision of the final judgment is complete (Rev. 20), John sees a revelation of the new heavens and the new earth, and of the bride (symbolizing the church) coming down from heaven (Rev. 21). The vision portrays the church as a perfect city, the new Jerusalem, i.e., the church glorified. The covenant is on the foreground, for the great voice out of heaven announces, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (v. 3). That is the covenant formula going back to God's promises to Abraham.

Even the fact that the church is pictured as a *city* is significant, because a city is a dwelling place and a place for fellowship. Thus the picture also points to the covenant life that believers will enjoy in heaven.

At the same time, the city has a wall about it. That points to the fact that the city exists in a kingdom. Those outside the walls of the city are “the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars” (v. 8). In addition, God reveals that “there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (v. 27). Taken together, the symbolism indicates covenant life within the kingdom.

The vision continues in Revelation 22, describing something of the life of the city, still in symbolic language—a pure river of water, “and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (v. 2). There the Lamb’s servants will “see his face”—another allusion to covenant fellowship. Yet, the kingdom is not absent, for the river proceeds out of the throne of God and of the Lamb (v. 1). In addition, “the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in” the city (v. 3), and the saints “shall reign for ever and ever” (v. 5). Plainly, this symbolic representation of the church in glory portrays kingdom and covenant standing together in the new heavens and the new earth.

Kingdom in Service of Covenant

Both covenant and kingdom began at the dawn of time. Both covenant and kingdom extend into eternity. Yet, it is possible to spell out a relationship between the two realities. The relationship is this: Although a reciprocal relationship certainly exists in that both serve the other and they are inseparably bound together, yet the kingdom serves the ultimate realization of the covenant. The covenant is the life of the kingdom, and the covenant life of fellowship is the end, which serves the glory of God’s name.

This is not the predominate view of the relationship. The more

ordinary position among Reformed theologians is that the covenant serves the kingdom.

The subordinate position of the covenant is found in any theology that makes the covenant a means to accomplish another goal—the common understanding, even among leading Reformed theologians. Abraham Kuyper stressed the importance of the covenant of grace with his teaching that set the very foundation of the covenant in the covenant life within the triune God. However, Kuyper made the covenant between God and man to be a pact or alliance of two over against a third party. According to Kuyper, God and man formed an alliance over against sin and Satan. When Satan is overcome and sin and death destroyed, then the covenant has accomplished its purpose.

Herman Bavinck likewise emphasized the importance of the covenant. The covenant of grace is God's covenant with the elect sovereignly maintained by God. However, Bavinck also considers it a means to an end, for he writes, "The covenant of grace describes the road by which those elect people will attain their destiny. The covenant of grace is the channel by which the stream of election flows toward eternity."¹¹

Every conditional conception of the covenant makes the covenant a means to an end. This is true of the conditional covenant theology of Heyns and Schilder. They posit that God establishes a covenant with every baptized child, and gives the promise of salvation to every one of these children, on the condition of faith. According to this view, the covenant becomes the means by which God gives salvation to some of these children.

For most theologians, the idea of covenant as means to an end carries through in its relationship to the kingdom. Samuel Volbeda is careful not to elevate one over the other. It was noted above that Volbeda presents covenant, church, and kingdom as "the three fundamental relations which God's people sustain to Him.... They are after all three strands of one cord."¹²

11. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, translated by John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), vol. 3, p. 229.

12. Volbeda, *Practical Theology*, p. 9.

Nonetheless he tends to make covenant serve the kingdom. He maintains, “Life, such as is generated within the precincts of the covenant, is the power that enables us to do the work of the kingdom of God. Conversely, the work of the kingdom is the *raison d’être* of the bestowal upon us of the blessed life of the covenant.”¹³ Later he writes:

It is needful to warn not only against divorcing kingdom service from covenant life, but also against dissociating covenant life from kingdom service. The first-mentioned vice is typically worldly; the second error is deeply entrenched in Christian circles. It may serve a good purpose to lay down, at this juncture, the principle that spiritual life is not an end in itself, . . . but a means to an end.¹⁴

In his work *The Coming of the Kingdom*, Herman Ridderbos addresses the relationship between covenant and kingdom and gives somewhat more significance to the kingdom. He writes that “the idea of the kingdom of God undoubtedly represents a special conception of the dramatic history of salvation within the totality of divine revelation.” He warns “against absolutizing one conception at the expense of another.” Then he adds, “Yet it cannot be denied that the idea of the kingdom *in se* is wider and more universal than, e.g., that of the divine covenant.”¹⁵

In fact, Ridderbos considers the covenant to be an aspect of the kingdom. He writes:

The idea of the kingdom of God is more comprehensive exactly because it is not only oriented to the redemption of God’s people, but to the self-assertion of God in *all* his works. Not only does it place Israel, but also the heathen nations, the world, and even the whole creation, in the wide perspective of the realization of all God’s rights and promises.¹⁶

13. Volbeda, *Practical Theology*, p. 9.

14. Volbeda, *Practical Theology*, p. 10.

15. Ridderbos, *Coming of the Kingdom*, p. 22.

16. Ridderbos, *Coming of the Kingdom*, p. 23.

Dr. Fred Klooster considers the kingdom to be the goal of the church and covenant. He writes:

I understand the 'kingdom of God/heaven' to be the all-embracing term referring in various contexts to the reign of God/Christ, to the realm of the kingdom, and to the citizens of the kingdom. Various nuances of meaning and certain distinctions will be introduced to develop the historical stages of the kingdom of God in salvation history. Included within the perspective of the kingdom are the covenant(s) and the church, *each of which is in its own way an instrument or agency of the kingdom.*¹⁷ [Emphasis mine, RJD.]

In his thesis, *The Role of the Covenant in the Kingdom of God*, Pieter W. Dekker asserts that Klooster taught that the covenant is a temporary instrument that will one day disappear. Dekker writes: "In an appendix to his notes for an eschatology course F. H. Klooster states that in the consummated kingdom of God/Christ there is no need of the covenant and church instruments of redemption-historical achievement: they have been fulfilled and attained their God-designed objective: the Kingdom!"¹⁸

Dr. Meredith Kline made popular the notion that God's covenant can be understood only in terms of the near Eastern treaties, especially of the Hittites. In these "covenants" the sovereign imposes a treaty upon his subjects. This theology of the covenant results in a covenant that is tailor-made to serve the kingdom. Kline writes.

If it is recognized that law covenant must provide the formal generic pattern, a systematic definition of covenant may be ventured with assurance that it is at least pointing in the right direction. God's covenant with man may be defined as an administration of God's lordship, consecrating a people to himself under the sanctions of divine law. In more general terms, it is a sovereign administration of the kingdom of God. Covenant administration is kingdom administra-

17. F.H. Klooster, "Covenant, Church and Kingdom of God in the New Testament," in A.O. Miller. Ed. *A Covenant Challenge to our Broken World* (Atlanta: Darby Printing Co., 1982), p. 85.

18. Dekker, *Role of the Covenant*, p. 96.

tion. The treaties are the legal instruments by which God's kingship is exercised over his creatures.¹⁹

Kline asserts that the covenant serves the kingdom by imposing the king's rule upon the subjects. Imbedded in the covenant are covenant promises of reward for obedience and covenant punishments for disobedience. He considers the covenant to be God's way of organizing the life of the kingdom.

Kline's conception of God's covenant of grace is not based on Scripture. Insisting that Jehovah God's everlasting covenant of grace is like pagan treaties is simply higher critical rubbish. Apart from that, it is obvious that, under his conception, the covenant serves the kingdom with rigor. One is left with the impression that the life of the kingdom would be not a life of love and friendship but a dreadful living under the fear of threats and the frustration of unattainable rewards.

All of these presentations, as noted, make the covenant to be the means to an end. We believe this view of the covenant of grace is wrong. Scripture teaches that the covenant is rather the end or goal of God.

That viewpoint, namely, that the covenant is the goal, is one of the contributions made by Herman Hoeksema to the right conception of the doctrine of God's covenant. As early as 1945, he took notice of what he saw as a common weakness in all the existing presentations of the covenant. At a conference of ministers and elders of the Reformed Church U.S. and of the Protestant Reformed Churches, Herman Hoeksema delivered a speech on "The Idea of the Covenant." In this speech Hoeksema noted that the Westminster Confession of Faith speaks of the covenant of grace "wherein [God] freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him that they may be saved" (Chapter 7, Art. 3). Hoeksema comments, "Here we meet with the idea of the covenant as something additional and secondary, a way to a certain goal, a means to an end. And it is this

19. *Oath*, p. 36.

notion that has become rather prevalent in Reformed theology.²⁰ He then proceeds to demonstrate the truth of what he writes.

In the late 1940s the contact that the Protestant Reformed Churches had with the newly formed GKNV and Dr. K. Schilder produced much discussion of the covenant. In 1949, Herman Hoeksema reiterates his criticism from the earlier speech and expands upon it.

All the definitions of the covenant which we have discussed so far have this in common, that they describe the covenant as a means to an end, not as an end, the highest end, in itself. They differ only in their denotation of the essence of the covenant, some emphasizing the idea of an agreement or pact or alliance, others that of the promise, still others that of a way unto salvation. They differ too in their description of the parties of the covenant and their relation to each other. According to some, the covenant is strictly unilateral. According to others it is completely bilateral. While still others prefer to speak of the covenant as unilateral in its origin, but as bilateral in its operation. And, again, some identify the covenant of redemption, the *pactum salutis*, with the covenant of grace; while others consider the covenant of redemption as the basis for the covenant of grace. Some insist that the covenant of grace is established with Christ; others call it a pact between the offended God and the offending sinner. But always the covenant is essentially a means to an end, a pact or agreement, and the essential elements are always the promise of eternal life and the condition of faith and obedience.²¹

Herman Hoeksema's insistence that the covenant be presented not merely as a means but as the goal is rooted in the doctrine of the covenant itself. God's covenant of grace is not an agreement. It is a relationship of love and friendship. Thus the relationship of the covenant to salvation is not that the covenant is a means unto salvation. Rather, God saves His chosen people in order that they might enjoy covenant life with God.

20. Herman Hoeksema, "The Idea of the Covenant," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 22, p. 440.

21. Hoeksema, "Different Views of the Covenant," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26, pp. 55-56.

Life with God is the highest life a covenant creature can attain. Here, too, wrong ideas abound as to the nature of covenant life. Some view covenant life merely as activity, as the opposite of being dead and inactive. Then covenant life is a means of gaining knowledge of God. Volbeda is wrong when he contends that this “life is a means of attaining to enjoyment. Through life, eternal life alone, the sinner may arrive at the blessedness of knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He sent into this world to seek and to save that which was lost.”²² He also presents covenant life as a means to serve in the kingdom.

This is an inadequate conception of covenant life, which is eternal life. It is not that eternal life allows one to obtain the blessed knowledge of God. Rather, this life *is itself* the knowledge of God, according to Jesus’ word in John 17:3: “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”

God created man to live in covenant fellowship with Him so that they will know Him. “And I will give them an heart to know me, that I am the Lord: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God: for they shall return unto me with their whole heart” (Jer. 24:7). This covenant life (which *is* the knowledge of God) serves the higher, even the highest goal of God, namely, His own glory. God purposed to glorify Himself by causing man to know His attributes from experience, so that man could praise God’s majesty and infinite perfections. God determined to reveal His perfections to these covenant people in and through Jesus Christ, the one in whom dwells the fullness of the godhead bodily (Col. 2:9). Further, God determined to bring His elect into His own covenant life in Jesus Christ, the Head and Mediator of the covenant. By bringing man into His covenant life, God causes him to experience the riches of God’s mercy. God causes every believer to know the power of sovereign grace operating in him personally. God causes mere man to feel the overwhelming joy caused by the divine love that fills his heart. God makes the redeemed man to experience perfection, righteousness, and holiness.

22. Volbeda, *Practical Theology*, p. 11.

The result is that every redeemed, covenant man, woman, and child sings the praises of God—His perfections and His works—out of his or her own experience. Thus the covenant is God's goal—a chosen people living with God, enjoying God, and praising Him forever.

That being the case, it cannot be that the kingdom is more important than the covenant. Nor can the proper relationship be simply that the covenant serves the kingdom.

The teaching that believers are to build the kingdom on this earth has the life of the covenant serving the kingdom. Obviously the social gospel sees the kingdom as the ultimate goal. Church and covenant serve the establishment of the kingdom. The predominant thinking even in churches that go by the name Reformed is that God's kingdom was horribly distorted by the fall into sin. According to Albert Wolters, sin "was not meant to be."²³ Thus it is man's calling to reclaim the earth. This rebuilding, restoring, and cleaning up is kingdom work, it is affirmed. Wolters expresses a common misconception of the Christian's calling when he writes: "In Jesus Christ we witness the long-awaited vindication and effective demonstration of God's kingship in the world.... The rightful king has established a beachhead in his territory and calls on his subjects to press his claims ever farther in creation."²⁴ Wolters goes so far as to insist that "the kingdom of God will not come in its fullness" until every area of human life (even the dance, he claims) has been regained for Christ by the efforts of believers.²⁵ This is exactly what nominally Reformed and Christian colleges are teaching their students.

But the theologians of the past pointed them in this direction. According to Dr. Fred Klooster, Louis Berkhof taught that "the church must proclaim the social message of Scripture and seek the realization of the kingdom of God on earth."²⁶ He explains.

23. Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), p 48.

24. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, p. 61.

25. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, p. 95.

26. Klooster, "Kingdom of God in the CRC," p. 218.

Berkhof recommended that the church should encourage its members to promote separate Christian organizations to advance the kingdom of God. In this way Christians would be “the leaven permeating the lump, God’s spiritual force for the regeneration of the world, His chosen agents to influence every sphere of life, and to bring science and art, commerce and industry in subjection to God.”²⁷

Volbeda sounds the same message.

When sin broke out like a conflagration in God’s world His eternal plan called for the extinction of the flames not only, but also for the re-building of the house that had been badly damaged. Accordingly God now entered upon a new course of action, viz. the redemption which is in Christ Jesus and which will be finished in the restoration of all things of which Peter spoke at Jerusalem in the days of Pentecost.²⁸

Volbeda speaks of “the Kingdom as cooperation with God in the realization of His glorious world-purposes.”²⁹ He describes the kingdom task as “rebuilding the world for God.”³⁰ All this is the wrong view of kingdom work and its development. It fails to reckon with the truth that Christ is and was eternally at the center of all God’s plans. God’s eternal counsel focuses on Christ. God determined eternally to have a church, a kingdom, and a covenant, all connected with and dependent on Jesus Christ.

According to His perfect plan, God formed Adam both a covenant creature and a king. Adam was created in God’s image for this purpose. Adam’s relation to God was not that of a slave or business partner, but a son. He alone of all creatures could know God, love Him, and live in friendship with Him. And only because he was a covenant creature in God’s image could Adam

27. Klooster, “The Kingdom of God in the CRC,” p. 219. Klooster is quoting from a lecture of Berkhof given at Calvin Theological Seminary and College in 1913 entitled *The Church and Social Problems* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Sevensma Co, 1913), p. 20.

28. Volbeda, *Practical Theology*, p. 14.

29. Volbeda, *Practical Theology*, p. 18.

30. Volbeda, *Practical Theology*, p. 20.

also be king under God. Without the righteousness, holiness, and true knowledge, and without having the relationship of love, Adam would have been unfit to rule the creation under God.

Also according to God's perfect plan, Adam fell. He rejected God's rule and friendship. Adam thus lost the position of friend/servant—lost the gifts of righteousness, holiness, and true knowledge, and lost his friendship with God. Therefore, he could no longer be a king, ruling the creation as God's representative. God would not permit an enemy to sit upon the throne.

However, this fall did not ruin God's plan or His kingdom. God determined this fall in order to make room for Christ. God would continue His covenant, but not with Adam and all those whom he represented. Rather, God maintained His covenant with the one foreshadowed by Adam—the eternal and natural Son, Jesus Christ. In addition, God continues His covenant with all those whom Christ represents, namely, the elect out of every nation. Christ is the Head and Mediator of the covenant, as is evident from Psalm 89 and Hebrews (see above) and from the fact that He is the Seed of the Woman (Gen. 3:15) and the Seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16).

As the Son, living in intimate covenant fellowship with the Father, Christ is also to be trusted with the kingship. The Father trusts His Son completely. His Son was and is ever faithful to do His Father's will (Ps. 40:8; Heb. 10:7). Christ proved His faithfulness in perfect obedience, even unto the death of the cross. Thus the Father raised Him from the dead and set Him upon the throne. The Surety and Mediator of the covenant is raised to the position of King (Ps. 2).

From that point of view, the covenant is essential for the kingdom. It is the life of the kingdom. And only those who are in covenant friendship with God are citizens in God's kingdom and may rule in that kingdom with Christ (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 12).

Yet we insist that the covenant is the goal, the end itself that God has determined. If that is so, then the kingdom must serve the covenant. And it does.

The kingdom serves as the structure for promoting the highest enjoyment of the covenant life of friendship.

Covenant fellowship requires a structure of good and righteous order. This is true in a family. God ordained that a covenant life should exist in families. God very carefully laid out what the relationships should be, and what the structure should be in a covenant family. There must be one head, the father. He must rule his household wisely. He must lead as a head does the body. He must love his wife and his children. The mother has her God-given place in the family. She is the help who is fit for her husband. She is to be in submission to her husband and assist him in all good and lawful things. She has authority over the children, so long as she does not usurp her husband's authority.

The children have a place in the family. They are important as the very heritage of God. They are under the authority of parents and are to honor, love, and obey them for God's sake. They are to love each other.

That is the structure of the home. The home must be governed by love and righteousness. Righteousness must be maintained. Evil-doing and evil-speaking left uncorrected will disrupt the harmony in the home.

When the father and mother and children live in their God-given roles, there is unity and love in the home. Covenant fellowship can exist between husband and wife, parents with children, and children together.

But let the father be gone, flagrantly neglecting his duties, or rule tyrannically, and what happens to the covenant fellowship in the home? Let the wife and mother usurp her husband's authority, and see what happens to the marital bliss. If children rebel, walking in self-centered lives (rather than love), the result is that covenant life of love and fellowship is damaged, perhaps destroyed. The family structure, with order, with righteousness, is essential for covenant life in the home.

God ordained the same in the church. It has structure due to the special offices and the office of believer. If all live in harmony with their God-given place, and if the love of God and righteousness rule, there is peace and harmony in the consistory, between the consistory and the members, and among the members. The dissolving of the structure results in chaos. That in turn damages the fellowship, as brother turns against brother.

Likewise God wisely determined that the kingdom must have structure if right covenant fellowship is to be enjoyed. Consider the era of the judges in Israel's history, when every man did what was right in his own eyes. What was life in Israel? It was chaos. Righteousness was not maintained. The people sinned against each other. The tribe of Benjamin was almost exterminated by the other tribes. In addition, there was little fellowship with God. His people turned to idols of the heathen and bowed the knee to gods of their enemies.

Over against that dreadful picture, God determined an eternal kingdom of perfect righteousness and peace where He might dwell with His people in covenant fellowship.

This is already true for God's elect in this life. The kingdom of heaven is within. By His Spirit Christ regenerates, thus destroying the dominion of Satan in the heart of the elect sinner. The Spirit establishes the throne of Christ there, and writes His law upon that renewed heart. This is crucial. An unruly and rebellious child will not enjoy fellowship with his Father. Accordingly, the Heidelberg Catechism rightly expounds the petition "Thy Kingdom come" as a request, first, that God will "rule us so by Thy Word and Spirit, that we may submit ourselves more and more unto Thee" (Lord's Day 48). King Jesus rules in the hearts of God's people, causing them "with love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works" (Lord's Day 33). The child of the King seeks the Father through His Royal Son, delights in Him, and enjoys the blessing of the covenant, namely fellowship with God.

The church is the primary manifestation of the kingdom on the earth. In harmony with that, the catechism teaches that the second request in the petition "Thy kingdom come" is "preserve and increase Thy church" (Lord's Day 48).

This earthly manifestation of the kingdom, the church, serves the covenant in so many ways. The preaching of the gospel gives the true knowledge of God—knowledge essential for fellowship. The preaching imparts grace to walk according to the will of the King. The sacrament of baptism seals the covenant promises to the believer. By the Lord's Supper, the believer is steadfastly united to Christ and partakes of His life and righteousness. Christ

is the King of the church, and through the officebearers He rules, establishing righteousness and peace, so that the communion of the saints is experienced in her midst. The keys of the kingdom are exercised there, opening the kingdom to the believers and shutting out the ungodly. Thus the main earthly manifestation of the kingdom, the church, serves to promote the life of love and fellowship between the saints, and especially between the saints and God in official worship.

Eternally this will be true in the kingdom of heaven in its final manifestation in the new heaven and earth. Christ will be the King. There will be a structure, order, and law, not chaos, not anarchy. The kingdom law is the law of love. There will be order and government. Saints will judge angels. They will reign with Christ (Rev. 20). They will sit upon thrones, judging in perfect righteousness. Every citizen will live in perfect righteousness and delight perfectly in the righteous will of the King. The result will be perfect harmony in the kingdom, with every citizen living unto and for the King and in love for each other. Perfect covenant life.

In this kingdom, God is sovereign. But as Bavinck pointed out, God will rule as our Father.³¹ Christ will be king under God. But He rules as our elder brother. Or, to change the figure, as a husband, the King will lead in perfect love and wisdom. Herman Hanko points out that what is true of a good earthly king is perfectly true in Christ as King.

A king has certain obligations in his kingdom: to rule for the well-being of his subjects, to seek the good of the citizens, and to delight in their happiness. The measure of the success of a king is the happiness of the people in the realm. This, too, is true of the kingdom of heaven. While surely the final purpose of the kingdom of heaven is the glory of God, it is also true that our sovereign King makes all His subjects supremely happy forever as he delivers them from sin and death and takes them into His own everlasting fellowship.³²

31. Bavinck, *Dogmatics*, Vol. 3, p. 246.

32. Hanko, *Everlasting Covenant*, pp. 205-206.

The entire kingdom will serve this perfect covenant life, for God will be all and in all. In Him will all the citizens find delight. Isaiah 65 describes the blessedness of the kingdom. This is the new heaven and earth (v. 17). God promises, "I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people" (v. 19). It is a kingdom, for God describes it as His "holy mountain" (v. 25), a figure of speech pointing to God's kingdom. And in that kingdom will be perfect covenant fellowship, for, promises God, "it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear" (v. 24).

And all the citizens will praise the King. The content of their praise is striking, as described in Psalm 145. "All thy works shall praise thee, O LORD; and thy saints shall bless thee. They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom, and talk of thy power; To make known to the sons of men his mighty acts, and the glorious majesty of his kingdom. Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations" (vv. 10-13).

Indeed, they will praise God for His righteous judgments that have destroyed His and their enemies. They will praise His sovereign power that has redeemed and delivered them. They will sing eternally of the riches of His grace.

Kingdom and covenant—existing forever, and forever inseparable. And within this righteous kingdom will be gathered all the chosen citizens out of all the nations of the earth, living with their God in unending, glorious covenant love and fellowship. ●

Breaking the Everlasting Covenant of Grace

Barrett L. Gritters

Introduction

One vital aspect of the doctrine of the covenant, which doctrine this and the previous issue of the *PRTJ* treat, is the biblical reality of covenant breaking. The Old Testament especially testifies to the reality that men break God's covenant, using the very phrase "break the covenant." The New Testament testifies to it, without using that precise language. Although some will deny the possibility that God's covenant can be broken—on the basis of a particular definition of "break" and on the basis of a particular view of the covenant—Scripture is plain that men have, do, and will, break God's covenant. Therefore, warnings must be issued today against covenant breaking. God's judgment falls upon covenant breakers.

This article will analyze the reality of covenant breaking. What is the reality of breaking God's covenant? What are the consequences of breaking God's covenant? Who can break God's covenant? Do both believers and unbelievers break God's covenant? Can both reprobate and elect break God's covenant? Can the pagan break God's covenant?

There is controversy over the question of covenant breaking. Especially does that controversy appear in the history of the relationship between the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (Liberated), or the Canadian and American Reformed Churches. This article will treat this controversy and the answers given by both the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Reformed Churches (Liberated).

Involved in the question of what it means to break God's covenant are other, more fundamental, questions. Most basic of which questions is: What is the nature of the covenant? Is it an agreement between God and man? Does the covenant consist of prom-

ise? Is the covenant a relationship? If so, what kind of relationship? A relationship of love? A permanent relationship? The answer to these questions determines the nature of covenant breaking. Then, these questions pertain: with whom is the covenant established? With the elect alone? With believers and all their baptized children? The answer to these questions determines the nature of covenant breaking. Does breaking the covenant lead to a loss of real, spiritual blessings, or does the sin of covenant breaking cause the covenant breaker to lose nothing, because he had nothing? This paper will also treat these questions, if not at length, since the other articles in this issue and the previous issue treated them.

But the article intends to do more than enter the controversy over the meaning of breaking God's covenant. It concludes with positive analysis of the sin of covenant breaking. Only to debate the concept of covenant breaking is not fruitful for the church of Christ. There must be a call to Reformed preachers to warn against covenant breaking and to make plain to the people the consequences of such grievous sin. The article will conclude with such a call.



There should be no question that it is possible for man to break God's covenant. The question centers on what it *means* to break God's covenant.

The Scriptures have a multitude of references to covenant breaking, almost all in the Old Testament. The following are representative of the various books of the Bible in which the expression occurs (usually with the Hebrew verb *parar* in the Hiphil form):

In connection with the earliest reference to covenant keeping, Jehovah warns about breaking the covenant: "He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant" (Gen. 17:13, 14). Leviticus 26:14-16: "But if ye will not hearken unto me, and will not do all these commandments; And if ye shall despise my statutes, or if your soul abhor my judgments, so that ye will not do all my command-

ments, but that ye break my covenant: I also will do this unto you.” Deuteronomy 31:16: “And the Lord said unto Moses, Behold, thou shalt sleep with thy fathers; and this people will rise up, and go a whoring after the gods of the strangers of the land, whither they go to be among them, and will forsake me, and break my covenant which I have made with them” (see also v. 20). Psalm 55:20: “He hath put forth his hands against such as be at peace with him: he hath broken his covenant.” Isaiah 24:5: “The earth also is defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant” (see also Isa. 33:8). Jeremiah 31:32: “Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband to them, saith the Lord.” Jeremiah 11:10: “The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant which I made with their fathers.” Ezekiel 44:7: “In that ye have brought into my sanctuary strangers, uncircumcised in heart, and uncircumcised in flesh, to be in my sanctuary, to pollute it, even my house, when ye offer my bread, the fat and the blood, and they have broken my covenant because of all your abominations.” It should be noted here already that non-Jewish strangers who had not been circumcised, the sign of the covenant, *broke* God’s covenant. Ezekiel 16:59: “For thus saith the Lord GOD; I will even deal with thee as thou hast done, which hast despised the oath in breaking the covenant” (see four more uses of the expression in 17:15-19).

Although the New Testament does not use the expression,¹ the most commonly referred to are in Hebrews:

6:4-6 For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy

1. Romans 1:31 has the expression (“Backbiters, haters of God, despightful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, Without understanding, *covenant-breakers*, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful”), but it does not refer to the same Old Testament concept.

Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.

8:8-9 For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord.

10:26-31 For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

No, the question is not whether the covenant can be broken, but what the Word of God means by the expression.

The most common explanation of breaking God's covenant is that one destroys the bond between two covenanting parties, severs a connection between those who have entered this relationship/agreement. "... (T)hrough the sins from the side of the sinner the covenant relationship with God really (is) severed."² To break the covenant, then, means "annulling it, destroying it, so

2. J. Geertsma, "Can We Break the Covenant" (<http://spindleworks.com/library.geertsma/covenant.htm>). From *Clarion* (1978) 27:292. Geertsma later says that it is a "severing of the covenant relation." This is the common definition of the Canadian Reformed theologians.

that it does not exist anymore.”³ A covenant breaker by his sin “disconnect(s) what was connected.”⁴

This paper proposes to define breaking the covenant differently. Because of a particular definition of covenant (a vital relationship of love between God and His people in Christ, established by promise), and a particular view of those who are *in* this covenant relationship with God (the believers only, and their elect children), covenant breaking does not and cannot mean to destroy a relationship, to disconnect what was connected, or to sever a tie that formerly bound God and man.

If to *break* the covenant must mean “to sever, to destroy the covenant,” then of course we must insist that the covenant is *unbreakable*, as other Protestant Reformed writers have adequately demonstrated.⁵ I contend, on the basis of the Scripture’s repeated reference to an actual breaking of the covenant, and on the basis of the Hebrew word itself, that the word ought to be understood differently.

3. J. Geertsma, “In What Manner Can the Covenant Be Broken?” (<http://spindleworks.com/library.geertsma/covenant.htm>).

4. J. Geertsma, “Once Again: Covenant and Election” (<http://spindleworks.com/library.geertsma/covenant.htm>). “...man, in his own responsibility, can disconnect what God has and wants to be connected... he does the disconnecting.” C. Tuininga writes: “But the Bible speaks of covenant breakers, of those who were in the covenant but because they did not live up to the demands of the covenant were cut off.”

5. The following are examples of PRC writers who appear, at least in some of their writings, to have accepted the definition of “break” as “destroy.” In his lengthy exchange in the *Standard Bearer* with J. Geertsma, H.C. Hoeksema began by saying that the covenant was “unbreakable.” He later refined his definition of “breakable.” D. Engelsma, in a review article (*PRTJ* 34 Nov. 2001), wrote that “a doctrine of a general, conditional, breakable covenant overthrows the gospel of salvation...” Cf. also his *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers* (Grandville: RFP, 2005), pp. 7, 93, 95, 173, 180, 181, 196, 207, 218, 219. A. denHartog, in an unpublished paper entitled “Covenant Breakers,” written for a ministers’ conference, says, “God’s covenant with his people is absolutely unbreakable.”

This paper proposes that covenant breaking should be defined as violating the covenant, sinning against the covenant, transgressing the covenant, profaning the covenant, committing outrage against the covenant.

The proposed understanding of breaking God's covenant depends on at least three things: First, it depends on the definition of the Hebrew word *break* (*parar*) and its use in the Old Testament. Second, it depends on the above-mentioned particular definition of the covenant of grace, which I hope to show has strong precedent in the Dutch and Reformed tradition. Third, this definition depends on the question of who are truly members of God's covenant: "With whom does God establish His covenant?" Finally, the acceptance of this definition of "break" does not depend upon, but must be seen in the light of the errors implied in the alternative definitions of covenant breaking.

The Hebrew word *parar*

According to the Hebrew lexicons, *parar* means "to break, violate." Gesenius gives the definition "to break, *always used figuratively, as a covenant.*"⁶ When Gesenius gives the second definition of "to make void," it is a *counsel* that is made void, a *vow* declared void, but not a covenant. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, whose indebtedness to Gesenius is explicit, give "break, frustrate" as the basic meanings. Then, "1. break, violate... a. (a list of texts)... b. of men violating covenant." Then, "2. frustrate, make ineffectual: a. counsel... b. make *vow* ... ineffectual."⁷

These definitions of the Hebrew scholars support the possibility of the definition of covenant breaking I have proposed. According to both, *parar* means break, often (if not always in connection with *covenant*) in the sense of *violate*.

In his exchange with H.C. Hoeksema in the late 1970s, J. Geertsma did an extensive word study of the word "break" in the

6. *Gesenius's Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1905), DCXCII.

7. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1907), 830.

Old Testament. There is not room here to analyze the entire study. What may be said is that, although there are times when *parar* ought to be translated “break” in the sense of do away with or destroy, most of the time it is more appropriate, and certainly not inappropriate, to translate it as *violate, transgress*. The whole of Scripture will determine how it must be understood.⁸ But it may not be rightly said that “we must conclude that the verb ‘to break’ does not mean: ‘to violate’ but ‘to destroy.’”⁹

With this definition and usage of *parar*, the people are said to have *violated* God’s covenant, transgressed His covenant. They did not end any relationship with Him. Rather, they profaned the great reality of His covenant with His people.

Up to this point it has only been shown that the Hebrew verb *parar* does allow this understanding. This definition and understanding of covenant breaking must yet be defended theologically. But this definition fits well with the definitive texts on covenant breaking.

In Genesis 17, God warns that those who refuse to circumcise their sons have broken His covenant. That is, they have transgressed the demands of the covenant relationship: Circumcise your children as a sign of My covenant. Those who refuse to receive the sign will be cut off from the people. The violators of the covenant will receive covenant judgments.

Leviticus 26 is an important passage in this connection, perhaps the single most important passage in the Old Testament regarding covenant breaking because of its length and careful de-

8. In connection with a study of the verb *parar*, it may be noted that there are other Hebrew verbs that mean to *destroy, shatter, break in pieces*, that would not be fitting in connection with a man’s treatment of God’s covenant with His people.

9. Geertsma, “In What Manner Can the Covenant Be Broken?” Nor will it do, in light of the Hebrew lexicons and biblical contexts, to say, “It would be very strange that now, all of a sudden, the meaning of the word “to break” would change, so that when the people ‘break’ the covenant that the LORD made with them, the verb can only mean: violate, transgress, while in all other cases it certainly also means: severing, annulling, destroying.”

scription. Not only does Leviticus 26 help define whether covenant breaking is violating or destroying, but it also points out fully the way in which the covenant is “broken”; the judgments of God upon these covenant breakers; and the faithfulness of God, who will never break His covenant. The chapter, essentially the concluding chapter in this great book of God’s covenant,¹⁰ begins by describing what it means to keep God’s covenant: Israel must “walk in God’s statutes, keep his commandments.” The next verses, through verse 13, describe the blessings of God for those who obey His commandments. But in the lengthier section of 14 through 39, Jehovah warns against disobedience to the commandments, despising God’s statutes, abhorring God’s judgments. This—disobedience to the commandments—is “breaking God’s covenant” (v. 15). The following verses describe in detail what judgments will fall on the covenant breakers.¹¹

In one of the most moving passages of the Old Testament, the Lord concludes the chapter by showing the way of repentance to these covenant-breaking Israelites. It must be noted that those who *broke* God’s covenant now confess their sin and return to God; they did not sever the relationship, but violated it. “If they shall confess their iniquity... if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity, Then will I remember my covenant....” “...they despised my judgments, and... their soul abhorred my statutes. And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God” (vv. 40-44). *To the same people who have broken God’s covenant*, God says, I will remember them, will not cast them away, will not abhor them. I am their God. I am the Lord (vv. 44,45).

The people broke—violated—the covenant. They transgressed it, profaned it. Israel did not “destroy the relationship” in which

10. Chapter 27 is the last chapter, but is considered by most as a kind of appendix to the book.

11. At the end of this study we will return to see the important applications of these judgments to the church today.

they lived with Jehovah. They did not “disconnect what God had connected.” But they violated it. And faithful Jehovah maintains it, will not violate it. He loves His people. He loves His covenant relationship with them.

This translation and explanation of *parar* fits well with the great Old Testament illustration of the covenant—marriage. Marriage is a covenant, a living relationship of love. A man can break/violate his marriage covenant in many ways. When he sins against his wife, he violates the relationship by his sin. By these sins, evil as they are, he does not do away with the marriage. These transgressions of his marriage covenant do not annul the marriage. The sins are even called “breaking his vows” of marriage. But these sins neither cause the marriage to pass away nor void the vows that he took when he married her. He breaks, in the sense of violates, but does not destroy his marriage.

When Israel sinned against God, they violated the marriage relationship. But God is faithful. He will not destroy them. He will not break His covenant with them. “For I am the Lord their God” (Lev. 26:44).

In man’s dealings with God’s covenant, “break” means “violate.”

A Particular Definition of the Covenant of Grace

Second, the definition of covenant breaking as *violating* the covenant harmonizes with, if not depends upon, the definition of the covenant as *a living relationship of friendship and love between God and His people, established by God in Jesus Christ, Head of the covenant*.¹²

12. For a description and defense of Christ as head *of* the covenant, and not only as head *in* the covenant, and the importance of this distinction, see Herman C. Hanko, “Christ the Head of the Covenant” in *PRTJ* 40 (Nov., 2006) 43-61. For the opposing view, see Jelle Faber’s essay, “American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism” in *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism & Extra-Scriptural Binding—A New Danger* (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1996), p. 37, 45, etc.

This is the definition the Protestant Reformed Churches have given to the covenant since their beginnings, a definition that fits with and builds on Reformed tradition. For the sake of space, I will not quote, but refer in the footnote to the most important sources, since it is well known that this is the standard Protestant Reformed definition of covenant.¹³

That definition of covenant involves two ideas: First, it is part of the grand Reformed tradition, and not outside the bounds of that tradition. Second, this definition leads to, if not requires, that “covenant breaking” mean “violate” and not “destroy.” (I will deal, below, with another possible meaning of “break” that a Protestant Reformed man may give; and with how someone who is not in this friend-relationship with God can “break,” that is, “violate” the covenant.)

But first, this definition of covenant as a relationship of friendship between God and His people in Jesus Christ is a part of Reformed orthodoxy and Dutch Reformed tradition.

There were two strains of teaching in Dutch Reformed history regarding the definition of the covenant. Is the covenant a living relationship of friendship between God and His elect people that is salvation; or is the covenant a conditional arrangement between God and all who are baptized which will lead to salvation only for those who fulfill the condition of faith? In a recent article in the *Calvin Theological Journal*, Richard Mouw describes

13. Herman Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed: Children in the Covenant*, rev. ed. (Grandville, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997); also his *Reformed Dogmatics*, sec. ed. (Grandville, Michigan: RFP, 2004); Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, Michigan: RFP, 2000), 261-398; David Engelsma, *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers: Sovereign Grace in the Covenant* (Grandville, Michigan: RFP, 2005); also his *Trinity and Covenant: God as Holy Family* (Jenison, Michigan: RFP, 2006).

these two strains, and speaks of the tolerance of both within the Reformed community.¹⁴

The Christian Reformed theologians Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, who wrote the definitive *Church Order Commentary*, said that the “stricter covenant conception,” which holds that the covenant is in essence “a bond of life-relationship between God and His people in Christ” as their “federal head,” is the “prevalent conception in the Netherlands Churches of our forebears.”¹⁵

If these more recent church fathers were not thinking of Herman Bavinck, they could have been, because Bavinck is the outstanding representative of the Dutch Reformed theologians who held to this conception of the covenant. The recent publication in English of volume three of his *Reformed Dogmatics*¹⁶ is helpful to see this.

Covenant with the Elect

But this view of the covenant, no “minor player” in Dutch Reformed tradition, that the covenant is a real, living, spiritual, saving reality in the life of the covenant member, itself depends on the teaching that the covenant is established with the elect alone,

14. “The Dutch Reformed community has long been conscious of the differences between these two perspectives, and, at times, it has been willing to tolerate the differences within its acknowledged boundaries of orthodoxy.” Mouw’s article is, “Baptism and the Salvific Status of Children: An Examination of Some Intra-Reformed Debates.” *CTJ* 41 (2006): 238-254.

15. *The Church Order Commentary: Being A Brief Explanation of the Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1941, p. 234. (N.B.: The quotation given is from two different parts of the page.) The discussion at this particular point in the *Commentary* regards proposed grounds for baptism of adopted children.

16. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), especially pp. 193-232.

and not with all the members of the church. On this, Bavinck was clear.

In this covenant Christ indeed acts as the head and representative of his own.... Although the covenant of grace has been made with Christ, through him it nevertheless reaches out also to his own, completely embraces and incorporates them body and soul.... The head of the covenant of grace is at the same time its mediator.¹⁷

Note well: as the head of the covenant, Christ acts as the head and representative of His own, that is, the elect who were “given him” by His Father.¹⁸ Bavinck teaches that “election is the basis and guarantee, the heart and core, of the covenant of grace.” If this is not maintained, “it not merely robs one of the true insight into the achieving and application of salvation, but also robs the believers of their only and sure comfort in the practice of their spiritual life.”¹⁹

Thomas Trouwborst, in his “From Covenant to Chaos: The Reformers and Their Heirs on Covenant Succession,” says that the standard doctrine of the magisterial Reformers was: “The Reformers understood our children as fully Christian. That is, the children of the covenant did not merely have certain advantages of being in the covenant or in the church, but they had salvation entire—whether described by forgiveness of sins, regeneration, being covered by the blood of Christ, justified, sanctified, or members of the kingdom of heaven.”²⁰

William Hendriksen indicates that the fathers who believed that the covenant is established with the elect only are “Ursinus,

17. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 229.

18. The expression “given him” is used especially in the gospel according to John. See, e.g., 6:37, 39; 17:2, 6, 9, 11, 12, 24; 18:9, where God’s election of His people is the governing thought.

19. *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 272, 273.

20. In *To You and Your Children: Examining the Biblical Doctrine of Covenant Succession*, ed. Benjamin K. Wikner (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2005), p. 76.

Olevianus, Mastricht, H.H. Kuyper, Hellenbroek, Bullinger, Petrus Martyr, Musculus, Polanus, Preston, Witsius, Braun, Lampe, Brakel, Francken,” and others,²¹ and that to deny that only the elect are “in the covenant” in that only they enjoy the “friendship, the loving kindness” of God, “is to deny Scripture.”²²

The Elect Breaking the Covenant

With this view of the covenant—a living relationship of friendship and love established by God in Jesus Christ, Head of the covenant, with the elect only—it is understandable that to break the covenant cannot mean “to destroy the covenant relationship, to sever the bond.” The elect cannot sin in such a way that the love and friendship with which God embraces him ceases to exist. For the elect child of God to break the covenant in *that* sense would be to teach Arminian, not Reformed doctrine.

But an elect believer is able to violate the covenant, transgress the covenant, sin against the covenant, even profane the covenant for a time. Although it is inexcusable sin, he can despise God’s commandments, abhor God’s statutes, and experience God’s avenging the “quarrel of [his] covenant” (see Lev. 26:25). But he cannot “disconnect what God has connected” in the spiritual, living relationship of love.

21. *The Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1932), footnote 42, pp. 93, 94.

22. The response to this view by the “liberated” theologians is: “The covenant is with all those who call themselves believers, and with all their children.” The view of covenant breaking as *destroying* requires this. It requires this inclusion of more than the elect in the covenant because God’s elect cannot destroy any saving relationship between them and God. But those not predestined to glory can. Thus, J. Geertsema is representative when he says, “God made His covenant with His people. He spoke to the whole people at Sinai: I am the Lord your God. I have redeemed you. And he promised to all of them entry into the promised land.” This includes every member of the nation of Israel at the time. According to Geertsema, God “redeemed,” “became the God of,” “all the individual members” of the nation of Israel. (“In What Manner Can the Covenant Be Broken?” <http://spindleworks.com/library/geertsema/covenant02.htm>)

There is another explanation of the elect “breaking” God’s covenant in the sense of destroying it. Also with this explanation, 1) the covenant is a living relationship of love, and 2) it is established with the elect alone. In this explanation, although he “breaks the covenant” in the sense of severs and destroys, the believer does not *actually* sever the relationship. He severs and destroys it *from his point of view*, he breaks it “conceptually,” destroys it as to his intentions. The relationship with God remains, because God is faithful; but the sinner in his mind and will destroys it.²³ In my judgment, although the reader must judge for himself, this view does not harmonize well with what appears to be the more natural meaning of Scripture’s repeated reference to believers’ “breaking” God’s covenant. Scripture indicates that they *did* something, not that they tried to do something, or thought they did.

The view of covenant breaking as “violating” opens the door to the understanding that both elect and reprobate can break the covenant, believer and unbeliever can break the covenant. Both of them live in the vicinity of covenant realities—Word and sacrament, the commandments of God, the worship of God, the promises of God, and the people of God. And both of them are able to speak against these realities, despise these realities, abhor the statutes, make light of God’s worship. Both of them break, that is, violate the covenant.

23. This is the view proposed by Herman Hoeksema in his *Believers and Their Seed*: “...broke God’s covenant, as far as he was concerned” (p. 76). This is the explanation of G.M. Ophoff, *Standard Bearer*, vol. 26 (May 1, 1950, pp. 350-353): “That is precisely what the carnal seed does with God’s covenant...*conceptionally*. They rend it in pieces, trample, despise and reject it.... So in this sense does this seed, so do we all by nature, break God’s covenant. We break, trample, despise and destroy it *conceptionally* and in deed as presented to us in Scripture and in the preaching thereof....” See also A. denHartog, “Covenant Breakers,” unpublished paper, p. 6: “...from man’s point of view.”

Pagans Breaking the Covenant

This is how the significant passage in Ezekiel 44:7 must be understood.

And thou shalt say to the rebellious, even to the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God; O ye house of Israel, let it suffice you of all your abominations, In that ye have brought into my sanctuary strangers, uncircumcised in heart, and uncircumcised in flesh, to be in my sanctuary, to pollute it, even my house, when ye offer my bread, the fat and the blood, and they have broken my covenant because of all your abominations.

In this text, the prophet says that strangers whom the circumcised Israelites had brought into the sanctuary had broken God's covenant. These strangers were not Israelites. They were "uncircumcised in heart, and uncircumcised in flesh." By the covenant people allowing these strangers into the sanctuary, these *strangers* broke God's covenant.²⁴ Notice, no promises of God were made to these strangers. The sign of the covenant had not been given to them; the text explicitly mentions this sign of the covenant being absent. God had established no relationship with them, formally or informally. Nevertheless, they *broke* (the Hebrew is *parar*) the covenant of God. There was no relationship for them to destroy, no connection to sever. Rather, they violated, transgressed, in the sense of profaned, despised, made light of, and spit upon, the holy things of God's covenant worship.

These strangers were "in the sphere of" God's covenant. All who break the covenant are "in the sphere" of God's covenant. "Sphere of the covenant" is the expression that has been used by Reformed theologians in the past to make clear that there is a distinction between those who are truly in the covenant and those

24. The NIV translates this as second person plural ("you broke my covenant") following the LXX: παρεβαίνετε τὴν διαθήκην μου. Then, it is not the heathen who broke the covenant, but Israel. The proper translation is that of the KJV, NKJV, etc., "they have broken." See Keil/Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, repr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), vol. IX.

who only appear to be in the covenant.²⁵ Both are in the vicinity of covenant realities: born to or adopted by believing parents, or brought near to covenant realities by marrying a member of the Christian church, etc. Paul refers to them as “of Israel.” They are not *truly* Israel, but they are “of Israel.” The strangers of Ezekiel 44, “uncircumcised in heart, and uncircumcised in flesh,” were such. Likely they found a spouse among the pretty girls of the Jews. They were not believers, had not even been willing to receive the sign of God’s covenant that He commanded be given to converts; but they were “in the sphere” of the covenant people, claimed covenant blessings, perhaps even said that they were part of the people of Jehovah. But because they were unbelieving, did not love what the worship represented spiritually, their presence in the sanctuary was covenant breaking, violating in gross fashion the relationship God had established with His people through the one sacrifice of the unblemished lamb.

Another view of covenant breaking

So far, I have explained: 1) That the view of the covenant as a saving relationship of love with the elect only is part of Reformed tradition; 2) That with this understanding of covenant, covenant breaking is to be understood as violating, not destroying (although there is a less-preferable view that regards the breaking as only “from the sinner’s viewpoint”); and that this view is not only reasonable, but more importantly that it fits with the language of Scripture and is in line with Reformed tradition.

Another view of covenant breaking defines the covenant differently, includes more than the elect in the covenant, and thus

25. The Christian Reformed Church used a similar expression in 1936 when its synod said: “That there is not sufficient ground to reverse the decision of the Synod of 1930 upholding the permissibility of the baptism of children born outside of the covenant circle and adopted by believing parents” (VanDellen and Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary*, p. 233). In the “Translator’s Preface” to Pierre Marcel’s *Baptism: Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace*, P.E. Hughes speaks of “children born within the sphere of that covenant.”

enables those who are in the covenant to “disconnect what God has connected.”

This view of covenant breaking requires that the covenant not be defined as a living relationship of friendship and love. It is a *relationship*, according to some, but a relationship not limited to God’s elect, not established unconditionally, and that can be broken in the sense of “relationship terminated.”

This is the view of another group of believers in Dutch Reformed history.

This is the view promoted by a recent article in the *Mid-America Reformed Journal*, where Cornelis Venema says that Gomarus “acknowledge(s) that not all of those with whom God covenants in the covenant of grace are elect.”²⁶ It is the view of the Canadian Reformed J. Geertsema: “I do not believe that the one child, being baptized, is ‘in the covenant,’ and that the other child being baptized is only ‘in the sphere of the covenant,’ but not ‘in the covenant’ itself.”²⁷ It is also the view of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated) and those of like mind, the Canadian (and American) Reformed Churches.

This view charges that any other understanding of the covenant and covenant breaking makes the preaching of covenant vengeance impossible or unnecessary (more on this below).

But this view, itself an error, leads to other grave errors. The view of a conditional covenant, that distinguishes between a covenant of salvation (with the elect only) and a covenant of grace (with believers and all their baptized children), claims that all the baptized children “have salvation in Christ, have the forgiveness of sins, have the adoption as a child of the covenant,” but later can reject God’s mercy and perish. It leads a minister to say, “When I baptize a child of believing parents, I can say to that child—and that is every child, not only the elect—that it has sal-

26. “The Election and Salvation of the Children of Believers Who Die in Infancy: A Study of Article I/17 of the Canons of Dort,” *MJT* 17 (2006): 72.

27. “In What Manner Can the Covenant Be Broken?”

vation in Christ....”²⁸ It leads another to say, “Yes, God does express his love for every covenant child.”²⁹ This is saving love that desires the salvation of every baptized child. Qualifications are made and explanations given to guard against the teaching of an Arminian “falling away,” but the explanations are not helpful to the membership, nor do they guard against the new errors of the Federal Vision.

It is not an incidental matter among the defenders of a conditional covenant to say that salvation is given, actually given, to all baptized children. In strongest terms this is taught. God’s words of judgment, which “cannot be misunderstood,” are words that “do not speak to sinners in general, but of people who have been washed, sanctified by the blood of the covenant...”³⁰ These, who have been washed, truly washed, may perish because they break the covenant. These to whom grace is an “indicative” are told, “Should the covenant be broken, God will come with his covenant curse and revoke his promises.” They are “beloved” of God, but may “prove themselves enemies of the gospel” and have “the psalms of curses... fulfilled against them.”³¹ The same person is one day “beloved of God,” and later is rejected and perishes.

A strong statement of this position is expressed in an old sermon, recently reprinted in *The Trumpet*, magazine of the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches. That it is recently reprinted indicates the real interest in promoting the view. In that sermon, B. Holwerda preached that in baptism God declares (to every baptized child)

that he gives us to share in him and in everything which he would be for men. He reveals that I am his possession. The possession of the Father, who “adopts us for His children and heirs....” The posses-

28. J. Geertsema, “Once Again: Covenant and Election,” p. 11.

29. C. Tuininga, in the “Letters” column of the *Standard Bearer*, vol. 73 (Jan. 1, 1997, p. 150).

30. C. van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel* (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1990) p. 107.

31. C. van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel*, p. 139.

sion of the Son, so that “He washes us in His blood... incorporating us into the fellowship of His death and resurrection, so that we are freed from our sins and accounted righteous before God.” The possession of the Holy Spirit, who “will dwell in us, and sanctify us to be members of Christ....” ... he says that I belong to him, that I am the possession of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and therefore a beneficiary of all their saving work.... ... so did God according to his good pleasure establish the bond between himself and you. He simply seized hold of you.... He swore by himself: As truly as I live, saith the Lord, this man stands in fellowship with the Father and the Son and the Spirit.³²

A few years ago the matter of the covenant was being discussed on public Internet forum among Reformed believers. A member of a church that held to the conditional covenant described the sad reality of a son’s impending excommunication for impenitent sin. The father, a man not uneducated in Reformed theology, explained that when his son was baptized many years earlier, God claimed the son as His own son, adopted him, regenerated him, gave him all the blessings of the covenant. How can it be explained that the son is walking in unbelief? There are two possible explanations, and only the future will reveal which is the case. First, it is possible that the son has embarked on a long period of wilderness wanderings and backslidings, from which he will return someday. What believer does not fervently hope, for the brother’s sake and for the glory of God, that his son will return. The struggles of believing parents are heartrending. But there is another possibility. The other possible explanation for the son’s departure is this: The son may be reprobate. It may be that he is not one of God’s elect children, destined for glory. Notice: when he was baptized, God claimed him as His own. In the end, God will reject him.

32. *The Trumpet* 19 (Jan./Feb. 2007), 6-11; (Mar./Apr. 2007), 5-9. Prof. B. Holwerda taught in the Reformed Seminary (Art. 31) in Kampen. He preached the sermon in 1942. It was published in 1955, reprinted in *Torch and Trumpet* (September, 1970) in a translation by Rev. John H. Piersma.

But what the teaching of a conditional covenant established with all baptized children leads to is not the main point in this paper.³³

Covenant Vengeance on Covenant Breakers

What must be seen is that the teaching of an *unconditional* covenant, established with the elect alone, and broken in the sense of violating it, does not prohibit or discourage the Reformed preacher from warning against covenant breaking. That the covenant can be violated requires preachers, in the new testament era also, to issue strong warnings regarding covenant breaking.

But this is the concern of the proponents of the conditional covenant, over against the teaching of an unconditional covenant. This is the concern of the proponents of “covenant breaking in the sense of destroying” over against the view presented in this paper. Their concern is that covenant vengeance will not be preached if there is no real danger of destroying the covenant relationship. When C. van der Waal speaks of the differences between Hoeksema and Schilder on covenant theology, he quotes Hebrews 6:4, 5 and Hebrews 10:29, classic texts on warnings for covenant apostasy. “Such texts must remain operative in our doctrine of God’s covenant and baptism.” Implied is that the teaching I have presented, that the covenant cannot be “disconnected” by man’s sin, will neglect such texts, make them inoperative in the teaching of the covenant. “There are no grounds on which the New Testament church may eliminate the notion of covenant vengeance.”³⁴

In the exchange between J. Geertsema and Homer C. Hoeksema in the 1970s, Geertsema wrote repeatedly of this, his concern:

...the Scriptures simply speak about a breaking of the covenant as something that can be done and against which the people are

33. For more on this, see especially D.J. Engelsma’s *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers*, 87-209.

34. C. van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel*, p. 107.

warned.... (O)ur Lord confronts His disciples with the covenant blessing and the covenant curse.... Paul uses Israel as an example for the church in Corinth. And he warns them not to go that evil way of Israel.... And pointing to Israel which did not receive the promised good because of their unbelief, the author warns the Hebrews, people of the new covenant, not to follow in the line of that unbelief. For then there is also for you a fierce judgment. See chapter 10:25 to the end, for example. It is evident that people of the new covenant can fall away. If this is not so, I cannot understand the New Testament in its serious warnings against apostasy and unfaithfulness.³⁵

The case could not be made clearer than how C. van der Waal expressed it:

To maintain that the new covenant is established only with the elect leaves no room for covenant vengeance in the New Testament.³⁶

But [if] only the elect are included in the covenant, and therefore the covenant vengeance is no longer a part of the structure of the new covenant... such a thesis generates a form of preaching that lulls the people asleep and causes complacency....³⁷

Canadian Reformed theologian J. DeJong expressed that the PRC “refuse to entertain the Scriptural teaching of...God’s wrath against covenant breakers.”³⁸

But the teaching of an unconditional covenant of grace with the elect alone and the real possibility of covenant breaking leaves the way wide open for, in fact, requires, sharp preaching of covenant vengeance. It issues the warnings generally and promiscu-

35. “Can We Break the Covenant?”

36. C. van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel*, 104.

37. C. van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel*, 166.

38. From the *Standard Bearer* 67, no. 12 (March 15, 1991): 271-274.

ously, as generally and promiscuously as the gospel is preached. The fears are not warranted.³⁹

Faithful preaching will include sermons from both the Old Testament (Leviticus 26, for example) and the New Testament (Hebrews 6 and 10, for example).

The preacher will not be afraid that such warnings may be taken to mean that the elect can fall away. He will also caution himself against any tendency to hyper-Calvinism, which would keep him from preaching warnings. It may not be relegated to a footnote that every Protestant Reformed preacher should regularly read “The Threat of Hyper-Calvinism,” David Engelsma’s last chapter in his *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel*.⁴⁰ Indeed, hyper-Calvinism is a threat only to Calvinists.

Sermons on Leviticus 26 will explain the reality that all who come into contact with spiritual things in the church—the Word, sacraments, the people of God—must treat these spiritual things with reverence. All who hear the commands of God must obey those commands, honor God’s statutes, fear His name. Both believer and unbeliever will hear that same word: believe the gospel; “kiss the Son” with the honor of an embrace in true faith.

The sermons will describe that it is possible for all who hear to treat spiritual things lightly, to profane God’s covenant, to sin against their baptism, against their confession of faith. They can violate God’s covenant by marrying an unbeliever, by not giving the children the sign of the covenant, by failing to bring them to

39. Insofar as it has been taught and written that “covenant breaking” is not possible, the fear is warranted. A minister who left the Protestant Reformed Churches in 1953 claimed that warnings about violating the covenant were not sufficiently issued from Protestant Reformed pulpits, and that this was one of the reasons that he left. “Man’s responsibility must be preached,” he repeated. I wrote about this in a seminary paper for “Recent Church History” in 1982, for which I interviewed the minister. The claim is a generalization and is difficult to substantiate.

40. *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel: An Examination of the “Well-Meant Offer” of the Gospel*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1994), 193-212.

Jesus. They can break God’s covenant by finding their pleasure in other gods, by being friends of the world. They can break the covenant by not having God as their greatest joy and delight. They can break the covenant in a hundred different ways.

But covenant breaking also takes place when pastors and theologians only debate about the covenant but do not live the covenant life with God. If they teach, defend, argue, and debate about the covenant, but do not themselves live in close friendship with God in Jesus Christ, they are breaking the vows they took in their ordination, and grossly violating by toying with the reality of God’s intimate friendship with His people through Jesus Christ.

To themselves when they preach, and to their hearers, the warnings are real. Nothing may be taken away. Those who continue in their covenant breaking ways without repentance will perish. No hesitation at this point is permitted. The kingdom of heaven is shut when the preaching “declares and testifies to unbelievers, and such as do not sincerely repent, that they stand exposed to the wrath of God, and eternal condemnation, so long as they are unconverted: according to which testimony of the gospel, God will judge them, both in this, and in the life to come.”⁴¹

The closer one comes to these spiritual things, the heavier are God’s judgments. The “strangers” who broke God’s covenant in Ezekiel’s day will be judged less severely than those who, all their lives, heard and saw the testimony of God’s covenant. The judgments for Chorazin and Bethsaida will be worse than those for Tyre and Sidon (see Matt. 11:21-24).

The judgments of God against covenant breakers will become *increasingly* severe. If the people are not brought to repentance by His initial judgments, Jehovah will “punish them seven times more for their sins” (Lev. 26:18). If they still do not turn, He will bring “seven times more plagues upon you according to your sins.” These are “wild beasts” that devour the children of the covenant breakers. This is applicable to the New Covenant era. If they are not “reformed by... these things” (26:23), but will “walk contrary” to God, God will walk contrary to them (26: 24). So the

41. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord’s Day XXXI:Q&A84.

chapter goes, with one warning after another spoken to all who lived in the sphere of the covenant.

Such preaching the Lord uses for His sovereign purposes of election and reprobation.

His own elect children will come to repentance through these warnings and threats, and by God's painful chastisements. The Canons of Dordt, in the section that teaches the perseverance of God's elect children, the Reformed believer confesses (the Reformed preacher, too) that God uses the preaching of covenant vengeance to keep His elect in the faith:

And as it hath pleased God, by the preaching of the gospel, to begin this work of grace in us, so he preserves, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of his Word, by meditation thereon, and by the exhortations, *threatenings*, and promises thereof, as well as by the use of the sacraments.⁴²

Those whom God has rejected in His sovereign decree will be hardened in their sins, and perish under His judgments.

For the sake of His elect among the people who hear, God will "remember the covenant," that "I might be their God: I am the LORD" (Lev. 26:45). He will not cast them away, neither will He abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and "to break my covenant with them" (26:44). For all His judgments upon them in the land of captivity into which He sends them (26:44), He will not cast them away.

Indeed, the children of the flesh who continue in their sins, in whom the chastisements did not work repentance, "perish among the heathen, and the land of (their) enemies shall eat (them) up" (26:38). But the elect remnant is preserved. They return to Jehovah in true repentance, a repentance worked in them by the preaching of the gospel of covenant vengeance, and the covenant judgments themselves.

These covenant breakers "confess their iniquity" that they have "walked contrary to" Jehovah. They admit that their sufferings

42. *Canons of Dordt, V:14*

are God “walking contrary to them.” Their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they accept the punishment of their iniquity. And in the way of their repentance, the Lord delivers them.

These words, and all the others like them in both Old and New Testaments, will be preached. God’s own will be saved. His covenant will be honored.

But the faithful God will be glorified above all, because He remembered His covenant. He sent the people judgments to bring them to repentance. He worked repentance and godly sorrow in their hearts.

Especially God is honored because in His faithfulness to His covenant, He poured out the covenant judgments upon His Son, Head of the covenant people. As a substitute for them this covenant Son and Head paid for all their covenant sins. Covenant vengeance was heard on the cross when this faithful, covenant-keeping Son cried out, “why hast thou forsaken me?” Covenant vengeance was poured out when this Son was plunged into the hellish agonies of eternal damnation.

The covenant judgments that God’s elect face are not punishments, but chastisements, sent in the love and faithfulness of their covenant Father, who will never break His covenant. Jesus has paid fully. He’s risen to prove it. ●

Correction for the November 2006 *Journal*:

In my article “Christ the Head of the Covenant,” an error inadvertently crept in. The error is found on page 46. The sentence in question reads: “It is this erroneous conception of Christ as Mediator that enables Faber to make the distinction between Christ as Head and Mediator *of* the covenant and Christ as Head and Mediator *in* the covenant. **“Faber, of course, denies the latter and believes the former.”** This sentence in bold type is incorrect. It ought to read: “Faber, of course, denies the former and believes the latter.” That is, Dr. Faber believes that Christ is Head and Mediator *in* the covenant, but he denies that Christ is Head and Mediator *of* the Covenant. It would be appreciated if the readers would make that correction in their *Journals*.

Herman C. Hanko

**Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*,
Volume Three: *Covenant and Election***

David J. Engelsma

Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, by Herman Bavinck. Tr. John Vriend. Ed. John Bolt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006. Pp. 685. \$49.99 (cloth).

With this volume the Dutch Reformed Translation Society is three-fourths of the way to the challenging goal it set for itself at its founding in 1994: the publication in English translation for the first time of Herman Bavinck's monumental *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek (Reformed Dogmatics)*. When completed, the English translation will consist of four thick volumes, corresponding to the four-volume work in Dutch. Volume three is entitled *Sin and Salvation in Christ*. Volume one, which appeared in 2003, is *Prolegomena*. Volume two, which appeared in 2004, is entitled *God and Creation*. Volume four, which is scheduled to come out in 2008, will complete Bavinck's treatment of the doctrine of salvation, begun in volume three, and will also contain Bavinck's doctrine of the church, including the means of grace, and his treatment of the doctrine of the last things.

Herman Bavinck was a dogmatician's dogmatician. More precisely, he was a Reformed dogmatician's dogmatician. He had vast knowledge of the Reformed, indeed Christian, tradition; deep insight into and reverence for Holy Scripture as the inspired word of God; the highest regard for the confessions and therefore for the system of Reformed doctrine; thorough familiarity with the other churches and their teachings, particularly the Roman Catholic Church; and an impressive grasp of the scientific and philosophical thinking of Western culture.

Interacting with the Culture

It was characteristic of Bavinck, who was determined to interact with the culture, that he worked into his exposition of Reformed doctrine the insights of other disciplines and the views of secular thinkers on the subject. In his treatment of God's punish-

ment of sin, Bavinck took note of a speech on the subject of punishment by a Prof. Kahl at the Evangelical Social Congress in Germany in 1903. He quoted Kahl:

The principle aim of punishment is retribution. Not vengeful reprisal, nor coarse retaliation, or external repayment; it is rather the authoritative restoration of the broken judicial order, in accordance with the laws of a higher set of values, by a punishment that fits the measure of indebtedness. Other goals accompany this aim, such as the protection of society, deterrence, and improvement. For the administration of justice and expediency are not mutually exclusive. But these accompanying goals must be dovetailed with and subordinate to the fundamental idea of justice (p. 167).

Agreeing with Kahl, Bavinck added the distinctively Reformed explanation of punishment.

Behind that judicial order stands the living, true, and holy God, who will by no means clear the guilty, and for him punishment rests not on “an absolute dominion” in the sense of Duns Scotus but on the demands of his justice. If he did not punish sin, he would give to evil the same rights he accords to the good and so deny himself. The punishment of sin is necessary so that God may remain God.... God cannot bear to let sinners, instead of submitting to his law and obeying it, defy that law, in principle making themselves God’s equals. In punishment, accordingly, God maintains his sovereignty (p. 168).

Toward the end of volume three occurs a brief, interesting, helpful account of subjectivism in modern thought and of the psychology of religion.

But the *Reformed Dogmatics* is the explanation, defense, and development of Reformed doctrine in light of the Reformed and Christian tradition, on the basis of Scripture, and in accordance with the creeds, in a systematic way. It is one of the truly great works of Reformed theology.

Total Depravity

Volume three treats of the doctrine of sin, including the entrance of sin into the world by the historical fall of Adam; of the

doctrine of the person and work of the mediator of the covenant, Jesus Christ, beginning with an important consideration of the covenant of grace; and of that aspect of the work of salvation consisting of the “order of salvation.” Explanation of the benefits of salvation included in the “order of salvation” is part of volume four.

Bavinck defended the hated Reformed doctrine of “total depravity.”

Inasmuch as in Adam all of human nature has been corrupted, nothing truly good can any longer proceed from it, any more than a bad tree can produce good fruit. Human persons are now under the hard necessity of not being able not to sin. Their virtues are vices rather than virtues (p. 119, 120).

Although Bavinck was a proponent of common grace, he did not mitigate the truth of total depravity with any reference to a common grace of God that supposedly keeps the sinner from being totally depraved and enables him to do what is good. An editorial footnote referring to common grace has been inserted, but in his treatment of depravity Bavinck himself did not mention the theory. In fact, in the very section in which Bavinck took note of Calvin’s esteem of the “virtues” of unbelievers, Bavinck recalled Augustine’s description of these “virtues” as “splendid vices” (p. 120). As orthodox Reformed theology has always done, for example, Question and Answer 91 of the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Confession of Faith, 16.7, Bavinck insisted that fallen humans be judged, not by men’s standards of good, but by the high standard of the law of God.

Scripture and the church, in teaching the total depravity of humanity, apply the highest standard, namely, the law of God. The doctrine of the incapacity for good is a religious confession. In light of the standard people usually follow in their daily life or in philosophical ethics, one can wholeheartedly admit that much of what people do is good and beautiful.... But there is still another, higher, ideal for us humans. There is a divine law with which we must comply. Virtues and good works are distinct. Good, true good—good in the eyes of a

holy God—is only what is done out of faith, according to God’s law, and to God’s glory (pp. 122, 123).

Limited Atonement

The entire mediatorial work of Christ, Bavinck viewed as obedience to the will of God. This work of obedience encompassed Christ’s entire life. Bavinck taught Christ’s active and passive obedience, but he warned against separating these two aspects of Christ’s work, as though His lifelong obedience to the law was only active and His suffering and death were only passive.

His activity was suffering and his suffering an action. It was one single work that Christ accomplished, but one so rich, so valuable in the eyes of God, that the righteousness of God was completely satisfied by it, all the demands of the law were fully met by it, and the whole of [our] eternal salvation was secured by it (p. 395).

With regard to the extent of Jesus’ death, which was “vicarious satisfaction,” Bavinck held that “it was God’s will and *intent* that Christ made his sacrifice...only for the sins of those whom the Father had given him” (p. 464). Not only is the application of the salvation of the cross limited, but also the “acquisition” of salvation by the cross was limited to the elect. “The application of salvation must therefore extend just as far as its acquisition. The application is comprehended in it and is its necessary development” (p. 467). In his defense of the doctrine of limited atonement, Bavinck leans heavily on the Canons of Dordt, II/8.

Discussing the extent of the atonement and its relation to the very nature of Christ’s death, Bavinck—the *irenic* Bavinck—condemned the Arminianism of the five Arminian Articles of 1610—those rejected by the Synod of Dordt—as a “totally different view of Christianity as a whole” (p. 459). The Arminian doctrine of a universal atonement that fails to assure the salvation of all, indeed of any, is a denial of the cross of Christ, and a denial of the cross of Christ corrupts all the truth of the gospel.

When Bavinck outlined the history of apostasy from the truth of “particular satisfaction” by Reformed and Presbyterian theologians and churches, he mentioned the “Marrow Men” in Scotland

in the early eighteenth century. Their “mediating position” led to Amyraldian universalism and, ultimately, to the silencing of the doctrine of limited atonement in Great Britain.¹ Bavinck noted that the “Marrow Men” deviated from the orthodox Reformed doctrine of limited atonement as defined in the Canons of Dordt and in the Westminster Standards in the interests of their notion of the “universal offer of grace” (pp. 460-464).

It is significant that, although Bavinck referred to the “revealed will” of God in connection with his defense of limited atonement by the decree of God, he did not explain this “revealed will” as a desire of God to save all without exception, as do professing Calvinists today, thus contradicting the confession of limited atonement according to election. Rather, for Bavinck the “revealed will” is “the rule for our conduct.” Specifically, the “revealed will” of God “gives us the right and lays on us the duty to bring the gospel to all people without exception” (p. 466).

Covenant and Election

Of special interest and great importance is Bavinck’s doctrine of the covenant of grace. The publication in English of the volume containing Bavinck’s doctrine of the covenant is timely. At present, the Reformed and Presbyterian churches are troubled by a covenant theology (the Federal Vision) that is the natural, logical, inevitable development of a doctrine of the covenant that de-

1. The theology of the “Marrow Men” fatally compromised the doctrine of limited atonement, not only by its well known teaching that the preacher may and must tell every human in his audience, “Christ is dead for you”—a statement as odd as it is erroneous—but also by its lesser-known teachings that the minister may and must also say to every human, “Whatsoever Christ did for the redemption of mankind, he did it for you,” and “[God] hath made him [Christ] to be sin for you.” This last statement, which is couched in the language of II Corinthians 5:21, deliberately changes the pronoun from “us” to “you,” thus making the death of Christ universal, as well as corrupting Scripture (see Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, Still Waters Revival Books, repr. 1991, pp. 127, 118, 133).

nies that the covenant is governed by God's eternal decree of election. Defenders of this doctrine of the covenant persuade Reformed people that a doctrine of the covenant in which the covenant is governed by election is destructive of the covenant and has no standing in the Reformed tradition. Bavinck proves otherwise.

Bavinck saw the covenant as fundamental to the entire work of salvation from the beginning. "From the very first moment of its revelation, grace assumes the form of a covenant" (p. 197). The covenant, which is the essence of true religion, is a "true fellowship between God and humanity" (p. 204).

Election governs the covenant. Certainly, the covenant is different from election. But the difference is not that "election is particular while the covenant of grace is universal, [or] that the former denies free will and the latter teaches or assumes it, [or] that the latter takes back what the former teaches." (The importance of the preceding sentence for the controversy over the covenant in Reformed and Presbyterian churches in 2007 cannot be emphasized too strongly.) The difference between election and the covenant is rather that in election the elect are passive, whereas in the covenant they are active. But there is a close relation between election and the covenant. The relation is that "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. The covenant of grace is the channel by which the stream of election flows toward eternity" (p. 229).

Christ is the head of the covenant. Christ was "chosen from eternity to be the head of a new covenant" (p. 294). "Christ was and is the head and the key party in the covenant of grace" (p. 228). This line is even stronger in the original Dutch: "*Christus was toen en nu, in O. en N. Testament het hoofd, de partij in het genadeverbond*" ("Christ was, then and now, in the Old and New Testament, the head, the party in the covenant of grace," *Geref. Dog.*, vol. 3, Kok, 1910, p. 239). Bavinck did not describe Christ as the "key party" in the covenant of grace, but as "*the party*," the one and only party. "The covenant of grace has been made with Christ [and] through him it...reaches out also to his own" (p. 229).

This implies, indeed states in so many words—“*his own*”—that with regard to men and women the covenant has been made with the elect in Christ, and with them alone. “In this covenant Christ indeed acts as the head and representative of his own, but he does not efface and destroy them” (p. 229).

The covenant is unilateral, that is, it is established by God alone in sovereign grace, and it is maintained by God alone in the faithfulness of His grace. “When God makes a covenant with humans, this unilateral character comes repeatedly to the fore: the parties, after all, are not equal, but God is the sovereign who imposes his ordinances on his creatures. When in Genesis 15:8f. God makes a covenant with Abraham, it is not really a compact but a pledge.... This unilateral character had to come out with ever-increasing clarity in the course of history” (p. 204).

As God alone made the covenant, so God alone maintains His covenant with Christ and the elect.

The question arose whether this covenant of grace was as unstable as the covenant of works had been before the fall. Replying to this question, revelation answered ever more forcefully and loudly as apostasy increased. No, this covenant does not falter; *people* may become unfaithful, but *God does not* forget his promise. This covenant is anchored solely in his compassion.... God cannot and may not break his covenant. Voluntarily, of his own accord, he bound himself to its provisions with a solemn oath; his name, his honor, his very being depend on it (p. 204; the emphasis is the editor’s).

This “indissolubility” of the covenant (the word is Bavinck’s) by the sheer mercy of God is no incidental matter to the Reformed believer, indeed to the Christian. “In this firmness and steadiness of the covenant of grace lies the glory of the religion we as Christians confess.... The covenant of grace is unalterably grounded, not in our virtues and works, but in God’s mercies” (pp. 204, 205).

Surely, this is Reformed Christianity, pure and unadulterated, indeed the gospel of the glory of the grace of God! Surely, every believer, especially every believer who is also father or mother of covenant children, thrills to this confession, and says “amen” from the heart!

Governed by election, made with Christ as head and the elect in Him, and dependent solely upon the sure promise and compassion of the faithful God, the covenant is unconditional, according to Bavinck. That is, the covenant, its promise, its grace, and its salvation do not depend upon the work or will of the member of the covenant.

God...established another, a better, covenant, not a legalistic but an evangelical covenant. But he made it, not with one who was solely a human, but with the man Christ Jesus, who was his own only begotten, much-beloved Son. And in him, who shares the divine nature and attributes, this covenant has an unwaveringly firm foundation. It can no longer be broken: it is an everlasting covenant. It rests not in any work of humans but solely in the good pleasure of God, in the work of the Mediator, in the Holy Spirit, who remains forever. It is not dependent on any human condition; it does not confer any benefit based on merit; it does not wait for any law keeping on the part of humans. It is of, through, and for grace. God himself is the sole and eternal being, the faithful and true being, in whom it rests and who establishes, maintains, executes, and completes it. The covenant of grace is the divine work par excellence—his work alone and his work totally. All boasting is excluded here for humans; all glory is due to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (pp. 225, 226).

Bavinck noted that “in the beginning Reformed theologians spoke freely of ‘the conditions’ of the covenant. But after the nature of the covenant of grace had been more carefully considered and had to be defended against Catholics, Lutherans, and Remonstrants, many of them took exception to the term and avoided it” (p. 229). Bavinck immediately added:

In the covenant of grace, that is, in the gospel, which is the proclamation of the covenant of grace, there are actually no demands and no conditions. For God supplies what he demands. Christ has accomplished everything, and though he did not accomplish rebirth, faith, and repentance in our place, he did acquire them for us, and the Holy Spirit therefore applies them (p. 230).

When Bavinck then spoke of “conditions” in the covenant, he made plain that he referred to the demands God makes of the elect

members of the covenant as their part in the covenant. These demands God empowers the members of the covenant to perform, by the grace of the covenant. Similarly, when he taught that the covenant becomes “bilateral,” he meant only that by the covenant grace of the Spirit of Christ the elect become active in the covenant, loving and obeying their covenant God. By “conditions,” he did not refer to acts of men and women that make a general covenant promise and a universal covenant grace effective. “Bilateral” for Bavinck did not mean that, once established with children, the covenant now depends for its maintenance upon the children, so that some children might fall out of the covenant and perish.

True, the covenant of God imposed obligations also on those with whom it was made—obligations, not as conditions for entering into the covenant (for the covenant was made and based only on God’s compassion), but as the way the people who had by grace been incorporated into the covenant henceforth had to conduct themselves (p. 204; see also p. 230).

Bavinck sharply distinguished the members of the covenant—elect believers—from those who are merely included in the “earthly administration” of the covenant. “It is self-evident, therefore, that the covenant of grace will temporarily—in its earthly administration and dispensation—also include those who remain inwardly unbelieving and do not share in the covenant’s benefits.” He observed that “with a view to this reality, Reformed scholars made a distinction between an internal and an external covenant.” Bavinck preferred to speak of “external and internal sides” of the covenant. But he insisted on the distinction: Some “are *in* the covenant,” but they are “not *of* the covenant” (pp. 231, 232; emphasis is the editor’s). Not all in the visible church, including the children of believers, are members of the covenant in the same way. Some are members of the covenant; others are merely externally in the covenant, that is, they are included in the “earthly administration” of the covenant.

The cause of the distinction is election.

Here on earth they [“those who remain inwardly unbelieving and do not share in the covenant’s benefits”] are connected with the elect in all sorts of ways; and the elect themselves, since they are members of the Adamic race, can as an organism only be gathered into one under Christ as their head in the way of the covenant (p. 232).

In his magisterial study of Bavinck, Dr. R. H. Bremmer observed correctly that “election took up an important place in Bavinck’s thinking about the covenant.”²

Bavinck endorsed the traditional doctrine of the covenant of works with Adam in Paradise. He criticized the traditional doctrine of the “*pactum salutis*”—the supposed basis of the covenant of grace in an eternal agreement between the first and second persons of the Trinity. Like Abraham Kuyper, he viewed the covenant with Noah as a covenant of common grace with all creatures.³

Editing and Translation

The editing of the volume by John Bolt is outstanding. His synopsis of each chapter is accurate and helpful. The completing of the information in Bavinck’s many footnotes, the bibliography, and the indices make the book a student’s delight. The book re-

2. R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus* (Kampen: Kok, 1961), p. 247; the translation of the Dutch is mine.

3. For a very brief analysis of the covenant with Adam as a covenant of works, see p. 225. Bavinck’s complete treatment of the covenant with Adam in Paradise before the fall is found in *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, pp. 563ff. For Bavinck’s criticism of the traditional doctrine of the “*pactum salutis*,” see vol. 3, pp. 212-216. For his explanation of the covenant with Noah as a covenant of common grace, see vol. 3, pp. 216-219. Demonstrating that it is impossible for defenders of common grace to seal this grace off from “special” (saving) grace, thus endangering the confession of the particularity of saving grace, no matter how staunchly these defenders of common grace confess the particularity of saving grace elsewhere, Bavinck says about the common grace of the covenant with Noah that by it “a susceptibility for salvation was maintained and the need for it aroused” among the idolatrous heathen (p. 219).

tains Bavinck's numbering of the paragraphs so that comparison with the Dutch original is easy.

I register one objection to the editing. This concerns the insertion of the additional female pronouns where Bavinck wrote only the male pronoun, often, but not always, to refer to both men and women, and the substitution of "humans" for Bavinck's "man." Tediously writing out, or saying, "he *or she*," or "him *or her*," is a modern convention. Bavinck was not trammled by this convention. We should have Bavinck in English as he wrote, not as some twenty-first century Americans write, or think Bavinck should have written.

Substituting "humans" for Bavinck's "man" seriously affects important doctrine in one instance. This substitution has God commanding "humans" to "till and keep the Garden of Eden" in Genesis 2:15. But God did not command "humans" to till and keep the Garden of Eden and, in closest connection with this, not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). God gave this command to Adam—the *male*—before ever there was another human. And this is what Bavinck wrote: "*in Gen. 2:15...moet hij den hof bebouwen en bewaren*" (*Geref. Dog.*, vol. 3, p. 7). The important doctrine affected is that of the representative headship of Adam (see Rom. 5:12ff.).

Similarly, in the same section of the *Reformed Dogmatics* "humans" is substituted for "man" in the matter of naming the animals. This substitution has "humans" naming the animals in the garden of Eden and being unable to "find a suitable helper among them": "[Genesis 2] has just informed us that humans are essentially distinct from animals, that they gave names to the animals and could not find a suitable helper among them" (p. 34). "Humans" did not name the animals; the man—the *male*—did, before Eve was created. In addition, he named his wife. Neither did "humans" fail to find a suitable "helper"; Adam—the *male*—failed to find a suitable "help." And this is what Bavinck wrote: "[Genesis 2] heeft pas verhaald dat de mensch wezenlijk van de dieren onderscheiden is, hun namen gaf en onder hen gene hulpe vond" (*Geref. Dog.*, vol. 3, p. 9).

Something should be said about the translation. John Vriend was a very capable translator (he died after translating all four

volumes, but before the first translated volume saw the light of day). His work faithfully renders the Dutch into English, so that the reader has Bavinck's doctrine in Bavinck's words and even in Bavinck's style—in English. At the same time, the work reads smoothly in the English language, no mean feat.

Occasionally, *dormitat Homerus*. On page 180, the line, “the pain far outweighs the sorrow,” is obviously a mistake. The line should read, “the sorrow far outweighs the joy.” The Dutch original is: “*de smart de vreugde zeer verre overtreft*.” On page 363, the phrase, “than by the Reformers,” is erroneous. The correct translation is: “than the Reformers” (“and these theologians were much more highly esteemed by Stancarus than the Reformers”). The Dutch is: “*heel wat hooger geschat, dan de Hervormers*.” The reference is amusing. Bavinck was describing the hostile attitude of a German theologian named Stancarus towards the Reformers. Bavinck quoted Stancarus as delivering himself of the violent judgment that “one Peter Lombard is worth more than a hundred Luthers, two hundred Melancthons, three hundred Bullingers, four hundred Peter Martyrs, and five hundred Calvins—who, if they were all crushed together in a mortar, would not yield one ounce of true theology.” Theology has its humor.

Vriend was guilty of one egregious error in translating. He perpetrated the error deliberately, and often. Almost always he translated Bavinck's reference to the “Roman Catholic Church,” or the “Roman Church,” or the “Romish Church” as “Catholic Church.” For example, on page 51 Vriend's translation has “Catholic theology even recognized,” etc. Bavinck wrote, “*de Roomsche theologie erkende*,” etc.

Bavinck never referred to the Roman Catholic Church as the “Catholic Church.” The reason was that the Roman Catholic Church is not the “Catholic Church.” Bavinck did not regard the Roman Catholic Church as the “Catholic Church.” He told his readers that Rome is not the “Catholic Church” and that he did not regard it as the “Catholic Church” in his doctrine of the church in volume four of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*: “*De zoogenaamde katholieke kerk is in der waarheid Roomsche kerk; dat is haar naam en haar wezen*” (“The so-called ‘Catholic Church’ is in reality the ‘Romish Church’; that is her name and her es-

sence,” *Geref. Dog.*, vol. 4, p. 401). It will be interesting to see how Vriend’s translation handles this line when volume four appears in English.

The book is a handsome hardcover, royal blue with gold lettering.

Like the other volumes it is adorned in the front with a powerful likeness of dogmatician Prof. Dr. Herman Bavinck by artist Erik G. Lubbers.

The layman must not shy away from Bavinck’s *Dogmatics* as deep theology for the ministers. I advise the layman not to begin his reading at the beginning, that is, with the first part of volume one, *Prolegomena*. Leave this for the theologians, or for later. Start with part four of volume one, “Revelation.” Or, begin with volume three. ●

Book Reviews

Genesis, by J. G. Vos. Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2006. Pp. vii + 544. \$20.00 (paper). ISBN-13: 978-1-884527-20-3. [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

Johannes Geerhardus Vos (d. 1983) was a minister, missionary, professor, and theologian who served the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America his entire ministerial career. He was a son of the distinguished Princeton Seminary professor, Dr. Geerhardus Vos, who taught alongside of J. Gresham Machen and B. B. Warfield. In his commentary on Genesis, the younger Vos makes frequent reference to the elder Vos' *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, which through J. G. Vos' efforts was published in 1948, one year before his father's death. In 1941, after serving several years as a missionary, J.G. Vos, along with his wife and three children, were expelled from China by the Japanese. In 1942, he accepted the call to be pastor of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in

the rural farming community of Clay Center, Kansas. It was during his pastorate in Kansas that Vos founded the religious periodical named *Blue Banner Faith and Life*. What later became his commentary on Genesis began as a series of articles published in the *Blue Banner*. From 1954 until his retirement in 1973, Vos taught in and served as chairman of the Bible department of Geneva College.

Vos' *Genesis* is one of those commentaries this reviewer would include in a list of recommended commentaries on the opening book of the Bible, a list that would also include the commentaries by Calvin, Leupold, Morris, and Harbach. Vos writes from a conservative, Reformed perspective. He writes clearly so that his explanation of the biblical text is understandable and edifying. The commentary is popularly written, directed to the ordinary believer, and therefore free of the technical material that far too often these days clutters the pages of newly published Bible commentaries.

Genesis is divided into three

main sections: “Part I: The Creation of the Universe, the World, and Man”; “Part II: History of the Human Race from Adam to Abraham”; and “Part III: History of the Covenant People from Abraham to Joseph.” These three sections, in turn, are divided into twenty-four chapters. The twenty-four chapters are divided into 166 separate lessons. Each lesson is a self-contained unit that concludes with a number of questions for study, reflection, and discussion.

Some commendable features of Vos’ *Genesis* commentary. Vos is committed to a literal creation account. He maintains creation *ex nihilo*, as well as creation in six literal 24-hour consecutive days.

God’s creation of the universe was a creation out of nothing. God created the universe by the mere word of His power. He willed that the universe should come into existence, and it came into existence. God used no previously existing materials or forces, nor did He employ any techniques, methods, or laws. The creation of the universe is a sheer, absolute miracle. This truth is expressed in orthodox theology by saying that God

created the universe “out of nothing” (p. 16).

...we shall regard the days of Genesis 1 as literal 24-hour days (p. 23).

Closely connected to his commitment to a literal creation account, as one would expect, is Vos’ commitment to a literal, worldwide flood in Noah’s day. Vos is good also on the divine institution and abiding validity of the Sabbath.

Those who regard the Sabbath as merely a part of the Old Testament ceremonial law, and who hold that it has been abrogated and is not binding on Christians, forget that the Sabbath is as old as the human race. It is one of two institutions that have come from before the Fall (the Sabbath and marriage) (p. 35).

Keeping the Sabbath, as instituted by God, involves obedience to the revealed will of God. Vos objects to those who promote Sabbath observance primarily on the grounds of the benefits that are connected to keeping the Sabbath, rather than the revealed will of God.

It is a mistake, therefore, to regard the Sabbath as

grounded primarily in considerations of practical usefulness. We have seen many tracts and articles on the Sabbath that make this mistake. They argue that we should observe the Sabbath because of the practical benefits that accrue from a weekly day of rest as well as the advantages to the Church and religion that come from a weekly day of worship. It is true, of course, that Sabbath observance brings great benefits of physical and mental rest to man; indeed, this feature is stressed in the Sabbath commandment as found in Deuteronomy 5:12-15. It is true, also, that faithful Sabbath observance tends greatly to advance the cause of the Church and religion. In fact, it would be hard to overemphasize the real benefits that result from faithful observance of the Sabbath. Yet, in spite of all this, it should be realized that these practical benefits do not constitute the sole reason, nor even the main reason, for Sabbath observance. It is quite possible that the prevalent neglect of the Sabbath that exists at the present day may be due, at least in part, to regarding the Sabbath only in terms of practical benefits, while losing sight almost entirely of the typical or sacramental

meaning of the Sabbath (p. 36).

Praiseworthy is also Vos' rejection of the view that makes the covenant a pact, bargain, or agreement. He rejects this covenant conception in more than one place. In connection with his treatment of the covenant of works, he writes:

We should realize that, in the Bible, God's covenant is not an agreement or compact between God and man, as equal negotiating parties. God and man are not equals; God is sovereign and man is subject. God, by His absolute authority, ordains and establishes the covenant, imposing it on man. Man has no part in determining the terms of the covenant arrangement; his part is only to obey (p. 54).

In connection with the covenant established with Noah, Vos writes:

We should note that God took the initiative in establishing this covenant relationship. This is very strongly emphasized in the text we are considering: "And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you." This covenant was not established by Noah, and it

was not established by God and Noah jointly. It was established by God acting alone. Noah was the recipient and beneficiary of this covenant, but he was not in any sense the originator or author of it. It is important to emphasize this because we live in a day when it is common to debase God and exalt man in religious thinking. Many people today talk of ‘making’ a covenant with God, when in reality, of course, they can do no such thing. The idea commonly met with that God’s covenant is a kind of ‘contract’ or ‘bargain’ or ‘agreement’ between God and man is based on the notion that God and man can be equal contracting parties to such an arrangement. The Bible, on the other hand, represents God as the establisher of the covenant and man as the recipient and beneficiary of it. God and Noah did not mutually discuss this matter and come to agreement on having a covenant with certain provisions; God imposed the covenant, and Noah accepted it (p. 161).

And in connection with God’s establishment of the covenant with Isaac, Vos makes the following comments:

The biblical idea of a covenant between God and man is often obscured at the present day by speaking of this relationship as an *agreement* or a *compact* without at the same time bringing out clearly that the initiative is with God, all the power is of God, and all the terms are specified by God. Man is the recipient of the covenant relationship; God and man are never regarded as equals or negotiating parties. It is particularly important in our day to emphasize the sovereignty of God in the covenant relationship because the overwhelming tendency of the day is to emphasize man—his decisions, activities, and powers—rather than God (p. 358).

Where today can one find this clear repudiation of the covenant as a pact, bargain, or agreement? What Vos objected to has today become the accepted view in Reformed and Presbyterian circles.

In dealing with the history of Esau and Jacob, Vos is solid in his defense of biblical election and reprobation. He inveighs against the “modern sophistry of election being based on foreseen repentance and faith” (p. 346).

There are any number of

additional praiseworthy features of Vos' commentary on the book of Genesis. Let me add a couple of lesser importance, but worth pointing out. The Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version, and the personal pronouns referring to God are capitalized. In the eyes of this reviewer, Vos and Crown and Covenant Publications are to be commended for these features of the *Genesis* commentary.

There are a few negative criticisms. There are, of course, always those passages treated in a commentary, the exegesis of which one disagrees with. So long as the interpretation does not conflict with the rest of Scripture or contradict the creeds, there is freedom of exegesis that allows for legitimate disagreement. There are passages like that in almost every commentary, as there are in this commentary.

I offer three main negative criticisms. First, Vos gives a strange, and so far as I am aware, an altogether unique explanation of the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Vos treats this part of Genesis in a chapter entitled "The Covenant of Works." He takes the position that Adam

and Eve were not allowed to and never did eat from the Tree of Life. According to Vos, they would have been permitted to eat of the Tree of Life only if they had successfully obeyed God and not eaten of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. At some point, they would have completed a divinely determined probationary period and would have then been permitted by God access to the Tree of Life. Their partaking of the Tree of Life would be the means to impart to them the higher life of the covenant of works, the heavenly and immortal life superior to the life with which God had originally created them.

The tree of life symbolized not merely the life that man already possessed, but the highest kind of life to which man could ever attain; it symbolized what is called in the New Testament "eternal life." This highest kind of life man did not yet possess. For this, he must first pass through a probation or test. We see from Genesis 3:22, that before he sinned, man had not yet eaten the fruit of the tree of life. Although there is no record of any command not to eat of it, it seems clear

that the right to do so had not yet been given. This is also in accord with the fact that when Adam and Eve sinned, they were barred from the Garden of Eden lest they attempt to eat the fruit of the tree of life (3:22-24) (p. 48).

Man was permitted to eat the fruit of all the trees, with the exception of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (and, of course, the tree of life) (p. 52).

I find Vos' position that Adam and Eve were not permitted and never did eat of the Tree of Life not to be the teaching of Genesis 1-3, certainly not the necessary implication of the statement in Genesis 3:22, and not the classic Reformed understanding of the passage.

A second criticism I have is that Vos embraces the false teaching of common grace. His commitment to the teaching of common grace does not loom large in the commentary, but it does come out now and again. Reader beware!

A final criticism that I offer is that although Vos gives attention to the doctrine of the covenant, and has some good things to say about the nature of the covenant, especially in connection with his rejection of the

teaching of the covenant as a pact, contract, or agreement, the doctrine of the covenant does not control his exegesis of the book of Genesis as it ought. Genesis is not viewed, as properly it must be viewed, as the unfolding of God's covenant of grace. Such a viewpoint would not only do greater justice to the overall message of the book of Genesis, but would also identify the unifying principle behind the history that is recorded in Genesis.

Nevertheless, this does not take away from the fact that Vos' *Genesis* commentary is to be highly recommended. Pastors, Christian school teachers, seminary students, as well as all serious students of the Bible are encouraged to buy it—a mere twenty-dollar bill for a commentary of nearly 550 pages. Given its format, it would serve well as a study guide for a Bible study class or discussion group, as well as personal Bible study. There is no more important book of the Bible than the book of Genesis. Understanding the contents of the first book opens up all of the rest. And Vos' *Genesis* does an excellent job of opening up the book of Genesis. ■

Baptism in the Reformed Tradition: An Historical and Practical Theology, by John W. Riggs. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002. Pp. ix + 187. \$24.95 (hardcover). ISBN: 0-664-21966-7. [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

Baptism in the Reformed Tradition is part of the Columbia Series in Reformed Theology, a joint project of Columbia Theological Seminary and Westminster John Knox Press. The project aims to provide useful theological resources from the Reformed tradition for the church today. Riggs is Professor of Historical Theology and Church History at Eden Theological Seminary in Saint Louis, Missouri. Eden is a seminary of the United Church of Christ.

Riggs' thesis is that the modern liturgical renewal movement has adversely affected the doctrine and practice of baptism in Reformed and Presbyterian churches, moving these churches away from their Reformation roots. He offers an analysis and critique specifically of the baptism form and ceremony found in *The Book of Common Worship* of the Presbyterian Church (USA). He also makes positive suggestions

to bring the administration of the sacrament of baptism more clearly in line with the views of the Reformers, John Calvin in particular.

The book begins with a helpful introduction to the liturgical renewal movement. Riggs demonstrates that the roots of this movement are in the Roman Catholic Church. He demonstrates how this movement has impacted both Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism, especially as regards the administration of the sacrament of baptism. Following this introduction, the main body of the book is divided into two parts. In part one, Riggs considers the roots of Reformed baptismal theology in the Reformation. He treats the teaching on baptism of the first generation reformers, Zwingli, Luther, and Bucer. He then examines the teaching of the second generation of reformers, Bullinger and Calvin in particular.

In my judgment, this is the strength of Riggs' book. He cites and carefully analyzes the original documents, highlighting the unique Reformed perspective on the sacraments. He points out the insight of the Reformers that the sacraments generally, and baptism in par-

tical, are both signs and seals. As seals, they are also positive means of grace. He identifies the careful way in which the Reformers distinguished their view of the relationship between the sign and the reality signified from that of Rome, on the one hand, and the Anabaptists, on the other hand. He points out the Reformers' insistence that the sacraments be joined for their meaning and power to the Word preached. He takes note of how the Reformers' teaching on the sacraments was informed by their doctrine of predestination. And he documents the ways in which the doctrine of the covenant impacted the Reformers' teaching on baptism, especially their defense of infant baptism over against the Anabaptists. Along the way, Riggs points out how the writings of the Reformers shaped and were reflected in the early liturgy of the Reformed churches. That is, perhaps, something that is not sufficiently appreciated. The *Form for Baptism* in use in the Protestant Reformed Churches, for instance, does not merely date back to the Synod of Dordt. But that form includes elements all the way back to the Reforma-

tion. Luther's *Flood Prayer*, for example, is incorporated into the first prayer of this baptism form.

In part two of his book, Riggs examines the Reformed confessions, as well as subsequent developments of Reformed baptismal theology by Schleiermacher and Barth in particular, both of whom repudiated infant baptism. Part two concludes with Riggs' analysis of the *Book of Common Worship*. His conclusion is that the *Book of Common Worship* reflects departure from the Reformed doctrine of baptism, a departure that he attributes to the influence of the liturgical renewal movement.

If the marks of Reformed baptismal theology are (1) gracious divine sovereignty and (2) expressing this sovereignty through covenant theology, then the success of the baptismal rite in the *Book of Common Worship* can be partial at best (p. 114).

He goes on to fault the new liturgy for cutting the sacrament of baptism loose from its moorings in the doctrine of the covenant.

Covenant rarely appears in the rite, occurring only once in a mandated section—the pastoral proclamation and interrogation that begins the Profession of Faith section of the rite. When covenant language does appear, its meaning seems at best ambiguous and at worst confused (p. 114).

Riggs' assessment of the negative impact of the liturgical renewal movement is on target and serves as a necessary warning to Reformed and Presbyterian churches. He clearly demonstrates that the sacrament of baptism has been victimized by this movement. Fact is that the negative impact of this movement is pervasive in the churches today, extending far beyond the sacrament of baptism to every aspect of the public worship of the church. And let us never forget the point that Riggs establishes, that the liturgical renewal movement has its roots in Roman Catholicism. And that, in the end, is where the churches are headed that buy into the movement, often catering to the demands of members for "livelier, more meaningful" worship. They are headed right back to Rome.

A few negative criticisms. Riggs interacts only very little with the Dutch Reformed and their developments in the area of the covenant and baptism. This diminishes the value of his book. Additionally, Riggs is far too soft on Arminianism, Roman Catholicism, and a few other heresies and heretical groups. It is also plain that Riggs approves the opening of the special offices to women, something that contradicts the Reformed tradition and Scripture. He speaks more than once of the minister who administers baptism as "she or he," "her or him."

A criticism of format. Footnotes should be included at the bottom of the page, rather than as end notes at the back of the book. It is annoying and distracting always having to turn to the back of the book in order to scan a footnote. In a scholarly work in particular, the value of footnotes is enhanced by including them at the bottom of the page.

The extensive bibliography, citing both primary and secondary sources, is a praiseworthy feature of *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition*. ■

Getting the Gospel Right: Assessing the Reformation and New Perspectives on Paul, by Cornelis P. Venema. Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2006. Pp. xi + 92. \$6.00 (paper). ISBN-13: 970-0-85151-927-2. [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

This book, authored by the president of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, aims to be a brief introduction to, as well as summary and evaluation of, the New Perspectives on Paul (NPP). At the same time, the book represents a condensed version of a much larger book on the same subject by Venema that is in the works and will in the near future be published by the Banner of Truth Trust. The focus of *Getting the Gospel Right* is the claim of the NPP "... to offer a more satisfactory interpretation of Paul's understanding of the gospel of free justification than that of the sixteenth-century Reformers" (p. 2). The book is divided into three main sections. In the first section, Venema relates "The Reformation Perspective on Paul." In the second section, he introduces his readers to "A 'New Perspective' on Paul." And in the last section, he offers "A Critical Assessment of

the New Perspective."

The praiseworthy feature of *Getting the Gospel Right* is that Venema provides a handy resource for an overview of the NPP. At the same time, the author highlights the individual contributions to the NPP by the leading spokesmen of the movement: E. P. Sanders, J. D. G. Dunn, and N. T. Wright. Sanders especially offers a new view of Second-Temple Judaism. Dunn offers a new view of Paul's teaching of "the works of the law." And Wright offers a new view of justification.

For the most part, Venema correctly identifies the errors of the NPP, as well as its divergence from the fundamental teaching of the Reformation: justification by faith alone. The NPP does not get the gospel right. In fact, the NPP stands at odds with Paul's teaching of justification by faith alone apart from works—the heart of the gospel. For Venema, not the NPP, but "... the Reformation perspective continues to capture one of the great themes of the Christian gospel: the amazing grace of God, who justifies, not the righteous, but the ungodly, for the sake of Christ" (p. 92).

The great weakness of *Getting the Gospel Right* is that

Venema fails to identify what must be regarded as the most significant departure of the NPP: its wrong covenant conception. Venema does not expose this serious error of the proponents of the NPP. Fundamentally this wrong covenant conception is that the covenant is a conditional covenant. It is because they have previously embraced this error that many in Reformed and Presbyterian churches today are succumbing to the influence of the NPP and its stepchild, the Federal Vision. What both the NPP and the Federal Vision have in common is their teaching of a conditional, breakable covenant. In the end, all who hold to a conditional covenant, as Venema himself does, will be unable to withstand the false teaching of the NPP, or at least be unable to oppose it with the vigor that the NPP heresy requires.

And that leads to my second criticism of *Getting the Gospel Right*. That criticism is that Venema's polemic against the NPP is not the sharp polemic that the heresy of the NPP calls for. For Venema the great question regarding the NPP is: "Is this new view of Paul's teaching one that will prove lasting, or is it a view that will soon be

seen only in the rear-view mirror of theology? Does it represent a substantial change in the way contemporary believers should understand Paul's teaching, or is it a passing fad?" (p. 3). Again: "Is the new perspective on Paul a theological fad, which is destined to go the way of all fashions generally, or does it represent a substantial and enduring alternative to the older, Reformation perspective, clarifying the teaching of the Scriptures?" (p. 59).

Venema's criticism of the NPP is relative and too often qualified. "... the older, Reformation perspective more faithfully and comprehensively represents the teaching of the Scriptures" (p. 59). The NPP "... is inadequate in several respects..." and its understanding of Paul's doctrine of justification "... far too general and imprecise..." (p. 74). The NPP "... fails to account adequately for the substitutionary nature of Christ's atoning work and the way believers benefit from that work through faith" (p. 81).

Venema's polemic is far too polite. He seems determined to find some good in the NPP. He praises these heretics for the positive contribution that he judges they have made to the

church's understanding of the truth. "Though it may be admitted that the new perspective has illumined some significant aspects of Paul's understanding of the gospel, its claims to offer a more satisfying interpretation of Paul's gospel than that of the Reformation seem at best overstated, and at worst clearly wrong" (p. 91).

Going soft on the NPP is altogether unbecoming of a Reformed minister and seminary professor who, as bound by the *Formula of Subscription*, has committed himself to refute the errors that militate against the Reformed faith, exerting himself to keep the church free from such errors. The need of the hour is that the NPP be exposed as heretical, its teachings as unbiblical and contrary to the Reformed creeds, and its proponents as false teachers. What is necessary is that the NPP be identified as heresy, heresy of the worst sort. What is necessary is that the trumpet be sounded clearly to warn God's Israel of impending danger (Ezek. 33:1-6). Woe to him who when the enemy threatens blows an uncertain sound on the trumpet (I Cor. 14:8)! What is necessary is that the churches be warned against this other gos-

pel, which is not another gospel, but a perversion of the gospel of Christ (Gal. 1:6, 7). What is necessary is that the NPP be opposed with the same sort of sharp polemic that Paul employed in exposing and condemning their spiritual forebears, the Judaizers. Paul did not express appreciation for the positive contribution of the Judaizers. He did not oppose them as the proponents of a new theological fad that would in time undoubtedly pass out of fashion. His judgment was not that their perspective was inadequate. His judgment was that their perspective was heretical. His warning to the churches was, "If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed." And the justification for his sharp polemic? "For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ" (Gal. 1:9, 10).

Such sharp polemic is called for, not only in light of the seriousness of the error of the NPP, but also in light of the pervasive influence that the NPP is having in Reformed churches and seminaries. This sharp polemic is called for in

light of the embrace of significant aspects of the teaching of the NPP by such movements as the Federal Vision.

In the end, the NPP's sin isn't only not getting the gos-

pel right, but gutting the gospel altogether. Let that be the title of the forthcoming expanded version of Venema's assessment of the NPP: *Gutting the Gospel*. ■

Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities, by Roger E. Olson. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006. Pp. 250. \$25.00 (cloth). [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

Roger E. Olson is an Arminian. This is not the charge of a theological foe. It is Olson's boast. Olson is a pure-blooded Arminian. He is an Arminian after the order of James Arminius.

It is the purpose of the avowed Arminian, and prominent evangelical theologian, with this book to validate Arminian theology as a legitimate form of the gospel. Olson is intent on thus crediting Arminianism among evangelicals. Especially is he determined to gain such acceptance for Arminian theology among professing Calvinists.

Olson frankly recognizes, and spells out, the differences between Arminianism and Cal-

vinism, but denies that they are fundamental. Under the big tent of evangelical Christianity, Arminians and Calvinists should receive each other as proclaiming somewhat different, perhaps complementary, versions of the gospel. In fact, Arminianism, at least the Arminianism of Arminius himself, is nothing more than a variant of the Reformed faith. Arminianism corrects the extreme positions of "high Calvinism." It is a kinder, gentler form of Calvinism. Arminian theology that is true to Arminius (Olson freely admits the apostasy of such as Finney) is a mild Calvinism that makes the love of God rather than the power of God central to the gospel.

To achieve his purpose, Olson goes about to expose the charges that Calvinism has always lodged against Arminianism as mere myths. That the heart of Arminian theology is belief in free will, that

Arminianism denies the sovereignty of God, that Arminianism is man-centered, that Arminianism rejects the bondage of the will, that Arminianism denies salvation by grace, that Arminians do not believe predestination, that Arminianism has a heretical doctrine of justification, and that all Arminians hold the governmental theory of the atonement are myths.

The realities, according to Olson, are the very opposite. Quoting Arminius and his disciples to demonstrate his contentions, Olson argues that Arminianism is a doctrine of salvation by grace. Arminian theology affirms the sovereignty of God, the bondage of the natural human will, predestination (although as a genuine son of Arminius Olson draws the line at even the semblance of an acceptance of “reprobation”), the glory of God in salvation, justification by faith alone, and, in certain of its theologians, the penal substitution of the cross.

Olson’s explanations of these Arminian “realities,” however, make plain that they differ essentially, not only from the corresponding Reformed doctrines, but also from the bibli-

cal teachings. For example, in Arminian theology election is God’s conditional choice of all who will to believe. In Scripture, election is God’s eternal, unconditional choice of a certain definite number *unto* faith and holiness (Acts 13:48; Eph. 1:4).

Likewise, the sovereignty of God in Arminian theology, according to Olson’s own explanation, neither decrees nor governs evil, does not determine who are to be saved and who are to perish, and is frustrated and defeated whenever a sinner perishes, inasmuch as Arminianism’s god wills the salvation of all humans without exception.

Biblical sovereignty, in contrast, has God decreeing and bringing about (through men and devils who are the authors of the wickedness and alone responsible) the most heinous deed ever committed: the crucifixion of the Son of God (Acts 2:23; 4:27, 28). Divine sovereignty in the Bible consists of God’s determination of both vessels of honor and vessels of dishonor (Rom. 9). As sovereign, the God of Scripture (and the Reformed faith) accomplishes all His pleasure (Psalm 115:3). His counsel is never frustrated, not even when His

precept is disobeyed (Isaiah 46:10). Such is the sovereignty of His Father in salvation, according to Jesus, that all whom the Father gave to Jesus (in the decree of election) with the desire that they be saved by Jesus will come to Jesus. Not one of them will perish (John 6:37, 38).

As Arminius himself did, Olson uses the great biblical, theological words and phrases, for example, election and the sovereignty of God, and claims the grand biblical truths, for example, salvation by grace, but strips them of their biblical content, indeed of the very meaning inherent in the words and phrases themselves. Election for Arminius and Olson, as the source of the salvation of the sinner, is not God's choice of the sinner in eternity, but the sinner's choice of God in time.

The sovereignty of God for Arminius and Olson is not God's (absolute) authority, but God's knuckling under to Arminius' and Olson's notions concerning what God may and may not do with regard to ordaining some to eternal life and others to perdition. Arminius and Olson stand out among those to whom the apostle says in Romans 9:20: "O man, who

art thou that repliest against God?"

Nor, in Arminian theology, is God's sovereignty (which Arminianism professes to maintain) His almighty power. Rather, it is an appalling weakness of God. In His Arminian weakness, God is powerless to prevent all the evils in history, which He fervently wishes not to occur. He weakly "permits" them to happen. Such is His weakness that God fails to save multitudes whom He desires to save and is completely dependent upon the will of the sinner for His salvation of those who are saved.

Although Olson wisely stays away from the subject of preservation, as a confessed disciple of Arminius he shares his spiritual father's doubt that God is able to preserve those in whom the work of salvation has been begun. Arminian theology, with its doctrine of an impotent, dependent god, teaches the terrifying possibility of the falling away of true believers and saints, in spite of this god's best efforts to save.

Some sovereignty!

Arminian theology is not only heretical. It is also dishonest. Honesty would acknowledge, "We reject election in the

interests of the free, sovereign choosing of the sinner.” Candor would admit, “We reject the sovereignty of God. God is subject to the authority and power of sinful men, whether by His own freely adopted self-limitation, or naturally.”

The Calvinist charges against Arminian theology are realities. Olson’s defenses of Arminianism against these charges, if not myths, are false.

It is especially the burden of the book to clear Arminian theology from the accusation that it is semi-Pelagian, or even Pelagian. Olson returns to this subject again and again. Understandably! The charge is damning. All Christendom condemns Pelagianism. All Protestant Christianity condemns semi-Pelagianism, which is the doctrine of salvation of the Roman Catholic Church.

In distinguishing Arminianism from both Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism, as he correctly does, Olson makes a point of great importance for Reformed churches today, although not the point which Olson intends.

Leaving outright Pelagianism aside, the Arminianism of James Arminius (and Roger Olson) can be distinguished

from semi-Pelagianism. Semi-Pelagianism teaches that fallen man retains a free will, that is, the ability to choose for God, Christ, and salvation when, as semi-Pelagianism puts it, the gospel “offers” God, Christ, and salvation “well-meaningly” to fallen man. Upon this good choice, which lies in the power of the natural man, his salvation depends.

Arminianism denies that the natural man has such a free will. At Dordt in 1618, the Arminian party confessed that the will of the natural man—the unregenerated sinner—cannot of itself choose the good or believe in Christ. The Arminians went further. They held that it takes the regenerating grace of God to free the will of the sinner, so that he can believe. This is what the Arminians said about the will of the natural man:

Man does not have saving faith of himself, nor out of the powers of his free will, since in the state of sin he is able of himself and by himself neither to think, will, or do any good.... It is necessary therefore that by God in Christ through His Holy Spirit he be regenerated and renewed in intellect, affections, will, and in all his powers, so that he

might be able to understand, reflect upon, will and carry out the good things which pertain to salvation.

The will in the fallen state, before calling, does not have the power and the freedom to will any saving good. And therefore we deny that the freedom to will saving good as well as evil is present to the will in every state (“The Opinion of the Remonstrants regarding the third and fourth articles, concerning the grace of God and the conversion of man,” in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), pp. 225, 226.

Olson emphasizes Arminian theology’s denial of the ability of the natural man to believe, and he is right to do so. This is a distinction between Arminianism and semi-Pelagianism. We are delighted that Olson calls the attention of Calvinist theologians to this distinction. The Arminian theologian makes a point of greatest importance to Reformed theologians and churches, although not the one Olson intends.

The nub of the issue between the Calvinist and the

Arminian doctrine of salvation is not that Calvinist doctrine affirms, whereas Arminian theology denies, the bondage of the will of the natural man. Arminianism too, at least the Arminianism of James Arminius (and Roger Olson), affirms that the will of the sinner is incapable of faith in Christ apart from the regenerating grace of God. (This will come as a shock to the vast majority of Arminius’ spiritual descendants, who brazenly preach the free will of every man by nature.)

The nub of the issue between Calvinism and Arminianism, regarding the saving of the sinner, is this. Arminian theology teaches that God bestows His regenerating grace upon all sinners who hear the gospel. This regenerating grace, which Arminianism ominously calls “prevenient grace,” frees the will of every sinner, so that the will is now capable of choosing rightly and believing.

God’s grace, however, is not irresistible. It merely enables the sinner to choose for Christ and believe. It does not effectually cause him to will and believe. The sinner to whom God’s grace is shown and in whom God’s regenerating grace

has begun to work can resist the grace of God. The decision is the sinner's to make: accept grace, or resist grace. God has nothing to do with this choice, except that He has put the sinner in the position of being able to make it. Upon this decision of the sinner by a will that is now absolutely free, the salvation of the sinner depends.

From the Arminian perspective prevenient grace restores free will so that humans, for the first time, have the ability to do otherwise—namely, respond in faith to the grace of God or resist it in unrepentance and disbelief. At the point of God's call, sinners under the influence of prevenient grace have genuine free will as a gift of God; for the first time they can freely say yes or no to God. Nothing outside the self determines how they will respond (*Arminian Theology*, p. 76).

Therefore, although Arminian theology can be distinguished from semi-Pelagianism, Arminian theology is not essentially different from semi-Pelagianism, or from outright Pelagianism. All agree that the salvation of the sinner is his own work, whether in whole or

in decisive part, and depends upon the sinner himself.

The Synod of Dordt, which knew the Arminian intricacies and subtleties thoroughly, was right in condemning Arminian theology as “the Pelagian error” brought up again “out of hell” (Canons of Dordt, II, Rejection of Errors/3).

The Reformed faith confesses a radically different doctrine of salvation. It is the doctrine of salvation by irresistible, or efficacious, grace.

Faith is therefore to be considered as the gift of God, not on account of its being offered by God to man, to be accepted or rejected at his pleasure, but because it is in reality conferred, breathed, and infused into him; *or even because God bestows the power or ability to believe, and then expects that man should by the exercise of his own free will consent to the terms of salvation and actually believe in Christ, but because He who works in man both to will and to do, and indeed all things in all, produces both the will to believe and the act of believing also* (Canons of Dordt, III, IV/14; emphasis added).

The Bible knows two gos-

pels of salvation, and only two. One is the false gospel of salvation accomplished by, and dependent upon, man's willing and working. This is Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism, and Arminianism. The other is the one, true gospel of salvation accomplished by, and dependent upon, the mercy of God alone, apart from the willing and working of the sinner. This is the Reformed faith. "It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy" (Rom. 9:16).

Olson must not call this indictment of Arminianism as essentially semi-Pelagianism a myth. He cannot. He himself has expressed as clearly as it is possible to do the truth of the indictment: "Regardless of what people do with their liberty, God will bring about his kingdom, *but who will be included in the kingdom is determined not by God but by humans making use of the gift of free will*" (*Arminian Theology*, p. 134; emphasis added).

Correctly, Olson identifies the fundamental question in the controversy between Calvinism and Arminianism regarding the actual salvation of a sinner, indeed, regarding the entire controversy: whether "grace is re-

sistible." He quotes James Arminius: "For the whole controversy reduces itself to the solution to this question, 'Is the grace of God a certain irresistible force?'" (*Arminian Theology*, p. 162).

If now the teaching of resistible grace is the very nub of Arminian theology and the fundamental difference of Arminianism from Reformed theology, as Olson contends, following Arminius himself, a truth of the greatest importance for Reformed churches and theologians is implied. This truth is not, as Olson supposes, that Arminianism thus escapes the charge that it is semi-Pelagian. Rather, Olson unwittingly exposes much of present-day Calvinism as having succumbed, or gladly sold out, as the case may be (God will judge), to Arminianism.

The fundamental Arminian tenet is resistible (saving) grace. And much of professing Calvinism teaches resistible (saving) grace.

What is the popular doctrine of the "well-meant offer of the gospel" other than the teaching of resistible grace? God is said to be gracious, with the saving grace of the gospel of the cross of Christ, to many more

humans than are saved by this grace. God's grace in the gospel is resistible and resisted. Not only on the judgment of Dordt, but also according to the judgment of Arminius, the doctrine of the "well-meant offer of the gospel" is essential Arminianism: *resistible grace*.

What is the popular covenant doctrine of a grace of God towards and in all children of believing parents without exception other than the teaching of resistible grace? God is said to be gracious towards many children who nevertheless are not saved by this grace. They resist it. Not only on the judgment of Dordt, but also according to the judgment of Arminius, the doctrine of a covenant of universal, conditional grace is essentially Arminianism: *resistible grace*.

Roger Olson's book will meet with a warm, private reception in Reformed circles, even though prudence may dictate that the public display of enthusiasm in the journals and magazines be tempered.

Many Reformed and Presbyterian theologians have for a long time taught hordes of seminarians to respect and receive "evangelical Arminians" as spiritual brothers and sisters and

even to welcome them into their churches. Their seminary boards have tolerated this, if not approved it. These seminary professors have made no secret of their esteeming Arminian theology as "another, if lesser, form of the gospel."

In his recent, glowing study of John Wesley and his theology, *Wesley and Men Who Followed* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 2003), The Banner of Truth's Iain Murray has defended the message of the rank Arminian as the gospel of Scripture (see my article, "Wesley and Murray, Who Follows," in the *Standard Bearer* 80, no. 6 [Dec. 15, 2003]: 123-126).

Olson names prominent Presbyterian and Reformed theologians who are on record as judging Arminianism as a form of the gospel, rather than heresy. They include Robert Peterson and Michael Williams, professors at the Presbyterian Church in America seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, Covenant Theological Seminary (*Arminian Theology*, p. 78). Also, "[Michael] Horton, who teaches theology at Westminster Theological Seminary California, has changed his mind about Arminians since 1992. He now considers them evangelicals,

although he still does not consider Arminianism consistent with Reformation theology” (*Arminian Theology*, p. 82). For Horton, Arminian theology is merely “faulty theology not consistent with the basic impulses of the Reformation” (*Arminian Theology*, p. 139).

If a synod of fifty or sixty of the most respected Reformed professors, ministers, and elders in the United States were to sit today in judgment on the theology of James Arminius, Simon Episcopius, and company, the result would be a thousand-page document of academic jargon and theological verbiage praising “the Reformed faith” to the skies (in order not to disturb the orthodox), while concluding that, although Arminianism is not always “clear” and “consistent” (this, by theologians whose theology is as paradoxical as Kierkegaard), neverthe-

less, Arminianism is essentially the gospel of grace taught in Scripture—“evangelical”—and should, therefore, be tolerated, and even respected, in the Reformed churches. The report would conclude, “Let us love one another.”

And the people would swallow it.

Against all this stand the Canons of Dordt—official, authoritative condemnation of Arminian theology in all its forms and spokesmen, from Arminius through Wesley to Olson, by the Reformed churches, worldwide, to the end of time: the hellish error of Pelagius.

This is not the judgment of “high Calvinism,” as Olson sourly suggests.

It is the judgment of Calvinism.

It is the judgment of the gospel of grace. ■

Divided by a Common Heritage: The Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America at the Beginning of the New Millennium, by Corwin Smidt, Donald Luidens, James Penning, and Roger Nemeth. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006. Pp. xiv

+ 226. \$24.00 (paper). [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

The intelligentsia in the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) desire the reunion of the two denomi-

nations. Work goes on, mostly quietly and behind the scenes, to achieve the merger.

The issues that occasioned the split in 1857 have long since ceased to matter, as the CRC has largely adopted RCA ways: hymn-singing, choirs, open communion, neglect of Heidelberg Catechism preaching, and practical rejection of the doctrine of predestination as confessed in the Canons of Dordt, in favor of the Arminian decisionism (“the well-meant offer of the gospel”) of popular American evangelism.

Regarding this last, it is of interest, if not of some significance, that one survey conducted by the authors of the book showed that “while a bare majority of CRC ministers (51 percent) report the Canons of Dort to be of importance, less than one-third of RCA respondents (30 percent) do so” (p. 79). Only 34% of the laity in the RCA have even heard of the Canons of Dordt (p. 78).

Whether the CRC would still regard membership in the Masonic Lodge, approved by the RCA and widespread among the members of this denomination, as an obstacle to reunion is a question.

Four professors in the col-

leges of the RCA and CRC, two in Hope College in Holland, Michigan and two in Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, explore the possibility of the reunion of their denominations. The authors are political scientists and sociologists. Their study is political and sociological. By means of surveys, they determine the current thinking in the two churches regarding doctrines, practices, secular politics, congregational life, and current issues.

Hot topics among current issues are women in church office and homosexuality. One of the informative surveys reveals that 60% of CRC ministers approve the ordination of women ministers, regardless of the apostle’s prohibition, “I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man” (I Tim. 2:12). In the RCA, 82% of the ministers approve women ministers. (In fact, 100% of the clergy in both denominations approve women in all the church offices: all are corporately responsible for the decisions of their churches’ synods, and the resulting practices throughout the denominations.)

Another survey shows that 34% of the members of the CRC

approve membership in the church of practicing homosexuals. 51% of the members in the RCA approve the membership of practicing homosexuals. Although this was not the purpose of the survey, and certainly is not the conclusion that the authors of the book draw from it, in fact this survey fairly screams the appalling apostasy of both these denominations. More than one third of the one and over half the other denomination approve the practice that the apostle judges “vile affections,” the behavior of a “reprobate mind,” and due ultimately to the “wrath of God...revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold the truth in unrighteousness” in Romans 1:18ff. By responding to a survey, all of these members of Reformed, Christian churches are bold to express their “pleasure in them that do” such things” (Rom. 1:32).

The conclusion of the authors is that, although merger would be an appealing marriage of convenience, if not of desperation, as both churches continually lose members, reunion would be difficult and costly. The difficulties would be prac-

tical: loss of still more members; meshing organizations and agencies; merging congregations in the same locale; and keeping the peace between those in the CRC who still support Christian schools and the membership of the RCA, which opposes Christian schools.

Ignored in this political and sociological treatment of the reunion of two Reformed denominations is the spiritual dimension. Church unity is intensely spiritual and, therefore, doctrinal. The manifestation institutionally of the oneness of Christ’s body is a solemn calling from Jesus Christ, the church’s head. It is realized by the Spirit of Christ, who operates by the preaching and confessing of sound doctrine (the gospel of the Canons of Dordt!), effecting one godly life of obedience to the law of God. The Spirit does not create church unity by surveys, graphs, and shrewd, often anxious, calculations weighing the earthly advantages against the carnal disadvantages of unity.

The uninvolved but interested observer of the nervous mating dance of the RCA and CRC closes this book convinced that there is no reason why the two churches should not marry.

Nothing doctrinal divides them. The authors themselves frankly acknowledge this.

Many RCA and CRC congregations have moved toward a more free-flowing approach to worship and ecclesiology as their institutional salvation. They have, in fact, de-emphasized the creeds and confessions of the Reformed tradition and joined the larger evangelical flow, adopting worship cadences and proclamation techniques that resound throughout contemporary Protestantism. In fact, so powerful has been this pull that one could posit that the adoption of this form of popu-

lar evangelicalism is doing more to undermine the rich confessional legacy of Reformed Christianity than all of the so-called “secularization” forces of modernity. Still, within both denominations there has been a driving force to eschew things that are seen as the most encumbering (*sic!*) elements of the Reformed legacy in favor of the expediency of contemporary, popular appeal (p. 184).

But the marriage, if it is consummated, will not be “made in heaven.” Church marriages, like personal ones, must be in the Lord. ■

Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context, by David Instone-Brewer. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. Pp. xi + 355. \$26 (paper). [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

For the first time in 2000 years, someone—David Instone-Brewer—rightly understands the New Testament’s doctrine of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Or so the author of this book claims.

The purpose of this book is to understand the meaning of the New Testament teaching on divorce and remarriage as it would have been understood by its original readers. This is as close as historical research can get to the elusive “authorial intent”....[My] conclusions are very different from the traditional Church interpretation of the New Testament texts, which concluded that divorce with remarriage was not allowed on any grounds, and that separation

was allowed only in the case of adultery, and possibly desertion by a nonbelieving spouse. The reason for this difference is that the background knowledge and assumptions of a first-century reader were already forgotten by the second century, and thus the texts were misunderstood even by the Early Church Fathers (p. ix).

Reflecting poorly as it does upon the Holy Spirit's work of illumining the church and implying that Christians have lived in ignorance of the fundamental institution of marriage until Eerdmans published *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* in 2002, the notion that Instone-Brewer is the first rightly to understand the New Testament doctrine of marriage ought to have given Instone-Brewer pause.

According to Instone-Brewer, the trouble with the church's understanding of marriage, divorce, and remarriage for the past 2000 years has been that she has not viewed the doctrine of Jesus and the apostles in light of Jewish teachings found in extra-biblical documents, as well as in light of Greco-Roman culture. The result has been that the church has

wrongly been inclined to regard marriage as an indissoluble bond for life and has foolishly tended to restrict divorce and remarriage on the part of her members.

Instone-Brewer corrects this evil. Forcing an interpretation on all New Testament texts teaching marriage as a bond for life and forbidding divorce and remarriage that he assures us is warranted by extra-biblical, Jewish documents he has studied, Instone-Brewer makes Jesus and the apostles teach marriage as the flimsiest contract ever hammered out by humans, the permissibility of divorce for any reason, and the lawfulness of all remarriages.

The Rev. Instone-Brewer practices what he preaches. He informs us that he supports all church members who divorce, regardless of the grounds, or lack thereof. He marries all divorced persons who request remarriage without asking any question about their former marriages. He does insist, however, on a "service of repentance for broken promises" the night before the new marriage. He provides a form for this service. The form suits his purposes well, for it can be used over and over for the same person, no

matter how many times he or she divorces and remarries and regardless of the sordid circumstances of his or her divorce or divorces (pp. 311-313).

Why the author thought it necessary to publish this, another book demolishing marriage, is puzzling. Evangelical and Reformed churches and ministers have been doing very well at utterly destroying marriage (and the family!) in their midst without the aid of extra-biblical, Jewish enemies of God's holy ordinance. The British scholar carries coals to Newcastle. Perhaps, the author and the publisher of this book intend to administer the *coup-de-grace* to the now sorely wounded institution.

The appeal to extra-biblical, Jewish writings in order radically to change the New Testament doctrine of marriage, and to unbelieving Jews, to annul the teaching of Jesus and the apostles, is the content of the book. This deserves the close attention of the true church and of the believer.

What the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) and the Federal Vision (FV) are doing regarding the doctrine of justification, Instone-Brewer does regarding marriage. On the say-so of the

modern scholars who have access to these Jewish documents, the church and the believer are being required to read the clear doctrine of New Testament Scripture through the murky glasses of the views, or supposed views, of "second-temple Judaism," that is, the Jews of the inter-testamentary period and of the time of Jesus Christ. In the case of the NPP and the FV, this means that the biblical truth of justification by faith alone becomes the heresy of justification by faith and works. In the case of Instone-Brewer, the extra-biblical writings of unbelieving Jews change the glorious teaching of marriage as a lifelong bond symbolizing the faithfulness of Christ and the church in the covenant of grace into an ugly license to break hearts, break up families, distress the church, and dishonor Christ for every carnal reason—usually lust.

The Gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching on divorce are portrayed in Matthew 19 and Mark 10 as a debate with the Pharisees. The concluding statement on the matter is found in Matthew 5:32 and Luke 16:18. The highly abbreviated form of these accounts requires considerable

unpacking, *which is only possible by knowing what could be omitted because it was "obvious" to a first-century Jew. Fortunately the same subjects are debated in rabbinic literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls, which use very similar methods of abbreviation* (p. 133; emphasis added).

The approach adopted in this book, of reading Scripture in the context of its culture, is based on the three principles of hermeneutics that were discussed in chapter ten:

1. Scripture should be read through the filters of the language and culture to which it was first addressed.

2. The morals and laws of Scripture should be compared with those of the cultures it was written for.

3. The primary meaning of Scripture is the plain sense, as it would be understood by an ordinary person in the culture for which it was written (p. 304).

It is high time that Reformed men and churches forthrightly address these modern attempts to Judaize the church and her members. I do not refer to endless discussions and arguments whether "second-temple Judaism" in fact taught

this, that, or the other thing. I refer to the attempt itself to make our interpretation of the New Testament dependent upon some scholar's understanding of extra-biblical, Jewish documents. I have been waiting for such a response to this ongoing attempt to bring Holy Scripture into bondage to the Jews and to the scholars for some time, in vain. Therefore, I take the opportunity to make a beginning of a proper, Reformed response. I could wish that the church today would stomach the response Martin Luther would have given to the Judaizing efforts of the NPP, the FV, and David Instone-Brewer. Then I would tell the theologians of the NPP and FV and Instone-Brewer what they can do with their extra-biblical Jewish writings and "second-temple Judaism," with a vulgarity.

Since the church today has become far too delicate—too nice (which is by no means the same as spiritual)—for such blunt talk, I must content myself with confessing that Scripture is our sole authority for doctrine (justification) and life (marriage, divorce, and remarriage). This implies that *Scripture* interprets Scripture. "Second-temple Judaism" does not

interpret Scripture. Much less does a scholar's reading of exotic Jewish documents interpret Scripture.

In short, what "second-temple Judaism" may or may not have thought and may or may not have written in obscure documents will not determine the church's understanding of the clear teaching of Jesus and the apostles in the inspired Scriptures.

The fact is that Jesus and Paul preached justification by faith alone *against* the heretical teaching by the Jews of their day that righteousness is by works of obedience to the law. We know that this was the teaching of the Jews of that day, not from extra-biblical writings recently discovered, but from the New Testament itself. It was precisely against the Jews' sin of trusting for righteousness in themselves that Jesus spoke the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. The message of the parable is justification by faith alone, apart from works (Luke 18:9-14).

It was precisely *against* the practice of the Jews in His day of divorcing for every cause and remarrying, supported by the theory concerning marriage that Instone-Brewer defends in our

day (namely, that marriage is nothing more than an easily breakable contract), that Jesus spoke out sharply, condemning and forbidding divorce and the subsequent remarriage (Matt. 19:3-12).

The church does not need the extra-biblical documents of "second-temple Judaism." The church has no interest in the extra-biblical documents of "second-temple Judaism." The church does not want the extra-biblical documents of "second-temple Judaism." The church will certainly not allow the word of God to be set aside, corrupted, revised, radically changed, and reinterpreted by the documents of "second-temple Judaism."

For the right understanding of justification and of marriage, divorce, and remarriage, "to the law and to the testimony." If there are those who "speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20).

Not only does Instone-Brewer have a high view of the uninspired documents of "second-temple Judaism," he has a sinfully low view of inspired Scripture. For example, he finds the clear, powerful testimony of Jeremiah 3 to the un-

breakable nature of the covenant of marriage—unbreakable even though the wife has committed adultery—difficult to interpret, that is, unclear and unconvincing, because of “many questions of redaction” (p. 42).

Instone-Brewer’s admissions about the teaching of the New Testament on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, as this teaching stands in its own right, apart from any reinterpretation of it according to extra-biblical standards, are striking, and significant.

When the NT texts on divorce are read outside the context of the first century, they appear to teach that divorce is allowed only for adultery and for desertion by a nonbeliever, and that remarriage before the death of a former partner involves sin (pp. 256, 257).

The traditional Church interpretation is almost uniformly that of indissoluble marriage, with separation allowed only on the grounds of adultery. This is based on a “plain” reading of the text without any pre-70 C.E. insight into the Jewish background of the Gospel passages. The modern reader is likely to come to

the same conclusion about the “plain” meaning of the text (p. 304).

Regardless that neither Instone-Brewer nor any other Greek scholar committed to remarriage after divorce will pay the slightest attention to it, I note that the verb in I Corinthians 7:15 correctly translated by the Authorized Version as “is (not) under bondage” does not mean, ought not to be translated, and may not be explained as “being *bound*”: “a brother or a sister is not *bound*.” So Instone-Brewer translates and explains the verb: “But if the unbeliever separates themselves (*sic*), let them separate themselves: the brother or the sister is not bound in such [cases]; for God has called us in peace” (p. 201).

Every second-year Greek student knows that the verb is not $\delta\acute{\epsilon}\omega$, but $\delta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\acute{o}\omega$. $\Delta\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ means “to be bound,” as in marriage, for life (see I Cor. 7:39, where the verb is $\delta\acute{\epsilon}\omega$). $\Delta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\acute{o}\omega$ means “to be in bondage,” as many churches are presently in bondage to false teachers and heresies.

In marriage, one is not in bondage to a wife or husband, nor does I Corinthians 7:15 say

so. I Corinthians 7:15 does not teach that an abandoned Christian is no longer “bound” to his or her abandoning wife or husband and that therefore he or she may remarry. Rather, it teaches that the abandoned Christian, though he or she is still “bound” to the deserting mate (as verse

39 clearly states), is “not under bondage.” What this means, I have explained in my own book on marriage, *Marriage, the Mystery of Christ & the Church: The Covenant-Bond in Scripture and History*, to which I refer the interested reader, as well as David Instone-Brewer. ■

God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology, by Michael Horton. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006. Pp. 204. \$19.99 (cloth). [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

Reformed and Presbyterian churches need an introduction to covenant theology. They are seduced by Baptist, revivalistic, Arminian, charismatic evangelicalism; influenced by the distinctly un-covenantal “Reformed Baptists”; pressured by the heretical covenantal theology of the Federal Vision; and, in large part, simply ignorant of the Reformed, biblical doctrine of the covenant.

Unfortunately, *God of Promise* does not supply the need of the hour. It is not an introduction of classic Reformed covenant theology as represented, for example, by

Herman Bavinck, but an introduction of the peculiar covenant theology of Presbyterian theologian Meredith Kline. Kline’s doctrine of the covenant goes seriously astray in at least two important respects. It derives, and therefore explains, the biblical covenant from the pagan, Hittite treaties of Israel’s day. “God took up this [Hittite] treaty motif for his relationship to Israel” (p. 26). This burdens the description of the biblical covenant with Israel with the language and concepts of “suzerains” and “vassals.”

Jehovah God was not Israel’s “suzerain.” Old Testament Israel was not God’s “vassal.” Jehovah was Israel’s father. Israel was God’s son (Ex. 4:22, 23). There is a difference.

In addition, the Reformed preacher is not, and must not be,

dependent upon scholar Kline's and scholar Mendenhall's reading of extra-biblical records of heathen treaties for his understanding of the fundamental biblical truth of the covenant of God with Israel and the church. Scripture reveals the unique nature of the relationship between God and His people known as the covenant. Every believer, particularly the Reformed preacher, who works with the Hebrew and Greek of Holy Scripture, can know with clarity and certainty the truth of the covenant.

The second error of Kline's and Horton's covenant theology is their identification of the Sinaitic covenant with Israel as a different covenant from the covenant of grace with Abraham. According to Kline and Horton, the covenant with Israel at Sinai was the imposition upon that nation of the "covenant of works" originally made with Adam in Paradise. Therefore, the new covenant in Jesus Christ is "not a renewal of the old covenant made at Sinai, but an entirely different covenant with an entirely different basis" (p. 53). Astonishingly, in the face of the entire sacrificial element of the covenant made at Sinai, Horton

maintains that there was "no mercy in the Sinaitic covenant itself" (p. 50). Horton contends that the covenant made at Sinai was merely God's promise to give Israel earthly blessings on the condition of Israel's obedience.

How this allegedly Reformed doctrine of the Sinaitic covenant differs from dispensationalism's differentiation of the covenant with Israel from the covenant of grace in Christ is not apparent. Horton even uses the characteristic language of dispensationalism: "The Sinaitic covenant (i.e., the theocracy) was a parenthesis in God's redemptive plot" (p. 69). For dispensationalism, the covenant of grace with the church is the parenthesis. For Horton, the covenant with Israel was the parenthesis. For the Reformed faith, there is no parenthesis.

Galatians 3 and 4 clearly teach that the old covenant with Israel was essentially the same as the new covenant with the New Testament church. The new covenant of Jeremiah 31 is the old covenant with Israel as renewed in Jesus Christ. The covenant with Israel was an administration of the covenant of grace with Abraham.

The book is also confusing. Whereas Horton at one point describes the covenant of grace as unconditional, at another point he asserts that “there are...in this covenant (God with believers and their children) ...real conditions (repentance and faith)” (p. 105). The contradiction is not resolved by Horton’s adding that “the meeting of these conditions is graciously given and not simply required.” “Unconditional” means that the covenant—the covenant of *grace*—does not depend upon any human work or decision of the will. The covenant depends solely upon the sovereign grace of God in Jesus Christ. But a “*real condition*” is some work or decision of the will of the member of the covenant upon which the covenant depends, whether the work is done and the decision of the will is made in the sinner’s own strength or with the help of God. “Real conditions” effectively deny the unconditionality, that is, the graciousness, of the covenant.

That Michael Horton can go on affirming “real conditions” in the covenant of grace in the face of the Federal Vision’s development of this conditional covenant theology in the denial

of justification by faith alone and all the doctrines of grace *in the denomination in which Horton is an ordained minister* is unconscionable. That Prof. Horton affirms “real conditions” in the covenant, specifically faith, regardless that his own creed, the Canons of Dordt, explicitly denies that faith is a (“real”) condition either of election or salvation confronts him with the matter of his own subscription to the Reformed creed. Indeed, by its doctrine that faith itself was purchased for the elect by the death of Christ, “whereby He confirmed the new covenant,” the Canons make plain that faith is no (“real”) condition of the new covenant (Canons, II/8).

Virtually lost in the welter of treaties, pacts, oaths, suzerain treaties, and royal grants is the simple, biblical, heart-warming truth that the covenant is the living relationship of love between the triune God in Jesus Christ as our sovereign friend and the elect church of believers and their children as friends of God, who serve Him as children serve the father whom they love.

An introduction to the covenant that began with this biblical truth about the covenant,

rather than with near eastern treaties, and that then reexamined the covenant with Adam in Paradise in light of this truth,

rather than uncritically accepting the traditional “covenant of works,” would serve the Reformed churches well. ■

The Virtual Church and How to Avoid It: The Crisis of Deformation and the Need for Reformation in the 21st Century Church, by Peter C. Glover. N.p: xulon Press, 2004. Pp. 297. Paper. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

The English Reformed pastor, Peter C. Glover, has written a sharp warning against the “virtual church” and an urgent exhortation to believers to maintain, join, and, where necessary, form the true institute of the church. The true institute, as described by Glover, is Reformed in doctrine, worship, and discipline.

The “virtual church,” that is the object of Glover’s incisive analysis and damning criticism, is the contemporary evangelical congregation that caters to the people, aims at growth, and emphasizes feeling. It is Arminian—especially Arminian—charismatic, tolerant, and worldly. Of late, it is a cyberspace church. One may be

member and participate in its services by means of the Internet.

“Virtual” implies “not real.” The “virtual church” is the false church of Article 29 of the Belgic Confession.

Practicing what he preaches, Glover names names. The “virtual church” is the church run, or promoted, by Schuller, Graham, Hybels, and Warren in the United States and by Lloyd-Jones in Great Britain. Lloyd-Jones is mentioned because of his miserable doctrine of the church, or total lack thereof, and his openness to the charismatic doctrine of the second blessing.

Glover calls evangelicals back to the fundamental truths concerning the church taught by the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The true church of Christ has marks. These marks are the preaching of sound doctrine, the administration of the two sacraments instituted by Christ, worship according to the regulative principle, and disci-

pline. Repeatedly, Glover draws from John Calvin's great treatise, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church."

The present deplorable condition of evangelical churches, contends Glover, requires solid reformation by the Word of God, not the emotional, ephemeral Puritan revivals.

Glover excoriates the ministers. Although he has evangelicals in view, his criticism applies to many Reformed men as well. They refuse sharply to expose, refute, and condemn false doctrine. Under guise of love, they decline to name the names of the false teachers, contenting themselves with vague references to false teachers "out there somewhere." These men are largely to blame for the wretched condition of the churches. Glover's indictment of the preachers and theologians deserves lengthy quotation.

To put it flatly, there is a culture of biblical "spinelessness" among many church leaders in our generation, a crisis of leadership of breathtaking proportions. In the face of growing and widespread heresy and error, many church leaders today choose to keep their heads down and

hope for the best, providing little or no spiritual leadership at all. Those who do speak up often do so in coded terms, making dark allusions to "dubious teachings" and without identifying who is responsible for them. It is as if the overriding fear among many church leaders today is toward fearing man not God. So deep is today's spirit of accommodation rooted that it has become almost the defining characteristic of leadership in the twenty-first century church. Is it any wonder that the world sees the church and much of its leadership as fawning, ambivalent, duplicitous, double-speaking, weak and irrelevant? (pp. 169, 170)

What is plain in the public forum of today's church is that the climate is almost universally hostile to proper biblical debate, with the implicit insistence that any controversy is marked by *irenic* discussion.... One is given to wonder what has happened to righteous anger, that which Christ showed against the aberrant Pharisee "church" leaders of his day, and which Paul revealed against the Christian "Judaizers"? The modern church often appears paralyzed by what John Calvin called "perfidious toler-

ance”.... How is it that those who today claim to be Reformed refuse to imitate the Bible’s use of strong language when the church is similarly assaulted in our day?...We appear to have lost our biblical bearings and have become enfeebled theologically and spiritually, with our evangelical faith becoming depressingly more theoretical than practical. We have allowed our Bible to teach us what we do believe, yet often without employing it to identify that which we do *not* believe. We make dark and vague allusions to teachings and movements “out there somewhere” yet without identifying them plainly, or those responsible for preaching them. What has happened to our understanding of spiritual leadership? How does this weak, tediously tolerant approach square with Scripture, and help protect the flock from ravenous wolves who slip into the sheep pen disguised in “sheep’s clothing”? (pp. 39-41)

Glover is right when he insists that being a faithful minister and defending the faith demand

identifying those who teach...error. “Naming names,” when it comes to who

is teaching error in the modern church, is today highly unpopular. It will necessarily involve leaders in individual debate and (that horrible word again) controversy. It needs to be broadcast loud and clear that the naming of names, when it comes to false teaching and false teachers in the church, caused the apostle Paul no sleepless nights at all (p. 208).

Although an amillennialist, Glover warns the Reformed and truly evangelical churches to avoid a pietism that seeks to avoid the world and exhorts them to “impact the world and culture” around them. He suggests how they might do this.

The “London Declaration (2000),” which Glover gives as an appendix, and approves as a description of the church and her calling today, defines “hyper-Calvinism,” which it rightly rejects, fairly and accurately: “the denial of the church’s responsibility to call upon all sinners indiscriminately to trust in Christ for salvation” (p. 287). This theological knowledge, or honesty, as the case may be, is rare.

Notably lacking in Glover’s underscoring of the importance of the sacraments, is any de-

fense of infant baptism and any condemnation of the Baptist corruption of this sacrament. Glover's approval of the inclusion of Baptist churches in the ecumenical alliances he supports indicates the reason. This lack is serious. The rejection, or disparaging, of infant baptism is a plague in Great Britain. The plague is evidence of the absence of the covenant. There will be no reformation in Great Britain, or anywhere else, without an uncompromising doctrine of the inclusion of the children of the godly in the covenant of grace.

Although the book is written by a Englishman and mainly has its eye on the churches in Great Britain, it ought to be read by evangelicals and Reformed in the United States—people, as well as pastors and elders.

At issue is the unconditional calling of every believer to be member of the true, instituted church of Christ and, if necessary, to separate from an institute that displays the marks of the false church, no matter how it assumes to itself the name of the church (Belgic Confession, Articles 27-29). ■

Trinity and Covenant: God As Holy Family, by David J. Engelsma. Jenison, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2006, Pp. x-148. \$19.95 (cloth). [Reviewed by Kenneth Koole.]

As the author states in his preface:

Although revised for publication as a book, this work is substantially the thesis submitted to and approved by the faculty of Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan for the degree of

Master of Theology in 1994. Such is the nature of the subject – Trinity and Covenant – that it cannot possibly become dated, whether in ten years or in a hundred years.

The RFPA (Reformed Free Publishing Association) is to be commended for prevailing upon Prof. D. J. Engelsma to do what was necessary to present his Master's Thesis in book form, thereby getting it out to the wider reading public. The book itself is a most attractive little volume, done up in classic style, pleasing to the eye and hand,

which to any lover of books is worth something in and of itself. But it is especially the content of this book, God as God triune, and thereby the God of life, and love, and everlasting covenant, that should in and of itself commend this book to the Reformed reader. What is more basic to the unique identity of the Christian faith than God as the triune one, and to Reformed theology than its covenantal emphasis?

Expounding on the doctrine of the Trinity is not for the faint-hearted; to set for oneself the task of writing a thesis on this subject to be analyzed and critiqued by fellow theologians takes a certain boldness, especially when the intention is not simply to write a survey of the history of this doctrine as it developed through the centuries, but to contribute something to its development and to the church's understanding.

The writer does not lack a boldness. Few would want, as Reformed theologians, to take to task in the same slim volume both Calvin (be it ever so respectfully) and the Reformed confessions (however deferentially) on any subject, much less on the venerable doctrine of God triune (at least not if one wishes to retain a reputation for

Reformed orthodoxy); but Engelsma does just that in this slim volume, and that, mind you, in the name of zeal for the development of the Reformed faith. If that by itself does not spark an interest in reading this volume, we are at a loss to know what will. The question is, can you engage in criticism of Calvin and the confessions on such a vital and venerable doctrine as the Trinity, and still be considered orthodox and solidly Reformed? Let the reader judge for himself. Having read the book, this reviewer is convinced one can, and Engelsma still is. His criticisms of both Calvin and the Reformed confessions do not cross the line of what it means to be a faithful son of the ancient creeds of Christendom, of the Reformed standards, and of the Reformation itself.

It is Engelsma's express desire to inject a lively interest back into the church's confession of the doctrine of God's trinitarian life, which is to say, confessing it as a doctrine, a revelation of God through His incarnate Son, which has clear practical significance for the whole of the Christian's relationships and life. This he is convinced can be done. The Reformed tradition has at its

disposal all the theological material necessary for the task (pp. ix, 6, 11), but it can be done only if Reformed theologians throw off what Engelsma calls a “fear of the three,” and then are willing at least to entertain reconsidering the truth of God triune, with the emphasis being that of friendship, fellowship, bonds of love—or, if you will, that of being the family God in and of himself (p. 62 ff.). The author does not claim originality in this notion and insight. It can be found in and is clearly stated by such theologians as Augustine (cf. p. 5), and by Bavinck, Kuyper, and Hoek-sema as well. The problem, Engelsma contends, is that other than Hoeksema, and Bavinck to a degree (p. 11), theologians have been reluctant to seize upon the significance of this aspect of God’s triune life and develop its implications accordingly.

Engelsma is not interested in ambiguities or in the nuanced approach so much in vogue these days. Having the courage of his convictions he lets the reader know in the opening words of his preface where his criticism lies.

The development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the

church in the West has not done justice to the threeness of God. There has been fear of a strong, bold confession of threeness as though this would imply, or lead to, tritheism.... This hesitation has kept the church from doing justice to the significance of the Trinity for the Christian life (Preface, p. ix).

We note the careful wording. Engelsma is not finding fault with the ancient and venerable creeds of the church of the West, as though the fathers failed to do their work with the care and biblical precision required. He is in full accord with the great Christological creeds, in fact in fuller accord than Calvin was (which deserves further comment in this review), giving some substance to the author’s criticism of the much revered “master of theology.”

Nor is it Engelsma’s contention that the great theologians of the post-Nicene church have failed to *defend* God’s threeness. He acknowledges they have, and well. But a defense is not the same as development (pp. 24, 25).

It is Engelsma’s contention that in developing God’s revelation of Himself as being three divine persons, the fear of the

charge of tritheism has over the centuries so dominated the church's leading thinkers that when it came to following the road along which the truth of God as the great three in one should have led them, one by one they halted. As a result, the threeness of God became the road less traveled by, or, to use Engelsma's wording, that one aspect of the doctrine of God triune to which Christ's church has failed to do full justice. Failing to do justice to something in theology is not the same as ignoring it all together, nor is it the same as being in error about what one says, but it is bound to have serious consequences as time goes on, and, as should be transparent, this is the more true the more central the doctrine in question is. And what doctrine is more central to the life and confession of the Christian faith in the New Testament era than that of God as God triune?

Of special interest is Engelsma's critique of Calvin and his trinitarian views. Recognizing full well Calvin's valuable contributions to the church's understanding of God as God Triune, Engelsma is yet bold enough to lay primarily at Calvin's door the hesitancy of

the church of the West to stress the threeness of God within His being. Engelsma asserts that Calvin, for all his orthodoxy on the doctrine of the Trinity, was yet, due to his zeal to safeguard God's oneness and the unity between the divine persons, hampered by a "fear of the three!" (pp. 32, 33).

Calvin, in his understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, is certainly not beyond criticism. The reality is that Calvin, for all his orthodoxy, was not happy with, nor, in the final analysis, in full agreement with the language of the Nicene Creed. He was at odds with the teaching of the Nicene Creed on the eternal generation of the Son. The Nicene Creed teaches that the Father's begetting of the Son pertains to the very being or essence of the Son Himself. That this is its view is clear by the phrase translated "...God (out) of God." This Calvin declared to be a "hard saying." All Calvin would subscribe to was a generation of the Son's person. As to the Son's essence or deity, He, like the Father, is underived. This became known as the *aseity* (the self-existence) of the Son. Calvin's teaching on this matter created no small stir in his own day. John

Murray describes it in terms of “...the furor which Calvin’s insistence upon the self-existence of the Son as to his deity aroused at the time of the Reformation” (Westminster TJ 25, May 1963: 141).

On this issue there has been no consensus among Reformed theologians to the present day. There remains room for ongoing discussion.

Where Engelsma stands on this issue is no mystery. He is in full accord with Nicea. “...the begetting of the Son is the Father’s bringing forth of the Son, not only with regard to the Son’s person but also with regard to the Son’s being (p. 59). This being his conviction, Engelsma takes Calvin to task. Though Calvin’s intentions were good, namely, to safeguard God triune’s oneness, it is Engelsma’s contention that

So did [Calvin] emphasize that the Son is equal with the Father that he did not do justice to the distinction between them. The *aseity* of the Son tends to blur the difference between Son and Father, as serious an error as subordinating the Son to the Father. The generation of the Son by the Father then becomes a rather meager business, involving

the person only and leaving the essence unmoved and unaffected.

The result is that one comes away from Calvin’s doctrine of the Trinity with the impression that the life of God is the existence of the one essence [sic! – kk). There is little in Calvin of the life of the Trinity’s being happy fellowship of loving Father and beloved Son in the Holy Spirit.... One looks in vain at Calvin’s comments on the passages in John’s gospel that reveal the eternal communion of the Father and the Son for some explicit recognition of this intratrinitarian fellowship, much less for pointed development of this fellowship (pp. 31, 32).

And the Reformed confessions, never straying far from the large shadow cast by Calvin, as a result, in Engelsma’s assessment, share the same weakness. Not mistaken in any of their utterances, not in error, but weak. Though they “emphatically affirm and clearly identify the three distinct persons,” yet in the Reformed confessions

...there is no recognition of the meaning of the Trinity for the life of God himself among

the persons, nor is there any explicit instruction concerning the essential significance of the Trinity for the nature of the church's life with God or for the nature of the life of believers with each other. The same holds for the Westminster Standards (p. 39).

That Engelsma's above-stated respectful criticisms deserve serious consideration is underscored by two considerations: first, the evidence of a spreading lack of interest throughout Christendom in the doctrine of the Trinity. As Engelsma points out:

...what Joseph A. Bracken has written about the Roman Catholic Church applies, all too often, to the Reformed churches as well: "Since there was no apparent pastoral value to be gained from an explanation of the doctrine, why should one bore people with something that in the end they wouldn't properly understand anyway? The net result, however, has been an informal conspiracy of silence among priests in pastoral work about the Trinity and the place of the dogma in the Christian life and worship" (pp. 41, 42).

Who can dispute that what has happened to Rome's priests is happening to Protestant's preachers as well?

And second, it is an undeniable fact that the whole drift of Christianity in its apostasy over the last two centuries has been towards the black hole of Unitarianism and its deadening, icy grips (p. 41). This has been especially true of apostate Calvinists in the last couple of centuries. Who can deny it? Could it be, as Engelsma contends, that this is an inevitable fruit of the church's failure to do justice to the plurality of God in His three distinct persons? The doctrine is soundly formulated as dogma for the church, but where is its practical significance, and how does this glorious truth serve as the divine pattern for all of life?

Engelsma has written his little book to suggest a way forward in this doctrine so central to the Christian faith.

Most intriguing is Engelsma's treatment of the Holy Spirit and His place in the intra-trinitarian love life (pp. 70-81). The Spirit's place in the trinitarian being of God is what is most mystifying and has been least treated in all theological treatises on the Trinity. Here Engelsma, with a certain bold-

ness, offers his contribution to the discussion of the unique place and activity of the Holy Spirit in His relationship of double procession from the Father and His Son, a perspective that, if not altogether unique and unknown, is certainly 'fresh.' It can be summed up in two brief quotes:

The procession of the Spirit is a single procession from the Father to the Son and from the Son to the Father. Thus, it is the eternal binding of the Father and the Son. Since it is the personal essence of the Spirit that proceeds, the very essence of the Spirit is the bond between the first and second persons (p. 76).

....Scripture reveals the Spirit, not as a third friend, but as the mutual love, the fellowship, who binds the Father and the Son (p. 80).

This, Engelsma is convinced, does justice to the biblical revelation and what was suggested by Augustine long ago (p. 74).

Intriguing, but requiring further discussion as far as this reviewer is concerned.

Engelsma's interest in publishing his thesis in book form

for a wider audience in the Reformed church world is preeminently practical. In addition to the foregoing, this is apparent from Engelsma's concluding chapter, in which he addresses the doctrine of God's covenant, in particular God's covenant with His special creature man as that is meant to be a reflection of His own covenantal life as God triune. Does there loom in the Reformed ecclesiastical scene at present an issue of larger proportions than that of the nature of God's covenantal dealing with man?

But what kind of covenant? A covenant of the conditional variety, or an unconditional covenant? That is the question.

Nowhere in his book does Engelsma make direct reference to the Federal Vision controversy doing so much damage in the Presbyterian and Reformed church world today, but in his concluding chapter Engelsma does bring criticism to bear on the covenantal view so prevalent amongst Reformed theologians today, namely, that of a conditional covenant, which is to say, viewing God's covenant as a contract between Himself and believers, a contract in which conditional promises rule the arrangement. As every stu-

dent of the present theological scene knows, it is this conditional covenant view that the Federal Vision men have seized upon and with such persuasive logic have used to promote and justify their errant justification doctrine.

Over against this conditional covenant view Engelsma would promote an unconditional covenant, and then have us trace it back to the very nature of the life and fellowship of God triune in Himself. As the author states concerning the conditional covenant, “There is, at the least, something jarring about the description of the covenant of grace between God and the sinner as bargain” (p. 113). This becomes the more jarring when that which is called the covenant of grace finds its source in a covenant agreement arranged between the Father and His Son, which one can only liken to a mercantile contract lifted from agreements between men. This, of course, is the language of the traditional presentation of the *pactum salutis*, the well known covenant of redemption. But does such a concept do justice even to relationships between human fathers and beloved sons and their cooperative efforts?

How much less to that which describes that of the divine Father and the Well-Beloved of His bosom.

It is not only Engelsma who is raising such questions for the Reformed church world’s thoughtful and reverent reconsideration (pp. 114-116).

We would point out that if Engelsma’s criticism of the conditional covenant view is valid, and this as the necessary corollary of God’s own internal covenantal life being one of unconditional friendship and love, then he has just delivered into the hands of Reformed theologians a powerful cudgel with which to deliver the FV error a mortal blow as well. This in itself ought to make every lover of the Reformed faith give what Engelsma is proposing serious consideration, be it ever so modest (p. 109).

Whether one finds himself in agreement with Engelsma’s thesis and its conclusions or not, what he presents in a compelling fashion are *the issues* facing Reformed theology in its crisis today.

It is a book with which every thoughtful Reformed theologian ought to familiarize himself. ■

Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition, by Peter Golding. Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2004. 240 pp. Price: 10.99 (UK). Softcover. ISBN 1857929233. [Reviewed by Rev. Douglas Kuiper.]

The value of this book is its history of the development of the doctrine of the covenant in the Reformed tradition.

Golding does not limit himself to this history; he notes in the preface that his book “is a synthesis of historical, biblical, and systematic theologies on the subject” (p. 7).

Accordingly, the reader finds a section in which Golding examines the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words used for covenant (pp. 72-83, and scattered references in pages 85-103). And in chapter 7 he sets forth the distinctive features and relationships of God’s covenant as established with Adam (after the fall), Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David; of Jeremiah’s promise of a new covenant; and of the new covenant in Christ.

The history of the doctrine of the covenant, however, pervades the book. Chapter 1 sets forth the foundation of our un-

derstanding of this doctrine, as laid by the early church fathers and the sixteenth century Reformers in Germany, Switzerland, and England. Chapter 2 investigates the development of the doctrine in the seventeenth century. Chapter 3, “Modern Understanding of the Covenant Concept,” explains the various kinds of covenants between man and man during biblical times. In chapter 5 (“The Covenant of Works”) Golding gives a history of the idea of the covenant of works, in addition to his evaluation of that idea. Chapter 6 (“The Covenant of Grace”) addresses the matter of the parties of the covenant, the conditionality of the covenant, covenant breakers, the sacraments, and the covenant of redemption between God and Christ. Even here, however, he does not set forth exegetical conclusions regarding these matters, but traces the history of how Reformed theologians have answered them.

The reader becomes convinced, if he was not already, that Reformed theology has always been covenantal.

Golding’s frequent quotes of and references to other Reformed writers leave one unclear at times whether Golding

is stating their view for the record, or adopting it as his own. Still, several of Golding's convictions regarding the covenant become clear, and make the book heartwarming to read. First, he evidently considers the essence of the covenant to be that of a bond or relationship (72-73, 92, 186). Second, he emphasizes the sovereign grace of God in administering His covenant:

In general, historical theology prior to the twentieth century has been seriously inadequate in its treatment of the divine covenants at this point. It has invariably understood the covenant in terms of mutual compact.... Nevertheless, the fundamental nature of covenantal administration remains constant—there is not so much as a hint of bargaining involved. Rather, it is consistently characterized by unilateralism (on the part of God) (p. 79).

Third, he avoids the trap into which many fall, of suggesting that God established His covenant with Abraham, David, etc, after the pattern of men's covenants with men.

However, the covenant was not an idea invented by an-

cient pagan societies.... It can be argued that just as all ancient civilizations retained garbled versions of the historic events of the Fall and the flood, so the mind and ethos of the pagan world retained the idea of covenant (p. 71).

One can glean from this quote that Golding views God's relationship with Adam in the state of perfection as a covenant relationship, and that the early chapters of Genesis are authentic history. The former proposition Golding explicitly and ably defends on pages 118-120. That Genesis 1-11 is authentic history he explicitly states on pages 144-145, arguing that any other view of Genesis 1-11 "has only served to undermine the foundations of biblical, and therefore covenantal, theology."

He to whom Herman Hoeksema is dear will note with interest Golding's assessment of Hoeksema's criticism of the idea of the covenant of works. Golding himself is satisfied to use the term, but rejects the notion of merit on Adam's part: "The 'covenant of works' was clearly not a contract, or even a compact—there is no trace of mutual agreement here—it consists rather in sovereign disposition on God's part. If that is

understood, then it seems permissible to use the term ‘Covenant of Works’ ” (p. 113). In Golding’s opinion, Hoeksema has created a needless difficulty by supposing that Adam would be given higher life as a consequence for obedience: “To suggest that Adam would receive a higher form of life cannot be proved from Scripture” (pp. 114-115).

Our first criticism of Golding’s book, then, is that he promotes the use of a term that suggests merit, while stating that he rejects any notion of merit in the covenant of God with Adam. This is double talk. Our joy that Golding vigorously defends God’s covenant with Adam as being sovereignly administered is turned to bewilderment when we read on page 116, with no indication that Golding disagrees with this statement, “according to the covenant of works, God’s favour is the reward of obedience.” This is unhelpful to any Reformed person trying to understand the covenant of God with Adam. Did not Adam enjoy God’s favor even before he obeyed—that is, was not God’s favor first? How then can it be the “reward of obedience”? And does not “reward of obedi-

ence” really mean “merit of works”? And if this is so with regard to the covenant of God with Adam, is it any different with us in the covenant of grace? But, Golding would argue, in this respect he stands well within the Reformed tradition, in which the term “covenant of works” has been used and so understood for centuries.

Similar is our criticism of his view that God’s covenant with Noah was one of common grace. Here too Golding finds many Reformed men in his company.* Here too he stresses that the blessings God gave Noah were gracious and redemptive—good Reformed talk.

* Not surprisingly, the view that the covenant with Noah is one of common grace is still promoted today among conservative Reformed scholars—cf. chapter 6 of Michael Horton’s book, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology*. The reader interested in reading a rebuttal of this view can consult Rev. Herman Hoeksema’s articles “The Covenant of Nature” in the *Standard Bearer*, volume 1, issue 11, page 10; issue 12, page 15; and volume 2, pages 9, 41, and 71. Also, Rev. George Ophoff’s article “The Covenant with Noah” in the *Standard Bearer*, volume 32, page 488.

But then he speaks of this covenant as being one of common grace, because it was concerned with temporal things, in the realm of nature. No Reformed theologian disputes that God's covenant with Noah included a promise to preserve creation as a whole, until the set time that Christ returned to destroy the earth. But was this not particular grace? Was not God's purpose here the gathering of the church and the coming of Christ?

My third critique is that Golding could have done more to demonstrate the unity of the various covenants of God with men throughout history. He does make a beginning at this, especially as regards the unity between the Old and New Testaments, by rejecting Dispensationalism (p. 171), and by pointing to the unity of the covenant in Christ with God's elect (p. 189). But that theme should be sounded more loudly in any book that explores the relationship between the various manifestations of God's covenant with men. Personally, I do not like the terms "Adamic cov-

enant," "Noahic covenant," "Davidic covenant," etc.—terms that Golding uses, and many others use. God has one covenant with Jesus Christ, and in Christ with all the elect. The gracious benefits of this one covenant God revealed in stages throughout history, a bit to Adam, more to Noah, still more to Abraham and David. But always it was God's covenant with Christ. This could have been developed more.

That Golding makes reference to such views among other Reformed theologians is not my criticism; his book must do that, and is helpful for doing that. That Golding does not more quickly distance himself from some inconsistent views regarding the covenant is my criticism. For, after all, it is not just talk about the covenant, not just a knowledge of what others thought about the covenant, but it is an understanding of the covenant that is faithful to Scripture in every respect—that is central to Reformed theology and precious to every Reformed pastor and person. ■

Dutch/Latin Translator Sought

The Board of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society, Grand Rapids, Michigan, responsible for the translation of Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, is now seeking a qualified translator to head the project of translating Peter vanMastricht's *Theologia Theoretico-Practica* (Dutch title: *Beschouwende en Praktikale Godgeleerdheit*). In addition to possessing computer word processing skills, such a translator must possess the following qualifications:

- a competent Latinist
- competent in reading and translating 17th century Dutch
- thoroughly conversant in the mode of Reformed theological discourse prevalent in the 17th century
- competent in Hebrew and Greek

Please direct all inquires to
Dr. Nelson D. Kloosterman, secretary,
nkloosterman@midamerica.edu

Contributors for this issue are:

Ronald L. Cammenga, professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament Studies in the Protestant Reformed Seminary, Grandville, Michigan.

Russell J. Dykstra, professor of Church History and New Testament Studies in the Protestant Reformed Seminary, Grandville, Michigan.

David J. Engelsma, professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament Studies in the Protestant Reformed Seminary, Grandville, Michigan.

Barrett L. Gritters, professor of Practical Theology and New Testament Studies in the Protestant Reformed Seminary, Grandville, Michigan.

Kenneth Koole, pastor of Grandville Protestant Reformed Church in Grandville, Michigan.

Douglas J. Kuiper, pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church in Randolph, Wisconsin.

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Published twice annually by the faculty of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary:

Ronald L. Cammenga, Editor (cammenga@prca.org)

Russell J. Dykstra, Book Review Editor (dykstra@prca.org)

David J. Engelsma (engelsma@prca.org)

Barrett L. Gritters (gritters@prca.org)



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Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary
4949 Ivanrest Avenue
Grandville, MI 49418
USA

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